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PEACE INITIATIVES AND PROSPECT OF PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Abstract

After the 9/11 attacks, the US-led coalition launched the global War on Terror, invaded Afghanistan and ousted the Taliban from power. The Karzai government came into power in January 2002. Nevertheless, the war is going on even after twelve years. Peace remains unachievable in Afghanistan while the war has spilled over into neighbouring Pakistan, given rise to several militant groups, continues to create instability in bordering countries. To end this bloody war, various parties have undertaken peace initiatives with the Taliban but the initiatives are facing growing uncertainty for various reasons e.g. the nature of the proposed withdrawal of NATO forces by 2014 is not clear, parties lack consensus, prioritise their individual interests and viewpoints, attach various conditions and change positions before and during peace talks etc. Pakistan, despite being a crucial actor in the current war in Afghanistan, has been experiencing its own security problems and much troubled relations with both Afghanistan and the NATO since joining the war. These have been negatively impacting peace initiatives. The country also remains deeply suspicious about another regional power India's growing involvement in and relations with Afghanistan. Besides the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban (TTP), there are several other militant groups active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, such as the Haqqani Network or the Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (HIG) who pose significant threats. But they are seldom invited in peace talks and similarly, their positions or perspectives on peace process are hardly ever addressed or taken into consideration. Meanwhile, the Karzai government's relations with the US-led coalition are also not working well; this is visible from the increasing disagreements and mistrust plaguing their mutual ties. Owing to these reasons, a long-lasting peace seems unattainable for Afghanistan in near future.

1. Introduction

For centuries, Afghanistan has been a battleground involving several empires and countries: the Greeks, numbers of Persian and Indian empires, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, Russian and British empires (Britain and Russia waged The Great Game, three Anglo-Afghan Wars, the Soviet Invasion of 1979 etc) are to name a few. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 codenamed "Operation Enduring Freedom" began with a view to finding and punishing the perpetrators behind the 9/11 attacks, particularly the Saudi billionaire and Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden living in Afghanistan and protected by the ruling Taliban. They refused to surrender him, angered the US and thus the "War on Terror" began.¹

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¹ Stephen M. Walt, "Reshaping U.S. Foreign Policy", *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2001-02, pp. 56-57.

With the Taliban's fall in November 2001 and assumption of power by the Hamid Karzai government in January 2002, it was expected that Afghanistan would now become peaceful and stable. However, that did not happen. The Taliban increased their insurgency since 2003. Besides, new militant groups e.g. the Pakistani Taliban, Haqqani Network, Islamic Jihad Union, Tora Bora Military Front, Ansar al-Mujahideen etc have emerged in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. There have been various attempts to achieve peace in Afghanistan though stakes are manifold. Up to now, no peace initiative has been welcomed by the Taliban without putting conditions. Other extremist groups show little or no interest in dialogues. At the same time, difference of opinions between the Karzai administration and western powers (especially the US) continues to hinder peace initiatives. Pakistan, a crucial actor in the current war, has been facing its own problems since joining and its role remains quite controversial. Although many NATO and non-NATO nations have withdrawn their own troops from Afghanistan, it is still not clear whether the US will withdraw its forces as it declared earlier about withdrawing within 2014. Now it says about maintaining some military presence. Under these milieus, some questions may arise: What about various peace efforts in Afghanistan and their outcomes? What are the viewpoints on peace by different parties involved in this war? If the coalition really withdraws, will Afghanistan see peace or become more insecure?

This paper seeks answers to such questions. It has six sections including the introduction. The second section states the beginning of the current Afghan war, the change of regime in Afghanistan, human and economic costs incurred and coalition's planning for withdrawal. The third describes some significant peace initiatives at national, regional and international levels. The fourth talks about different views from different parties on prospects of peace in Afghanistan. The fifth section discusses whether peace initiatives will work or not. The final section contains concluding remarks that end the paper.

2. The Current Afghan War: Background, Costs and Coalition Withdrawal Attempts

Afghanistan was already shattered by gory ethnic conflicts and a dreadful civil war lasting from 1989 (when the USSR withdrew) to 1996. Former Mujahedeen groups assumed new names under their respective leaders while hostility began to grow among them slowly yet steadily. In this struggle for power, the Taliban known for their ultra-orthodox following of Islamic Sharia'a law² emerged victorious and assumed power in September 1996. Nonetheless, their rule was not unopposed; anti-Taliban people and militias united under the Northern Alliance, led by several warlords. When the 9/11 attacks took place, the Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden, thought to be active in Afghanistan, were termed as main suspects. On 20 September 2001, the then US President George W. Bush, speaking at the US Congress,

² Dennis Abrams, *Hamid Karzai*, New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007, p. 14.

demanded that the Taliban must hand Laden over to the US and uproot all Al-Qaeda activities in Afghanistan.³ On 5 October, the Taliban proposed to hold Laden on trial under Afghan laws; they also asked the US to provide concrete evidence for Laden's role in the attacks. But the US disagreed and held on to its own stance. Two days later, the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan. They were also joined by the Northern Alliance. Within 13 November 2001, the combined forces of the coalition and Northern Alliance took over Kabul. The Taliban were deposed from power. Subsequently, the Hamid Karzai government came into power. The US-led coalition kept up its activities after removing the Taliban from power and launched numerous operations to crush them totally. From General Tommy Franks, to current General Joseph F. Dunford – several commanders have been changed to handle the war. But it goes on violently, endangering Afghanistan more and some other countries involved in the conflict.

The economic and human costs of this war have really been massive and may have prompted plan for withdrawal, though amid the global economic slump the war did and does go on. A Harvard University research paper estimates the costs of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan somewhat between US\$ 4-6 trillion.⁴ Washington based faith-oriented lobby group the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) put the US expenditures at US\$ 778 billion from 2001-2012; they predicted the US would spend about another US\$ 86.5 billion in 2013 in Afghanistan.⁵ The UK's spending stands over US\$ 55.5 billion.⁶ The war continues to take severe human tolls on parties involved. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Afghan Independent Human Right Commission (AIHRC)'s joint report of 2011 put Afghan civilian death tolls at 37,208.⁷ The midyear-2013 UNAMA report added another 5,324⁸ taking the total number to 42,532. The coalition has lost many soldiers; major loss tallies include the US (2,309) followed by the UK (447) and Canada (158) respectively.⁹

³ "President Bush Addresses the Nation", *The Washington Post*, 20 September 2001.

