

ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS IN AFGHAN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

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Abstract: Survivors of the devastating war that lasted decades in Afghanistan are now looking for a long-term arrangement for peace and security so that they can go back to normal living. Given the financial problems coupled with the administrative situation threatened by powerful domestic proxies of international players, the government of the country is not able to handle the problems alone in this war-torn country. Despite the complexities involved, the engagement of non-state actors in the Afghan peace process is inevitable to accelerate the progress.

This study aims to examine the diverse array of non-state actors, including international mediators, civil society organizations, and domestic power groups, and to match their underlying interests and strategies to attain peace. Delving into a range of sources, the article strives to assess the scope of engagement and the impact of non-state actors on the peace process. These entities have proved helpful in liaising the efforts of the sitting administration with the nature and capacity of domestic power groups, civil society organizations, and external contributors. They could help reduce domestic tensions and portray the true picture of internal difficulties and complexities to the donors by filling the communication gap wherever possible and through back-door negotiations. Deep down it is not only beneficial for the Afghan administration but for the domestic power groups and civil society organizations as well, since these entities also want to have an association with the commanding authorities to safeguard their interests.

The study asserts that balanced combined efforts by the government and the non-state actors are needed to eliminate domestic differences and promote peace and harmony in the country. Especially when the national government lacks resources after such a long war and anarchy in the country, it will be helpful for Afghanistan and its regional neighbors.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Security, Peace, Negotiations, Non-state actors.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Afghan nation has been facing unsafe living conditions for almost half a century now as being a battlefield for proxy wars of big powers. This situation has not only affected Afghanistan itself but also played a role in holding the whole region regarding economic and social developments and contributing positively to global advancements.

In 2001, the incident at the World Trade Center led to an attack on Afghanistan by the United States to remove the Taliban from Afghanistan. Despite partial initial success in achieving the targets, the main leaders of the Taliban, including Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar, remained out of reach of the United States for years (Sheikh & Greenwood, 2013).

After continued attempts, the U.S. had located and killed Osama Bin Laden in May 2011 by operating in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Later in 2011, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates had first time held reconciliation talks with the Taliban. This process continued for the coming years without any significant progress. However, it was a positive indicator that both the government and the Taliban were interested in a diplomatic settlement of the conflict. The Taliban had kept asserting the restoration of a modified version of administration matching their style. However, the Kabul government wanted a new arrangement that could ensure peace and safety, and strengthen their rule (Nabeel, 2018).

Even Afghan President Ashraf Ghani offered the Taliban recognition as a political party, released their captives, eased the restrictions, and reviewed the constitution. The Taliban believed that the Afghan government was not speaking on its own and was taking advice from the U.S. for which they rejected the offer (Safi & Ruttig, 2018). In July 2018, Donald Trump's government made a move to engage their ambassadors in direct negotiations with the Taliban and started a series of talks in September 2018. The U.S. Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, was nominated by President Trump in September 2018. Being an American citizen born in Afghanistan, he began this difficult process of mending fences with the Taliban and other players, sending a strong signal that the United States was serious about signing an accord this time (Maley & Jamal, 2022).

Different regional and international actors had participated in multiple rounds of talks over a year to find a way out. Finally, on February 29, 2020, the parties were able to locate common terms that eventually led to the withdrawal of the U.S. armed forces from Afghanistan. A deal was signed between the United States and the Taliban, which was deemed to be the end of a long war in Afghanistan that had started with the 2001 invasion of the U.S in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the primary objective of the U.S. to remove the Taliban and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorist organizations was still not achieved. The leaders of Al-Qaeda and ISIS were still present in Afghanistan and ruling the areas. Despite this agreement with the U.S., they continued guerilla warfare against U.S. forces and the government of Kabul, meaning thereby that terrorism and insurgency were still present in the region (Karim & Hussain, 2022).

On the contrary, the United States had committed to reduce its troop strength from 12,000 to 8,600 within 135 days, and the withdrawal of all foreign soldiers was scheduled to be completed in fourteen months (Maizland 2020).

The American people had become weary of the long-stretched Afghan war, costing over \$2 trillion to date, and had resulted in thousands of deaths. Trump had promised throughout his campaign to bring an end to the Afghan conflict and the United States had also committed to assist the United Nations to remove sanctions placed on Taliban. The goal was to help the Taliban through the transition from a military group to one participating in the democratic process in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Taliban had established shadow governments in several regions, and as of January 31, 2018, only 229 districts, accounting for about 56.3% were under the control of the Afghan government (Mirza et al., 2020).

