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## Preface

Last week, the spokesman for the Pakistani Army said that the peace talks stalled with the secret information being revealed by Kabul. The secret information was the disclosure of the death news of Mullah Mohammad Omar which caused the peace process to become stalled. However, after the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban stalled and the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan broke down, the regional diplomacy regarding this issue has been activated and the struggles for revival of stalled peace process are going on.

In the recent few weeks, the special envoys of UN, America and China to Afghanistan and Pakistan has visited to Kabul and Islamabad and views were exchanged regarding the revival of Afghan peace process. Besides that, the issue of Afghanistan's peace process was included in the visit agendas of Pakistani officials to America. What would be the role of regional diplomacy in the revival of the stalled peace process and what is the probability of reinitiating this process? It is discussed in this week's Analysis.

You will also read about the relations between the Taliban and the Russian Federation in the second part of this Analysis. Last week, some reports regarding Taliban's meeting with Russian officials in Tajikistan were broadcasted. Since last few months, after the increasing presence of ISIL in Afghanistan and especially, after the Taliban seized Kunduz for some days and insecurities in the North of Afghanistan has increased, the Russian's concerns toward Afghanistan have also increased. Therefore, it is said that Russia, though contacting the Taliban, wants to ensure that the insecurities are not going to be extended to the Central Asia. Considering the background of the ties between the Taliban and Russia, what is the possibility of Russia's military assistance to this group?

These are the issues which will be discussed in details in this issue of weekly analysis.

## The Regional Diplomacy and the Possibility of Reinitiating the Peace Process



From the last one month, the regional and international diplomacy on the stalled Afghan peace process is mobilized once again. In this regard, the Chinese Vice-President had visited Afghanistan and the special representative of China to Afghanistan and Pakistan had also visited to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Besides that, the special representatives of the United States and United Nations had also visited to Pakistan in the last three weeks.

The senior officials of Pakistan, after the announcement of the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar, which caused the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan to become frozen, have repeatedly expressed that they want the revival of peace process. On the other hand, the Afghan side is also hopeful for reinitiating the peace process.

How was the regional diplomacy regarding the peace process? The Afghan side would soften its position or not? And, what would be the possibility of reinitiating the peace process in the future? Here they are discussed.

## **Pakistan wants the revival of peace process!**

After the Pak-Afghan relations broke down, a lot of senior Pakistani officials- from political leaders to military commanders-have repeatedly talked about renewing the peace process. A month ago, Nawaz Sharif during his second official visit to US gave a speech in a US think-tank and said that: “We have told Afghan President Ashraf Ghani that Pakistan was prepared to help revive stalled Afghan peace talks but could not bring the Taliban to the negotiating table and be asked to kill them at the same time.<sup>1</sup>”

An important part of Obama and Nawaz Sharif talks was related to security and peace process in Afghanistan and this issue was also reflected in the joint statement of Pakistan and America. They in the joint statement said: “Both leaders expressed their commitment to advance an Afghanowned and -led peace and reconciliation process between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban, and called on Taliban leaders to enter into direct talks with Kabul and work toward a sustainable peace settlement.<sup>2</sup>”

Raheel Sharif, the Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan had a 5-day visit to America last week; an important part of his visit’s agenda was related to Afghanistan. However, the details of his visit especially related to Afghanistan are yet to be cleared, but the spokesman for the Pakistani Army, Gen. Asem Bajwa, through his Twitter Account has provided some details and said that the challenges and solutions toward the Afghan owned peace process was discussed in this visit.

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<sup>1</sup> See online: <http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/10/23/pakistan-s-sharif-urges-renewed-peace-talks-in-afghanistan>

<sup>2</sup> See online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/22/2015-joint-statement-president-barack-obama-and-prime-minister-nawaz>

## Why Pakistan is eager to revive peace talks?

After the peace process became stalled, senior Pakistani officials, specifically the Foreign Minister, the Prime Minister and the Chief of Army Staff have repeatedly talked about the revival of peace process.

The question emerges that why Pakistan is that much eager to revive the peace process? It can be answered in the following two points:

**First:** Besides the several privileges that the Afghan government provided to Pakistan, the Pakistani side did not take any remarkable step regarding the peace process and it only provided a meeting with a number of Taliban leaders that had not got a clear result. First, it did not do its best regarding the peace process. Second, the Murree meeting near Islamabad and the appointment of Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, as the new leader of the Taliban in Pakistan empowered this point of view that Pakistan, if it wants, can make the Taliban ready to have peace negotiations with the Afghan government. The third reason was that Pakistan, after the announcement of the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar, felt itself alone in the diplomatic ground; it is why it is now continuously emphasizing on the revival of peace process.

**Second:** For the first time in the past fourteen years, Pakistan had grabbed a chance to make good relations with Afghanistan; even this occurred at the cost of reducing the Indian influence in Afghanistan! A new report of the US Congress points this matter and said that Pakistan is afraid of closer ties between Kabul and Delhi. However, now, Pakistan is afraid of losing this chance.

