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Turkey's Potential for Facilitating Regional Cooperation and Peace in Afghanistan

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Eighteen years after the fall of the Taliban and the international community's efforts in Afghanistan, the country is still one of the most insecure places in the world. The situation deteriorated further, especially after the drawdown of U.S. and NATO troops and the transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghan government in 2014. Several attempts have been made, both military and diplomatic, to end the long running insurgency in the country, but none have succeeded so far.

Given this backdrop, this essay examines Turkey's role and potential to facilitate regional initiatives conducive for fostering security and stability in Afghanistan. The essay provides a brief overview of Turkey's engagement with the Afghan conflict; examines the Heart of Asia–Istanbul Process (HoA-IP); assesses Ankara's ability to facilitate regional cooperation; and finally, evaluates whether Turkey can help bring the Taliban to the negotiation table with the Afghan government.

Afghanistan-Turkey Relations: An Overview

Friendly relations and diplomatic engagement between Afghanistan and Turkey began in 1921 when Afghanistan became the second country to recognize the Turkish Republic and signed a Treaty of Friendship with the country,² also known as Turkey-Afghanistan Alliance Agreement.³ Turkey sent 212 citizens to Afghanistan as teachers, doctors, officers and experts in support of Afghanistan's modernization

1. Marzia Azizi is a Researcher at ATR Consulting in Afghanistan.

2. Karacasulu, Nilufer. "Reconstruction of Afghanistan and the Role of Turkey." USAK, 2010. <http://www.acarindex.com/dosyalar/makale/acarindex-1423910525.pdf>

3. "Turkey-Afghanistan Bilateral Political Relations." Official website of Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_afghanistan-bilateral-political-relations.en.mfa

efforts between 1932 and 1960.⁴ Turkey's support to Afghanistan went through an interregnum during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but resumed in the 1990s.⁵

Post 2001, Turkey's engagement with Afghanistan continued in the form of security cooperation and developmental assistance. Turkey sent troops as part of the NATO mission to Afghanistan. Turkey's development assistance program began in 2004, and since its inception, Ankara has provided nearly USD 1.1 billion in this regard.⁶ Although Turkey avoided partaking in direct counter-insurgency operations, it actively contributed to training and equipping the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP).⁷ As part of a cooperation agreement between the two countries, Turkey has trained 3,353 Afghan cadets as of January 2019.⁸

In addition to security related contributions, Turkey has also adopted non-military, civilian-based approaches to towards trust building in Afghanistan. For example, Turkey established two civilian-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) in Wardak and Jowzjan provinces in 2006 and 2010 respectively.⁹ Given Ankara's military, social and economic contributions, Turkey has been one of the closest allies of Afghanistan in the post 2001 period.

In an attempt to build regional consensus towards peace and stability in Afghanistan, the HoA-IP was officially launched on 2 November 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey.¹⁰ Turkey played a significant role in establishing the process.¹¹ The main objective of the HoA-IP is to facilitate peace and stability in Afghanistan and investment for quicker reconstruction of the country.¹² As its initiator, Afghanistan is the permanent chair of the HoA-IP and is

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Karacasulu, Nilufer. "Reconstruction of Afghanistan and the Role of Turkey." *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian studies*, 2010. <http://www.acarindex.com/dosyalar/makale/acarindex-1423910525.pdf>

8. "168 Afghan women police candidates being trained in Turkey's Sivas." January 24, 2019. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/168-afghan-women-police-candidates-being-trained-in-turkeys-sivas-140745>

9. Kaya, Karen. "Turkey's role in Afghanistan and Afghan Stabilization." *Military Review*, July-August 2013. https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20130831_art007.pdf

10. Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, official website. www.hoa.gov.af