Significance of Non-State Actors in Peace Process

When it comes to enhancing or diminishing human security, non-state players, including commercial companies, armed groups, non-governmental organizations, and NGOs, are crucial. Many non-state actors, especially NGOs, are regularly engaged to help improve human security situations. Helping governments protect and restore vulnerable ecosystems, assisting displaced people, and calling for more regulation of the weapons trade are all examples of their contribution towards the betterment. In the modern global setting, non-state actors are greatly helpful in promoting human security, which is not yet assured in the less developed world. By partnering closely with local communities and demonstrating superior capacity-building abilities compared to conventional players, non-state actors have an advantage during internal disputes. There are various ways in which such entities could contribute to safeguarding human security. These groups can operate beyond the foreign policy limitations and restrictions imposed by state institutions; and they have better access through communicators, who can act in various settings, to engage directly at the grassroots level with the communities. Regarding internal disputes, these entities tend to be more adaptable than governmental actors. The growing involvement of non-state entities in ensuring human security during times of anarchy and war has always been coupled with great challenges. There may be a lack of coordination and clarity about responsibility due to many unauthorized participants. There is a downside as well that this whole arrangement of prioritizing civil society above official institutions diverts resources from the state, which would already be facing challenges (Bruderlein, 2000).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study has been conducted based on the secondary data available through recent research work. The information collected includes but is not limited to the following.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It has particularly focused on the recent history of the conflicts observed in Afghanistan.

Overview of Afghanistan's Conflict

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States spearheaded an invasion to change the Afghan regime and eradicate terrorist elements from the area. Over the two decades, Afghan and international troops had been continuously attacked by Taliban insurgents despite their defeat as ruling organizations. The war exposure of many of the Taliban

commanders was from before the creation of armed factions in the early 1990s when they had fought alongside Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. The United States had provided the Mujahideen with arms and funding as part of its stance against Cold War adversaries. Afghan president Mohammad Daoud Khan was deposed in a communist coup in 1978, and the Soviet Union supported the revolution of communist leaders. Even though the Soviet Union withdrew its forces in 1989, the domestic conflicts were the reason for the continued unrest, and in 1992, widespread destruction was witnessed due to internal power politics.

The Taliban had emerged as a significant actor in the region in the early 1990s, with many of its members having attended religious institutions from within and outside of Afghanistan. Soon they had improved their military situation and took control of Kandahar, the second-largest city in Afghanistan after Kabul. They also guaranteed that urban areas would continue to be risk-free. The then Mujahideen leaders and their forces were widely reviled for committing breach of human rights and war crimes to seize power. Therefore, the arrival of the Taliban was observed as a relief. In 1996, the Taliban overran the country's capital and forced out Najibullah Ahmadzai. The only nations that recognized the new management were Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan. When the Taliban initially gained power, their arrival was greeted with open arms. Their early success in rooting out corruption, reducing crime, and making the highways and places under their authority secure for commerce had helped them to rise quickly. The Taliban, however, had never loosened the initially set limits, maintaining that doing so would undermine their goal of preventing a repeat of civil war atrocities.

However, the West was not happy with the track the Taliban had adopted to run the country. Soon they got a chance to intervene when the United States blamed al-Qaeda for the 9/11 attacks, and made the United Nations impose sanctions on the Taliban in 1999. After the Taliban refused to turn up accused al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who was hiding in Afghanistan, the United States commenced its invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. Bin Laden was blamed for planning and execution of the worst assault in United States history. As a matter of principle, the Afghanistan government demanded evidence linking bin Laden to the 9/11 attacks from the Bush administration and tried to bargain with Washington as well, but the U.S. turned down every reconciliation attempt. After a long resistance, the United States and its allies met success, and the Taliban were eventually overthrown by the government. In December 2001, Hamid Karzai became the helm of an interim administration. However, a continued effort of over two decades proved a waste when on Sunday, August 15, 2021, the Taliban, who had been expelled from Afghanistan in 2001, returned to power and took over the presidential palace. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani also left the country (Arifani, 2021).

Previous Attempts at Peace Talks

The escalating cost in economic terms, societal harm, and human suffering caused by the Afghan war prompted the international community, led by the United States, to explore political alternatives for a peaceful resolution to the crisis. Therefore, a peace effort was accelerated. At first, there was no unified approach to peacemaking or reconciliation. Pakistan continued to be a staunch supporter of the idea that moderate Taliban should participate in Afghanistan's democratic process and principally had met success in convincing the Afghan government.

In 2010, the Afghan government made overt attempts to initiate peace talks with the Taliban with the help of Saudi Arabia. In the beginning, there was an attempt to exclude Pakistan from the negotiations, but Pakistan was able to restore its status by making the participants aware of its peculiar position in the peace process and crucial contributions that were undermined by the Afghan government and the United States. Later, the Afghan government convened the National Peace Conference, or Peace Jirga, in the middle of 2010. President Karzai had requested the Taliban as well to participate in negotiations. Despite that the Taliban were promised some additional concessions offered by the U.S., they refused to join and expanded their operations instead.

