

GENERATING A POLITICAL PROCESS FOR AFGHANISTAN: RE-INTEGRATING AFGHANISTAN INTO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract:

In the prevailing socio-economic and political situation, numerous radical changes have taken place in Afghanistan's engagement process due to the protracted high level of violence, a lack of political consensus, and a trust deficit among the various sides of the ongoing conflict, exacerbated by the hasty and chaotic withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops in August 2021. In addition, inevitable national, regional, and global spoilers have played a devastating role in the international community's peacebuilding efforts. Nevertheless, engagement efforts in Afghanistan have culminated in bringing the Taliban back into power in Kabul and have further destabilized the country. The article "Generating a Political Process for Afghanistan" explores Afghan politics, focusing on challenges and opportunities in establishing a sustainable political process. Its main goal is to propose a framework to address ongoing instability, answering how to reintegrate Afghanistan into the international community through analysis of history, current politics, and challenges.

The article uses a multidisciplinary approach, combining political science, history, and conflict resolution. It highlights Afghanistan's deep-rooted political issues like poor governance, ethnic divisions, and security threats. Despite these, opportunities for reform exist through inclusive governance, constitutional reform, and international support. The study's implications are relevant to policymakers, scholars, and practitioners seeking peace and stability. By understanding the complexities of Afghan politics and pathways for change, stakeholders can foster a more resilient, inclusive political process.

Key Words: Afghanistan, engagement, international community, political process, reintegration

Introduction

Landlocked, Afghanistan lies in the heart of Asia. It links three major geographic regions: the Indian subcontinent to the southeast, Central Asia to the north, and the Iranian plateau to the west (Barfield, 2010). Therefore, any turmoil, conflict, or failing-state scenario can easily spill over into any of the regions it connects to, destabilizing not only the Asian continent but also threatening global security.

The transition from war to peace has long interested peacebuilding scholars; it has been a complicated theme to track in Afghanistan. Historical Afghanistan has never had a strong centralized government that could coerce, control, and monopolize the power of its territorial sovereignty (Rubin, 1995); tribes have always defended their independence against the coercive power of the capital (Barfield, 2010); therefore, researching the transition from war has always been the interest of the peacebuilding scholars (Rubin, 1995).

Whereas, after the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1998, the Najib government could not remain in power for more than four years (Cordovez, 1995), and the state failed to achieve a successful transition from the Soviet-backed government to a new democratic structure run by Mujaheddin and supported by the international community, led by the USA. As Diego Cordovez (1995) writes, the superpowers' rivalry dominated the Cold War world, but not by the superpowers themselves, as both treated Afghanistan as a pawn in their global struggle. In addition, Burnet Rubin (1995) argues that the main obstacle to civic order is not the culture driven by ancient hatred but the weapons the superpowers have provided.

Thomas Barfield (2010) argues that for Afghanistan to be prosperous, it requires less reliance on the Kabul government and more emphasis on the country's key regions, a focus that was lost during the United States-led occupation over the past two decades. This view is supported by William Dalrymple's (2013) assessment, which reiterates that, in historical perspective, there are striking parallels between the twenty-first-century occupation of Afghanistan and that of 1839-42. He notes that despite efforts by a dozen countries and a thousand agencies over a decade since 2001, the government still needs to be fixed (Dalrymple, 2013).

The international community, led by the United States of America, had to focus on the conflict in Afghanistan because its impact on global security was by then too obvious to ignore. Toward this end, Afghanistan was invaded, and the Taliban, then the de facto authorities in the country, were removed from power. The Taliban's gestures and signals of amnesty and peaceful reintegration into society were rejected, and a bounty was placed on their leaders' heads. Thus, they had no choice but to flee to Pakistan, where they were regrouped, retrained, and rearmed before being sent back to war in Afghanistan.

The American decision to remove the Taliban government from power suddenly opened a window of opportunity to resolve the long-standing Afghan conflict (Afsah & Guhr, 2005). Undoubtedly, development and peacebuilding were essential to the U.S.A.'s objectives for invading the country. The Petersberg conference near Bonn at the beginning of December 2001 and the donor conference held in Tokyo in mid-January 2002 defined the broad outlines for peacebuilding and reconstruction in Afghanistan (Wimmer & Schetter, 2003). Under the Bonn Agreement, a loya jirga, comprising representatives from all the country's regions, agreed to a new constitution. The U.S. government has spent around \$145 billion over 20 years trying to rebuild Afghanistan. The Department of Defense (D.O.D.) has also spent \$837 billion on warfighting, during which 2,443 American troops and 1,144 allied troops have been killed, and 20,666 U.S. troops have been injured (S.I.G.A.R. Report, 2022).