## Regional Diplomacy

The special representatives of China, U.S. and U.N. had visited Pakistan and all of them emphasized the revival of the Afghan peace process. However, before these visits, the vice-president of China visited Kabul and the Afghan President, during this visit, regarding the peace process said that: “We have the same policy and approach towards China and our other strategic partners, and would like to work

together for a long lasting peace firstly based on equality between Afghanistan and Pakistan as a two sovereign countries and secondly would like to carry out joint and sustainable measures for the regional peace”.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese Vice-President “Li Chau Yuen” in his speech announced his support to Afghanistan regarding the Afghan-led peace process and its struggles for improving its relations with neighboring countries.

After this visit, Mr. Deng Xijun Special Representative of the People’s Republic of China for Afghanistan and Pakistan visited Islamabad on November 6. Earlier, he was the Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan before that. He, then, traveled to Kabul and met the leaders of the National Unity Government (NUG), where he said that China is ready to provide facilities for the talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government; because the peace in Afghanistan is also beneficial to China. He said that his aim from this trip is to understand the thoughts of Afghan and Pakistani sides and added that he will visit Afghanistan and Pakistan for the same aim in a month.

On November 11, US acting assistant Special Representative for South Asia Laurel Miller had a trip to Islamabad and met the special advisor to the Prime Minister in Foreign Affairs, Tariq Fartimi in the Foreign Ministry. Meanwhile, Nicholas Haysom, the UN Secretary General's special representative to Afghanistan also visited Pakistan and met Sartaj Aziz, the foreign affairs’ advisor to the Pakistani Prime Minister.

The revival of the peace process was emphasized in all of these meetings. The Pakistan's role in the peace process was also lauded and put pressures on Pakistan to make the Taliban ready to peace talks; but whether the peace process will revive or not? Its probability is discussed below.

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<sup>3</sup> See online: <http://pa.azadiradio.org/content/article/27342782.html>

## The Possibility of the revival of Peace Process

Besides the mobilizing of regional and international diplomacy regarding revival of the peace process, the following three reasons can also increase the probability of the peace process:

**First:** Considering the estimation and experience, Taliban's operations would decrease in the upcoming winter and, due to this, the ground for the revival of the peace process would be paved.

**Second:** If rather a third-party individual and someone who does not have a background of fighting against the Taliban is appointed as a head of the High Peace Council (HPC), it would be considered as a green light to the Taliban by the government, which would mean that the Afghan government is truthfully committed to peace talks with the Taliban.

**Third:** There are rumors that Omar Zakhilwal, the advisor to the Afghan President would be appointed as an ambassador and President's special envoy to Pakistan. Omar Zakhilwal has confirmed these rumors on his Facebook Page and Twitter Account that he has talked with government and both of them are agreed, but the decision is yet to be finalized. If Omar Zakhilwal was really appointed as an ambassador in Pakistan, it would be a positive diplomatic gesture to Pakistani side and would create a new atmosphere for trust-building. The reason is that the probability of the revival of the peace process in a large extent is based upon trust-building. Now, the entire side including the Afghan government, Pakistan and Taliban are suspicious of each other more than every other time and this suspicion can be eliminated through practical actions only.

## The Afghan Taliban and its Relations with Moscow



After the Taliban took control of the Kunduz City for a while, the Afghan government regained it, later; however, in the aftermath of fall of Kunduz, rumors about the contacts between the Taliban and the Russian authorities are heard in Afghan media. It is said that these talks have taken place on the border of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Afghan officials expressed their concerns on this process, and some MPs have considered it as intervention in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.

However, neither the Russian official authorities in Russia or Tajikistan have expressed any reaction over this and nor the Taliban has confirmed or denied this news. Moreover, if we assume that they had contacted recently, however it wouldn't be fresh news by any mean because there are contacts between the Taliban and Russians since several years especially after the Taliban's political office was shifted to Qatar.



## **The Afghan-Russia relations during the Taliban Regime**

The start of the Taliban activities in Afghanistan in 1995 prompted Russian concerns. Russians considered Taliban movement as a conspiracy of Western countries to destabilize Central Asia and as a result they make contacts with the government of Prof. Rabbani in Kabul.

The government of Mujahedeen led by Prof. Rabbani that was increasingly vulnerable against the Taliban movement extended its hand to Russian and in an important step, it hosted the negotiations between Imam Ali Rahman, the head of the Tajik government supported by Moscow, and its opposition, and the Tajiks Peace Treaty was signed between Said Abdullah Noori, the leader of the opposition and Imam Ali Rahman, the President of Tajikistan.

Akbar Toorajanzada, one of the former leaders of the Tajik opposition on 14 May 2013 in a program of BBC Persian TV named (On the Other Word) said: "Prof. Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud helped us in the beginning, but when the pressure of The Taliban increased on them, they became increasingly dependent on Moscow and therefore, they put pressure on us to deal with (Rahman). We became sacrificed of the war of Prof. Rabbani with the Taliban."