⁴ Linda J. Bilmes, *The Financial Legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan: How Wartime Spending Decisions Will Constrain Future National Security Budgets*, Harvard University, March 2013, available at <https://research.hks.harvard.edu/.../citation...>, accessed on 22 December 2013.

⁵ "Costs of the Afghan War: By The Numbers", the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), available at http://fcnl.org/afghanistan/Cost_of_the_Afghan_War_By_The_Numbers, accessed on 22 December 2013.

⁶ Frank Ledwidge, *Investment in Blood: The True Cost of Britain's Afghan War*, London: Yale University Press, 2013.

⁷ *Afghanistan Midyear Report 2011 on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Kabul, Afghanistan, July 2011.

⁸ "Afghan Conflict Takes Increasing Toll on Civilians in First Half of 2013", The United Nations, available at <https://www.un.org/apps/.../story.asp?...Cr=Afghan>, accessed on 20 December 2013.

⁹ "Fatalities Details of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan", *iCasualties*, available at <http://www.icasualties.org/OEF/Fatalities.aspx>, accessed on 20 December 2013.

Albeit withdrawal is still uncertain, the US-led coalition began thinking about gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan starting since 2011. On 22 June 2011, the US President Obama in his address to the nation said that he would withdraw 10,000 soldiers by late 2011 and another 23,000 by September 2012.¹⁰ Besides the UK, Germany and France withdrew their civilian staffs working in Afghan ministries in 2012.¹¹ In February 2013, at the State of the Union address, Obama said about reducing US forces in Afghanistan from 68,000 to 34,000 by February 2014.¹² Canada decided to end its military mission in Afghanistan within March 2014.¹³ Nevertheless, the US withdrawal still remains indefinite both in nature and timeframe.

3. Notable Peace Initiatives

There have been Afghan, regional and international initiatives to establish peace with Taliban. The London International Conference on Afghanistan (January-February 2006) may be called the first of such efforts where 66 nations and 15 international organisations took part for assisting and rebuilding Afghanistan. The conference focused on enhancement of security e.g. disarmament of all militias by 2007 and cleaning all mine fields, drug trade reduction, promoting effective government in Afghanistan, advancing socioeconomic developments etc.

Major actors in peace efforts have been the Karzai administration, Afghan politicians and tribal leaders, the UN, NATO, the Taliban and their affiliates, Pakistan, and rarely, other armed militias. Taliban and other militias demand total exit of foreign forces, end of aerial and ground attacks on them and common Afghans, release of their group members from captivity, and reject to lay down weapons as conditions for joining peace talks. Pakistan has been an important actor in Afghan peace initiatives and at the same time, continuing its own negotiations with the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), a force to be reckoned with. The UNAMA has been working to promote peace, stability and development in Afghanistan. The US Institute of Peace (USIP), a US congressional body, is engaged in peace efforts in Afghanistan. Some peace initiatives are still being undertaken by different parties involved in this war. Below are some peace initiatives undertaken since 2007 to present day.

¹⁰ David Jackson, "Obama to Pull 33,000 Troops from Afghanistan by End of Next Summer", *USA Today*, 23 June 2011.

¹¹ Isaac Hock and Paraag Shukla, *Timeline: The Afghan Response to the 2012 Koran Burning Incident*, Washington D. C.: Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 02 March 2012.

¹² Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Obama Wants to Cut Troop Level in Afghanistan in Half over Next Year", *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2013.

¹³ Roland Paris, "The Truth about Canada's Mission in Afghanistan", *Policy Brief*, Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS), University of Ottawa, No. 22, March 2014.

3.1 National Level

In April 2003, President Karzai showed his willingness to integrate Taliban fighters into Afghan society by distinguishing between moderate and extremist Taliban. Former Taliban commander Mullah Haji Jilani responded by condemning the Taliban's activities. He and 12 former Taliban then joined the Programme Tahkim-e-Solh (PTS) or the Programme for the Strengthening of Peace in August 2005, led by another former Mujahedeen commander Sibgatullah Mujaddedi. Although this initiative got much publicity, it could not bring any viable result.¹⁴ In April 2007, Afghan President Karzai admitted speaking to some Taliban on prospects of peace in Afghanistan.¹⁵ In September, he offered talks with them risking his own life.¹⁶ In March 2010, his administration arranged talks with the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) who proposed for departure of all foreign forces by 2010; Taliban were absent and refused future participation until foreign forces would completely leave Afghanistan.¹⁷ In April 2010, Karzai asked Taliban to drop weapons and address their grievances yet asserting that foreign forces would stay, so long as fighting would go on.¹⁸ In May, he proposed potential safe exile for Taliban leaders into any third country and reintegrating fighters into the Afghan society; he talked about spending around US\$ 160 million for them as promised by the international community. Taliban fighters might receive vocational training, have options of being involved in agriculture, construction and infrastructural development, emergency response teams, even joining Afghan security forces.¹⁹ The Afghan National Consultative Peace Jirga (NCPJ) held a three-day meeting in June 2010; it discussed proposals to provide support to reformed militants and review all Afghan prisoners in Guantanamo Bay to see whether some of them were wrongly detained. At the Kabul International Conference (July 2010), Karzai endorsed a scheme to reintegrate lower level Taliban soldiers and reap more benefits from higher level leaders in turn.²⁰

¹⁴ "Taliban Talks: Past, Present and Prospects for the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan", in Mona K. Sheikh and Maja T.J. Greenwood (eds.), *DIIS Report*, Copenhagen, Denmark: Danish Institute for International Studies, June 2013, p. 16.

¹⁵ "Afghan President Karzai Admits Seeking Peace Talks with Taliban", *Fox News*, 24 September 2007, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,297819,00.html?sPage=fnc/world/afghanistan#ixzz1swAgkDus>, accessed on 28 December 2013.

¹⁶ Sayed Salahuddin, "Afghanistan's Karzai Urges Taliban Talks after Scare", *Reuters*, 09 September 2007, available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-29427920070909>, accessed on 21 December 2013.

¹⁷ Hamid Shalizi, "Taliban Say not Involved in Kabul Peace Talks", *Reuters*, 23 March 2010, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE62L0PT20100323>, accessed on 21 December 2013.

