



ROYAL DANISH DEFENCE COLLEGE

# Policy Brief

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## APPROACHING PEACE TALKS IN AFGHANISTAN: STAKEHOLDERS, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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The Afghan peace process between the Afghan government and Taliban has shown little progress until recently. President Ghani's call for peace negotiations along with the successful Eid ceasefire had resulted in unprecedented optimism and new possibilities for constructive engagement. It was in the wake of these events that the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC) and the Islamabad-based Regional Peace Institute (RPI) organized a Track II seminar on peace talks in Afghanistan. This brief summarizes the central insights from that conference, and it is the ambition of the organizers that the seminar's recommendations will be shared among the relevant stakeholders and political institutions in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### Key recommendations:

- Strengthen intelligence sharing and cooperation between ISI and NDS;
- Acknowledge that sub-national peace arrangements have very serious limitations due to their infringement of the core political issues in Afghanistan;
- Recognize that a peace deal between the Afghan government and the Taliban involves offering something that one may not wish to offer. Compromising always involves unpleasant concessions which are essential, and
- US should engage in talks with the Taliban. This will not harm the Afghan government.

Held on June 28-29, the Track II seminar “Approaching Peace Talks: Stakeholders, Challenges, and Prospects” was the third in a series of Track-II engagements organized by the RDDC and RPI that seeks to contribute to peace and stability in Afghanistan. Attending the seminar were a number of highly experienced former officials and current practitioners in Afghanistan and Pakistan, along with three prominent international scholars: Mr. Felix Kühn from Germany, Dr. Antonio Giustozzi from the UK, and Dr. Barnett R. Rubin from the US.

Three topics guided the discussions at the seminar:

- Sub-national peace arrangements
- The role of intelligence communities
- Peace talks with the Taliban

This brief will elaborate the main findings and considerations from each of these sessions, focusing on specific recommendations at the end of each section.

## **The role of intelligence communities**

The national intelligence agencies of Afghanistan and Pakistan have played a critical role in past conflicts in the region and are still serving the purpose through backchannel contacts. The Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) are the principal intelligence players in the Afghan conflict and the role of other third-party intelligence agencies should not be overestimated.

Despite the inherent clandestine and opaque nature of intelligence operations arguably directed by both ISI and NDS, the session saw a constructive debate without the customary blame game. It was noted that the level of ISI-NDS cooperation has increased recently and the central recommendations seek to further strengthen this.

### **Recommendations:**

- Conduct joint investigations and visits;
- Establish inter-intelligence agency task forces with the right mindset, language skills and knowledge of the counterpart’s history, customs, and system;
- Establish a hotline between the NDS and ISI;
- Ensure that information sharing will lead to tangible action by the counterpart in order to enhance trust building;
- Build a common intelligence narrative through joint press statements and communication;
- Establish (as a pilot project) a joint anti-Daesh group, and
- Initiate cooperation in a top-down manner, e.g. director meetings every month, and establishment of committees at the highest level in both countries for intelligence cooperation.

## **Sub-national peace arrangements**

The hesitation of the Taliban to engage in peace talks with the Afghan government has led to opening the proposition of yielding territory to the Taliban as a concession in peace negotiations. However, the idea of splitting up Afghanistan goes against the core political objectives of all parties. Nobody is interested in internal divisions, which a sub-national peace deal could entail.

Sub-national arrangements may also be understood as ‘non-comprehensive arrangements’ where initial agreements aim at creating the foundation whereby other disputes could also be settled. A ‘non-comprehensive deal’ stands in contrast to the notion of a ‘grand bargain’, which resolves all outstanding issues.

The conceptual imprecision proved to be a hindrance in evaluating the precise outcome of this session, but the following recommendations could still be extracted with overall consensus:

### Recommendations:

- Acknowledge that sub-national peace arrangements have severe limitations;
- Focus on establishing a peace deal that would provide the foundation for further negotiations instead of an all-encompassing 'grand bargain', and
- Include ethnic minorities in the peace deals. Ethnic tensions remain a driver of violence and instability in Afghanistan.

### The role of external parties

The conflict in Afghanistan is international. This was repeated throughout the seminar not only because the United States and NATO are involved, but also because almost all regional countries have contacts with the Taliban or other non-state actors inside Afghanistan. The role of external parties is essential for understanding the conflict in Afghanistan. This is often a detrimental point when discussing national peace talks in Afghanistan, but it is, nonetheless, essential.

It was agreed among the participants that Russia's and Iran's lines of communication and alleged support for elements within the Taliban has increased over the past year as US presence is viewed as a geopolitical issue by these countries.

US military presence is perceived as a US bridgehead in the frame of a geo-political great game from Moscow and Tehran. A level of convergence of interest has arisen with parts of the Taliban. However, neither Russia nor Iran is interested in a US defeat in Afghanistan, as this will lead to collapse of the state, thus adversely deteriorating the regional security situation further. However, containment of the US military presence in the region seems to be a key priority at this moment.

China is steadily playing a bigger role in Afghanistan and the larger region. The Chinese government

has announced that they were willing to engage diplomatically and economically to contribute to negotiations. Pakistan's alleged support to the Taliban remains a widely discussed and contested subject.

During the seminar, there was broad agreement that ISI's influence over the Taliban has decreased during the last few years together with the Afghan Government losing control over increasing swathes of territory.

### Recommendations:

- Acknowledge the essential role of external parties as stakeholders in the Afghanistan conflict, and that these are compelled to act for safeguarding, even promoting self-interest.

### Peace talks with the Taliban

The Taliban demand for direct talks with the United States has been met with skepticism due to the broad acceptance of an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' peace process. However, this does not need to be an issue. Taliban do not demand to speak *first* with the US, nor *exclusively*, which leaves room for initial US-Taliban talks including the government of Afghanistan at a later stage, and such talks, during deliberations at the seminar, were not considered to constitute a threat to the Afghan government.

However, sustainability of a peace deal remains a principal issue of concern, and it must be clarified whether a peace deal aims at involving all parts of the Taliban, or, whether the initial objective is the isolation of the irreconcilable components of the Taliban.

Furthermore, it was argued that the Taliban is a much more unified organization than some experts had argued as all components of the movement complied with the central Eid-ceasefire order issued by the Taliban leadership.

A major issue in the negotiations is going to revolve around military power sharing and the authority and funding of the Afghan security forces. 'Who wields the guns' is a central issue as a lack of resolution of this issue will render any peace deal unsustainable.

Finally, negotiations, per se, are not a source of hesitation. Rather, it is the resultant political agreement that may change the power structure in Afghan politics. The conflict between the government in Afghanistan and the Taliban movement did not start as a conflict between current leaders and entities. It started with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979.

The conflicts in Afghanistan involve an ethnic dimension where Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras fear that a peace deal will make them worse off than they are at the current juncture. Ignoring the potential ethnic inter-communal tension will jeopardize the prospect of peace.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Recognize that negotiations involve compromise, which entails concessions: to offer something that you may not want to;
- Initiate talks between the United States and the Taliban which the government of Afghanistan should join after initial contact;
- Ignore other non-state armed actors as none other is relevant;
- Focus on topics where compromise is possible, for example the constitution of Afghanistan allows for amendments.

And by the same token:

- Acknowledge that agreement on everything is not possible. Focus efforts on a framework for an incremental peace process;
- Recognize the principal issues of military power sharing, and
- Revive the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) talks and use this as the platform to engage with the Taliban.

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