

In this article, Tajik political analysts Mahmud Giyosov and Sherali Rizoyen reveal the Afghan warring parties' stance on the peace process. A major issue for the Central Asian states in this process is the future of foreign terrorist groups that have citizens of post-Soviet countries in their ranks.

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The current military-political situation in Afghanistan remains a sustained crisis after 2014. Over this period, there had been an increase in military clashes, including terrorist attacks by the armed opposition, which led to a significant loss of human life. Since the signing of a peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban on February 29, 2020, in Qatar, terrorist attacks continue and had grown. This can be attributed to the opposition's ambition to attain a more stable status and influence in the forthcoming negotiations for the power-sharing agreement.

The warring parties' stance on the peace process

Reaching a "respected by all and sustainable peace [sulhe bozzat va poydor]"^[1] in Afghanistan is complex and multifaceted because global and regional powers have interwoven interests and strategies in this country. The heterogeneity of internal players' interests aggravates the situation even more. To examine the political environment in Afghanistan, we need to consider various parties' stances independently:

The stance of the Afghan central government

The Afghan authorities, represented by President Ashraf Ghani and Chairman of the High Peace Council Abdullo Abdullo, in their statements and interviews, highlight their commitment for a peace dialogue with the Taliban. The Afghan government has held several conferences and online meetings on comprehensive peace in the country, and this demonstrates their willingness to start an inter-Afghan dialogue.

However, due to various reasons, the opposing sides have not been together at the negotiating table in recent months, as the central government, like the Taliban, has been maneuvering to free the captives.

External players, primarily the United States, have been pressuring the Afghan government in recent months, and it did not allow President Ghani to use the issue of unreleased prisoners - Taliban supporters (there were 400 out of 5,000 of them) -in a peace dialogue.

Ghani, therefore, deemed convening of the Consultative Loya Jirga (*Pashto* لوی جرگه لوی جرگه "Great advice" - editor's note) as an easy way out. The deliberative body members agreed to release 400 Taliban supporters (accused of non-war crimes). President Ghani, based on the decision of the House of Representatives, signed a decree on the release of Taliban supporters without compromising his own interests and political image.



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani before members of the All-Afghan Council of Elders (Loya Jirga). Kabul, 7 August 2020. Photo: ARG

Thus, the central government had proven to the Taliban its willingness to commence an inter-Afghan dialogue. In recent months, the Taliban have demanded the release of all 5,000 supporters, while the matter of the unreleased 400 was used to deter dialogue. The current situation left parties with no reason to suspend the negotiations.

Taliban's stance on the peace process

Taliban leaders who signed a peace agreement with the United States have pledged to commence peace talks with the Afghan government. The reality is that the Taliban's political elite, for their part, with all their will, cannot curtail attacks and violence. The

Taliban are a motley group and there are many reasons for attacking the army and civilians. A key factor here is the fact that Taliban fighters in the provinces and in different cities have great powers and are not controlled from a single center.



Taliban in an Afghan prison before their release. Photo: Getty Images / AFP / W.Kohsar

Another factor is the financial and economic incentive, availability of arms and ammunition in their hands: the smuggling of drugs, precious stones, valuable materials, as well as tax and fees revenue cover the movement's financial needs. According to various estimates, the financial benefit of the Taliban per year ranges from 500 million to \$ 1.5 billion. According to the Afghan government's official statements, reports of local and foreign media, Pakistan and Iran render solemn financial and other support to the Taliban, which also plays an important role.

Despite the government's release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, the country still witnesses fierce fighting with the deaths of military and innocent civilians. This suggests that stability and token hostilities in Afghanistan might persist unfeasibly.

The stance of Afghanistan's influential persons and political elite

Afghan elite and influential persons in the country such as Hamid Karzai - ex-president, Yunus Konuni - ex-chairman of parliament and vice-president, Abdurab Rasuli Sayyaf - one

of the influential persons of the jihad era and leader of the Islamic Union party (registered today as Call of Islam), Ismailkhan is an ex-minister and one of the influential persons in the county's western part, and others support the dialogue and the peace process in Afghanistan. This elite group endorses the peace process in Afghanistan in order to sustain their influence on the country's future military-political situation.



Косим Бекмухаммад: в Кабуле ошибаются, когда думают, что талибы станут частью власти

Influential political parties in Afghanistan such as the “Islamic Society of Afghanistan” (regardless of the latest disagreements between this party's leaders), the Islamic Party of Hikmatyar, the “Party of Islamic Unity” (an influential party of the Khazarians), the Islamic Movement of Dostum and others, as long as having their representatives in the dialogue, also support the peace process. Spokespersons of these parties have already been listed in the Afghan government's peace talks delegation. So, the sons of Ato Muhammad Nura, Abdurashid Dostum, and others were delegated as participants in the upcoming peace talks.