The 2011 Second Bonn Summit on Afghanistan is worth mentioning. A peace process headed by Afghanistan was proposed at this summit. The government wanted a reconciliation. Vice President Joe Biden had gone far enough to say that the Taliban were not our adversary. The Afghan government had started expressing its anxiety about progress in peace negotiations with the Taliban. The main factor was the establishment of the Taliban's office in Qatar. Even President Karzai tried to start a discussion with the Taliban parallel to the United States. The Taliban had persistently insisted the United States renounce violence by removing its forces, as a primary requirement, from Afghanistan to demonstrate dedication towards the peace process. The negotiations were suspended due to a deadlock. Later, the United States and NATO allies, supported and encouraged by Pakistan, began a series of diplomatic and covert measures to urge the Taliban to return to the negotiations, and the process was restarted after a break of almost a year of suspension. In 2015, the Taliban were permitted

to reopen a political office in Qatar. By playing such a pivotal role, Pakistan expected that the parties involved in the peace negotiations between the Taliban and the United States would give due consideration to Pakistan's role and strategic and political interests in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Mullah Mansoor was assassinated in a drone strike in Baluchistan, Pakistan, on May 22, 2016. It was a big setback to the peace talks initiated with Pakistan's assistance and was seen as a threat to Pakistani sovereignty and an assault on the Afghan peace process.

The Peace Process and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group Peace and reconciliation were not a one-time occurrence but rather the result of ongoing diplomatic and political efforts on the part of various attracted parties. Forming a body dedicated to finding a political resolution in Afghanistan, specifically negotiating peace with the Taliban, was seen as both innovative and essential. On January 11, 2016, the Quadrilateral Coordination Group of Afghanistan (QCG) convened for the first time. Afghanistan government's strong commitment to peace and reconciliation with Taliban groups and Hezb e Islami Hekmatyar was reaffirmed at the summit. With the singular goal of ending the Afghan conflict, Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed as a special counselor in Afghanistan. He quickly reached out to the Taliban, the Afghan government, and Islamabad as well. Pakistan was approached with a letter from President Trump asking for Pakistan's assistance to end the conflict in Afghanistan (Sargana & Sargana, 2019).

ENGAGEMENT OF NON-STATE ACTORS

It was important to engage all concerned players to make the peace efforts successful. The efforts aimed to benefit from different sources and make the country a participative and contributing member of the region and the world.

Identification and Profiles

Paramilitaries, Warlords, Militias, Private Security Firms, Insurgents, Rebels, and Guerrillas were all examples of non-state actors that play a role in various violent conflicts. Moreover, the 'Global War on Terrorism' was an indication that transnational terrorist networks were a big concern. Official authorities were often cautious about getting into informal conversations and agreements with ANSAs, particularly with the individuals they had dubbed as 'terrorists,' regardless of the designation the government had given to that group. However, such talks began in some cases in violent situations. It was made possible in many situations, by virtue of multiple political or administrative offers, for non-state actors to become non-violent political parties whose legitimate aims were to be absorbed into state machinery. While there were reasonable concerns about recognizing or legitimizing armed groups through engagement, it was often difficult to avoid any engagement with NSAs regarding international humanitarian law and humanitarian issues in general. The problem of non-recognition of NSAs was addressed, and the aim was to evaluate the consequences of recognition on conflict dynamics (Phillips & Smith, 2021).

Motivations and Interests

The international world had found it challenging to adequately handle Afghanistan's difficulties due to the absence of a recognized administrative authority. Slow but steady progress was observed by the non-state actors in supporting the national government's efforts to set up a reliable political administration. In addition to complicating the efforts to resolve the Afghan war, the emergence of non-state players such as TTP further strained relations between the international community and Afghanistan.

The Afghan government needed to maintain connections for foreign support in their efforts to deal with the current problems and create a stable and proficient political administration. In addition to diplomatic, financial, and technical coordination and mentoring, helping to strengthen Afghan institutions and fostering the growth of civil society are the ways to achieve this goal. Aggravation of issues like poverty, inadequate educational facilities, reduced commercial opportunities, and political instability are the impacts of war. Non-state actors can play a very positive role in alleviating them for the national cause.

When negative characters in non-state entities like TTP try to cause instability and commit terrorist attacks, the NGOs or civil society organizations must stand up to isolate such entities and make it possible to expedite the fixation process. It could be supported using state force, diplomatic pressure, and targeted sanctions if needed. The global community needed to take action to obstruct such harmful acts, as well as networks and funding systems. ¹

¹<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/02/06/the-rise-of-non-state-actors-in-afghanistan-a-consequence-of-political-vacuum/>

3. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

IMPACT OF NON-STATE ACTORS

Non-state actors have been helpful in different conflicts worldwide and were believed to play a positive role in Afghanistan.