Despite the lessons of history, the international community has once again become involved in a conflict from which an exit is hard to envision and in which success is difficult to define, let alone achieve (Galád, 2012). "We have nothing to fear from Afghanistan, and the best thing to do is to leave it as much as possible to itself. It may not be very flattering to our amour propre, but I feel that the less the Afghans see of us, the less they will dislike us." – General Roberts, after the second British retreat from Kabul, 1880 (Skinner, 2010).

History may or may not repeat elsewhere, but it certainly did in Afghanistan. The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, which has lasted longer than two decades, has not achieved what was most hoped for: security for the Afghan people and the stabilization of the entire region (Galád, 2012). It was predictable from the outset; the invasion of Afghanistan was doomed to fail.

As the war took its toll on the military and civilians, the United States and the new Afghan government recognized that an outright defeat of the Taliban was unlikely, if not impossible (Ellis,

2021). In the first ten years of the military intervention, the war claimed the lives of more than 2,000 NATO troops, including at least 1,228 Americans. It costs U.S. taxpayers nearly \$100 billion annually, roughly seven times Afghanistan's gross national product (G.N.P.) of \$14 billion (Ayman, 2013). The fundamental question for the U.S. was how to withdraw its military forces and achieve some "peace with honor" in Afghanistan without reaching its core political objectives. For this reason, many thought that negotiations with the Taliban and other insurgent groups were necessary, despite the formal policy of the United States not to negotiate with terrorists.

The U.S. sought a withdrawal that was not a defeat and increased the cost of war for the Taliban by sharply ramping up NATO airstrikes against insurgents. President Obama ordered over 30,000 U.S. forces to pressure the Taliban enough to coax them into negotiations. American pilots dropped 2,100 bombs on Taliban positions between June and September 2010, a near-50 percent increase over the same period in 2009 (Ayman, 2013). The shortcomings of these missions mainly relate to civilian casualties and missteps that profoundly affect the cultural and religious sensitivities of the Afghan people (Galád, 2012). The policy failed to produce the desired result. Once it became clear that the war could not be won solely through military action, the U.S. government began exploring options for peace talks with the Taliban. The Afghan peace process was initiated by Obama during his second term, allowing the Taliban to open an office in Doha, Qatar, which Hamid Karzai, then the president of Afghanistan, vehemently opposed (Kuehn, 2018). In December 2009, President Barack Obama set a target date of July 2011 for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the handover of security responsibility to Afghan forces (Ayman, 2013). Fatigue from the fighting and the cost of the war were the most critical drivers of this decision.

According to Coll (2018), the United States began contacting the Taliban in 2004 when President George Bush asked Zalmay Khalilzad, then the U.S. Ambassador to Kabul, to speak with the Taliban. Later, President Obama signed an official memo in September 2010, which authorized State Department officials to speak with the Taliban for the first time since the United States invaded Afghanistan (Coll, 2018). Reportedly, the first secret talks took place on May 07, 2011, in Germany, where the Taliban were asked for a prisoner exchange treaty, improved treatment of their comrades in custody, the lifting of sanctions against the Taliban, and the opening of a Taliban political office in the Gulf, while the U.S.A.'s objectives and priorities were the isolation and destruction of Al Qaeda (Coll, 2018). It took two more years for the Taliban to officially open a political office in Doha, Qatar, to engage with the United States in peace negotiations; the office opened on June 18, 2013 (Reuters, 2013).

Although formal peace talks began after the Taliban's political office was established in Doha, Qatar, in 2013, it took almost ten years to conclude a final agreement and sign the peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban. On February 29, 2020, after more than a year of official discussions between the Taliban and U.S.A. representatives, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement that outlined the course for withdrawing American troops and set the stage for a post-war Afghanistan (Ellis, 2021). Twenty years ago, the United States of America and the coalition forces' overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 confronted Afghanistan with a substantial new set of challenges (Maley, 2009).

