

ABDULLAH'S VISIT TO PAKISTAN AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

Center for Strategic & Regional Studies - Kabul



CSRS ANALYSIS | Issue No. 356

04 Oct 2020

Website: www.csrskabul.com - www.csrskabul.af

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On 28th September, 2020, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the High Council of National Reconciliation had a 3-day visit to Pakistan at the invitation of prime minister Imran Khan. Before his visit, President Ashraf Ghani had a telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Imran Khan about the Afghan peace. What will be effects of Abdullah's visit on the peace process? What was Pakistan's role in the Afghan peace so far? And how its role will affect the Afghan peace in the future? Center for Strategic and Regional studies analysis these issues here.

Aims of Abdullah's Visit to Pakistan

On the official invitation of prime minister Imran Khan, Chairman of the High Council of National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah visited Pakistan on 28th August, 2020. During his visit, he had meetings with the chairmen of the senate and the parliament, Prime Minister Imran Khan, President Arif Alawi, and some religious scholars. In addition, he addressed to the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) about bilateral relations between both countries and the Afghan peace.

Abdullah Abdullah was the chief executive officer of the unity government before his appointment as the chairman of HCNR and is visiting Pakistan after 12 years. This might be the reason behind the warm welcoming by Pakistani officials. Considering the political

disagreements between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, Pakistan might be striving to express that they are supporting them even in difficult times. Also, the goal might be pushing to reduce India's influence in Afghanistan and prevent any possible threat that may occur from the Afghan soil. This is due to the fact that the foreign minister of Pakistan was although optimistic for the Afghan peace, but expressed his concerns about those who strive to sabotage the peace process.

Pakistani officials titled Abdullah Abdullah as a key figure in the peace process and assured of their ample support from the Afghan peace. Prime minister Imran expressed to Abdullah Abdullah that any decision made by Afghans in intra-Afghan dialogue will be accepted by his country. While addressing the institute of strategic studies in Islamabad, foreign minister Shah Mohamood Quraishi has also emphasized that his country has made efforts to bring a lasting peace to Afghanistan and will continue to support the Afghan peace. Although Pakistan has made promises to contribute to the Afghan peace, but future will disclose about its role in the Afghan peace.

Overall, Abdullah's visit has to some extent helped to eliminate those obstacles that were contributing to shamble the bilateral relation between both countries. Pakistan religious scholars also assured Abdullah of their comprehensive contribution to the Afghan peace. Also, Pakistani scholars will reportedly visit Kabul regarding the Afghan peace. If the Afghan government was able to obtain support of Pakistani scholars, it will be easy to resolve complex matters of the intra-Afghan dialogue in a short period of time, since the Taliban respect Pakistani scholars. Consequently, it will help to reduce violence and improve bilateral relations between both countries. To express its good intentions, Pakistan has declared about enabling trade opportunities and facilitating better visa services to Afghans.

Pakistan's Role in the Afghan Peace

Since the US invasion in 2001, former president Hamid Karzai made more than 20 trips to Pakistan to obtain its support regarding the Afghan peace. However, his visits for peace were unsuccessful. At that time, former president even tried to contact Abdul Ghani Berader, deputy of the Taliban movement, who also eager to discuss peace. But Mulla Abdul Ghani Beradar was

captured in 2010 in Karachi, which resulted in postponement of peace process. Later in 2018, he was released from prison.

Zalmi Khalilzad, US special Representative of Afghan reconciliation has expressed to the USIP that Mulla Abdul Ghani Beradar was released from prison upon his request. Whereas other members of the Taliban who were interested in peace were either killed or captured in Pakistan. Later, the political office of the Taliban was inaugurated in Qatar which was criticized by the Afghan government at the first stages. However, the office was not only able to reduce Pakistan's pressure on leaders of the Taliban, but contributed to the commencement of peace process.