The stance of foreign armed groups and fighters in Afghanistan

Most foreign armed groups ranging from al-Qaeda to militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have had close contacts and often collaborated with the Taliban, both during their rule and during their resistance to Western forces and the Afghan army.

These groups are under no circumstances willing and will not be supporting sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan, as the latter imperils their dominance and physical security. In this case, we might assume that foreign armed groups will seek close ties with the Taliban's militant wing, with their military elite in order to support disgruntled armed militants to avert a comprehensive peace in Afghanistan, and will produce all sorts of obstacles to hold up the inter-Afghan dialogue.

These groups expect to recreate the power that existed in 1996-2001, i.e. complete

usurpation of authority, the formation of a state following the religious constrictors. In this vein, the terrorist organization Kotiboti tawhid wa jihod (Monotheism and Jihad) is one of IMU's branches, including Katibat al-Imam Bukhari and the Islamic Jihad Union (both within the IMU) perceived the Taliban agreement with the United States as a victory for the Taliban and through their Telegram channel began to threaten the Central Asian countries[2].

The stance of foreign states involved in the Afghan issue

Over the past 19 years, various countries have, publicly and privately, "contributed" to settling or triggering Afghanistan's problems. The United States, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, European countries, India, China, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, the Central Asian states over the past two decades, based on their own strategic interests, levels of influence and involvement, took part in the Afghan crisis[3]. The United States, undoubtedly the key state in settling the Afghan problem, today devoted its efforts to ensure that fragile peace and relative stability reign in this country.

According to the agreement signed with the Taliban, the United States withdrew from Afghanistan at the first stage five of its bases and 3,400 troops from 12 thousand forces and must complete withdrawing its troops by May 2021. Until the complete withdrawal of its armed forces, the United States should pedal the commencement of the peace talks in Afghanistan and reach a conditional peace, as the international image of this superpower depends on that. Today we know that the agreement on permanent peace in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of US troops from this country will be used by President Trump in the upcoming elections.



US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad (left) and Taliban officials. Photo: Reuters

Other global and regional powers also want to do their bit to achieve peace, and today in force there are parallel formats for initiating peace talks in Afghanistan, which worth separate analysis. In general, the success and effectiveness of peace talks and inter-Afghan dialogue depends to a greater extent on the country's neighbors - Pakistan and Iran - which we cannot exclude or underestimate either. Afghanistan risks falling under the influence of Pakistan and Iran if the international community's efforts fail. Besides major domestic and international problems, both Iran and Pakistan are unwilling to act as an observer in addressing the Afghan crisis. Analysis suggests that mainstreaming positions of Iran and Pakistan on future processes in Afghanistan will be conducive in peace talks and their sustainability.

What to expect for foreign armed groups in the current environment?

The civil war in Afghanistan indicates a tiny possibility for successful negotiations and the efficacy of the inter-Afghan dialogue. As mentioned earlier, the interests, strategies, and expectations (sometimes conflicting) of different global and regional powers are intertwined

in this country.

Various experts and political analysts in Kabul, nonetheless, are positive about the peace process and write about the likely success of the negotiations. Regardless of their forecasts, today the machine of the inter-Afghan dialogue for peace arrangements has been hurled, and such factors as the peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban, the release of their supporters from prisons, the mutual exchange of prisoners can be deemed unprecedented in 40 years of civil war. The analysis reveals that reaching a sustainable peace is challenging owing to disagreements between countries involved and the conflicting interests of the United States, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, among others. It is likely that an Afghan government will be formed like in Iraq, while terrorist groups will be active in the outskirts of the country, in places waging an armed struggle against official Kabul.

A major issue for the Central Asian states in this process is the future of foreign terrorist groups that have citizens of post-Soviet countries in their ranks. Extremist groups of Central Asian origin, such as the IMU, Ansorullah and others, have several times attempted to destabilize Central Asia in the past decade. However, due to the inadequate number of supporters among the population and the countries' military capacity, those extremist groups have failed to realize their plans. Another important factor is that the US and NATO military operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan helped to address the impact of extremist groups of Central Asian origin.

Foreign armed movements and organizations will play on resentment and would use all their powers to hinder the start and largely the efficacy of the inter-Afghan peace dialogue. Supporters of Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other foreign terrorist organizations, clearly, will not be allowed in the peace process. This will very much concern them as the peace in Afghanistan will naturally reflect on them and diminish the space for their activities. They have three possible options:

1. They might continue the confrontation until the very last militant, which is equivalent to their physical destruction;
2. They might completely surrender to the authorities and anticipate a fair trial;
3. They might move to other conflict-prone regions or zones with relentless instability, or to northern Africa, Somalia, and Yemen. We will discuss these given options as possible scenarios.

