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## Preface

The effort made on bringing the ongoing Afghan war to an end, particularly the struggle of the Afghan government made for the purpose of making peace with the Taliban has encountered deadlock as the war continues to grow cumbersome each day. Therefore, a number of countries in the region and the world have decided to play a role in solving the Afghan matter.

The planning of an Afghan peace-related meeting in Russia as well as the visit of a senior Taliban Political Office delegation to Uzbekistan and its discussion with Uzbek officials on Afghan peace and withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan are the latest signs of these regional efforts. Although the Afghan government has failed to initiate direct talks with the Taliban, there are expectations that the United States will have direct negotiations with the group. First part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS) discusses the role and impact of regional efforts in the Afghan matter.

The second part of the Weekly Analysis is allocated for examining the transformation of U.S. and NATO general commanders in Afghanistan. On the one hand, the general command of foreign forces in Afghanistan has been changed many times in the last 17 years and on the other, the U.S. has constantly changed its strategies since the beginning of the Afghan war; however, the battlefield is always focused on these strategies only. A year after the Trump strategy was announced, Zalmay Khalilzad gets appointed as the U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan while simultaneously the new General commander of International Forces assumes his duty. What impact these changes are likely to have on the Afghan war is the question studied in this analysis.

## Role and Future of Regional Efforts in Afghan Peace



While the regional and international-level efforts for Afghan peace are underway, the actors in the process search for their own interests in the matter. Taliban also try to further increase their diplomacy in an effort to usurp these actors for the sake of putting pressure on the Afghan government and International Community.

In recent years, similar efforts are made on the Afghan peace; however, these efforts have been comparatively hastened in the last few months. Examining them closely, these efforts can be divided into two parts: one are the efforts has been made through satisfaction and/or encouragement of the Afghan government and U.S. and the other are those which are made for putting pressure on the U.S. and/or originates from the active diplomacy of Taliban.

Following the Tashkent Conference, the Afghan government was able to hold another important meeting in Saudi Arabia which resulted in a declaration on illegitimacy of Afghan war in order to pressurize the Taliban; but the planning of a peace-related meeting with the Taliban in Russia is a move made against the satisfaction of the Afghan government and has created concern in Kabul.

The topic on the nature and purpose of peace-related regional efforts, the associated concerns and barriers, and the impact and future of these efforts are discussed here.

### **Regional Peace Efforts**

Qatar is a country who took the first step to play a role in the Afghan peace and, thus, having an understanding with the United States, provided the Taliban with a political office. At the beginning of the Trump Presidency, there were rumors on the closing of the Qatar Office, however, it still seems that the Qatar Office being the most powerful address of the Taliban diplomatic activities have led to regional and world countries taking up roles and getting involved in the Afghan peace, especially in the talks with the Taliban. At the same time, the Taliban have also organized different activities and talks from this address, and a number of important Western officials have even been members of the Qatar Office at different times.

The role of Qatar is worth considering as the most effective in such efforts and the allegations of ruinous goals are yet to be seen with regards to the Qatar Office. Therefore, the Qatar Office is expected to be accorded recognition as the official office of Taliban for direct peace talks.

From the very beginning, Pakistan was against the inauguration of the Qatar Office, but a number of other countries have benefitted from the existence of the office for the purpose of increasing their role in Afghanistan; among Iran ties with the Taliban should be pointed out. Both Iran and Taliban have confirmed these ties; justifying them with some reasons; however, the US and Afghan government accuse Iran of secretly supporting Taliban. As Iran is afraid of ISIS (Daesh) and meanwhile has tensions with the U.S, it seems likely that Iran would deepen its

ties with Taliban which will have an impact on increasing of U.S needs and lead to a higher probability of U.S. direct talks with Taliban.

Besides Iran, Russia has also expanded its ties with Taliban after the emergence of ISIS in Afghanistan; although Russia is afraid of Daesh on the one hand, while on the other hand its ties with the U.S. are seen as a part of the continuation of the Cold War. Hence, Russia's efforts are not considered as peace-oriented. The National Unity Government (NUG), which has better ties with the U.S. in comparison to the second term of President Karzai, has relatively deteriorated ties with Russia. The Afghan President Ghani accused Russia of directly providing weapons to the Taliban. Based on this, the Afghan government is suspicious of Russia's peace efforts and counts it as part of Russia's Cold War tactics with the U.S.

Furthermore, a number of countries including Uzbekistan, made ties with the Taliban to protect its interests related to regional projects and to ensure safety from the incursion of ISIS into their countries. Thus, they try to play a role in the Afghan issue and peace talks with the Taliban.