Unfortunately, the Afghan peacebuilding process was neglected by many who have been writing, exploring, and researching Afghanistan's future since the beginning of the United States' invasion of Afghanistan. As William Maley (2002-2009) wrote about the Afghanistan Wars, he highlighted

the challenges facing post-Taliban Afghanistan, including rebuilding the state, restoring trust and security, laying the foundations for reconstruction, and retaining international attention.

Similarly, when Ahmed Rashid (2008) was exploring the "Decent into Chaos" to elaborate on how the war against Islamic extremism was lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, he noted that the international community was failing to coordinate its military and security strategy with its development architecture while facing a breakdown with the Afghan government and Karzai; he is not pointing out the significance of launching a robust peacebuilding process where all that went wrong could be directed to a right pathway of "state-building" in Afghanistan. On the other hand, ordinary Afghans were optimistic that by the invasion of the USA and its allies, they would have had a more stable government based on democratic values, but as James Dobbins (2008) noticed in the early of the USA invasion, achieving democracy through warlords seemed an unrealistic approach to stabilize the country; therefore, slowly but surely Afghanistan was pushed into a failed state rather than winning the war against Taliban's insurgency and becoming a post-war stabilized country. In September 2008, the situation became so gloomy that the British ambassador to Afghanistan, Sherard Cowper-Coles (2012), warned that the U.S. war strategy would fail. John Paul Lederach (1997) believed that Peacebuilding is a dynamic social construct requiring investment and resources, coordination of labor, laying the foundation, detailed finishing work, and continued maintenance.

Peacebuilding efforts involve a shift of focus away from the warriors, with whom pre-peacekeepers are mainly concerned, to the attitudes and socio-economic circumstances of ordinary people. Therefore, it tends to concentrate on the context of the conflict rather than the issues dividing the warring parties. A key goal of Peacebuilding concerns the building, reforming, and strengthening of local institutional capacity. (Gross, 2013)

To conclude, the Afghan peacebuilding process was of interest to many expert analysts of Afghanistan's political philosophy only after Obama's failed surge to defeat the Taliban on the battlefield. Heather Selma Gregg (2018) researched the causes of the failure and found that the international community, led by the United States, missed opportunities for nation building in Afghanistan; she indicated that the international community failed in all five sectors of the nation-building initiative: creating a safe and secure environment, bringing good governance and democracy to the country, establishing the rule of law, building a sustainable economy, and advancing social well-being. As mentioned above, there needed to be more interest in investing time and resources in researching the Afghan peace process. In contrast, everyone was interested in studying the international community's failure to secure Afghanistan or win the Afghan war. The Afghan peace process was initiated by Obama in his second term, allowing the Taliban to open an office in Doha, Qatar, which was vehemently opposed by Hamid Karzai, the president of the Afghan government (Kuehn, 2018).

Reintegrating Afghanistan

Recently, Afghanistan's ideological and political divisions have been exacerbated by the influence of neighboring countries, each of which plays both ideological and ethnic cards in the context of a decade-long East-West competition, waged through numerous "regional conflicts. Therefore, continuous engagement of the international community with the Taliban at multiple levels is highly significant. Issues such as girls' education, civil society empowerment, and an inclusive (participatory and representative) government should be short-term objectives to be achieved through diplomacy. Meanwhile, empowering Afghans, civil society, the media, and Ulema who believe in change should be the priority of any empowerment decisions.

To be sure, such engagement is unlikely to yield short- or even medium-term benefits. Instead, international actors should take a long-term approach by engaging with and cultivating ties to religious networks—the madrassas and sheiks that form the world from which Haibatullah emerged and from which he draws guidance. This transnational network spans the Afghan-Pakistani border and centers on Deobandi madrassas and higher education institutions. There is a diversity of opinion in these spaces, and sources here should be cultivated for potential engagement. At the same time, this transnational network remains the most poorly understood aspect of the Taliban; hope for engagement lies, first and foremost, in developing an adequate understanding of this world and then in identifying potential partners who can serve as interlocutors with critical figures in Amir's retinue. The facts of girls' education or international engagement are less important than who delivers them, the trust-based relationships they have, the authority they yield, and how they are framed. That means identifying individuals from this transnational madrasa world—Deobandi Mawlawis and Sheiks. Even with impressive Islamic bona fides, individuals from other backgrounds will not be sufficient. For example, an April 2022 letter from Taqi Usmani (SunniOnline, 2022), a noted Pakistani mufti, urging the Taliban to reopen girls' schools, was met with a backlash among sheiks linked to Haibatullah. Using such figures, international actors should seek to exploit tensions between Islamic and rural Pashtun conceptions of critical issues.