¹⁸ "Karzai Issues Open Invitation to Meet With Insurgents", *Fox News*, 11 April 2010, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/04/10/karzai-casts-doubt-major-kandahar-offensive/>, accessed on 21 December 2013.

¹⁹ Jon Boone, "Taliban Leaders to be Offered Exile under Afghanistan Peace Plan", *The Guardian*, 05 May 2010.

²⁰ Richard A. O'Connell Jr., "Karzai Approves Plan for Taliban Reintegration", *The New York Times*, 01 July 2010.

3.2 Regional Level

In Afghanistan related affairs, including the current war, Pakistan's role has always been vital. In October 2010, Pakistan agreed to assist Afghan initiatives for peace talks with the Afghan Taliban.²¹ In August 2011, it attended a trilateral peace talk (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the US) assuring full support to assist Afghanistan for bringing Taliban leaders to join this process.²² It committed to provide US\$ 330 million for reconstruction of Afghanistan.²³ In December 2012, it agreed to release eight Taliban prisoners to help the Afghan peace process.²⁴

During 2012, Pakistan with a view to facilitating Afghan peace initiatives, attempted to develop better relations with several leaders of the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance, notably Tajik leaders like Abdullah Abdullah, Ahmed Zia Masood (brother of late Ahmad Shah Masood) and influential Uzbek leader Abdur Rashid Dostum. These attempts were directed at reshape Pakistan's image as exclusive supporter of Afghanistan's Pashtun majority, the ethnic group the Taliban belong to. In 2012, senior Afghan and Pakistani delegations met over twenty times to discuss and advance the Afghan peace and reconciliation initiatives. In November 2012, the Afghanistan-Pakistan Joint Peace Commission was restarted after Afghan leader Salahuddin Rabbani visited Islamabad. After this visit, 13 Taliban leaders were released from Pakistani prisons as Afghanistan earlier demanded to help them take part in peace talks. In December 2012, when Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmi Khalilzad visited Pakistan, 15 more Taliban leaders were freed. Pakistan also agreed to help materialise the Peace Process Road Map prepared by the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC). This plan gave Pakistan a key role in Afghan peace and reconciliation efforts evident in the plan's first proposal calling for focus on securing the cooperation from Pakistan. It then urged Pakistan to assist in forming direct communication between the Afghan government and known leaders of armed militia groups. Moreover, the plan aimed at having a final peace agreement as well as extension of regional cooperation by 2014.²⁵ In 2013, Pakistan undertook several more attempts to help peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. Several Taliban detainees were released this year. Pakistan joined the Brussels talks (April 2013) for peace in Afghanistan²⁶ besides the US and Afghanistan. The talks were aimed at resolving Pak-Afghan differences and bringing the Taliban to negotiation. The release of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a top Taliban leader, was expected to boost the peace process. Pakistani Premier Nawaz Sharif said that there had been an agreement for allowing a peace

²¹ "Pakistan Willing to Assist Afghan Peace Negotiations", *Pajhokw Afghan News*, 15 October 2010, available at www.pajhokw.com/.../2010/.../pakistan-willing, accessed on 28 December 2013.

²² Muhammad Tahir, "Pakistan, Afghanistan, US Hold Meeting on Afghan Peace Process", *Xinhua*, 03 August 2011, available at <http://www.xinhuanet.com>Home>World>, accessed on 24 December 2013.

²³ "Pakistan's Role in Afghanistan's Reconstruction", *Pakistan Today*, 15 October 2011.

²⁴ Zazar Khan, "Boosting Hopes for Peace Talks, Pakistan Frees Eight Afghan Taliban Prisoners", *The Globe and Mail*, 31 December 2012.

²⁵ Ishtiaq Ahmad, "Pakistan's 'Regional Pivot' and the Endgame in Afghanistan", *IPRI Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 6-7.

²⁶ "Kayani Meets Kerry, Karzai for Afghan Peace Talks", *Dawn*, 24 April 2013.

council from Afghanistan to continue talks with Mullah Baradar.²⁷ He pledged support for Afghanistan-Taliban peace talks in December 2013 as well.

3.3 International Level

In October 2008, former US defence secretary Robert Gates proposed reconciliation with the Taliban for a political solution of the war.²⁸ In March 2009, an international conference on Afghanistan held in The Hague. This conference emphasised on promoting good governance and consolidation of democracy in Afghanistan, enhancing economic growth and development where the UN would play a broader role to support peace and stability. It also proposed gradual transfer of security affairs to the Afghan government. In January 2010, it was reported that some Taliban leaders met Kai Eide (the UN special representative for Afghanistan) in Dubai. Taliban discarded this claim as unfounded.²⁹ At the London International Conference on Afghanistan (January 2010), Karzai expressed high expectations for establishing peace, for example, reaching out to top Taliban leaders, creating a platform for holding peace talks and therefore, inviting them in a grand Loya Jirga composed mainly of important, senior Afghans;³⁰ for these, he recommended for founding an organisation whose name was suggested as the "National Council for Peace, Reconciliation and Reintegration".³¹

Throughout 2011, there had been attempts at peace talks: the US covert steps to hold talks with the Taliban, Hillary's highlighting the need of negotiations,³² the UN proposal for removing sanctions on blacklisted Taliban personnel³³ (an essential requirement from the Taliban) etc. The Bonn Conference (December 2011) emphasised on handing over security affairs to Afghanistan by 2014, international community's long term engagement and commitment after NATO's withdrawal, reconciliation and reintegration of Taliban members into the Afghan society. In January 2012, the Taliban sought to open an office in Qatar for potential peace talks with the coalition; Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that release of the Taliban detainees from Guantanamo Bay prison might be set as a prerequisite for peace talks.³⁴ In late March 2013, Jan Kubis, the UN envoy to Afghanistan urged the Taliban to sit for peace talks

²⁷ Patrick Quinn, "Pakistan PM Vows Commitment to Peace with Taliban in Afghanistan", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 November 2013.

²⁸ "Gates: U.S. Would Support Afghan Peace Talks with Taliban", *CNN.com*, 10 October 2008, available at http://articles.cnn.com/2008-10-10/world/gates.taliban_1_afghan-security-forces-afghan-government-afghanistan?_s=PM:WORLD..., accessed on 21 December 2013.

