

COMMENT 201 - Intra-Afghan-Peace Talks (II): Pakistan and the puzzle over the future of foreign military presence in Afghanistan

By Siegfried O. Wolf

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Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf, Director of Research at SADF (Coordinator: Democracy Research Programme); he was educated at the Institute of Political Science (IPW) and South Asia Institute (SAI), both Heidelberg University. Additionally he is member (affiliated researcher) of the SAI as well as a former research fellow at IPW and Centre de Sciences Humaines (New Delhi, India).

The Afghanistan imbroglio, particularly the [remaining 2,500 foreign troops on its soil](#), will confront new U.S. President Joe Biden with early decisions ‘[that will define the contours of the war’s next chapter and determine the legacy of the American-led invasion](#)’. He inherits not only a ‘[nascent, fragile peace process](#)’ but also a controversial ‘[peace agreement](#)’ with the Taliban struck by the former Trump administration in February 2020. This agreement initiated not only the launch of peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government but also [committed the US](#) - and subsequently the NATO as well¹ - to a total withdrawal of forces by May 1, 2021. In exchange, the United States [received security assurances](#) and [counterterrorism guarantees](#), including the cut of ties with Al-Qaeda and other international terror groups.

We must consider the rapidly declining security situation, particularly the rise in violence and [targeted killings](#)² and the worrying pace of [disintegration and eventual dismantlement](#) of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) – which contrasts with the extraordinary military strength of a Taliban force

¹ Based on the common principle between US and NATO: ‘[Together in, together out](#)’.

² Particularly media personalities, opinion makers, intellectuals, civil servants, female judges of the Supreme Court, among others, became the focus of terror attacks. The [European Union condemns](#) them clearly as ‘... a deliberate attempt to silence a polity based on principles of rule of law, democratic values and respect for human rights that undermine a peace process in need of mutual trust.’

uninclined to fulfill its commitments³. Any kind of political settlement or (comprehensive) ceasefire seems unreachable at the moment. Thus, political decision makers in both Washington and NATO may consider reviewing the May 2021 deadline. For we are witnessing a situation in which it seems impossible [to preserve the recent gains](#) regarding democracy, respect of the constitution, human rights, civil society development, among others. Thought questions may be in point: Is it possible to keep the withdrawal deadline? If not, how much longer should US/NATO remain a presence in Afghanistan? Three months, six months? Until a peace deal is actually achieved? Or are we to consider an open-ended presence with a counterterrorism or counterinsurgency strategy, or with both missions? The crux of the matter is best summarized by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg who [stated](#) in a press conference during a meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of NATO members in December last year:

“If we stay, we risk continued fighting. And an even longer-term engagement. If we leave, we risk Afghanistan once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorists. And the loss of the gains made with such sacrifice. So there is a price for staying longer. But there is also a price for leaving too soon.”

However, in all conceivable scenarios, the US and NATO will need the support - or at least the good will not to constitute a hindrance - of regional partners such as China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and India. Consequently, one piece of this puzzle for Washington and NATO to consider at the [Defence Ministerial meeting](#) in February 2021 (when it will probably be decided whether to stay or leave), is how Afghanistan’s neighbours, foremost Pakistan, will respond.

In order to map potential upcoming trajectories, it is crucial to consider how Pakistan will perceive an extended foreign military presence in Afghanistan – what might be the implications and reactions. So as to address these questions, one needs to review Pakistan’s interests – as well as its leverage in keeping the Taliban both committed to their agreement with the US and engaged within the Intra-Afghan-Peace Talks (or Afghan Peace Negotiations/APN). To begin with, one must be

³ More concretely, the unwillingness by the Taliban to cut their relations with Al-Qaeda and other international terror groups. Moreover, the Taliban continue to conduct attacks against the U.S. military in Afghanistan, thereby violating their agreement with the U.S.

aware that [Pakistan's actual priorities in its Afghan policy](#) are the achievement of maximum leverage in Afghanistan's domestic and international affairs (with the overall aim [to keep India out](#) of its western neighbourhood), as well as the immediate establishment of an interim government. Furthermore, Pakistan does not perceive a military victory by the Taliban over the Afghan government (GIROA)/ANDSF as conducive to its interests.