Through the office, the Taliban had 18 months of complex discussions with the US regarding the Afghan peace. Consequently, their negotiations reached a relative success and both sides signed a peace deal on 29th April, 2020. During the 18-month discussions, the US and the Taliban officials visited Pakistan several times. When Imran Khan won the election and got elected as the prime minister in July, 2018, Pakistan was under strong criticisms of president Donald Trump, claiming that Pakistan does not play constructive role in Afghan peace, as expected by the US.

In September, 2018, when Zalmi Khalilzad was appointed as the US special representative for Afghan peace, it was anticipated that he will take serious actions against Pakistan. In January, 2020 however, Senator Lindsay Graham visited Pakistan and facilitated face-to-face meeting between Imran Khan and Donald Trump. His visit to the US provided an opportunity for Pakistan to express its role in the Afghan peace. During his first series of visits to the region in December, 2020, Special representative Zalmi Khalilzad earnestly requested Imran Khan to support the Afghan peace. Subsequently, Prime minister Imran Khan had his first meeting with President Donald Trump in July, 2020, and discussed about the Afghan peace.

In addition to US officials, Afghan officials have also strongly criticized Pakistan and accused it of supporting the Taliban and other militants. However, Pakistani officials have continuously rejected such claims and have expressed that Afghan peace is beneficial for Pakistan. According to them, Pakistan has also been harmed due to the Afghan war.

Who Does Pakistan Actually Support?

The Taliban fought with US and its allies until 29th February, 2020. On 28th February, 2020 however, the US and the Taliban reached a partial agreement about the Afghan peace. Based on the agreement, both sides will not attack each other, and 5000 prisoner of the Taliban will be released by the Afghan government in exchange of 1000 prisoners of the government. Although the prisoners release process was planned to be completed within 10 days, but it took around 6 months. During the period, Pakistan used to request both sides to release prisoners and commence intra-Afghan talks.

During the disagreements over prisoners' release, the Taliban visited Pakistan. And when the Afghan government called upon Loya Jirga for the release of remaining 400 prisoners of the Taliban and the Jirga sanctioned the release, Pakistan welcomed the decision. In addition, during the opening ceremony of the intra-Afghan dialogue, Pakistani officials once again emphasized that the Afghan war can only end through talks and does not have military solution.

Pakistan satisfaction With Afghan Peace

Pakistan is among those countries of the region whose role in Afghan peace is vital. Considering India's influence over Afghanistan, as India has invested around 4.2 billion USD on various infrastructures such as Salma dam, Chahbahar port, the building of the Parliament and others, and the US pullout, Pakistan is forced to not only have close relations with the Taliban, but to have constructive relations with those Afghan officials who are close to India. Through this, Pakistan strives to reduce the risk of India's use of Afghan soil against them.

Previously, Pakistan used to pressure the Taliban to attract privileges from the US and the Afghan government. However, as the Taliban has attained global support and recognition, Pakistan avoids pressuring Taliban and even forewent hosting intra-Afghan dialogue. The country strives to express to the US and the Afghan government that they support the Afghan peace and shows off their involvement in the process.

As the development works of CPEC project will first commence in Pakistan, in order for its

success, Pakistan is forced to contribute to the Afghan peace. The project can face obstacles due to insecurities in Afghanistan and its failure can worsen the poor economic condition of Pakistan.

In addition, the US has disclosed importance of India in its policy for southern Asia. On the other hand, through some constructive actions, Pakistan strive to obtain support of the future administration of Afghanistan.

Undoubtedly, a lasting peace in Afghanistan is not possible without the support of countries in the region. This is because the matter of interests the US and China has complicated the Afghan peace process.

A lasting peace in Afghanistan is beneficial for countries in region, especially for Pakistan. As Pakistan officials express their concerns about the use of Afghan soil against Pakistan by India, hence, if Pakistan wants to reduce its concerns, the country should play a key role in the Afghan peace process. If insecurities persist in Afghanistan, such concerns of Pakistan may increase.



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