²⁹ Joshua Partlow, "Taliban Maintains Hard-line Stance, Denies U.N. Meeting", *The Washington Post*, 31 January 2010.

³⁰ Hamid Shalizi and Abdul Malek, "Taliban Say no Decision yet on Karzai Offer of Talks", *Reuters*, 29 January 2010, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/01/29/us-afghanistan-idU...>, accessed on 11 December 2013.

³¹ Paul Richter, "U.S. Cool to Karzai Plan on Taliban", *The Los Angeles Times*, 29 January 2010.

³² David Jackson, "Obama Team Talking to Taliban in Afghanistan", *USA Today*, 20 February 2011.

³³ Rod Nordland, "Afghans Want Sanctions Lifted on Taliban Figures", *The New York Times*, 04 June 2011.

³⁴ Matthew Rosenberg, "Taliban Opening Qatar Office, and Maybe Door to Talks", *The New York Times*, 03 January 2012.

and President Karzai also visited Qatar for holding probable peace talks with them. At the London Trilateral Peace Talks (late October 2013) participated by Afghanistan, Pakistan and the UK, dialogue on Pak-Afghan shared interest in maintaining regional peace and stability took place. The UK and Pakistan assured firm commitment for promoting economic development and Afghan-led peace efforts.³⁵

3.4 Key Reasons behind the Failure of Peace Initiatives

To date, no peace initiative for ending the current Afghan war has ultimately been successful. There have been both internal and external factors failing peace initiatives in Afghanistan. For example, the Programme for the Strengthening of Peace (PTS) failed as it lacked necessary political backing and also for administrators' corruption.³⁶ The Karzai government wants the Taliban to sever all ties with Al-Qaeda which they refuse. The Taliban and the HIG were absent in the NCPJ meeting and condemned it as an excuse to protract foreign military presence. Other militants also condemned the meeting. Some Afghan leaders boycotted the NCPJ. At the Kabul conference of July 2010, Karzai expressed plans for reconciliation and reintegration of Taliban fighters into the society. Those plans suffered setbacks in November 2010 when his requests to the US for stopping nighttime raids and reduction in troops' numbers³⁷ went unheeded; former NATO commander in Afghanistan General David Petraeus criticised Karzai's concerns while the then US secretary of state Hillary Clinton supported Petraeus.³⁸ The murder of Burhanuddin Rabbani (chief negotiator then) in September 2011 hammered the ongoing initiatives of that year. Karzai imperiled possibilities for peace talks in February 2012 by rejecting Taliban's Qatar office proposal saying he would decide the venue instead.³⁹ The Quran desecration at Bagram airbase in late February and the Panjwaii massacre in mid-March worsened this crisis. In May, the killing of senior negotiator Arsala Rahmani (a former Taliban minister) endangered peace talks again.⁴⁰

Pakistan, a crucial actor in Afghanistan related affairs, has been facing its own problems. Deep mistrust of Pakistan both by NATO and Afghanistan has been a stumbling block for peace initiatives to succeed. Conversely, US aerial assaults on Pakistan have often made Pakistan withdrawing from efforts and also temporarily shut NATO supply lines to Afghanistan. Moreover, Pakistan wants Afghanistan to discontinue ties with India; in the Brussels talks of April 2013, Pakistan raised this

³⁵ "Trilateral Meeting: London Summit Renews Afghan Peace Impetus", *The Express Tribune*, 30 October 2013.

³⁶ Thomas Ruttig, "The Other Side – Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors – and Approaches to Talks", *Afghanistan Analysts Network Thematic Report*, July 2009, p. 26.

³⁷ Chris McGreal and Jon Boone, "US Defends Afghanistan Tactics after Karzai Calls for Troop Reduction", *The Guardian*, 15 November 2010.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "Afghan President Says Taliban can not Open Office in Qatar", *Xinhuanet.com*, 17 February 2012, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2012-02/17/c_1314163..., accessed on 11 December 2013.

⁴⁰ Kevin Sieff and Sayed Salahuddin, "Arsala Rahmani, Taliban Leader Turned Afghanistan Peace Negotiator, Slain in Kabul", *The Washington Post*, 13 May 2012.

demand which Afghanistan did and still does not comply with. Many attacks by extremists like the TTP, Afghan Taliban, Haqqani Network in Afghanistan are always blamed as supported by Pakistan. When Pakistan did not join the Bonn conference on Afghanistan (December 2011), Karzai accused Pakistan of hindering peace talks with the Taliban.⁴¹ Such mutual mistrust and blame-game have been collapsing talks. Although Pakistan has been supporting these efforts, it is really difficult for the country to fight militants both inside its territory and Pak-Afghan border areas while engaging in peace talks.

The Karzai administration and the Afghan Taliban are highly doubtful of each other. When President Karzai visited Qatar in March 2013 to hold talks with them, Taliban response was cold.⁴² In June 2013, they opened their first office in Doha, Qatar which ultimately shut down by July of that year. Because, their sign and flag both were taken down by the Qatar government after the Karzai government expressed dissatisfaction.⁴³

Rifts are apparently widening between Karzai and the US. In fact, NATO attacks on Afghan civilians, for example, the Uruzgan helicopter attack of February 2010 and Helmand airstrike in May 2011, created deep divisions between the Afghan government and the coalition, strengthened militants' ground who refused to join peace talks, launched attacks and thus led peace process to failure. In addition, peace initiatives heavily focus on economic or social issues e.g. development, women's rights, reconciliation and reintegration but do not adequately address political ones, although grievances over these remain an effective tool for militants to recruit more members.

4. Different Views on Prospects of Peace in Afghanistan

The current war in Afghanistan includes various parties and everyone has individual viewpoints or interests. The war began between the US-led coalition with the Al-Qaeda and Taliban, but now involves various militia groups from Afghanistan, Pakistan and to some extent, remnants of Al-Qaeda. Furthermore, the war has not remained limited to Afghanistan rather spread to neighbouring Pakistan, making the achievement of peace more complex.

4.1 The Afghan Taliban and Other Militias in Afghanistan

The Afghan Taliban wants complete departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan and has maintained this demand. There have been other conditions as well, e.g., release of Taliban prisoners from different custodies, removing the names of blacklisted Taliban leaders from the UN or other sanctions lists, acceptance as

⁴¹ "Hamid Karzai Accuses Pakistan of Stalling Talks with Taliban", *The Express Tribune*, 04 December 2011.