Keeping the Taliban's political leadership at the negotiation table would help to maintain - and strengthen - Pakistan's central role in the APN. Islamabad will attempt to use its role within the APN to put additional pressure on the Ghani administration to resign and subsequently to allow the formation of an interim government. Furthermore, by having the (ongoing) opportunity to offer US/NATO support for the APN, Pakistan expects to strengthen its position in both current and upcoming attempts to secure aid from international donors. Another consideration among Pakistani authorities is to increase its chances to gain concessions from the US and other NATO countries in form of support for Islamabad's position towards India, particularly regarding Kashmir. The fact that Pakistani efforts to spread allegations against and disinformation about India⁴ reached an unprecedented peak at this particular moment can be seen as revealing. Islamabad also hopes to receive support in its struggle against anti-Pakistan forces residing in Afghanistan, foremost the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

A military victory by the Taliban is perceived by Pakistan's military and Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) as a crucial step towards a further emancipation of Taliban factions from Pakistan. Here, the apparent fragmentation processes within the Taliban movement ('factionalism') partly serves Pakistan's interest to limit (control) the political and military rise of different factions. It appears that Pakistan is interested in a balance of power between the different factions of the Taliban, as well as between the Taliban as whole and other militant groups in Afghanistan. However, this also complicates its opportunity to exercise influence over the whole movement. It does seem that the opportunity of the Pakistani army and ISI to

⁴ According to Islamabad's claims, India is supposed to be involved in the sponsorship of terrorist activities on its soil and is planning a surgical strike against Pakistan – these are some of several accusations. These accusations lack any substantive evidence confirmed by independent observers and are rigorously rejected by New Delhi.

convince the Taliban to remain in the APN – as well as to agree to a comprehensive ceasefire – is shrinking. Such decline can be reinforced by the growing [influence of Iran](#) over some Taliban factions (and splinter groups), especially among those military commanders against both the peace deal with the US and negotiations with the GIROA. As we witness an increasing “appetite” for a [military victory](#) (instead of pursuing the Doha peace process earnestly) among both the Taliban military leadership and rank and file, it becomes obvious that Afghanistan will face not only a further escalation of violence but also a new civil war. The situation will worsen if and when the US/NATO decide to extend its presence; it is probable that the Taliban will relaunch their attacks against foreign troops. Since Pakistan’s military and intelligence forces are not willing to impair their deeply entrenched good relations with the Taliban, it will become more difficult to both function as a main sponsor of insurgency groups and at the same time maintain the public façade as a reliable and constructive partner of US/NATO forces in Afghanistan. Moreover, Islamabad’s policy to [maintain collaborative relations](#) with the US will become more challenging. Consequently, [Pakistan will continue](#) its ‘dual policy’: On one side it will maintain its support to the Taliban, both political-diplomatically and militarily; on the other side it will continue to build-up countervailing forces so as to make sure that the Taliban does not become too powerful in political as well as military terms. One should expect, in both scenarios, that Pakistan will step-up its efforts in both these directions. Furthermore, it will also enhance its engagement with regional actors, oppositional politicians, and other key political figures so as to extend its leverage in Afghanistan.

Against this backdrop, an extended NATO mission could have a modifying (constructive) impact on Pakistan’s Afghanistan approach – but only if and when it is *finally* flanked by a clear message from the new US administration and NATO member states. More concretely, the US and NATO must stress that positive relations – which include the consideration of Pakistan’s security concerns, military-to-military relations, financial and other types of support - are only possible if and when Pakistan’s security sector agents decisively use their influence so as to make the Taliban agree to a ceasefire (or at least significantly reduce violence), suspend the potential resumption of fighting against US/NATO forces,

and cease pursuing a military victory in Afghanistan. This of course includes the suspension of Pakistan's military support to the Taliban and other militant groups combatting both the ANDSF and foreign troops.

However, although some elements within Pakistan's leadership, especially civilians such as Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Minister Qureshi, would be willing to accept a (limited) extended stay of US/NATO, one should expect most military and ISI agents to reject this, particularly if longer (open-ended) stays are considered. Also, Islamist pressure groups will exercise their influence and lobby for the refusal of any foreign military presence – especially an enduring counter-terrorism and/or counter-insurgency mission. This would have negative repercussions for the domestic security situation in Pakistan. In sum, one must seriously doubt whether Pakistan will become a credible and supportive partner as regards any kind of foreign military presence in Afghanistan.

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19 Avenue des Arts 2nd floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
E 0833.606.320 RPM Bruxelles
Email: info@sadf.eu Web: www.sadf.eu