Positive Contributions towards Peace

Multiple internal and external organizations have been participating in developmental operations and different programs in Afghanistan parallel to the sitting administration. A brief description is provided hereunder.

Mediation and Facilitation:

Due to the complicated domestic power structure in Afghanistan, after the international community intervened to oust the Taliban in 2001, it was obvious that large-scale assistance would be needed to address the damage and the years of neglect that the country had suffered (Jo, 2005). The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund ARTF was set up in March 2002 to serve as a coordinated financing mechanism for the transitional government's recurrent budget and priority reconstruction projects recognized by the government. Between 2002 and 2007, the ARTF successfully mobilized \$1.45 billion in grant contributions from 25 donors. Much of the education sector was used towards salary payments, which amounted to around \$109 million annually. Enrolment of children in grades 1 – 12 increased across the country from 3.1 million in 2002 to over 5 million in 2006. The enrollment of girls more than doubled over the same period, from 839,000 to 1.75 million (Bank & Group, 2013).

In Afghanistan, the National Solidarity Program was one of the ARTF's vehicles for investment financing. It was aimed at building community-level structures, called Community Development Committees, based on the demand for services. At the time of the evaluation, over 300 schools had been built using a community-led approach. Four issues were faced during the process, four more prominent. First, the community structures this program sought to develop were fragile and incapable of making the links between communities and the national government. Second, there was no gender policy behind participating in and managing the Community Development Committees. Third, the Ministry of Education could not meet the demand for services generated by the capital investment through the Community Development Committees on the supply side. Fourth, the level of governance on which the success of a community-driven approach would rest was not being given adequate attention. One of the recommendations was to develop a more programmatic approach to Community Development Committees and focus more on the sustainability of investments (Robinson-Pant et al., 2021).

Humanitarian Initiatives:

In Afghanistan, non-state actors could critically encourage adult literacy projects and provide literacy classes. The Department of Mines, Metals, and Energy relies on UNESCO-Kabul for a variety of services. Additionally, ANAF AE focuses on testing new initiatives and aiding the state in policy formation. They have been developing a method to speed up the learning process for adults, helping them to attain the equivalence of 12 years of education in only 7 years. To further its mission of empowering women, ANAF AE was also working to establish literacy education, having the potential to affect societal structures and bring about change. Help, one of the worldwide NGOs, was also engaged in initiatives aimed at promoting individual agencies. They include reading and writing instructions into their TVET programs to boost economic growth. Individual benefactors have a significant role in enabling working-age persons to improve their lives and those of their communities. The Afghan government's economic policies and practices were reinforced by the activities of non-state players in the supply and funding of ALE projects.

Non-State Actors Predominantly Managed Program, a system of informal religious literacy sometimes known as Quranic literacy, was the earliest of the literacy projects. Students at these institutions often gain exceptional skills in their native language. Further, the learners in major cities who had completed a nine-month literacy program offered by the government or non-governmental organizations NGOs with a State-signed agreement had the opportunity to enroll in special adult education institutions known as literacy schools. These colleges would cater only to adults and get funding from the state. They are either on public land or in leased facilities set aside for that purpose. Availability and Involvement of state and non-state providers choose their students from among internally displaced persons and returning immigrants and from those unable to attend school for financial, cultural, or some other reasons. Most of the world's illiterate population lives in rural areas, making it difficult in developing countries to provide equal access to literacy instruction for everyone. Another

problem with developing and running any public service program is the geographically imbalanced population distribution in the country, with 43% of the population living in only seven provinces and 57% spread among the other 27 provinces.

However, ANAFAE and other non-state actors contributed positively. Adult education projects valued by local communities but difficult for the State to finance had benefited greatly from the support of non-state actors. Despite obstacles like ongoing safety issues, a difference in cultural norms, and extreme poverty were still there, non-state actors found novel ways to reach out to those who lacked access or had missed formal schooling (Robinson-Pant et al., 2021)

Challenges and Criticisms

The general safety and security situation was bad and biased due to political and religious issues. The records show that the national cause was taken over by the rivalry between the domestic power groups, which widened the gap between productive dialogue and coordinating efforts.

Security Concerns:

In the first half of 2021, there were reports of attacks against religious leaders. Many religious scholars were assassinated since the beginning of the Taliban attack in May. Given the history of persecution and the Taliban's unwavering commitment to establishing an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the religious scholars fitting the description that challenged the legitimacy of the Taliban ideology legitimately had a reasonable fear of persecution. However, there was not much information available about what happened afterward.