11. Ibid.

12. Ranjan Das, Nihar; Zafar, Athar and Tiwary Smita. "Assessing Istanbul Process as Regional Initiative on Afghanistan & Way Forward." *Indian Council of World Affairs*, March 24, 2017. <https://icwa.in/pdfs/IB/2014/IPRIAfghanistanIB24032017.pdf>

voluntarily accompanied by one of the 14 participating countries every year as a co-chair. Additionally, the Process has 17 supporting countries, including Turkey, as members, and 12 supporting organizations including the UN.¹³ The HoA-IP is comprised of three types of dialogues or fora: 1) the Ministerial Conference (MC), which is the highest decision-making forum within HoA-IP and takes place once every year; 2) the Senior Officials Meetings (SOMs), which take place three or four times a year; and 3) Ambassadorial Meetings (AMs), which are mostly held in Kabul when it is deemed necessary by the Afghan government.¹⁴ Since the launch of the Process, 18 MCs have been held where Turkey has accompanied Afghanistan as co-chair twice (2011 and 2018).¹⁵ According to the HoA-IP website, the three main pillars of the Process are Political Consultation; Confidence Building Measures (CBMs); and Cooperation with Regional Organizations.¹⁶ The MCs have established six CBMs, which are specialized frameworks and designed to address regional issues. There have been six agreed upon areas relevant to the CBM sphere. They include Counter Narcotics, Counter Terrorism, Disaster Management, Education, Regional Infrastructure, and Trade and Commerce and Investment Opportunities.

HoA-IP and Peace and Stability in Afghanistan

Despite its crucial role as a platform for cooperation in the region, the HoA-IP has been less successful in terms of addressing current regional security challenges compared to the potential it holds, given how it enjoys membership of almost all regional countries. According to a study on security cooperation in the Heart of Asia Region by Assess-Transform-Research Consulting (ATR), the existing regional security mechanism of HoA-IP has not been able to address the ongoing regional security challenges.¹⁷ The study argues that security cooperation in the HoA-IP framework has not been very effective due to the existing conflict of geopolitical interests of some regional states such as for instance those involving Afghanistan

13. Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, official website. www.hoa.gov.af

14. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate General of Regional Cooperation. The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process: Progress Assessment 2011-2015. Kabul: Afghan Government, September 2016.

15. Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official website: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_afghanistan-bilateral-political-relations.en.mfa

16. Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process official website. www.hoa.gov.af

17. "Study on Security Cooperation in the Heart of Asia Region". The Asia Foundation, November 07, 2016. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/study-security-cooperation-heart-asia-region/>

and Pakistan, and Iran, U.S. and Saudi Arabia to name a few.¹⁸ Similarly, Marissa Quie, a professor of political science at Cambridge University, has argued that though there has been some degree of consensus among regional actors about the shared security threat, multilateral cooperation to address these threats have been difficult to achieve.¹⁹ In her 2014 essay, she elaborates that certain local, national and regional disputes, such as the dispute between India and Pakistan and Afghanistan and Pakistan, hold the potential to complicate the already difficult path towards achieving peace.²⁰

Moreover, geopolitical rivalries distract the focus of the Heart of Asia countries from Afghanistan. For example, while Saudi Arabia could play a stronger role in facilitating talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in reality, it focuses on its war in Yemen and on its rivalry with Iran.²¹ The ATR study identified two main opportunities that could intensify security cooperation in the region: firstly, allowing broader economic integration among the regional countries; and secondly, joint patrol of borders (towards transforming borders into points of connectivity and not separation), and countering money laundering.²²

Despite its shortcomings, the HoA-IP holds great potential for fostering cooperation among its members to facilitate positive transformation and towards peace and stability in Afghanistan. This is particularly important because the HoA-IP is the only regional initiative which has almost all the regional actors as members²³ and holistically works towards political, security and economic cooperation, unlike the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA), Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), each of which focus only on one of the above-mentioned regional aspects.²⁴

18. Ibid.

19. Quie, Marissa. "The Istanbul Process: prospects for regional connectivity in the heart of Asia". *Asia Europe Journal*, April 13, 2014. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10308-014-0385-7>

20. Ibid.

21. Study on Security Cooperation in the Heart of Asia Region". The Asia Foundation, November 07, 2016. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/study-security-cooperation-heart-asia-region/>

22. Ibid.

23. HoA-IP members: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan.

24. RECCA aims to improve regional economic cooperation among the regional countries; the QCG is a four country grouping (Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the U.S.) which is aimed at initiating a reconciliation process between the civilian government of Afghanistan and the Taliban; the SCO is a China led Eurasian political, economic and security alliance comprised of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and India where Afghanistan is an observer member.

