

## **Afghanistan: The Possible Arena for Major Powers Inevitable Cooperation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Afghanistan has been a center of a struggle between major powers since the 19th century. In 2001, the fight against terrorism had sparked a new power struggle among local, regional, and international Afghanistan actors. Various state and non-state players with conflicting perspectives and conflicting approaches are trying to pursue their strategic, political, and economic goals in Afghanistan. Due to similar security threats, complex economic interdependence, and economic liberalism, different scenarios may emerge in Afghanistan, leading to the potential collaboration of major global and regional powers in Afghanistan. This partnership can be expanded for several logics and reasons, among which security comes first. The peace treaty concluded between the United States and the Taliban on February 29, 2020. The continuing peace process via intra-Afghan peace talks with regional states has fortified hopes for peace in Afghanistan through cooperative measures among major regional and international powers.

**Key Words:** **Afghanistan, Russia, Iran, China, Terrorist, United States, Economic, Taliban & International Powers.**

### **Introduction**

The peace process agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban on February 29, 2020, and the ongoing talks for intra-Afghan peace in cooperation with regional states have strengthened Afghanistan's peace process. The number of U.S. troops will decrease, and eventually, the U.S. will withdraw from Afghanistan under a peace agreement with the Taliban (Council on Foreign Affairs, 11 Sept 2020). Afghanistan has long been an important destination for rival states to pursue their own interests. The war in Afghanistan has now led to significant coordination between regional and global powers, which seek to make Afghanistan a stable place, as instability leads to negative consequences of the disturbing cross-border crisis for all the neighbors. Therefore, Pakistan, Iran, China, Central Asian Republics, and Russia all want Afghanistan to be stable because unstable Afghanistan will be a sanctuary for transnational terrorist organizations that intensify terrorism and drug trafficking in the neighboring countries. Therefore, these stakeholders' noncooperation can lead to law and order crises, terrorism,

drug trafficking, and illegal arms trade through militants. The ultimate victim of the tragedy of such a crisis will be the Afghan people. However, this time, their worries and anxieties will cross Afghanistan's borders and affect South, Central, and West Asia's entire regional security. The complex and volatile security models of these regions will have serious consequences for the world at large.

## **Contemporary Afghanistan**

The contemporary political situation in Afghanistan is one major factor in the peace process, with the biggest problem of weak nationalism inside Afghanistan, which has allowed foreign intervention. New extremist ideologies such as Islamic State (IS) are gaining strength, creating new terrorist syndicates, and this will be a direct problem for all nation-states. These terrorists will have a global agenda that will not have any geographical boundaries and poses an equal threat to the West. The US has spent more money in Afghanistan than it gave to rebuild Europe after World War II. However, only 63% of the country has been under the Afghan government's control, and the remaining is still at the mercy of the Taliban and Warlords. Taliban's new territorial expansions in Helmand, Kandahar, and other places can make the Taliban more powerful and liberated of any compulsions of the peace agreement. One of the reasons for their success is corruption in the Afghan army and police leadership, but the other reason could also be the United States' lesser strikes. On the other hand, opium cultivation is still high, even increased four folds in the last 15 years (Justin Rowlatt, 2019). In the meantime, the country faces a high rate of corruption due to a lack of stable government institutions and a lack of accountability systems. In the struggle for this power, non-state actors, especially militant organizations, can undermine regional security. NATO forces have somehow smashed al-Qaeda's network in Afghanistan, but al-Qaeda's split and fragmented Taliban still can pose serious challenges for security forces. The fight against such a militant group will be more serious and difficult for Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), especially when the joint efforts of 49 countries under NATO fail to eradicate terrorism. As the ANSF lacks the capability to tackle the growing problems by local militants, ISIS and the Taliban's split groups, and the half-heartedly intra Afghan dialogue process can also halt the reconciliation process. There is also the big threat of ISIS in Afghanistan, where different groups are reluctant to compromise to pursue personal interests. Whereas ethnic and racial divisions in the country are also a source of political uncertainty. These conditions encourage these groups to grow poppies and do drug trafficking, which negatively affects the state of law and order. Besides, these developments can make the war on terrorism counterproductive, and Afghanistan again can be drowned into another civil war and became a stage of a new wave of terrorism. Hence, the only industry operating in Afghanistan is the war industry, and fighters benefit from the precise delivery of weapons and aid from foreign, regional, and international stakeholders. Such issues have not enabled the country to support itself and making it dependent