Generating a Political Process in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's history is marred by centuries of internal strife, external invasions, and geopolitical maneuvering. From the Great Game of the 19th century to the Soviet occupation in the 20th century, and later the rise of the Taliban, the nation has been a battleground for competing interests, leaving deep scars on its social fabric. Moreover, the legacy of tribalism, ethnic divisions, and weak state institutions has further complicated efforts to establish a functioning political order.

In the aftermath of the 2001 US-led invasion and the establishment of a democratic government, Afghanistan saw a glimmer of hope for political stability. However, this optimism proved short-lived, as governance remained plagued by corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of inclusivity. The 2021 withdrawal of international forces exacerbated existing challenges, leaving a precarious security situation and a fragile political system in its wake.

Today, Afghanistan is entering its sixth year under the Taliban's uncertainty and complete control, making it the only party to hold unilateral control over the country in recent history. However, French scholar Oliver Roy noted that Afghanistan's society is deeply divided, with a solid rural-urban divide. Despite being a predominantly rural movement, the Taliban now govern major cosmopolitan cities such as Kabul, Herat, Mazar, Kandahar, and Nangarhar. While there have been some compromises between the Taliban and the urban population, there are indications that these compromises may only last for a while.

Changing Dynamics:

In the past five years, the Taliban has shown some willingness to deviate from its strict interpretation of Sharia law, which it enforced during its previous rule from 1996 to 2001. It has allowed activities such as taking pictures, owning televisions, and even popular games like Buzkashi. It has also tolerated Afghans in central cities who do not adhere to strict grooming standards, such as beards or turbans. However, there are signs that the Taliban is gradually reverting to its original governance style. It has been imposing requirements that public servants grow beards and cover their heads,

and those who fail to comply may face dismissal. "Political opportunity theory" and "political process theory" explain the conditions, mindsets, and actions that enable a social movement to achieve its goals. According to this theory, political opportunities for change must first be present before a movement can achieve its objectives. Following that, the movement ultimately seeks to effect change through the existing political structure and processes. Political process theory (PPT) is considered the core theory of social movements and how they mobilize (work to create change).

The political opportunity that existed in the form of international communities' agreement to collectively not recognize the Taliban's regime should be materialized into political pressure to convince the Taliban to be part of a political process that can ensure respect for inclusivity, human rights, women's rights, and girls' education.

Regional Shifts:

There have also been exciting changes in the Taliban's regional partnerships. In 2026, their leading regional partner is Iran, with whom they had been at odds in 1998. Previously, the Taliban showed less tolerance towards Shia Afghans, particularly the Hazara community. However, they now seem to ignore developments in Hazara-populated areas and seek economic and political benefits from Iran. On the other hand, the Taliban are facing issues with Pakistan over the partnership of Tahrir Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which fought together with the Afghan Taliban for the past two decades; the comradeship is making it difficult for the Afghan Taliban in Kabul to respond to the needs and wants of Pakistan's government.

To catalyze any political process in Afghanistan, the international community's role looms large. Its involvement is not only pivotal to Afghanistan's future but also critical to its present circumstances. However, the international community's approach must transcend individual interests and be cohesive rather than fragmented. A disjointed approach from the international community only serves to further marginalize Afghanistan, worsening its instability and perpetuating poverty.

Various strategies have been attempted by the international community to address the Taliban's governance in Kabul, ranging from neglect and isolation to appeasement and engagement. Yet, none of these strategies has yielded the desired outcomes. What remains lacking is a strategy centered on meaningful engagement, one that could potentially reset the Taliban's trajectory to a pre-Doha Agreement era. This entails compelling the Taliban to return to a position in which they are willing to engage as a cooperative party, acknowledge and respect fundamental human rights values, and recognize other Afghan factions as legitimate political partners. Such an approach could pave the way for a more inclusive government in Afghanistan, fostering stability and progress.