⁴² "Karzai in Qatar to discuss Afghan Taliban peace talks", *Dawn*, 30 March 2013.

⁴³ "Taliban Close Qatar Office in Protest at Flag Removal", *The Daily Telegraph*, 09 July 2013.

a political entity in Afghanistan⁴⁴ etc, some of which have indeed been met. For example, several Taliban members have been freed. The Taliban also want NATO raids on various parts of Afghanistan be stopped. Yet, they refuse to denounce Al-Qaeda and international terrorism.⁴⁵ They neither recognise the Karzai government nor the Afghan constitution, whereas believe themselves as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. In 2012, however, at a discussion in France, Taliban representatives said they did not want to rule the country exclusively.⁴⁶ One Taliban member even said that many in the group wanted peace but hardliners were prevailing over them.⁴⁷

Other Afghan militias have their own views for peace, e.g. the HIG's 15-point plan in February 2010. This included: foreign forces would withdraw fully by the end of 2010; while in Afghanistan, they should stay within their bases and not in main cities or populated areas; the Karzai government should rule unless new elections would take place; security affairs should be handed over to Afghan authorities; foreign fighters must move out of Afghanistan and elections be held after coalition forces would withdraw; cessation of faction warfare; and forming of a 7-member National Security Council with the consensus of all Afghan factions that would take final decisions on key issues. This council would be centered in a province where Afghan authorities would oversee security issues and there should be no foreign troops etc.⁴⁸ Most of these demands were not met. The HIG, though a strong ally of the Afghan Taliban, did not support a bilateral US-Taliban peace initiative saying that would not assure peace.⁴⁹

Other groups have not made their position clear or are now largely absent from peace talks. This is evident in the fact that groups other than the Taliban or the HIG have not been called in to participate in such initiatives. Warlords remain quite powerful in the country and with the Karzai government in power have been able to secure positions. Some of them are virulently anti-Taliban, e.g. Abdur Rashid Dostum (former leader of a group in the Northern Alliance), served as the defence minister in the Hamid Karzai government, and now heads the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan, current first Vice-President Mohammad Qasim Fahim etc. Even then, the Taliban and their allies seem to have some advantage, because many groups and people working or speaking against them continue to suffer terribly at their hands. Moreover, only the Taliban or their allies are known to place demands.

⁴⁴ Mona K. Sheikh and Maja T.J. Greenwood, *op. cit.*, p. 25

⁴⁵ Bill Roggio, "Afghan Taliban Reject US Call for Peace Talks", *The Long War Journal*, 19 January 2014, available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/afghan_taliban_rejec.php, accessed on 27 December 2013.

⁴⁶ Denis Gray, "Taliban not Demanding Afghan Power Monopoly", *The Washington Times*, 23 December 2012.

⁴⁷ Julian Borger, "Afghan Insurgents Want Peace Deal, Says ex-Taliban Minister", *The Guardian*, 20 September 2013.

⁴⁸ Bill Roggio, "Hekmatyar's 'Peace Plan' Calls for NATO Withdrawal by 2011", *The Long War Journal*, 22 March 2010, available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/03/hekmatyars_peace_pla.php, accessed on 22 December 2013.

⁴⁹ "Today's Afghan News Headlines", The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 21 July 2013, available at <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx>, accessed on 23 December 2013.

4.2 *The West*

4.2.1 *European Union (EU)'s Views*

European views on peace and stability in Afghanistan focus on development and capacity building. The EU has sent a police mission to Afghanistan to train the Afghan police and law officials. The Council of European Union expressed its strong support for state-building and long-term development in Afghanistan. The EU believes that an entirely Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation and reintegration process would help ensure lasting peace in the country. It encourages the growing participation of Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries in the Istanbul Process on Regional Cooperation and Security,⁵⁰ and is developing methods/frameworks for promoting regional stability.⁵¹ British MPs suggested that a peace agreement led by legitimate Afghan authorities with the Taliban would help save the country from another civil war. The UK Parliamentary Defence Select Committee said the following measures would help ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan: free and fair elections, adequately trained Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) with necessary funding, functional judiciary with effective oversight of human rights issues, keeping up development assistance, working out viable plans to combat corruption and drug trafficking.⁵² Germany has been active for promoting peace and development in Afghanistan. At the Bonn Conference in 2011, the International Contact Group (ICG) on Afghanistan and Pakistan headed by Ambassador Michael Koch (German Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan) was formed to address these issues in Afghanistan and in the region. The group met three times in 2012 and members agreed to support Afghanistan, under the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, for initiating effective and transparent strategies for growth and development. Donors would provide Afghanistan with around US\$ 16 billion over the next four years in the form of civilian assistance.⁵³

4.2.2 *US Views*

The US now wants a political solution of this war. The USIP has been working for promoting peace in Afghanistan for long. In 2012, it suggested some measures in this regard which included: ensuring access to information for the US and Afghanistan about the happenings in the latter, supporting analytical work on critical development, peace and stability issues, strengthening of governance

⁵⁰ The Istanbul Process was established in November 2011 to increase regional cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours. It emphasises common threats facing these nations: terrorism, drug trade, poverty and militancy. The US and over 20 other nations are supporting members of this initiative.

⁵¹ "EN Council Conclusions on Afghanistan", EN Council, 24 June 2013, available at <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/.../130624-RSF-AFG.p...>, accessed on 21 December 2013.

⁵² "Afghanistan Peace Deal with Taliban Needed, Say MPs", *BBC News*, 10 April 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-22087122>, accessed on 28 December 2013.

⁵³ "The International Contact Group", 07 December 2012, available at <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/.../AfghanistanZentrala...>, accessed on 30 December 2013.

and rule of law; building understanding of and capacity in conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution for Afghan individuals and institutions.⁵⁴ In 2012, the US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed for establishing long-term bilateral relationship. Afghanistan will receive US development aid for next 10 years and should commit itself to promoting effective governance. In return, US personnel will have full liberty to use Afghan facilities even after 2014. Aside from the Karzai government, the US wants to engage the Afghan Taliban for peace deals. But the Afghan government and the Taliban are often not on good terms. The US stresses the active engagement of Pakistan for promoting peace in Afghanistan. Central Asian nations are considered by the US as important for establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan. In 2013, in the joint statement of the 2nd Kazakhstan-United States Strategic Partnership Dialogue, the US lauded Kazakhstan's role for supporting peace and stability in Afghanistan.⁵⁵ In Kyrgyzstan, the Manas Transit Centre has long been a US facility for transport and logistics to support peace initiatives in Afghanistan. After the 9/11 attacks, Uzbekistan allowed the deployment of 1,500 US troops in southern Uzbekistan in return for US assistance to deal with its own terrorism problems.⁵⁶ Still, the US position is different since it wants to maintain some military presence in Afghanistan after the proposed withdrawal by 2014 while other nations have withdrawn theirs.