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on foreign financial assistance. The new civil war can also end the democratization and modernization process in Afghanistan and turn Afghanistan into a region that promotes extremism. Therefore, the fate of the Afghan nation is uncertain and can be decided by others. Afghanistan has faced proxy wars between regional and non-regional states historically. Recently, Afghans have been hoping for stability in their country. However, the US-led coalition government's fractional success in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan could lead to a resumption of the regional conflict in Afghanistan. Consequently, there is a significant change shown in these stakeholders' strategic models, and they need to be collaborative. There are some serious moves and efforts required in progress for intra Afghan negotiations as the Afghan government has given a big offer to the Taliban to negotiate than it did in the past. The Taliban resurgence in October and November 2020 can make negotiations more demanding from the U.S. and the Afghan government. If they are not served through peaceful means, it can lead to a new civil war (Dawn, 22 Sept 2020). The Trump administration announced that the number of U.S. troops would be reduced to about 2,500 by January 15, 2021. The Trump policies on Afghanistan have created challenges for the new Biden administration, which needs to rethink the withdrawal. The probabilities of successful negotiations are slim, and the presence of 2,500 troops can force the U.S. into a new Afghan civil war without proposing real help to the Afghan government and people (Hadid, 2020). Until fully withdrawn, U.S. counterterrorism forces can have both positive and negative effects. The US forces can only be positive if they are used against terrorism on the borders of Afghanistan and do not pose a threat to other regional states and can harm Afghanistan and the region if they recklessly attack people, including the local population, and threaten other regional countries, including China, which can create a state of fierce warfare which does not benefit anyone's interests.

### **Peace and stability in Afghanistan**

Stable Afghanistan explained under Barry Buzan's theory of complex regional security promotes stability in three regions, and its instability can lead to instability in three regions. Regional complex security theory elaborates how each state's security in the region is interconnected with other states' security, leading to extreme security interdependence in the region. (Buzan & Waever, 2003) Major states can become part of regional security complexes to cope the catastrophes or for self-interests, like the United States and the Russian presence in Afghanistan (Lake and Morgan, 1997 and Kupchan, 2000). In a regional security complex theory, Afghanistan's place can be taken as an insulator, "a state between the two or more regional security complexes." However, Afghanistan could be taken as part of the Middle East / North Africa Regional Security Complex (Persian Gulf Sub-Complex), the Post-Russian Space Regional Security Complex (Central Asia Sub-Complex) the South Asian Regional Security Complex (Kurečić, 2010). So, if states all of these regions follow their own strategies without cooperating, a new

great game will emerge, and Afghanistan will face serious chaos with the participation of many actors. America's complete withdrawal should be made after some deal with China, Russia, and India, so the benefits of peace deals should be equalized and stop all regional states from reengaging in proxy politics in Afghanistan. Currently, the interests are converging at a higher level, and this stability will allow the U.S. to leave Afghanistan based on a good regional agreement. The European Union model between Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Russia, and India would be ideal. However, it could become a reality if interests and resources could be pursued to achieve mutual interests. For instance, Afghanistan's geographical location, which is now needed by regional states' projects like TAPI, CASA 1000, and CPEC, requires Afghanistan's stability. This stability can only come through a rational approach among different powers and with a negotiated interest package globally, regionally, and locally to realize who should get what kind of share.