The international community should unite its messages rather than send mixed signals to the de facto authority in Kabul. Clarity and consistency in messaging can encourage the Taliban to align their policies with the international community's expectations. The differences between the international community and the region benefit the Taliban in power more than the other two parties. The area and international community are facing the conflict-of-interest dilemma in dealing with the Taliban on specific issues like inclusivity, women's rights, human rights, fighting terrorism, eradicating poppy cultivation, and preventing drug trafficking.

A Unified Agenda:

The international community should emphasize to the Taliban the importance of engaging in dialogue with all factions within Afghanistan. While determining whom to engage with can be a later agenda item, intra-Afghan dialogue should be a primary goal of the international community in addressing Afghanistan's current challenges. (Rubin, 2006) Discussions about recognizing the Taliban's de facto government, delisting them from the Security Council lists, and freezing Afghan assets become more complicated without a unified international approach.

Afghan Ownership and Priorities:

Afghans themselves must strive for a platform to unite and secure Afghanistan's national interests. Dialogue should be the preferred method for resolving the crisis rather than resorting to armed conflict against the Taliban. A dialogue system can also facilitate the Taliban's transformation from a military group to a political movement. (Ayman, 2013) It is essential to recognize that Afghan solutions are crucial for resolving the crisis, as the regional priorities differ from those of Western countries. The region prioritizes security, economic issues, and border management, while the West emphasizes women's rights, girls' education, and inclusive governance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The urgency of generating a sustainable political process in Afghanistan cannot be overstated. A stable political framework is essential for addressing the root causes of conflict, promoting economic development, and safeguarding the rights and aspirations of all Afghan citizens. Without such a process, the risk of further violence, extremism, and instability looms large, jeopardizing not only the prospects for peace within Afghanistan but also regional security and global stability. Moreover, establishing a viable political process is crucial for fostering trust among diverse ethnic and tribal communities, enhancing the government's legitimacy, and creating avenues for meaningful political participation. (Rubin, 2006) By engaging in inclusive dialogue, institutional reform, and reconciliation efforts, Afghanistan can embark on a path towards genuine democratic governance, paving the way for a brighter and more prosperous future for its people. In light of these considerations, this article delves into the challenges and opportunities inherent in establishing a political process for Afghanistan, offering valuable insights and recommendations for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners alike. By addressing the historical legacies, current dynamics, and prospects of Afghan politics, we aim to contribute to the collective effort of building a more resilient and democratic Afghanistan.

The future of Afghanistan remains uncertain amid complex dynamics. The international community's role is crucial in shaping Afghanistan's future, but a lack of unity and clarity in its approach hampers effective engagement with the Taliban. (Cooper & Schindler, 2002) Intra-Afghan dialogue is essential for resolving the crisis, and Afghans themselves should prioritize national interests through peaceful dialogue.

1. **Addressing Socioeconomic Inequalities:** Socioeconomic disparities and marginalization contribute to the power and influence of parties involved in the past

four and a half decades of war. Addressing these inequalities through targeted development programs, job creation, and poverty-reduction measures can undermine the appeal of warmongers and provide individuals with alternative pathways to participate in society.

2. **Supporting civil society** involves empowering and promoting organizations that are vital for raising public awareness and encouraging participation. These organizations play a key role in advocating for good governance, human rights, and social justice.
3. **Regional Cooperation:** War proxies often extend beyond national borders, with regional actors supporting or undermining peace and stability. It is essential to foster regional cooperation, diplomacy, and dialogue to address the regional dynamics that perpetuate warmongers and work towards common objectives for peace in Afghanistan.
4. **Learning from Successful Examples:** While the situation in Afghanistan is complex, there are examples from other countries where efforts to address warmongers have been relatively successful. Learning from cases such as those in Sierra Leone and Liberia can provide valuable insights into practical strategies for disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, state-building, and peacebuilding, as well as for Afghanistan's reintegration into the international community.

By considering these additional points and implementing a comprehensive approach that addresses the multifaceted aspects of warmongers, future efforts in Afghanistan and similar contexts can increase their chances of success in countering the influence of extremist groups and building sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

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