

Quo Vadis Afghanistan:

Dynamic Domestic Stakeholders, Regional Concerns and Aspirations

As the **US President Joseph Biden** announced a **complete withdrawal from Afghanistan will take place before August 31**, earlier than expected, stating that *“we did not go to Afghanistan to nation build”*, the Taliban forces seem to have made significant advancements, having conquered, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry, as much as two thirds of the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border. Similarly, the Taliban march towards Afghanistan's northern region witnessed the first offensive against an Afghan city, Qala-e-Naw, capital of Badghis province, neighbouring Turkmenistan.

As the balance among the most significant domestic political stakeholders in the country seems an open topic, where the Taliban forces benefit of an increasingly reinforced position, the **US and NATO withdrawal might leave room for probable void of power**. As the neighbouring countries seek a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, they seem compelled to ascertain, accommodate and possibly mediate varying views of the country's political future, this being the **primary condition for recovery and economic development of this country** and to **open the robust avenues for bilateral relations with the regional states as well as with the world**.

Unquestionably, **Afghanistan represents both an opportunity, in terms of economic and trade cooperation, as well as a potential threat, since the risk of conflict spill-over may significantly increase in the light of the US withdrawal**. In this regard, **intra-Afghan negotiations are essential in assuring the adequate framework for peace and lasting prosperity**.

As one of the most affected countries by the prolonged situation in Afghanistan, with over 3 million Afghan refugees and financial losses caused by the Afghan conflict amassing 150 million USD, **Pakistan is certainly desirous of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan**. According to the **Pakistani Prime-Minister Imran Khan**, his country is ready to become *“a partner for peace in Afghanistan”* seeking *“a political settlement, stability, economic development and the denial of any haven for terrorists”*. Unambiguously opposing *“any effort to impose a government by force in Kabul”*, the Pakistani Prime Minister admits that *“we have done a lot of real diplomatic heavy lifting to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table”*.

As a **core member of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Troika** and a strong voice in the **Extended Troika** of the United States of America, Russia, China and Pakistan, **Pakistan's position represents a key factor in the**

Afghan peace process.

With an incremental role in the peace negotiations, as a neighbour of Afghanistan and a significant economic force, capable of meeting Afghanistan's investment needs, **China has the potential to become a major partner in the medium and long term evolution of Afghanistan.** Part of China's Belt and Road Initiative since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding of 2016, **a peaceful Afghanistan would be able to positively contribute to China's need for mineral resources, investment and infrastructure projects.** Presiding over the 4th meeting of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan troika last month, on June 3, China contributed to the **Eight-point consensus**, a significant milestone in Afghanistan's peace process, stating that the three countries must *"call on all parties in Afghanistan to cease fire, stop violence and substantively advance inter-Afghan negotiations"*, while playing *"a more constructive role in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan"*; they must strengthen the trust building measures; China and Pakistan should participate in the *"peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan"* and *"expand economic and trade exchanges with Afghanistan"*; the three countries should deepen *"high-quality Belt and Road cooperation"*; they should *"explore new space for cooperation in such areas as health care and education"*; similarly *"strengthen cooperation against the COVID-19"*; likewise, *"strengthen counter-terrorism and security cooperation"*; also *"deepen the trilateral foreign ministers' dialogue mechanism"*.

In fact, the intensifying relations between Afghanistan and China have witnessed a recent development on June 8, when the Ambassador of Afghanistan, along with other Ambassadors of South-Asian countries, attended the launch of the *"China-South Asian Countries Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Center"*, aiming, according to **China's Assistant Foreign Minister, Wu Jianghao**, to *"pool strength, integrate resources, and exchange wisdom to support and help the South Asian countries' economic development and livelihood improvement, jointly promoting the cause of poverty reduction"*.

Certainly, as the Taliban gain momentum in Afghanistan, **China needs to manage a certain balance with the extremist domestic stakeholders and may seek to not utterly depend on the other members of the Troika in this regard.** On one hand, from a security standpoint, some analysts claim the Taliban have offered refuge to Chinese minorities engaged in terrorist activities, which, if true, could prove rather displeasing to Beijing. On the other hand, given the potential role of Afghanistan in the Belt and Road Initiative, the investment opportunities, the potential exploitation of the country's mineral resources, as well as the pivotal role of the Wakhan Corridor in terms of infrastructure, **China may try to adequately, yet pragmatically, accommodate all the parties involved in the intra-Afghan negotiations.** In this regard, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Afghanistan Contact Group, reactivated in 2017, after a seven-year long break, could prove a practical multilateral instrument in adding further weight to China's potential role in Afghanistan. After all, as the **Chinese Ambassador in Kabul, Wang Yu**, put it, *"China attaches a great importance to strengthening pragmatic cooperation with Afghanistan"*.

Naturally, China and Pakistan are not singular part-takers in the intra-Afghan negotiations after the US and NATO withdrawal with an aim to see Afghan people reaching the much desirous peace and stability along with solid international relations.

Russia, which continued to play a role in the Afghan peace process after its withdrawal in 1989, may attempt to position itself as a mediator between the various internal factions, benefiting the advantage of close relations with India and China. Certainly, part of the Commonwealth of Independent States, **it is in Russia's interest that Afghanistan will not become a base for terrorist groups that may spill-over regionally.**

India may increase its role in the Afghan peace talks, as according to the special envoy of Qatar for the fight against terrorism, Mutlaq bin Majed al-Qahtani, **India currently maintains relations with the Taliban, which could signal a major change in the New Delhi policy towards Afghanistan.**

With the Taliban having taken control of Islam Qala (*according to the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation*), a district neighbouring Iran, the **Iranian government may vest additional interest in the peace-negotiations of its Eastern neighbour.** In fact, recently, on July 7, **Iran hosted a major high-level talk between the Afghan government and the Taliban forces**, first of its kind in the past months. Among the participants figured the **Taliban chief negotiator, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai**, as well as the **Afghan former Vice President Yunus Qanooni** and other members of the **High Council for National Reconciliation.** The **Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif**, declared that Iran is *“ready to assist the dialogue”* and to *“resolve the current conflicts in the country.”*

Clearly, as **emerging mediators in Afghanistan**, having deployed consistent efforts with tangible results, **Qatar and Turkey are likely to play a more active role in the intra-Afghan peace talks.**

Unquestionably, **the most significant role should be played by the domestic Afghan parties.** After all, it is only them that could build their own future, establish their own relations with other regional and international powers, **in accordance with their country's own national interest**, which in the first instance should be to avoid a possible civil war and a dramatically change of the internal power balance, the result of which will lead to a victorious and defeated equation, on its turn a reason for future conflicts and instability.

Indeed, **only following a common and peaceful nation-building process could the substantial and so much long waited goals of the Afghan people come to fruition.**

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