### **Major powers cooperation in Afghanistan**

Stakeholders such as the United States, Russia, Pakistan, China, Iran, and India have their own strategies to achieve their national interests and goals in Afghanistan. Due to conflicting interests, mistrust, and different strategies among these players, Afghanistan can lead to a new civil war crisis (Olsson, Holmquist & Lackenbauer, 2012). The condition in Afghanistan still depicts a proxy war between regional and international stakeholders such as the United States, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, supporting different ethnic and sectarian groups for their own interests.

With all apprehensions, there is still the possibility of cooperation because the civil war in the 1990s made Afghanistan suffer politically and economically. In contrast, the other states also faced negative consequences from their past policies in Afghanistan. However, the problem is that each stakeholder wants their own terms in Afghan peace solution according to their own interests. Therefore, all of these players need to give up their ambitions and find a solution that removes or serves real concerns. Therefore, the only way is that the regional and international forces must find a solution that solves their problems that do not harm other states. Players at three levels, nationally, regionally, and internationally, have their own goals, but none of them can achieve their security and economic interests without cooperation. In Afghanistan's case, absolute benefits, such as peace and security, must outweigh the relative achievements of maximizing economic and strategic interests. This state of cooperation in Afghanistan can be analyzed based on the stag hunt theory. Jean-Jacques Rousseau describes a hunting situation in which two or more people go hunting, as explained by Kenneth A. Oye

“A group of hunters surround a stag. If all cooperate to trap the stag, all will eat well (CC). If one person defects to chase a passing rabbit, the stag will escape.

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The defector will eat lightly (DC) and none of the others will eat at all (CD). If all chase rabbits, all will have some chance of catching a rabbit and eating lightly (DD). Each hunter's preference ordering is: CC > DC > DD > CD. The mutual interest in plentiful venison (CC) relative to all other outcomes militates strongly against defection. However, because a rabbit in the hand (DC) is better than a stag in the bush (CD), cooperation will be assured only if each hunter believes that all hunters will cooperate. In single-play Stag Hunt, the temptation to defect to protect against the defection of others is balanced by the strong universal preference for stag over rabbit.” (Oye, 1985, p.8).

Everyone is free to choose whether to hunt a stag or a rabbit, and each player must decide on the action without knowing the other's choice. Man can hunt a rabbit on his own, but a rabbit is useless compared to a stag, and to hunt that, one must have another person as a partner for success (Bowles, 2009 and Spaniel, 2010). Therefore, it is clear from the following table that if player one chooses a stag and player two, they will get a payoff of 3 (CC). However, if player one hunts a rabbit and player two try for a stag, then the first player will get 2 (DC) and the second 0 (CD), and so on. All countries in Afghanistan, including Afghanistan, can be considered hunters, while the stag or the rabbit can be considered an illustration of security and economic interests. Therefore, if they cooperate, their payoffs will be maximized. Stag Hunt is a game that defines Nash equilibrium as a way to get maximum benefits. Collaboration is possible as a source of maintaining equilibrium (Barrett, 1998). The strategy pair (Stag, Stag) leads as payoffs are greater for both players than the other strategies. Simultaneously, the risk is also extraordinary than the strategy (Rabbit, Rabbit) because doubt exists about other actors' strategies.

		2. Hunter/State 2	
		<i>Stag/Security/ Economics</i>	<i>Rabbit/ Security/ Economics</i>
1. Hunter/State 1	<i>Stag/Security/ Economics</i>	3, 3	0, 2
	<i>Rabbit/Security/ Economics</i>	2, 0	1, 1

Table 4.1 Stag hunt game theory. This chart is designed based on Rousseau's ideas and William Spaniel lecture on Stag hunt based on his book *Game Theory 101: The Complete Textbook*, published on September 3, 2011

Stability and security in Afghanistan are the common goals of all stakeholders, but they have conflicting strategies, which should be turned into a partnership strategy, because in the prisoners' dilemma game, they may have a non-zero-sum result if they cooperate, but by the situation created by stag hunt players can maximize their interests through cooperation as Robert Jervis described,