Facilitating Talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan

As a member of the HoA-IP initiative, Turkey can play a constructive role in facilitating talks between Afghanistan and its immediate neighbors, particularly Pakistan. Ankara has recently attempted to do so by offering to host a trilateral summit between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey on Afghan peace. In the past, too, Turkey has facilitated communication between Kabul and Islamabad, and Afghanistan can tap into the existing potential to actionalise the recent offer, and proactively engage Turkey to play such a role more actively. Given the shared historical, religious and cultural linkages, Turkey has enjoyed good relations with both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In this regard, Turkey has some precedence on which it can build. Since 2007, Turkey has been hosting and facilitating direct communications between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁵ Each of these meetings had a specific theme, such as economic cooperation, security issues and education activities.²⁶ Ankara has played a crucial role in encouraging the two countries to at least directly communicate and share their concerns and perspectives. As Karen Kaya flags in her 2013 analysis, at the 2009 security summit, military and intelligence chiefs from Afghanistan and Pakistan met for the very first time at the same table.²⁷

Meanwhile, of the trilateral summits that have taken place so far, the fifth summit (2010) has been the most successful achievement where both countries agreed to conduct joint military operations to fight against terrorism in urban terrain.²⁸ Consequently, both countries expressed their gratitude to Turkey's contributions as a mediator. Recently, on 4 January 2019, after the first visit of Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister, Imran Khan, to Ankara, where he met Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the two countries agreed to hold a trilateral summit in Istanbul with the Afghan government in an

25. Kardas, Saban. "Turkey's regional approach in Afghanistan: A civilian power in action". Center for Strategic Research, April, 2013. http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/SAM_paper_ing_06_int.pdf

26. Karacasulu, Nilufer. "Reconstruction of Afghanistan and the Role of Turkey". Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian studies, 2010. <http://www.acarindex.com/dosyalar/makale/acarindex-1423910525.pdf>

27. Kaya, Karen. "Turkey's role in Afghanistan and Afghan Stabilization." Military Review, July-August, 2013. https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/Military_Review_20130831_art007.pdf

28. Ibid.

effort of bring peace and stability in Afghanistan.²⁹ However, there is no guarantee that the upcoming summit would produce tangible, measurable results towards addressing the ongoing conflict between the neighbors.

Turkey's Role in the Afghan Peace Process

Along with its efforts to encourage talks between the Afghan and Pakistani governments, Turkey also possesses a potential ability to facilitate peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government. In so doing, Turkey can use its ties with the Taliban; the joint platforms in which Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan are members; as well as its diverse and strategic relationship with Pakistan which includes arms supplies (Turkey is one of Pakistan's biggest arms suppliers).

With regard to the Ankara-Taliban relationship, two events, among others, suggest that Turkey enjoys good relations with the Taliban. First, when Motasim Agha Jan, a senior Taliban leader, was wounded in an assassination attack in Pakistan in 2010, Turkey offered him refuge and the Taliban leader accepted the offer.³⁰ In 2012, Turkey announced that it was ready to host a Taliban office in Ankara.³¹ Therefore, Turkey can use these channels and existing relations with the Taliban to support the Afghan peace process. Why Ankara has not yet done so remains unclear, but nonetheless, the Afghan government can harness this potential.

In so far, the Taliban have repeatedly refused to negotiate directly with the Afghan government because they view it as a foreign-imposed regime.³² However, though direct negotiations between the Taliban and the U.S. have been ongoing since July 2018, one cannot expect that these talks will convince the Taliban to accept the legitimacy of the Afghan government.