4.3 *Regional Powers*

4.3.1 *Pakistani Views (Including Pakistani Militant Groups)*

Pakistan's view is quite complex regarding peace in Afghanistan. For instance, Pakistan considers Afghanistan as essential for its own strategic depth in case of an Indo-Pak military conflict. Therefore, a friendly Afghanistan will be greatly helpful for Pakistan, although Afghanistan does not adhere to this. Since the current war began, there have been many ups and downs in Pak-Afghan relations yet Pakistan has shown quite strong support for peace in Afghanistan. It views Afghan participation as necessary in any peace talk and says will not support if those lack Afghan approval.⁵⁷ The present government of Pakistan has reiterated support for peace in Afghanistan⁵⁸ and said that for this purpose, wants to engage all stakeholders including militant groups. Conversely, Pakistan considers the growing Indian presence in and relations with Afghanistan as a threat to its own influence and interests there.

⁵⁴ "Progress in Peacebuilding: Afghanistan", US Institute of Peace (USIP), December 2012, available at <http://www.usip.org/category/countries/afghanistan>, accessed on 21 December 2013.

⁵⁵ "Joint Statement of Second Kazakhstan-United States Strategic Partnership Dialogue", US Department of State, 10 July 2013, available at <http://www.state.gov/press/2013/07/20130710>, accessed on 29 December 2013.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Wishnick, *Strategic Consequences of the Iraq War: U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia Reassessed*, Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), May 2004, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Julian Borger, "Pakistan Will Not Support Afghan Talks Until Kabul Backs Them, Says Minister", *The Guardian*, 21 February 2012.

⁵⁸ "Peaceful, Stable Afghanistan is in Pakistan's Interest: Sharif", *Dawn*, 30 November 2013.

The Haqqani Network, a key ally of the Taliban, in 2011 expressed support for peace in Afghanistan; their condition was that the talks should be conducted by the Mullah Omar-led Quetta Shura.⁵⁹ But deaths of several Haqqani leaders either within Pakistan or by US drone strikes in Pak-Afghan border areas have resulted in its withdrawal from peace process, while the group has not launched or tried any attack after 2012.

The TTP is not related to the Afghan Taliban, but has close ideological affinity with them. It demands that for successful peace talks, all its prisoners must be freed from captivity. Another demand is to end all drone strikes in Pak-Afghan tribal areas.

4.3.2 Indian Views

India neither participated in the Afghan war nor is directly involved there unlike Pakistan, but is becoming quite important for varied reasons. When the Taliban (whom Pakistan supported) were ruling Afghanistan, India supported the Northern Alliance. Presently, India has been expanding cooperation with Afghanistan. It opened medical and educational centres there. It agreed to train Afghan security personnel. There have also been efforts to raise military cooperation. India's main goal of promoting peace in Afghanistan is to reduce the threat possessed by Muslim militant groups from Afghanistan and Pakistan who are often alleged to be backed by Pakistan. Here, India has deep worries indeed; although there are Muslim militants in India, the TTP recently threatened to spread their activities into Indian Kashmir.⁶⁰ While the porous Pak-Afghan border helps these extremists travel between these two countries, if they can create mutually useful contacts with their Indian counterparts, that will create more difficulty for India. Another goal of India is trade expansion. India participated in the Istanbul Process in 2011 and endorsed the New Silk Road plan. This plan is meant to increase trade and integration of South and Central Asia.⁶¹ At the same time, it also intends to transform Afghanistan into a business hub for these two regions.⁶² A peaceful and stable Afghanistan will promote India's trade with resource-rich Central Asian states and vice-versa.

⁵⁹ Dean Nelson, "Feared Haqqani Network Announce Support for Taliban Peace Talks", *The Telegraph*, 17 September 2011.

⁶⁰ "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan Pledges to Fight in Kashmir, Implement Sharia in India", *The Indian Express*, 08 January 2013.

⁶¹ Robert O. Blake, Jr., "The New Silk Road and Regional Economic Integration", the US Department of State, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2013/206167.htm>, 13 March 2013, accessed on 22 December 2013.

⁶² Abhimanyu Chandra, "Prospects for Future Peace in Afghanistan: India as a US Partner", February 2012, available at: <http://yris.yira.org/comments/267>, accessed on 20 December 2013.

4.3.3 *Iranian Views*

Iran's view on peace in Afghanistan involves political and religious perspectives. An important country in global and regional politics, Iran will not surely be comfortable with Western presence (particularly US) on its eastern frontiers though it is recently holding talks with them on its nuclear programme. However, this country supported the Northern Alliance during the Afghan civil war of the 1990s and was one of the first nations to back the US invasion of Afghanistan.⁶³ There remains also the drug trade concern for Iran coming from Afghanistan. The country did not recognise the Taliban regime, welcomed their removal and helped establishing the Karzai government whom the Northern Alliance was not willing to share governance power with at first. But at the Bonn Conference of 2001, Iran pressed them to reach a compromise.⁶⁴ Therefore, a peaceful Afghanistan, friendly groups like the Karzai government and the Northern Alliance will be in Iran's interest. Besides, a secure eastern border will enable Iran to act more effectively against insurgency within its own territory. These insurgents are Sunni and Shiite Iran will not prefer the Sunni Taliban to come and assist them.