“The Prisoner's Dilemma differs from the Stag Hunt in that there is no solution that is in the best interests of all the participants; there are offensive as well as defensive incentives to defect from the coalition with the others; and, if the game is to be played only once, the only rational response is to defect. But if the game is repeated indefinitely, the latter characteristic no longer holds and we can analyze the game in terms similar to those applied to the Stag Hunt. It would be in the interest of each actor to have others deprived of the power to defect; each would be willing to sacrifice this ability if others were similarly restrained. But if the others are not, then it is in the actor's interest to retain the power to defect.” (Jervis, 1978, P. 171).

Afghanistan is a place where major powers play non-cooperative games repeatedly. These repeated non-cooperative games can lead them to adapt the final and finest cooperation strategy, which gives maximum payoffs (Hart and Mas-Colell, 2012). Consequently, if a state is eager to cooperate to get maximum advantage and cooperate for security while others will not, the state may lose its interest, and another state may get its interests. However, these attained benefits will not be permanent as the disorder generated by its noncooperation can soon surround it. Therefore, states can decrease this risk by peacekeeping and using international forums to cooperate on the Afghanistan problem. This is the only real way to pursue their interests in changing world politics through liberal policies. Although countries have different interests in Afghanistan, some partnerships have already been seen in several different ways and means.

Certainly, former US President Obama stated on March 27, 2009, that "none of these nations benefit from a base for Al-Qaeda terrorists, and a region that descends into chaos. All have a stake in the promise of lasting peace and security and development." (Obama, 2009). Similarly, General David Petraeus, ex-Commander of U.S. Central Command, said,

“It's not possible to resolve the challenges internal to Afghanistan without addressing the challenges especially in terms of security related to Afghanistan's neighbors. A regional approach is required.... [The Coalition] will have to develop and

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execute a regional strategy that includes Pakistan, India, the Central Asian States and even China and Russia along with perhaps at some point Iran.” (Petraeus, 2010).

These countries' main goal with different state strategies is to have a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, which will be beneficial for all regional and international players. The prospects for a "new Proxy war" in Afghanistan will only diminish if there is a cooperation between regional states. The last Twenty years' efforts to resolve Afghanistan's problems by force have clearly demonstrated its ineffectiveness and made dialogue and cooperation a last resort. Today, it is on the agenda to take practical steps to start national reconciliation based on UN Security Council resolutions through like-minded countries like SCO's contact group on Afghanistan. On the other hand, sustainable socio-economic development should be a key factor in maintaining Afghanistan's security and stability.

When Trump ordered talks with the Taliban in July 2018, many states welcomed the move. For instance, Russia has cooperated to ease international sanctions against Taliban leaders, which have shown themselves to be collaborative and have strengthened dialogue (Joyenda, 2017). Russia has appreciated China's move to Afghanistan, while the U.S. government is optimistic about Russia's Afghanistan role. President Dmitry Medvedev has acknowledged that Afghanistan is a "common cause" between Russia and its NATO-ISAF partners.

Cooperation between Russia and the United States can be seen in the U.S.-Russia-Afghanistan air transit agreement since July 2009. In contrast, the U.S. military and the Russian military export agency did a \$375M agreement and launched 21 new Mi-17V5s military transport helicopters for the Afghan Air Force under the establishment of a NATO-Russia Council Afghan Helicopter. The NATO-Russia Council also worked through counter-narcotics personnel from Afghanistan, Central Asia, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey for the Central Asia Drug Enforcement Program through mobile training teams. Such cooperation will help reduce the remaining differences in Afghanistan through consensus and consistency in the emerging global system, as Afghanistan's situation has broad prospects for regional states and the international community as a whole. The Eurasian Economic Union and the CIS can contribute to this joint effort by opening up their attractive and promising Afghanistan markets. Russia can also join multilateral economic and infrastructure cooperation projects, including the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) energy project. As major actors in the world order, China and Russia need stability in Afghanistan to stop Islamic militancy, respectively.