Attacks on educational institutions, threats against educational institutions and their employees, and other occurrences were recorded by UNAMA in 2020, affecting the ability of children to attend school. Attacks against educational and healthcare institutions and their employees persisted during the first half of 2021, according to UNAMA. These attacks included both direct assaults and fighting that caused damage to schools and hospitals. Only in one event, when three explosive devices carried by non-suicide vehicles went off outside a school in a Kabul neighborhood, primarily inhabited by the Hazara community on 8 May 2021, killed 85 civilians and injured 216. Most victims were schoolgirls. This was the worst attack on Afghan civilians at the beginning of 2021. Security quoted that this assault was allegedly linked to ISKP.

In recent years, the Taliban have collaborated with humanitarian organizations to portray themselves as a government monitoring service delivery. Killings, threats, intimidation, harassment, and kidnappings of healthcare staff were among the recorded events. Insurgents and clinics often strike a deal to access clinics in highly sensitive areas. Depending on insurgent groups' level of control or contestation, healthcare personnel face different situations in different areas.

Rival parties had frequently conducted attacks on non-governmental organizations because their activity was seen as biased or offensive to certain groups' religious or cultural values. People involved in de-mining efforts or polio vaccination campaigns were also targeted because they were seen as spies or because their work was not in conformity with the Taliban's plans. There have been reports of threats against healthcare personnel trying to provide services to certain population segments, particularly to COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

The Taliban allegedly raided the headquarters of several nongovernmental organizations, NGOs, and civil society groups after they had gained power, and they also went door-to-door searching for activists. It was also stated that women-led NGOs were raided, with cars being taken and premises locked in certain instances. In addition, there was a list of 25 prominent women from Herat, including civil society leaders and individuals who collaborated with foreigners or were social activists. Reportedly, the Taliban had also shot a woman in the forehead in her home, killing her, along with another woman who was a nurse and an activist for women's rights on suspicion of violating the orders.²

Lack of Accountability:

The Taliban have been trying to acquire political clout by exploiting the humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan. Other factors that could encourage non-state actors to collaborate with the Taliban include responsible conduct on a basic level of respect for human rights, economic reforms to benefit the country and the neighboring states, and effective prohibition of the spread of religious extremism. Failure to meet these conditions would inevitably lead to an environment of distrust and contrary to legitimacy and could, in turn, hold back the administrative quest of the Taliban.

² <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-afghanistan-2022/23-religious-leaders>

Not to mention that Afghanistan could become a sanctuary for foreign jihadists due to the complex domestic network. There is a strong perception that it would be difficult to block terrorists from using Afghan land for their cause even if, in principle, they are not permitted by the Taliban.³

Religious experts, jurists, community elders, local powerbrokers, and other participating entities are involved in operating a non-state traditional justice system, which has been prevalent in many regions of Afghanistan for a long time. Any human rights violations conducted by non-state actors can also stem from land disputes between groups or individuals, such as communities, ethnic groups, or even blood feuds. It would be a tough job for the Taliban to bring all those engaged in activities hereinabove to a uniform system.⁴

CASE STUDIES – EXAMINING SPECIFIC NON-STATE ACTORS

NGOs and Civil Society Organizations

The Afghanistan Institute for Civil Society Organizations recommends that CSOs diversify their financing streams to include sources other than foreign donors to ensure financial sustainability. CSOs can only achieve their goals within a regulatory and policy climate conducive to their work. They must also be able to access financial sources through their institutions as prescribed in the bylaws. However, the Afghan government has not yet established a system to ensure the long-term viability of CSOs by allocating specified development resources in the national budget. In some instances, reform efforts in this area date back to 2012 but have yielded only incremental improvements so far. The ability and credibility of many CSOs to explore collaborative possibilities with the business sector and individual financiers were restricted. Such restraints included the capacity to answer questions about the openness and efficacy of CSOs, provide evidence of mutual interest, relevance of activities to the national cause, and effective application of funds. CSOs in Afghanistan do not actively seek out or use fundraising options. In the Islamic framework, a larger ethical notion of charity is available that provides fertile ground for the development of humanity-based individual contributions to Muslim communities. This was especially true in light of the mandatory Zakat (Hasan, 2016).

According to a joint evaluation of aid to Afghanistan by the DANIDA Evaluation Department 2005, the NGOs had a history of filling the gap in the education sector that was halted during the Taliban regime. After the fall of the Taliban, ARTF assisted the Ministry of Education in taking a leadership role in the sector. The Ministry of Education had joined hands with NGOs in its consultative and technical groups, and they worked together to varying degrees. However, the administrative suspicions about the motives of NGOs led to discussions regarding their fate in the system. At some official levels, they were perceived as incapable of providing proper education services. The joint evaluation concluded that NGOs were crucial to the development and maintenance of the operations. However, the donors should work with all stakeholders for appropriate regulation, avoid misuse of the available sources, and project the NGO concept.