We are witnessing the transformation of the status and position of the Taliban. The fact of their peace agreement with the United States, them being invited to various formats of a peaceful settlement of the situation in Afghanistan, unofficial contacts with official Kabul

allow us to say that today the Taliban are being modified and emerge as a “power-forming factor” (the Taliban consider themselves victors of 19-year-war, while honorably and with certain pressure on the central government they prepare themselves to partake in the inter-Afghan peace process).

It is undeniable that there will be Taliban supporters or representatives in the imminent Afghan government. They will play an essential role in the transformation of political processes in Afghanistan. This factor doubles the Taliban’s responsibility both among its supporters and before the international community.

Scenarios for the future of FTOs

Based on the above analysis, we might consider the following scenarios for the FTOs in Afghanistan, particularly of Central Asian origin:

Persistence of the present position: stable instability.

The peace process in Afghanistan will not be feasible due to the interwoven interests and strategies of different countries and neighbors involved, as well as due to the lack of agreement between Afghanistan’s political and intellectual elite. A significant domestic factor is an unformed coherent and stable political culture among elite groups. Political processes in Afghanistan, therefore, are still hard to forecast. Extremist organizations and movements of Central Asian origin, in this environment, would pursue their activities under the Taliban’s patronage, and thus it is very difficult to predict their actions.

The success of the peace talks and the joint struggle of the government forces, and the Taliban against foreign groups.

Given the success of the peace talks in Afghanistan and the middle ground for elite power-sharing groups, we might consider a scenario when the presence of foreign armed organizations will be detrimental for both sides. They will become a “bargaining chip” and will be eradicated completely in order to prove that foreign armed groups were/are responsible for the destabilization of Afghanistan. This scenario is unlikely but it could change the Taliban’s in both the local and the international community. On the other hand, the official Kabul will be able to validate the agreement to further moderate political processes. The Taliban will reinforce the “power-forming factor” phenomenon.

A corridor for foreign fighters as a precondition for a fragile peace .

You might deem this contingency scenario as the other side of the second scenario. This is possible only if the Taliban and official Kabul are guaranteed by both themselves and external actors that only they will manage the country's political affairs. In these conditions, the foreign fighters could be transferred to Northern Africa, Somalia, and Yemen. But since the global powers ferociously compete in Afghanistan's neighboring regions, these forces, with proper military and financial support, can act as a destabilizing instrument. In this vein, Central Asia is viewed as one of the zones for the transfer of armed extremist groups, but due to the region's low geopolitical virtue, this option is unlikely. Central Asian states should not preclude this scenario, but rather should devise pre-emptive measures, i.e. comprehensive cooperation of the region's security forces with each other and with Afghanistan. Only this way we can lessen the influence and potential threats of FTOs with Central Asian citizens in their ranks.



Is Peace in Afghanistan Possible?

There is also the possibility of using FTOs to counter Chinese influence, by transferring these groups across the narrow land bridge of the Wakhan corridor to the XUAR. Today, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is worrisome for China's geopolitical opponents and we observe this in the information space in views and analytical publications. The new "Central Asia - China" format of Chinese policy in the region, the first ministerial meeting of which was held on July 16, 2020, can also traditionally cover issues of regional security and joint counteracting extremism, terrorism, and separatism.

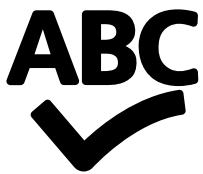
The above scenarios may not come true, and the political processes in Afghanistan, by tradition, might develop beyond analysis and forecasts. Experience suggests that one should not underestimate Central Asian extremist groups and rather be prepared for the worst-case scenario.

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[1] Discourse of Afghanistan's political leadership - in official meetings and events on peace arrangements and the beginning of inter-Afghan talks.

[2] See: [Dr. Pravesh Kumar Gupta](#), [Mahima Chhapariya](#). US-Taliban Peace Deal and its Implications for Central Asia. 16 May, 2020. URL: <https://diplomatist.com/2020/05/16/us-taliban-peace-deal-and-its-implications-for-central-asia/>

[3] О стратегических интересах некоторых перечисленных стран см.: Гиёсов М., Ризоён Ш. Интересы внешних игроков в Афганистане в новых условиях / Центра исследований армии, конверсии и разоружения (Украина). Дата публикации: 03.07.2020. URL: <https://cacds.org.ua/?p=9385>



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