### **Afghan Government and Regional Peace Efforts**

The basic reason behind the increase in actors in the Afghan peace efforts is the failure of the Afghan government in initiating peace talks with the Taliban, where a number of countries are pursuing an effort that would lead the Taliban to have talks with the Afghan government and the U.S.

Since 2010, the Afghan government initiated peace efforts with the Taliban; however, most of the time, it took the shape of a project and apart from spending millions of dollars on the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC), no concrete result has been seen yet. The NUG, however, went a step further than the Karzai Administration and even offered the Taliban some privileges for the sake of starting direct peace talks; but the strategy encountered serious barriers. The problem is that the Taliban consider the Afghan government "incapable" when it comes to the fate of the foreign forces deployed in Afghanistan and thus reject direct talks with the government. Furthermore, some other problems such as the

government's internal disputes, have also resulted in the failure of the Afghan government in this task.

As the role of regional countries began to increase with regards to the Afghan issue, the Afghan government also tried to grab the cooperation of some regional countries and bring these efforts under its control. For that reason, President Ghani, through initiating the Kabul Process, emphasized an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led peace process. Considering the efforts of the government, the Tashkent Conference and the Religious Scholars' meeting in Saudi Arabia should be considered. Although, the international community are not all set to neglect the government which has been brought to this level in 17 year, the result has been the government's insistence on bringing the peace process under its control. The Afghan government is afraid that if it fails in the peace talks, it will pave the way for further failures in the government and will cause the U.S., who was supporting the Afghan-led peace process, to enter the field by itself and disregard that matter to some extent. For this reason, Deputy Secretary of State Alice Wells's direct talks with the Taliban, was a matter of concern to the Afghan government, and through publishing a statement the Government said that no country substitutes the Afghan government in peace talks.

### **Taliban-U.S. Talks**

One the one hand, the government peace policy is unsuccessful as the Taliban provided negative response to President Ghani's call; on the other hand, the Taliban ties are about to expand with Iran and Russia, and that is what will make the Afghan issue more complex.

It still is not expected that the Taliban will easily sit at the negotiation table with the Afghan government because the entire effort on the issue was neutral – from putting pressure on Pakistan, to putting military and political pressure on the Taliban. And now, as the U.S. gave the green light to the Taliban, direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban seem impossible for now. Besides that, although the international pressures and arrival of Imran Khan has brought some hopes of Pakistan's cooperation, however, it still seems likely that pressures

on Pakistan and recent changes in the leadership of the country would not pave the way for direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Even though, the Taliban diplomacy is remarkably more active in the last few years. Taliban has established ties with Russia and a number of other countries in the region which has caused the U.S., besides other factors, to show readiness for direct talks with the group after 17 years.

Although, talks between Taliban and the U.S began in 2013 and talks were pursued on the exchange of Bowe Bergdahl and five imprisoned senior Taliban leaders; the office is yet to be accorded recognition as a result of the insistence of the Afghan government and, hence, they are yet to initiate official talks with the group.

### **Conclusion**

The efforts of regional countries, however, might not lead to direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban, but they contribute to the peace process in general, because the peace process seems impossible until the U.S. takes a direct role and part in it. Therefore, such pressure especially that of Russia, can have an impact on the U.S. position in this regard.

Taliban are enthusiastic for peace talks more than any other time. As the Taliban expressed its power and leverage in the ongoing war through a 3-day Eid Ul Fitr ceasefire, the ISIS group is also gaining power in Afghanistan day by day; hence, Taliban are afraid of their weakening role in the battlefield. Eventually, increase in the public, political, and military pressure on Taliban have also made them keen on peace talks in comparison to the past.    End

## Change in Foreign Forces Command and its Impact on Afghan War



U.S. Gen. Austin Scott Miller, who was officially appointed as the commander of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan and of Operation Resolute Support two months ago, took over on Sunday (September 2, 2018) at a ceremony in Kabul. Miller takes over from Gen John Nicholson, who led the NATO mission for over two years.

Scott Miller is the ninth commander of Foreign Forces in the 17-year long U.S. war on Afghanistan. Miller, who previously had served as commander of the U.S. Special Forces Operations Command, was nominated as the General Commander of the Foreign Forces in Afghanistan. The former generals in the Afghan war failed to defeat the anti-government armed groups and they have achieved little apart from the continuation and expansion of war during the past 17 years.



The consequences of changes in U.S. War Command during the past 17 years, the results of Trump's War Strategy on Afghan war and the changes needed for determining the fate of U.S. war in Afghanistan are discussed here.

### **A Glance at Changes in War Command (2001-2018)**

The ongoing Afghan War was initiated by U.S. and NATO 17 years ago when 9/11 attacks were claimed to be the main reasons behind the U.S. campaign on Afghanistan.