29. "Turkey to Host Trilateral Meeting on Afghan Peace." Tolo News January 5, 2019. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/turkey-host-trilateral-meeting-afghan-peace>

30. Sayed Sallahuddin. "Senior Taliban leader Motasim freed by UAE, returns to Kabul to help Afghan negotiations." The Washington Post, April 21, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/senior-taliban-leader-motasim-freed-by-uae-returns-to-kabul-to-help-afghan-negotiations/2014/04/21/e270268c-c982-11e3-93eb-6c0037dde2ad_story.html?utm_term=.3112210a0ee2

31. "Turkey to Allow Taliban Office in Ankara." Tolo News, December 12, 2012. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/turkey-allow-taliban-office-ankara>

32. Extended US-Taliban peace talks in Qatar raise Afghan hopes." Aljazeera English, January 24, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/extended-taliban-peace-talks-qatar-raise-afghan-hopes-190124144710617.html>

Given Turkey's close relations with Pakistan and its ability to contribute towards preparing the ground for peaceful and direct talks between both countries, Ankara could encourage Pakistan to place pressure on the Taliban for peace talks with the Afghan government. In doing so, Turkey can use three platforms that Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan are members of: the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), the HoA–IP, and the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation.

It is worth mentioning that Turkey is the second largest arms supplier to Pakistan after China,³³ and this gives Turkey a degree of leverage over Pakistan. Additionally, Turkey could also play a role similar to that of Qatar's by offering a political office for the Taliban in Ankara as it offered during a meeting with former Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, in 2012.³⁴

Conclusion

In short, Turkey has always been a friendly political ally of Afghanistan since the early years of the 20th century and has made remarkable contributions towards Afghanistan's security and stability through its educational, military, economic and mediatory support in the 21st century. Turkey's training of Afghan cadets and its development assistance to Afghanistan are clear examples. Turkey is also host to a large number of Afghans studying in Turkish universities and a substantial number of laborers and both Afghan immigrants (legal and illegal) and asylum seekers live in the country.

At present, the Afghan peace process is in dire need of regional and international support and cooperation. In this regard, Turkey occupies an interesting position and holds a potential to support the process for three reasons. It is member to at least three regional platforms, i.e. OIC, the HoA–IP and the Kabul Process, and these platforms can be used to facilitate cooperation and consensus on the Afghan peace process. Moreover, Turkey enjoys good relations with the Taliban and Pakistan,

33. Sabena Siddiqui. "Turkey, Pakistan upgrade strategic partnership." *Asia Times*, May 17, 2019. <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/05/opinion/turkey-pakistan-upgrade-strategic-partnership/>

34. "Turkey to Allow Taliban Office in Ankara." *Tolo News*, December 12, 2012. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/turkey-allow-taliban-office-ankara>

two important parties to the Afghan conflict. Furthermore, Turkey's effort in facilitating direct talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan and seeking opportunities for encouraging Taliban for negotiations with Afghan government is essential at the moment when Afghanistan is feverishly pursuing its quest for peace and stability in the country.

Policy Recommendations

- As explained above, the HoA-IP has been less successful, mainly in terms of building a regional consensus for bringing peace in Afghanistan. As highlighted, the conflicting geopolitical interests of some participant states have been the main reason behind this failure. However, the HoA-IP can also be used as a platform for discussion and negotiations on geopolitical issues. For example, the Durand Line issue between Afghanistan and Pakistan can only get resolved once a discussion on the matter becomes possible between the two states. Using its good relations with both countries, Turkey can encourage the two to at least begin initial talks and conversations on the Durand Line issue in order to facilitate exchange of perspectives, demands and sentiments.
- The government of Turkey announced that the country will host a trilateral summit for bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan. This was set to take place after the March 2019 election in Turkey. However, as of June 2019, the interaction has not taken place. For the two countries to establish a good relationship, such direct talks are essential. Therefore, Kabul must engage closely with Ankara to ensure that more active efforts are taken towards making such interactions possible.
- The government of Afghanistan should enhance its existing good relations with Turkey. However, there exists a view that although Turkey and Afghanistan share friendly relations, Ankara's relationship with Islamabad is closer than that of Kabul and Ankara. In order to empower the prevailing friendliness in Kabul-Ankara bilateral relations, the government of Afghanistan should increase its interactions with Turkey. For example, the Afghan government can

increase its diplomatic visits to Ankara and invite investments from Turkish companies in varied sectors in Afghanistan.

- Given Turkey's close relations with Pakistan and its ability to prepare the ground for peaceful and direct talks between both countries, Ankara should, in consultation with the Afghan government, encourage Pakistan to place pressure on the Taliban for peace talks with the Afghan government. In doing so, Turkey can use three platforms that Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan are members to: the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), the HoA–IP, and the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation.