

Kabul Process Falters as Taliban Support Rises

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Complex geopolitical rivalries make it unlikely that the Kabul Process will bring peace to Afghanistan.

At the end of one of the most difficult weeks in Kabul, the National Unity Government (NUG) hosted the promised Kabul Process Conference in an attempt to “[build the security alliances](#) that will let us face this common threat [terrorism] together.” The conference brought together representatives of 24 countries and three major international organizations to reach an international consensus on fighting terrorism and to draw broader support for the cause. The Kabul Process, as President Ashraf Ghani [pointed out in his speech](#), comes after many other failed “bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral and even multilateral” efforts, including efforts recently undertaken by Moscow, to convince the Taliban to join peace talks and to seek ways to end the conflict in Afghanistan. The goal was to redraw international attention to the Afghan conflict that seems to have been consigned to oblivion by Afghanistan’s allies (the United States and NATO in particular).

The recent conference is, however, different in some ways from earlier efforts. First, it is an original Afghan initiative owned completely by the Afghan government. Second, the conference put an end to the idea that peace talks are an open-ended opportunity for the Taliban. This is a clear and strong demonstration of Afghanistan’s resolve and political will in fighting terrorism and seeking peace. Third, the conference was a bold effort to lucidly and unequivocally highlight the risks and threats associated with an insecure Afghanistan, both to the countries in the region and to the world as a whole. Likewise, it underscored the opportunities for regional security, growth, and connectivity that comes with a secure Afghanistan. Fourth, now Afghanistan’s stance against Pakistan, which NUG believes is a major state sponsor of terrorism, is more clear and so is the message that the conference will send.

With Ghani attending the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, where he plans to secure the support of SCO members for the Kabul Process, the effort will gain more momentum and the commitment to make it a success seems to be solid. There are many concerns, however, that remain unaddressed, making the prospects of peace grim.

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First and foremost, the Taliban are now stronger than at any point since the Americans invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to topple their regime. Now, after 16 years, they control more territory (over 50 percent, as Ahmad Zia Masoud said in his dismissal in April this year), can wage more suicide attacks, can threaten more districts, and have secured more regional support as Iran and Russia joined the list of the group’s sponsors. Ghani offered olive branch to Pakistan upon assuming power in 2014, furthering the efforts with several trips to Islamabad, but Pakistan gave his outreach a cold shoulder. Instead, Pakistan, as the most powerful sponsor of Taliban, chose to keep supporting the group, despite their superficial gestures to the contrary. As the Taliban enjoying

more dominance than ever with enough support and sponsorship, the chance for them to join peace talks is small.

Moreover, the notion that the Taliban is a terrorist group fighting for a religious ideology has been so magnified and exaggerated that the group's use as a foreign policy tool by regional (and international) powers has been neglected. More than fighting a religious-ideological war, the Taliban fight a proxy war primarily to counter India's presence in Afghanistan, to guard Pakistan's supposed strategic depth, and to keep the Durand Line agenda off the table. And now the political backdrop has become more complex, when both Iran and Russia are getting more involved in the game with a determination to counter the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. In addition, Afghanistan's struggle to draw international attention to Pakistan's backing for terrorism and to isolate Pakistan regionally and internationally became weaker as China threw its full support to Pakistan. Therefore, the Taliban gained the support of Pakistan (and China and Saudi Arabia stand with Pakistan), Iran, and Russia, when Afghanistan ally, the United States, has yet to release its strategy for Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the Taliban is not the only terrorist group threatening peace and security in Afghanistan. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) branch has a foothold in the country now, trying to consolidate its position and broaden its powerbase. ISKP's presence in Afghanistan diverts media attention from the Taliban as the Islamic State branch claims responsibility for more terrorist attacks, and furthermore dilutes the Afghan security forces' struggle on the Taliban front. ISIS recently announced it would take revenge for Russia's attacks against the group in Syria in Afghanistan. That makes the situation even more complicated, since Russia has reportedly started arming and sponsoring the Taliban, hinting the emerging of a third Great Game.

With powerful players in the game, increasingly complicated conflict of interests, Iran's larger role, and the NUG as a weak government, the prospect for the Kabul Process is gloomy. Appeasing all players to ensure peace in Afghanistan seems impossible. The peace prospect for Afghanistan is as complicated as ever.

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