At that time, the Russian Federation, despite having economic problems, helped the government of Prof. Rabbani. After the Taliban took control of the Kabul and the government of Prof. Rabbani moved to the North, these aids continued to be supplied through Tajikistan.

After the Taliban took power, it sheltered the armed oppositions of the Central Asian Regimes; however, it did not allow them to cross the border and fight inside those republics. After the Taliban, entered for the first time to Kunduz and Mazar-e Sahrif, it issued a statement and ensured the Central Asian countries that they will not face any danger from the soil of Afghanistan and the Taliban wishes that its borders with its entire neighboring countries will be the borders of peace and friendship forever.

However, the Taliban responded the Russian Federation that was supporting the anti-Taliban forces by making contacts with the government of Aslan Maskhadov in Chechnya that were fighting against the Russian Federation and eventually, the Taliban, was the first and the last regime, which officially recognized the Chechen government.

The Russian Federation, through the Taliban Embassy in the United Arab Emirates, officially informed the Taliban that Russia wants its loans worth \$11B from Afghanistan since 1979, (These \$11B were the cost of Russia's war in Afghanistan). Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, the Taliban Foreign Minister wrote in response that not only Afghanistan owes any penny to Russia but it also reserves the right to take compensation of war from the Russian Federation. From a hand, the Russian Federation claims that the Soviet Union is responsible for war in Afghanistan and destruction of this country, however, on the other hand, when it comes to material interests, consider himself an heir to the Soviet Union.

### **After the fall of the Taliban**

United States of America's war on Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban regime provided the opportunity for the Russian Federation to take a deep breath; still, it had concern about warriors for Central Asia and Caucasus present in the ranks of the Taliban. However, these concerns paled when these elements taken refuge in the tribal areas of Waziristan far from the Northern areas of Afghanistan and the borders of Central Asia.

From the Russian perspective, the continuation of war in Afghanistan wasn't considered as a threat to Russia and as long as the war continued, the Central Asian countries were secured from being intervened by Western countries. Afghanistan's insecurities also impact China's investment in Russia's exclusive preserve "Central Asia" to remain stalled.

Russia's major concern was related to the increasing drug cultivation and production under the control of foreign forces in Afghanistan, which the Russian was considering as an Opium War against them. A few years ago, the US to give confidence to Russians, allowed their forces to participate in several counter-narcotics operations along with American and English forces in Afghanistan.

### **Taliban and Russian Contacts in Recent Years**

The first contacts between Russians and the Taliban occurred in 2006 and 2007; these contacts were in relation to the prevention of drug trafficking to Central Asia that eventually comes out from Russia, and that Russians were urging the Taliban to prevent this work. These contacts can be considered as a testing Taliban, where the Taliban were not so successful and, then, the contacts were cut off.

In 2013, the Taliban seized a helicopter for a foreign private company that had to land due to poor weather conditions in *Arza*, locality of Logar. The pilot of this helicopter was a Ukrainian holding Russian citizenship. The release of these hostages provided an opportunity for Taliban and Russia to contact with each other in Dubai and eventually, after several months, the Taliban freed Russian hostage.

Hence, it can be said that the Russian have contacted the Taliban in limited cases, for example, when they have a problem or need, these contacts are occurred but the Russians have never provided assistance especially the military assistance to the Taliban in order to make problems to the foreign forces in Afghanistan. The Russian officials have repeatedly warned about the early withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

### **Concerns over spreading insecurities to Central Asia**

Recently, Taliban's activities in the North have caused concerns to the Russian Federation. These concerns were originated from that the Afghan military officials claimed that the war of Kunduz was leaded by foreign warriors in the ranks of the Taliban which most of them were from the Central Asian countries.

However, the Taliban had previously announced that they have no plan for war outside Afghanistan, but with the emergence of “The Islamic State” group or *Daesh* and its fight with the Taliban in the East of Afghanistan has changed the

situation. “The Islamic State” group consider the entire Islamic world as its territory and has included seizing these areas in its priorities.

On the other hand, the largest and the most powerful front of “The Islamic State” group is consisted of volunteer fighters from Central Asia which has made Russia to adopt a preventive strategy in order to prevent their influence and ultimately their return to Central Asia and, through military presence it is trying to eliminate them at the battlefield of Syria.

Russia is worried due to uncertainties about the emergence and spread of ISIS in the world that whether this group may start its operations in the Central Asia and, in this regard, the role of Afghanistan as the gateway and the opening of Central Asia are very important.

On the other hand, controlling some part of the Northern borders of Afghanistan with the Central Asian countries by the Taliban, especially some districts in Badakhshan and Darqad District of Takhar compels the Russian to have contacts with the Taliban.

Therefore, a number of analysts believe that if the Russian see any threat to Central Asian countries from Afghanistan; it would perhaps carry out a similar operation in Afghanistan as it has done it in Syria. However, the military assistance of Moscow to the groups other than the Afghan government including the Taliban and with the aim of preventing the closeness of ISIS to the borders of the Central Asia resembles more anecdotal and it does not seem practical.

The End

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