Initially, the war was started for the purpose of eliminating the Taliban regime and Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan. At first, the NATO and U.S. forces were able to defeat the Taliban; however, their defeat in 2001 was temporary and they were able to reinstate their operations in different parts of the country. Currently they are more powerful in comparison to the past few years. Insecurity has expanded to the center of the provinces and for now, a large portion of the Afghan soil is out of the control of the Afghan government.

Although, it is 17 years that the war is ongoing in Afghanistan and is further enflamed day by day, besides the parties involved, tens of thousands of civilians were also killed and wounded in the war, but neither the US nor the armed opposition groups were able to defeat their opponents from the battlefield.

During the last 17 years, the U.S and NATO were not able to defeat their armed opponents through increasing the number of soldiers and replacing commanders in leading the war and even bringing changes in the war strategies.

From 2001 to 2018, various generals like; Gen. David Mccarnan, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, Gen. David Petraeus, Gen. John Allin, Gen. Joseph Dunford, Gen. John Campbell, Gen. John Nicholson) took the command of NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan; however, none of them were able to win the Afghan war, except for escalating political and security instability in the country.

## **Donald Trump's Military Strategy**

The burning U.S. battlefield in Afghanistan is the legacy of former U.S. governments to the Trump Administration. Donald Trump, prior to ascending to Presidency, was strongly against the ongoing U.S. war in Afghanistan. However, shortly after becoming President, he emphasized the continuation of the Afghan War.

Trump announced his new Strategy for Afghanistan on August 22, 2017. The strategy was focused on continuation of support for the Afghan government, elimination of terrorist groups and eradication of their safe havens in Pakistan. On the day of announcing his strategy, Trump emphasized several times on victory in Afghan war and defined his victory as follow: "attack of enemies, eliminating ISIS, beating Al Qaeda, preventing Taliban from controlling Afghanistan and putting an end to attacks against the United States".

Presently, a year has passed from the announcement of the new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan, but the situation in Afghanistan has worsened more than ever. According to a recent report by SIGAR, more than 40 percent of Afghan soil is under the control of the armed opposition of the Afghan government. Also, the Taliban have started to carry offensive attacks on provincial centers. After the collapse of Kunduz, the Taliban were able to attack the provincial centers of Farah and Ghazni provinces, to seize the absolute majority of governmental administrations, and to continue fighting in the city for several days.

ISIS, who Trump spoke about eliminating, has increased its attacks in comparison to the past. Besides governmental bodies, ISIS has carried attacks on media, mosques, educational and cultural centers. The group also took responsibility for the rocket assaults on the Afghan Presidential Palace on the day of Eid al-Adha.

Considering the status quo, after a year, the U.S. now wants to win the war through bringing changes in its command; however, looking at the last 17 years and the changes brought in the command of foreign forces deployed in Afghanistan, it is assumed the changes in the leadership of the foreign forces deployed in Afghanistan will not be effective.

## **Need for Change in U.S. Strategy**

While a decade and half has passed since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and beginning of the bloody war here, the only achievement the U.S. could have has been the continuation of the Afghan war and the U.S. presence in the region.

Though the Trump Administration, unlike former administrations, has also tried to defeat the armed opposition through war and military pressure; these pressures are nothing but a repetition of a failed experience.

A while ago, after a year passed from the U.S. new strategy on Afghanistan, some foreign agencies had reported that the U.S. might review its war strategy toward Afghanistan. Prior to release of such reports, the New York Times had reported that President Trump has ordered his diplomats to initiate direct talks with the Taliban.

Following these initial reports, further reports on direct talks between U.S. officials and Taliban representatives in Doha, the capital of Qatar were released. Although, the meeting made Afghan people optimistic about peace; the realization of real peace depends on the continuation of these negotiations and the achievement of a positive outcome, something that is currently in a state of ambiguity.

Meanwhile, considering the U.S. war in Afghanistan, changes in command of foreign forces deployed in Afghanistan is not considered an effective solution for the Afghan war; because every military commander has to follow a predetermined strategy and for now, Scott Miller also has to follow the war strategy of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Gen. Scott Miller was among the first commanders entering Afghanistan during the U.S. campaign on Afghanistan in 2001. Miller was responsible for training and equipping local and police forces in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2011 and was commander of Joint Special Operations Command in 2013. Generally, Scott Miller is one of the starters of the U.S. campaign on Afghanistan and has experience in war policies and how to deal with the armed opposition of the Afghan government; but, for now, appointing such persons as the leaders of foreign forces deployed in Afghanistan will cause severity of war.

Overall, the U.S. and its allies are required to work on putting an end to their longest war in Afghanistan. Currently, what should be worked on is how to assist in the continuation of U.S.-Taliban talks leading to a palpable outcome.

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