In Afghanistan, an emerging issue was the lucrative packages NGOs offer to attract skilled workers from the civil service and undermining long-term development objectives. While this problem was not restricted to one sector, it had resulted in suspicions about the motives of NGOs. One strong reason was the official information and planning leakage with every outgoing person, and the personal connections they hold in the official system. One recommendation by the joint evaluation was for donors to look more seriously at mitigating the capacity and resource gap between the public administration and international humanitarian and development assistance. The same report also concluded that the aim should be to develop voluntary and constructive synergies between NGO and state planning while avoiding the creation of a local NGO elite that out-competes the public sector for staff because of its better remuneration (Berry, 2010).

Tribal and Religious Leaders

In Herat, Ismail Khan's ascent to prominence as a mujahideen commander during the 1980s Soviet invasion shows how, once in control of Herat, Khan attempted to stimulate the local economy. After the fall of the communist regime in 1992, Ismail Khan opened Herat to foreign agencies, utilizing their resources to improve his personal standing. These support organizations provided much-needed services, including hospital and refugee aid management. Ismail Khan was able to recollect his power and become indispensable after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. He did this by proving himself as the only one who could keep terrorism and insurgents at bay and by using customs, revenues, and other funds generation

³ <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/04/21/afghanistan-taliban-politics/>

⁴ <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-afghanistan-2022/>

as part of new state machinery to build legitimacy. The other war warlords, including Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Mohammad Qasim Fahim, had also effectively managed shifting political situations (Malejacq, 2020).

The most powerful of the Northern Alliance leader commanders was the Tajik from Panjshir named Ahmad Shah Massoud, followed by the ethnic Uzbek named Abdul Rashid Dostum. Dostum's and Atta Muhammad Noor's troops controlled strategic mountains and valleys south of the crossroads town of Mazar-e Sharif. They had experienced soldiers to fight against the Taliban.

Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance, was appreciated for his capabilities by the international community and media, despite reports of his alleged abuses of human rights. On the anniversary of his death, known as Massoud Day or Martyrs' Day, Massoud was celebrated as a national hero in Afghanistan, mostly by those who were not Pashtun. It was believed that Massoud was killed before he could be considered a threat by the international community (Worley, 2023).

Nahdlatul Ulama NU, an Indonesian-based organization that entered Afghanistan as a faith-based transnational player, earned greater confidence from the parties in conflict than the state actors. Although not all groups within the Taliban had accepted to speak to NU. NU's According to Rüländ, von Lübke, and Baumann, NU's capacity to implement a holistic, just, and impartial peace strategy was what made it feasible to fill the gap created by the absence of governmental entities. As a result of NU's many efforts to promote discussion, the climate in Afghanistan turned much more relaxed. NU was probably the only non-state entity in Afghanistan with strategic plans (Mahfudin & Sundrijo, 2021).

Regional and International Players

After 9/11, the United States provided significant funding and weaponry to the erstwhile Afghan mujahideen who had become warlords. The United States had done this during its fight against the USSR and later against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Following the collapse of the Taliban government and the elimination of the al-Qaeda network, the United States maintained its support for domestic warlords. Although this support had helped the United States and its allies in eliminating the Taliban and al-Qaeda, it also posed a danger to the fledgling democracy and state-building efforts.

The post-Taliban state-building endeavor in the country brought a temporary calm that warlords took advantage of. Many of them were pushed to help make peace with the new state. Their warlordism was toned down, but they didn't suddenly become upstanding citizens. It was hoped that political and social transformation brought on by economic reconstruction and democratization would eventually weaken the foundations of Afghan warlordism. Unfortunately, it did not work as expected. The United States supported the warlord system for its short-term targets, and resultantly, it hampered the planned long-term modernization approach. The U.S. depended on warlords for reasons like personal connections, intelligence, information, political demands in Kabul or the provinces, and force protectors. Because of their pre-existing ties, they were able to influence and get lucrative contracts associated with the rebuilding, logistical, and military presence efforts. Further, they had utilized their wealth and influence to pave the way for provincial and national legislatures, where they could rule with virtual immunity.

The rise of the warlord class in Afghanistan could be traced back to the Afghan Jihad at the time of the Russian invasion and occupation in the 1980s. Already having some informal tribal structure of warriors, taking this opportunity as a chance to strengthen themselves, they had developed their own private military and controlled specific areas from which they created and collected wealth, and this phenomenon had persisted as one of post-Taliban Afghanistan's most intractable problems. The United States invested considerable time, effort, and money in Afghanistan after the collapse of the Taliban administration in 2001. However, without assessing the exact needs of the area and the nation, continued blunders by U.S. policymakers hindered their ability to achieve desired objectives. The major lapses that hampered the designing the development structure included repeated poor investments in both people and ideas, which did not help to make connections with the masses; and contrary to the democratic approach, favorite warlords were engaged amongst the collaborators despite that many of them were responsible for atrocities against their people. Hence, the significant quantities of money and weaponry donated to the former Mujahideen had turned to warlords as part of the War on Terror aimed at fighting and dismantling the al-Qaeda network and its allies (Azami, 2021).

ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS IN SHAPING AGREEMENTS

Non-state actors play a major role in backdoor diplomacy, helping to soften the environment and pave the way towards commonalities.

Influence on Negotiation Dynamics

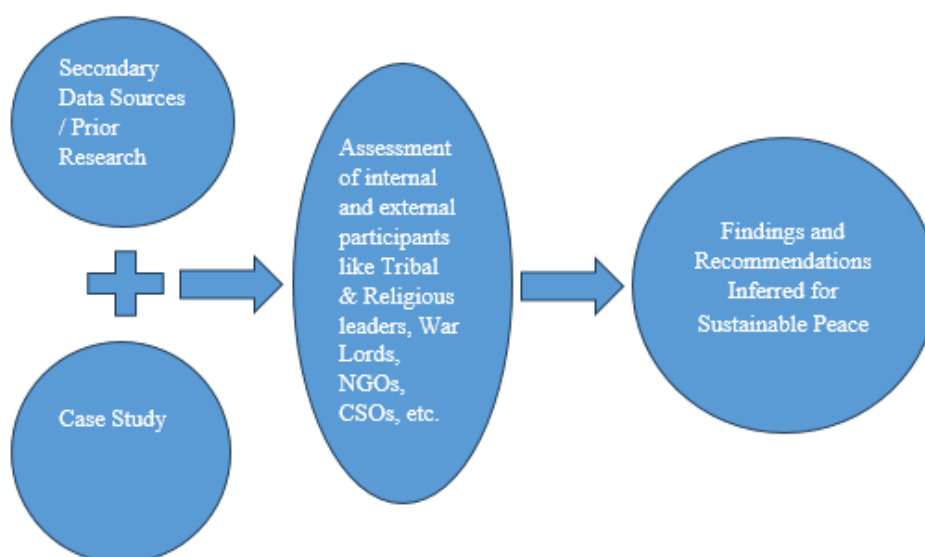
For the sake of law and order and territorial defense, it is in the best interest of all Afghans as individuals, parties, and the whole nation to have robust law enforcement and security forces, including an effective police force and army. Despite their strong nationalism and commitment to fighting crime, the Taliban are reluctant to proceed with a strong security force. This was because the existing professionals were trained and equipped by the West. Taliban would prefer an Integration of Taliban commanders and fighters with ANSF to get managing or supervisory roles in law enforcement, particularly in the southeast and south. The Taliban's act to support ISAF to establish credible Afghan security forces would create a positive image towards constructive efforts rather than an external danger by most bordering governments and regional powers. Also, in the current circumstances, most Taliban leaders would prefer a reduced presence of Al-Qaeda in eastern Afghanistan for the sake of both the local and national interests.

Addressing Divergent Interests

The interests of the Afghan community are quite diverse. Urban and rural Afghans share many aspirations and ambitions. According to surveys and field studies, peace and security are paramount to the Afghan people. Everyone wants the fighting to end so that people may get back to normal living, work, travel, and do their daily lives without fear. Fair and inclusive governance, professional police, and the efficient administration of justice are what most Afghans want, given the pervasive corruption, abuse of authority, and impunity observed in the society. They are waiting for a government that could work and deliver basic services, particularly in the areas of health, education, and commerce, and enable them to survive and reduce extreme poverty. They also want foreign aid to continue. A well-managed economy, with policies that could encourage trade and investment and, ultimately, the creation of employment, is something the nation needs and keenly awaits. Regardless of one's stance on social, civic, or political concerns, the most recent elections in Afghanistan reflected that the majority cares about maintaining their culture and traditions and safeguarding basic human and democratic rights. Only a small chunk supports the oppressive and discriminatory treatment of women under Taliban rule. Afghans, both individually and collectively, favor preserving their country's independence and sovereignty.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research has been conducted using a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is the one associated with the opinions and subjective facets of a study that cannot be measured numerically. In this study, the deductive method was applied to examine the role of non-state actors in multi-faceted Afghan peace negotiations proceedings, and it focused on recognizing the involvement and impact of all the internal and external non-state influencers. The study is constituted by an analysis of available research supported by a case study. It has been designed to encompass the comprehensiveness of participation and obstacles inferred to uphold a maintainable peace in the region.



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⁵ Diagram by the Author of this article to display the methodological process

5. DISCUSSION

THE FUTURE LANDSCAPE

It is believed that careful advancement to minimize the conflicts, providing a healthy working environment through the creation of effective communication channels, and by keeping external stakeholders intact, the efforts for peace and security would pace up the operations in a positive direction.