4.3.4 *Chinese Views*

China, after the fall of the Taliban, has been broadening relations with Afghanistan. Under the Sino-Afghan security and economic cooperation agreement of 2012, Afghan security personnel will receive training from China. China has secured rights to engage in mining and oil businesses in Afghanistan.⁶⁵ Chinese view of promoting peace in Afghanistan has been summarised as the "Five Supports": supporting an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconstruction process, helping Afghanistan improve its capacity building, promoting a national reconciliation through Afghan efforts, and helping develop the economy, assistance for improving relations with neighbours.⁶⁶ Another aim of Chinese support for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan may be from security perspectives, i.e. the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Muslim separatist group active in China's Xinjiang, Central Asia and North Waziristan in Pakistan has been an ally of the Afghan Taliban. Albeit China has no border with Afghanistan, in the changed circumstances, Afghan militants may try to establish broader support for the ETIM traveling through Pakistan, whom China has borders with.

⁶³ S. Enders Wimbush, "Great Games in Central Asia," in Ashley J. Tellis, Travis Tanner, and Jessica Keough (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2011–12: Asia Responds to Its Rising Powers – China and India*, Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2011, p. 262.

⁶⁴ Manoj Kumar Mishra, "Iran's Changed Perception Concerning its Role in Afghanistan Following Soviet Disintegration", *Afro Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2012, pp. 76-96.

⁶⁵ Zhao Huasheng, "Chinese Views of Post-2014 Afghanistan", *Asia Policy*, Seattle, Washington: National Bureau of Asian Research, No. 17, January 2014, p. 38.

⁶⁶ Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives (CSIS Reports)*, Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 2012, p. 5.

4.3.5 Karzai Government's Views

The Karzai government wants to hold dialogues with all relevant parties. It views the Afghan Taliban and neighbour Pakistan as two crucial actors for peace in Afghanistan despite grave mistrust about them. Many times, President Karzai has stressed a constructive role of Pakistan in peace talks regarding Pakistan's significant influence on the Taliban and other Muslim militants in the region; he even agreed to allow Mullah Omar to compete in the upcoming Afghan presidential elections of 2014,⁶⁷ believing that will facilitate the proposed reconciliation and reintegration. For this, he urged the Taliban to give up weapons or violence. Besides, talks are going on about signing a bilateral Afghanistan-US agreement for helping ensure peace and security in Afghanistan after the NATO withdrawal in 2014.

5. Whether Peace Initiatives will work or not?

As days go by, situations are becoming increasingly complicated in Afghanistan. Differences between today's global, regional and internal situations of Afghanistan with those when this war began are vast. Many attempts have been directed at peace and reconciliation at various levels but peace has not been achieved in Afghanistan. There are many actors and issues involved here that continue to put the peace talks/process into deep uncertainty.

5.1 Afghanistan's Internal Situations

The notion that internal situations are now better in Afghanistan is not beyond question. For instance, the infamous Bagram prison still is a thorny issue between the militia groups and the coalition. The Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) is reported to be involved in seriously abusing detainees.⁶⁸ Afghanistan retains the label of the top producer of opium in the world, a business the Taliban depends on substantially and does not want to give up. Several programmes to eliminate this business have failed. Afghanistan, despite having recently discovered minerals worth trillions of dollars, is a least developed country with large number of unemployed people and human lives are often at risk there. The Karzai government has various allegations on itself and shown little/no efficiency in dealing with militias (mainly the Taliban) as well. Afghan security forces have attacked and killed western forces several times. All these can, and in many cases are already badly endangering prospects of peace in Afghanistan.

⁶⁷ "Mullah Omar can Run for President in Afghan Elections: Karzai", *The Express Tribune*, 02 April 2013.

⁶⁸ "Report Lifts Lid on Torture in Afghanistan Prisons", *Gulf Times*, 20 March 2012.

5.2 *Regional Situations*

These have changed a lot since the war began in 2001 and continue to take more intricate turns. Pakistan has been in a great dilemma since joining this war where its role remains both important and controversial. In recent past, Pakistan security forces have clashed with Afghan, even NATO forces on Pak-Afghan borders. Drone strikes in those areas keep on killing civilians as well as Pakistani soldiers albeit US claims that strikes are intended to kill militants and staunchly defends the strikes. Pakistani militant groups sustain close links with Afghan ones and have proved equally lethal to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Western forces in Afghanistan damaging peace prospects. With a new government assuming power in Pakistan in May 2013, it was expected that peace process in Afghanistan would gain a new momentum. This is yet to happen despite strong pledges from Pakistan which views the growing Indo-Afghan relations with suspicion. Pak-Afghan relations now show mounting mutual distrust which did not exist in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. At present, they continue blaming each other for aiding extremists and failure of peace efforts, making the Afghan transition towards stability more precarious.

5.3 *The Proposed 2014 Withdrawal of NATO and Possible Consequences*

NATO's plan for withdrawal from Afghanistan can be traced back to November 2010 when it stated plans for withdrawal by the end of 2014.⁶⁹ In June 2013, NATO handed over the charge of security to Afghanistan. NATO Chief Anders F. Rasmussen said they would carry on assisting Afghan security forces but not engage in preparation, leading or execution of plans, and complete the combat mission by the end of 2014.⁷⁰ The US wants to maintain a certain number of troops after 2014 for training Afghan forces and maintain operations against extremists. It is trying to sign an agreement with Afghanistan to that end. President Karzai remains cautious about signing and endorsing such an agreement saying he will not sign it until elections take place in April 2014. The bulk of NATO troops in Afghanistan is from the US and without the Afghan-US security agreement signed, NATO will not retain military presence there.⁷¹

The coalition's withdrawal from Afghanistan will have extensive implications. Firstly, the Karzai government will be in profound trouble holding onto power. The Taliban, Al-Qaeda, TTP, other Afghan and Pakistani militia groups will have more liberty in conducting their activities. Afghan forces will face militants from their own country, Pakistan and Central Asian republics – all of whom share borders, generally similar

⁶⁹ James Kirkup, "Lisbon: NATO Leaders Endorse Afghanistan 2014 Withdrawal Date", *The Telegraph*, 20 November 2010.

⁷⁰ "Bomb Blast Hits Afghanistan on Security Handover Day", *Deutsche Welle*, 18 June 2013, available at <http://www.dw.de/bomb-blast-hits-afghanistan-on-security-handover-day/a-16888374>, accessed on 12 December 2013.

⁷¹ Adrian Croft, "U.S.-Afghanistan Pact Failure Would Force NATO to Pull Force Out of Country", Rasmussen Says", *The Huffington Post*, 02 December 2013.

demographics and culture with Afghanistan. If militants from these countries enter and start operating in Afghanistan, then containing them will be highly challenging for Afghan and the remaining foreign troops.