Moreover, the 'multiple chessboards view' explains that China, India, Iran, and Pakistan can cooperate on economic issues, but there are disagreements on political and strategic issues. Gwadar and Chahbhar also depend on cooperation

among regional countries and the region's security situation, which is impossible without peace in Afghanistan. The inducements to cooperate outweigh the profits that they can get from hostility. So there is an enormous win for both Pakistan and Afghanistan if they collaborate. Besides, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can create a regional economic integration forum, promoting regional peace and stability. The Chinese economic development projects in neighboring states create a conducive environment for eliminating the roots of terrorism. The United States and China share several common interests in the region. The BRI initiative could add Afghanistan to the regional economy, which the United States has tried for years. If these two states dispel mutual doubts, then the partnership can serve their common interests of security (Zimmerman, 2015). The United States has also encouraged China's role in Afghanistan, as it is mutually beneficial to link Afghanistan to Beijing for regional action. The United States and China are developing transportation infrastructure and railways in Afghanistan, which can play an important role for both Chinese and US Silk Road visions and mineral extraction in Afghanistan. Michael Wines, Beijing Bureau Chief at *The New York Times*, writes that "American troops have helped make Afghanistan safe for Chinese investment...however if China succeeds in developing Aymak and generating revenue for the Kabul government, that helps achieve an American goal" (Wines, 2010). The United States and China hope to find a way to resolve their long-standing conflict and work together in Afghanistan. China is a member of Istanbul's "Heart of Asia" cooperation program, and it has held trilateral meetings with Russia on Afghanistan. It has also promoted the China-India bilateral initiative on Afghanistan and engaged Afghanistan in Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

From a regional perspective, Pakistan is important for U.S. Afghan policy. Therefore, in 2004, a key non-NATO ally of the United States was declared and provided more than \$ 20 billion in aid to Pakistan in the following years. On the other hand, General John W Nicholson, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, said that "20 of the 98 US-designated terrorist groups in the world were in the Af-Pak region (13 in Afghanistan and seven in Pakistan), making it the highest concentration of the terrorists groups anywhere in the world" (Iqbal, 2016). Therefore, to eradicate terrorism, the United States, India, and Afghanistan must cooperate with Pakistan. At the same time, U.S. and India can help Pakistan build a bridge with the Northern Alliance, while Pakistan can help India reconcile with the Taliban. The Intergovernmental Council (IGC) is a regional forum for Coordinating Planning with its members Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan can strengthen India-Pakistan talks by focusing more on trade (Tahir, Junaid, 2008). Similarly, improving Pak-India trade ties could benefit Afghanistan as well as working on TAPI (Hameed and Sadika, 2012 and Ahmed, 2015). Similarly, the Indian government has begun talks with two other major countries - China and Russia and CARS countries - to harmonize existing regional initiatives such as the Istanbul / Heart of Asia process.

Furthermore, the European Union's role, which has called on all countries in the region to use their good offices to advance the Afghan-led peace process, cannot be ignored. It reiterated its support for the Heart of Asia Process to deepen



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political and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbors. Similarly, at the BRICS summit on October 16, 2016, Afghanistan expressed its support for the peace process and called for Afghanistan's stability.

"deep concern at the persisting security challenges in Afghanistan and significant increase in terrorist activities" as they concluded that "they affirm support to the efforts of the Afghan government to achieve Afghan-led and Afghan-owned national reconciliation and combat terrorism, and readiness for constructive cooperation in order to facilitate security in Afghanistan, promote its independent political and economic course, becoming free from terrorism and drug trafficking." (TOLO news, 2016).

According to BRICS leaders, Afghanistan's stability must come from regional states' efforts and the international community to focus on the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission and the Afghan National Security Forces. Multilateral, regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS Development Bank, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Heart of Asia Conference should also be involved in the Afghan peace process (TOLO news, 2016). In this way, India shares its interests with almost all Afghanistan stakeholders, so it cooperates with other leading international donors, such as the European Union and the United States Agency for International Development, in education, capacity building, and even infrastructure. Serious efforts are needed to work in joint ventures. Thus, in the talks in February 2020, it was clear that the United States, Russia, Pakistan, and China have a strategy to negotiate with the Taliban, forcing India to accept the Taliban's legacy in Afghanistan.

Other regional efforts include the Istanbul Process and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (REC-CA), which deals with multi-sectoral issues and regional commitments to combat terrorism, militancy, and extremism. The existing political coalitions can help in peace and development procedures through the Afghanistan Advocacy and Support Group (AASG) and later became the Afghanistan Regional Advocacy and Support Group (RAA SG) to increase civic support in the peace process. Existing regional organizations such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the South Asian Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CARC) can step up efforts to build cooperation. These regional organizations can consolidate the regional actors for reconstruction and development and turn it into a business hub by supporting trade and transit corridors. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), about 2.7 million Afghans live in exile in neighboring countries, so the Afghan diaspora and refugees' problems also need to be addressed through regional efforts (FES, 2013). Sustainable Afghanistan requires the signing of multilateral agreements on regional peace agreements and other issues, such as India and Pakistan's signing for the fight against drugs. This is the only way to save the new economic projects like 'Silk Road project from terrorism

(Howard and Traugher, 2008). This cooperation can be established through cultural exchanges, people-to-people contacts, increased trade, and good diplomatic ties. Besides, Central Asian states, Gulf States, and Iran should also provide assistance and support to Afghanistan in the manner agreed in the Tokyo Declaration (2012) and at the London (Afghanistan) Conference (2014). The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) has received \$ 15.2 billion from international partners for Afghanistan's development in 2017-2020 (TOLO News, 2016). At the NATO summit in Warsaw, it was agreed to maintain an international military presence in Afghanistan, and the Afghan security forces will receive \$ 4.5 billion aid annually until 2020. It is noteworthy that the international community has been engaged in a large-scale effort to develop Afghanistan. In November 2020, Foreign Minister of Japan, Mr. Toshimitsu Motegi, announced, "Japan continues to stand with the Afghan government and its people. We will work on providing assistance from 2021 to 2024, maintaining the amount comparable to the past four years, which was \$180 million per year." (The Japan Time, 2020). Similarly, the rising powers like China and India may be more inclined to increase Afghanistan's economic aid.

Moreover, stability, peace, and prosperity in this region are closely linked to the continuous development of a clearer and more democratic polycentric world order based on respect for international law and the modern world's cultural diversity. If all stakeholders are not allowed to get their mutual interests in Afghanistan, like security and economic prosperity, they could be involved in a new proxy war. So the future policies of all these countries towards Afghanistan are interdependent. The major powers and the neighboring states of Afghanistan need to work together to restore peace in Afghanistan.

After the February 2020 agreement between the US and the Taliban, a sustained dialogue process started between the Taliban and the Afghan government over the peace process in Doha, which resulted in a formal agreement in December 2020. This agreement was referred to as "The Springboard to Peace," and most states and international institutions welcomed it as a milestone achievement (Al Jazeera, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The preceding discussion reveals that all major powers must reaffirm that none of Afghanistan's neighbors can be excluded from the active Afghan-led peace process in the region because excluding a single actor can lead to a zero-sum game current Afghan scenario. In such a scenario, one of the two countries may benefit more in the short term than the other, but both will lose important opportunities for change, peace, and stability in the long run. Therefore, the differences among these actors should be resolved through cooperation and mediation to bring lasting peace in Afghanistan, for which international organizations also can play their role. The success of peace through negotiations and cooperation and the US complete withdrawal from Afghanistan requires two-tier board collaboration, one on a regional and second domestic basis. If such cooperation among major powers is achieved for Afghanistan, this cooperative structure/spirit will facilitate cooperation among the major powers in other global affairs in the evolving global order.

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