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Preface

The National Unity Government (NUG) announced the new leadership for the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) after a long delay. The Afghan HPC has been the subject of the critics and instead of a mediator it is considered one side of the war. The background of the Afghan HPC, the reasons for its failure, and appointing the new authorities are the issues we will analyze here.

Besides that in the fourth meeting of the quadrilateral talks the four countries decided to commence direct talks with the Taliban in the first week of March in Islamabad. The quadrilateral peace talks aim at bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiation table with the cooperation of the Pakistan. The Pakistani Chief of Army Staff Raheel Sharif talked about the Afghan Peace Process with the senior officials of Qatar during his visit to Qatar two days before the fourth quadrilateral meeting. The question is whether what are the obstacles towards direct talks through quadrilateral meetings? And how feasible is the commitments made in these meetings?

You would read more detailed analysis about the above two subjects put together by the Editorial Board of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies.

High Peace Council role in the Afghan Peace Process (2012-2016)



The National Unity Government (NUG) announced the new chairman and authorities of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) after one year delay during a special ceremony on Sunday 22 February 2016. Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani, a former Jihadi leader is appointed as the chairman of the HPC and Mohammad Karim Khalili, Habiba Surabi, Ata-Ullah Salim, Malawi Khayber, Haji Din Mohammad and Malawi Khedam are appointed as the deputy chairmen of the council.

The Afghan government appointed the new authorities for the HPC two days before the fourth quadrilateral meeting and according to the joint press release of this meeting, the Afghan government and the Taliban are to talk directly in the first week of March in Pakistan.

What role has the Afghan HPC played in the Peace Process? What will be the impacts of the new structure of the HPC on Afghan peace process? These are the question we try to answer here.

The need to form HPC!

After intensification of the war in 2008, the eighth year of the US and NATO war in Afghanistan, the Afghan government and International Community for the first time felt the necessity of opening a path to peace talks with the Taliban. Thus Kai Aida, special representative of the UN in Afghanistan started the first peace talks with the Taliban.

The years after 2008 were the bloodiest years for American soldiers, as in 2009, an American soldier Bowe Bergdahl was captured by the Taliban in Paktika. Thus, Americans were also convinced to include negotiations in their “war strategy” against the Taliban.

On the other hand, the Afghan government also began talks with individual Taliban members. However, most of the talks were conducted with fake Taliban (who were not real Taliban) but some real Taliban members were also among them. Later in June 2010 the Afghan government called the “Peace consultative Loya Jirga¹” and due to the recommendation of this Jirga the Afghan HPC was established which was later followed by the “Peace and Reintegration Program”.

Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani was appointed as the first chairman of the Afghan HPC who was assassinated in September 2011 in Kabul. Later, his son Salahuddin Rabbani was appointed as the chairman of this council. After the formation of the NUG in January 2015, Sallahuddin Rabbani was appointed as the Afghan Foreign Minister and this led the HPC to carry on without a chairman for almost one year, eventually on 22 February 2016, Pir Saied Ahmad Gailani was appointed as the chairman of the HPC.

¹ Loya Jirga is the grand assembly in Afghan traditions.

Evaluation of the Afghan HPC

If one evaluates the Afghan HPC briefly, he would recognize that:

1. Due to the efforts of this council, some individuals joined the peace process.
2. The council is yet to have any remarkable achievement in the peace process.

Based on the statistics of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), from 2010 to the third quarter of 2015, approximately 10578 armed individuals joined the peace process, 988 of which were the leaders of the armed oppositions and they have also handed over around 8101 light and heavy weapons to the Afghan government.²

The terms “armed individuals” and “their leaders” can be questioned; it is also a question whether have this number of the armed opposition leaders really joined the peace process because according to the local experts, in the areas where the program was implemented, it was politically dealt with and thus the responsible authorities distributed the money among their own followers.

From the very beginning of its establishment, the HPC has spent a large amount of money, but it still has failed to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table and thus all these monies are wasted.

Although, neither the Afghan government nor the HPC has informed the Afghan people about the expenditures of the HPC; but according to the statistics provided by NGOs, about \$782 million are spent for the “Peace and Reintegration Program”.³ Based on the statistics of UNDP, the donor countries have donated \$131.766 million to Afghanistan in connection to its peace and reconciliation process.⁴

² Read the UNDP report by clicking on this link:

<http://www.af.undp.org/content/dam/afghanistan/docs/crisisprev/APRP/APRP-3QPR-2015.pdf>

³ In this regard see the Pajhwok report:

<http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2015/09/02/huge-expenses-afghan-peace-effort-achieve-little-gains>

⁴ See the UNDP report for more info:

<http://www.af.undp.org/content/dam/afghanistan/docs/Project-Summaries/ProjectSum-012016/APRP%20-%20Project%20Summary%20Jan%202016.pdf>

The reasons for the failure of the Afghan HPC

Due to the following factors the Afghan HPC failed to bring peace in the country:

Lack of a specific mechanism and policy for peace: since its establishment on 5 September 2010, the Afghan HPC does not have a specific and comprehensive policy to bring the government's armed oppositions to the negotiation table. In this regard its major policy was the "peace and reintegration program" which the Taliban considered "complete surrender" to the Afghan government and not the program for peace. Thus, lacking a realistic policy was a main factor of HPC's failure.

Lack of independence competence: beside the lack of policy on peace and reconciliation, the HPC was not offered competence and independence required to act independently in the Afghan peace process.

Anti-Taliban figures in the council: most of the HPC members are anti-Taliban figures who precede fighting against them; and the Taliban does not trust them and are suspicious about their will for peace. Thus, this is one of the main reasons for the Afghan HPC's failure.

Lack of coordination: generally people with conflicting thoughts are gathered in the council. On one hand a number of the former Taliban (such as Abdul Hakim Mujahed who was formerly acting HPC head) owns the membership of the HPC; on the other hand, some anti-Taliban elements such as Usrad Sayaf are gathered in the HPC. thus non coordination and contradictory thoughts of the council's members have led to major problems.

Lack of impartiality/neutrality: HPC was established by the Afghan government and the Afghan government pays expenditures. Therefore the HPC is deemed to be a government institution and one side of the conflict rather than an impartial mediator. The majority of the council's decisions and positions are determined by the Afghan government and due to the lack of impartiality of the HPC the Taliban termed it "an address to safeguard US's interests".⁵

⁵ for further info visit the link bellow:

http://www.bbc.com/pashto/afghanistan/2010/09/100929_taliban-deny-talks.shtml

Political bribery: judging the people who were appointed as the HPC's head by the Afghan government, one can conclude that this position was used as a political bribe. On the other hand, the provincial authorities of HPC used the council for their own political interests and thus financially benefited their followers.

The new leadership and the council's role in peace talks

The former Afghan president always emphasized on the Afghan HPC as the only address for negotiation with the armed oppositions, but when Ashraf Ghani came to power, he relied on Pakistan and China and mostly carried out the peace talks through representatives of the Presidential Office and the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thus the Afghan HPC was marginalized from the Afghan Peace Process.

In the Murree talks where for the first time the representatives of the Afghan government talked face to face with the Taliban the council's role was limited.

The very fact that the representatives of the Afghan Foreign Ministry participate the quadrilateral peace meetings between the Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States of America and China, on one hand shows that the Afghan government does not trust the council and on the other hand it explains the council's role in the Afghan peace process. On the other hand, no remarkable change has occurred in the structure of the HPC and still it seems that the positions in this council is being offered as political bribe.

Direct talks with the Taliban: The Past and the Future



The fourth quadrilateral meeting was convened in Kabul. According to the joint press release of this meeting, the face-to-face talks with the Taliban will commence in the first week of March in Islamabad.

Prior to this, in the third meeting, the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) had decided to start direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban at the end of February; however, it is not yet clear why these talks have not started while the month is almost ended.

Recent decisions about direct talks come at a time when the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif talked about the Afghan peace process with senior Qatari officials during his one day visit to Qatar which took place two days before the fourth quadrilateral talks.

The background and importance of direct talks with the Taliban, and the possibility of holding these talks in March are the issues that will be analyzed here.

Significance of direct talks in the Afghan peace process

Whether there were conflicts between foreigners and the internal parties, or internal forces that were involved in armed conflict with each other; the conflicts were being resolved through face to face talks almost in every country; thus, one can conclude that only direct talks would put an end to conflicts. For instance, the “Paris Peace Agreement” which was made between the governments of the Northern Vietnam and Southern Vietnam, the U.S and Provisional Revolutionary Government of Vietnam brought the “Vietnam War” to an end.

It goes the same way in Afghanistan, the entire peace efforts that have not contained direct talks were either fruitless or had negative consequences. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Geneva Conference was convened, but due to the lack of direct talks with the real sides of the war, it had unwanted outcomes and became one of the factors behind the “Afghan Civil War”.

The direct talks will also make the country to get even closer to security, peace and prosperity. However, it is important that these talks should take place with the real parties of the war and it should not be due to the pressure.

The background of direct peace talks

The face to face talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban first happened during Hamid Karzai era and were mostly carried out with the Taliban individually; Mullah Baradar, Mullah Motasim Agha Jan and some other Taliban were among them.

The Muree talks were held in Islamabad between the Afghan government and the representatives of the Taliban that were really representing them and were ready to set around the negotiation table with the Afghan government. The talks were held after the Afghan government’s outreach to Pakistan for its peace process and when Pakistan was under pressure due to the promise of Raheel Sharif about bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiation table in March 2015. Therefore,

the way was paved for the Murree talks to be commenced in June 2015, but it came to a halt after the disclosure of the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar.

After the Murree talks came to a halt and the regional and international efforts for Afghan peace process began, Quadrilateral peace talks commenced in December 2015, and its fourth meeting was recently held in Kabul. In the first and second meeting of this series the four countries decided about the procedure of the quadrilateral meetings and in the third meeting they discussed over the “road map” for talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban and in its fourth meeting they determined to commence direct talks with the Taliban in the first week of March in Islamabad.

Obstacles toward direct talks

Considering the realities on the ground, the obstacles to face to face talks with the Taliban through the quadrilateral meetings are as follows:

- At the start of the quadrilateral meetings, all the efforts were focused on the Taliban to be brought to the negotiation table by Pakistan rather than gaining the confidence the Taliban which is the main opposition party of the ongoing Afghan war. Therefore, the Taliban does not trust these talks and is suspicious about its intentions.
- Unrecognition of the Taliban’s political office in Qatar paves the way for the failure of the face to face talks; because the Taliban believes that their Qatar Office is the only address to carry out the talks and this has been proven in the past that the decisions made by the Qatar Office were acceptable for the Taliban.
- On one hand, not removing the bans to which the Taliban influential leaders are subject can also be an obstacle towards the talks because if the influential Taliban leaders did not participate in the talks, then the talks would be mostly failed. On the other hand, releasing the prisoners and fulfilling some other conditions can build trust between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Will direct talks begin?

After the fourth meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, the Afghan Taliban's political office in Qatar declared that they were neither informed about quadrilateral meetings and direct talks, nor were they contacted in this regard.

If one study the Taliban's diplomacy in the past years, one will find that declaring difficult positions the Taliban either are not prepared for the talks or they wanted to talk directly, as in the cases of releasing the Russian pilot and the American soldier, Bowe Bergdahl.

Whether direct talks with the Taliban will commence within two weeks, is a significant question. Because in the past when Pakistan made solid promise to pave the way for face to face talks with the Taliban, it happened after long delay and with a lot of difficulties and only once in the past one and a half year.

The face to face talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in March is not a challenging task; but the question is who will represent the Afghan Taliban in these talks? If the representative of the Taliban's Qatar office or the members of the Taliban's leading council did not participate the talks, it will once again fail.

The end

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Note: Please let us know your feedback and suggestions for the improvement of Weekly analysis.