Regional scenarios will be affected substantially. The Taliban and most other Afghan militants are largely Sunnis. In contrast, Afghanistan's neighbour Iran is a Shiite nation. If Iran tries to influence the overwhelmingly Shiite Hazara Afghans whom the Taliban used to torture ruthlessly, that will generate ethnic clashes. Pakistan also has large Shiite population and Shiite-Sunni clashes are not uncommon there. Once begun, none of the three nations will be immune. Pakistan has been competing with India to secure its own influence in Afghanistan. In the absence of western forces in Afghanistan, Indo-Pak rivalry will spread there and become more intense, which will not be good at all for this war-ravaged country. Besides, the discovery of large reserves of minerals in Afghanistan, competition to explore and utilise those can instigate conflicts among different powers.

The US' post-2014 plans for keeping troops in Afghanistan can also give rise to security concerns. There is lack of trust between forces of the coalition and Afghanistan. There have been mutual killings committed by soldiers of both sides. This raises safety questions of the remaining US troops and civilian personnel. If such killings occur after the withdrawal, that will produce more harmful results. On one hand, the US may reduce or even cancel assistance programmes for Afghanistan and on the other, anti-US sentiments will continue to grow in Afghanistan.

The Afghan peace process can be impacted deeply. Militia groups who are not interested in peace talks and even if do, then may place harder conditions. When with superior military capabilities, the coalition has had difficulties in eliminating these groups, their withdrawal and maintaining smaller military presence in Afghanistan will create more insecurity. Afghanistan is a country of diverse ethnic groups with Pashtuns being the largest. The Taliban belong to this group. The absence/smaller presence of Western forces will encourage them to intimidate other groups or take over other areas in Afghanistan, as they did before their ouster. If they try that again, opponent groups and people will not remain quiet and Afghanistan may again slide into turmoil like the Civil War of 1996-2001. Anti-Taliban elements in the Karzai administration may also oppose talking to the Taliban for peace due to their inherent enmity. These differences will be a severe blow to peace efforts of the administration. Afghan militants do not like the proposed Afghan-US security agreement to be signed as it provides for US military presence after 2014. If it is signed, militants will gain more reasons for rejecting peace process, as their demand for total departure of foreign forces will not be met. This might lead peace talks to failure.

6. Concluding Remarks

Western powers' view of peace in Afghanistan implies many complexities. While they want peace with the Taliban and other militants, they want their own model of democracy in the country which these groups completely disagree. Whenever peace efforts have been taken or at least are under process, unexpected events occur, various conditions are attached either in Afghanistan or outside, by different parties jeopardising the efforts.

Despite a political solution being necessary and sought after by both the US and the Taliban, the US decision to maintain troops after 2014 may focus more on the military aspect. The Taliban are thinking of forming a political party but also emphasising about preserving their core ideals.⁷² Their rivals like the Northern Alliance, will not welcome the Taliban either as a political party and ensuing antagonism can put possibility of peace and stability in Afghanistan at stake.

For peace and stability in Afghanistan, cooperation from Pakistan is indispensable, what Afghanistan repeatedly emphasises despite mutual distrust. In October 2011, the country openly criticised Pakistan for supporting the Taliban and other militias yet sought Pakistani assistance.⁷³ Current Pakistani Premier Nawaz Sharif said he wanted to hold talks with the TTP, but nothing about the Afghan Taliban or other extremists, e.g., Haqqani Network, Al-Qaeda, Laskar-e-Taiba etc. Pakistan is alleged to have considerable influence on these militants though has itself been their victim, denies allegations of aiding them or subverting peace process. Being agitated by allegations and attacks, if Pakistan withdraws support from the peace efforts, Afghanistan will be in more danger, let alone peace and stability.

Gaps between Afghanistan and the US are widening. The pending security agreement says military presence will be for indefinite time but President Karzai opts for 10 years, from 2014 when the US proposes to withdraw.⁷⁴ Afghanistan's decision to release 65 prisoners from Bagram prison angered the US who termed them as dangerous terrorists.⁷⁵ US' plans to retain military presence in Afghanistan after 2014, may also displease common Afghans besides the Karzai government and damage the peace process. For example, after Burhanuddin's assassination, some young Afghans expressed willingness to join the Taliban and fight the US for many years.⁷⁶ This war has produced a lot of refugees and despite existing provisions of care, many are falling

⁷² Tahir Khan, "War-weariness?: Taliban may Launch Political Party", *The Express Tribune*, 04 March 2013.

⁷³ Joshua Partlow and Karin Brulliard, "Afghan Government Seeks Pakistan's Help in Stalled Peace Process", *The Washington Post*, 09 October 2011.

⁷⁴ Tim Craig and Karen DeYoung, "Afghan President Hamid Karzai Says He'll Delay Signing of U.S. Accord on Troops", *The Washington Post*, 21 November 2013; also see Karen DeYoung and Tim Craig, "U.S., Afghanistan Agree on Language of Security Accord, Kerry Says", *The Washington Post*, 20 November 2013.

⁷⁵ Mathew Rosenberg, "Afghans' Plan to Release Prisoners Angers U.S.", *The New York Times*, 31 December 2013.

⁷⁶ Kevin Sieff, "Young Afghan Fighters Eager to Rejoin Taliban", *The Washington Post*, 16 September 2011.

prey to inhuman living conditions. Without proper rehabilitation, they may become extremists themselves sooner or later.

Groups or parties involved in the Afghan peace process often alter their stances, e.g. Afghan and Pakistani Taliban keep up attacks notwithstanding assurances for ending these; Pakistan sometimes opens the NATO supply routes and suddenly closes them protesting the drone strikes, withdrawal or assistance plans change nature and conditions etc. Disagreement among parties about demands or proposals of each other in peace process, leads to deadlock, confrontation and eventually, cancellation of peace talks. While a viable political solution is necessary for the present Afghan war, there are military, humanitarian, economic and governance concerns as well. There is no guideline how challenges to these as well as peace process should be handled, e.g. convincing the militias to drop weapons and agree to unconditional peace talks is proving difficult. Moreover, parties possess different viewpoints for ending the war and disagree to compromise individual interests. Thus, it seems quite likely that peace initiatives will go on besides violence but a durable peace may not be achievable in Afghanistan in near future.