Potential Evolutions in Non-State Actor Involvement

Warlords, drug lords, and local commanders were among those in authority who stood to gain financially from the status quo of instability. However, as foreign aid started to dwindle, some of the main players noted political, financial, or organizational advantages to stability. Very profitable mineral extraction would be halted if the fighting in Afghanistan continues for too long, reducing resources and the legitimacy of the government. Given the expansion of the Taliban rule to the north, those leaders would face a cut in earnings. Despite that, they would continue to have some hold; the legitimacy of their cause, general command over the affairs, and capacity to run the show would all go down in the absence of foreign forces. Many Afghan players are believed to care for stability in the medium to long run, but only if they feel their main interests are protected. Afghan stability has always been in the best interest of the region and the rest of the world, as it would help overcome extremism, civil conflict, and cross-border contagion. It would also help pace up the development process for all participants. Establishing a cooperative administration in Kabul would provide security and economic advantages to China, Russia, and India. Participation of non-state actors in peacebuilding and developmental efforts would ensure the elimination of the continued anarchy in the area, and the U.S. and its allies would be spared from the perceived costs of ongoing combat and unilateral advances by the Taliban if the situation becomes stable.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Respect for human and women's rights, development, and bolstering commerce and investment are among the many objectives the Afghan public holds in high esteem but do not receive the requisite consideration from the leaders of associated parties. It provides significant evidence that non-state actors should be part of any peace efforts. Concessions could be offered for peace to be achieved, but it won't be fair or long-lasting if it doesn't represent the hopes and dreams of the common Afghan and all the domestic stakeholders involved. This research highlights the significance of better understanding the coordination between the parties, including their nature and dynamics, as well as their most essential sources of influence or leverage. The continuance of foreign help for the Afghan government and the key non-government players, whether in direct financial support to the government or technical assistance, is needed not to waste the time and money invested by the world over the last two decades.

The warring factions may also desire the involvement of third parties, like the United Nations, to monitor the execution of terms and a collective adherence to the master plan if the underlying conflicts could eventually get resolved through negotiations. Looking at the promotion of trade and investment, many countries are interested in doing business with Afghanistan, particularly China and India, which are interested in the country's natural riches. However, geopolitical interests take precedence over economics. The nations often see investments as secondary to geopolitical and national security concerns. Although there is a significant unemployment rate in Afghanistan, the major administrative partners may not prioritize trade and investment for a number of reasons, including the possible availability of foreign aid for the near to medium term as their own source of funds and the lack of influence from industrial organizations (Waldman & Wright, 2014).

7. FINDINGS

The participants are still navigating through the complex dynamics of bringing peace to this war-scarred country. In the case of Afghanistan, along with external mediators, domestic participants, including paramilitaries, Warlords, Militias, Private Security Firms, Insurgents, Rebels, and Guerrillas, have also been contributing to different roles. While their involvement is complex and challenging due to multifaceted rivalries, it has also presented opportunities for broad-range solutions through their racial, political, and military influence in the system. This collaboration has offered many participants the opportunity to achieve their goals bilaterally. The administration had been looking for sources to deal with the problems at hand effectively, and the domestic power centers wanted to be a part of the legitimate process.

Parallel to this, external mediators like NGOs supported by international stakeholders have also been liaising on two fronts. At the internal level, these organizations help to minimize differences with the negative domestic entities like TTP, and at the external level, such organizations help to streamline and strengthen connections with the donors. These supporting actors have been greatly helpful to the sitting government on all national fronts, principally in sectors like safety and security, health, education, and human rights.

IMPLICATIONS

As the peace process proceeds, all stakeholders must recognize and encourage the importance of productive dialogue with non-state actors to attain a coordinated pace of national development. An environment of understanding would keep up the hope for a durable peace and progress that could pave the way for a brighter future for Afghanistan and its people. This scenario suggests that the engagement of non-state actors to a level where both sides, especially the sitting administration, don't feel any threat of excessive intervention by the intermediaries or the other participants would be of great help to maintain and promote peace and harmony in Afghanistan and to put the region towards sustained development.

8. CONCLUSION

The Afghan peace process has now tapped a critical stage of reinforced hope toward lasting normality. The role of non-state actors is vital given the level of inherent weaknesses in the sitting administration due to prevailing economic, social, and safety challenges. The government alone is not in a position to deal with all the mess at hand and needs a supportive role from all stakeholders. On the other hand, although the non-state actors, including internal and external power centers, social pressure groups, and the humanitarian organizations engaged in the process, could prove to be good support and opportunity, they also involve the risk of divergent vested interests that may not conform to the vision of the government. It portrays a delicate and complicated scenario and urges for a very practical and balanced approach coupled with concerted efforts to achieve the desired results.

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