



UPDATE: In June 2018 Taliban & Afghan Army commanders met briefly. Taliban reps met US State Dept's Alice Wells in Qatar in late July 2018.

Over the last few months, the tectonic plates of the Afghanistan conflict have shown signs of movement, with the latest being an offer from President Ghani to recognize the Taliban as a political party if they join negotiations "to save the country," writes Dr Sohail Mahmood (pictured).

An October 2017 offer from US Secretary of State Tillerson was followed by a lengthy open letter in February 2018 offering talks. An international conference of 25 nations plus the EU, UN and NATO is currently under way in Kabul. The diplomatic overtures in both directions have not quite been drowned out by the noise of air and vehicle launched bombs.

Afghanistan has been shaken by several Taliban and IS attacks already this year in which at least 140 have been killed and hundreds more wounded. On January 29, militants killed at least 11 soldiers in an attack on an army post in Kabul. Two days earlier, at least 103 people were killed and 235 wounded in a suicide bombing in Kabul. The attack was one of the deadliest in Afghanistan's history. The Taliban have claimed the attack and the Afghan Government has blamed the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani network. As expected, the Ghani government blamed Pakistan for the attack. President Donald Trump issued a stinging statement on Saturday evening deploring a Taliban-orchestrated suicide car bombing that killed at least 95 people and

wounded 158 others in Kabul, Afghanistan. In comments released by the White House, President Trump said:

This murderous attack renews our resolve and that of our Afghan partners. The Taliban's cruelty will not prevail...The United States is committed to a secure Afghanistan that is free from terrorists who would target Americans, our allies, and anyone who does not share their wicked ideology. Now, all countries should take decisive action against the Taliban and the terrorist infrastructure that supports them

President Trump reiterated his "resolve" to see the struggle through, saying "the United States is committed to a secure Afghanistan that is free from terrorists." Gen. Joseph Votel, head of the United States Central Command, declared that victory is "absolutely" still possible in the country. United States Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also condemned the attack.

Much earlier, the Taliban had attacked a hotel in Kabul in which 22 people were killed and an Islamic State suicide bombing at a charity in eastern Afghanistan had killed four people. The Islamic State group was involved in at least 10 fatal attacks in Afghanistan last year.

Over the last 16 years, the United States has deployed more than 100,000 troops at the conflict's peak. At least 2,300 of its soldiers have been killed and the United States has spent more than \$1tn on its military operations. It has also spent a record \$100bn more on "nation-building", helping fund and train an army of 350,000 Afghan security forces. Today, the United States has increased its assistance to Afghan security forces by increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan from 8,500 to 14,000. However, the United States and its allies face a daunting challenge to completely defeat the Islamic State and Taliban groups. The increased United States troops will not have much impact on the security situation in Afghanistan because the country's own security forces are badly trained, poorly led, suffer from very low morale and are also inadequately compensated. The conflict is taking its toll in the country. Over the last year, some 10,000 of Afghanistan's security forces were killed. The Trump administration is making an erroneous judgment in thinking that new troops can be critical in winning the war against the Taliban and Islamic State. The continuing violence in Afghanistan indicates the brutal reality in Afghanistan that the Taliban and Islamic state groups are again growing stronger. Presently, the Taliban controls about 40% of Afghanistan, more territory than at any point since the United States intervention in 2001. The Taliban has gained a foothold in several areas in Afghanistan and has launched several big attacks in big cities.

Meanwhile, the country suffers from poor governance and bankrupt leadership. The security situation has deteriorated in large sections of Afghanistan. International aid groups are pulling out of the country now. The UN Secretary General's report for the General Assembly notes that at the end of the last year, "the security situation remained highly volatile, as conflict between the government and anti-government forces continued throughout most of the country". Over 21,000 incidents were reported till November 2017 and "attrition within Afghan National Police remained a major concern".

The Ghani government is overwhelmed by corruption, rivalries and in-fighting. It is unable to deliver basic public services. Unemployment is very high. Lately, the Islamic State group has

also achieved some sort of foothold in Afghanistan. The Islamic State has launched several attacks on foreigners and Afghanistan's Shiite minority. The group claimed responsibility for at least 15 bombings in Afghanistan in 2017, up from just a couple in 2016. As the Islamic State got defeated in Iraq and Syria it turned towards Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. However, they are not going to take over Afghanistan. Given their small numbers, the Taliban movement will not return to power in Afghanistan. However, that does not mean that it can be fully defeated as it has enough capability to fight on for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, insecurity in Afghanistan is growing; the Taliban and Islamic State groups are extending their networks and can hit anywhere and anyone. The security response has been ineffective.

Clearly, the Trump administration's strategy of sending more troops to Afghanistan and increasing air strikes in Afghanistan is failing. In the end, the only solution to the Afghanistan conflict must be political. The recent UN Secretary General's report emphasizes that "there is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan" and "only a negotiated settlement can bring lasting peace and stability" there. Recently, United States U.N. envoy, Nikki Haley, said that President Trump's policy was working, and that peace talks between the Ghani government and the Taliban are closer than ever before.

There is a parallel regional initiative known as the Quadrilateral Coordination Group of Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and US trying to resolve the conflict but has also failed to achieve peace in the country.

Other countries, including China and Turkey, are undertaking similar efforts. The Taliban has held some talks but also has carried on fighting. Given the situation, the prospect for a successful outcome are dim for the near foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan has become the world's biggest narco state where opium production grew from about 100 tons annually in the 1970s to 2,000 tons by 1991. In 2007 opium production increased to 8,200 tons. In 2017, the Afghan opium harvest further climbed to 9,000 tons.

Today, in some areas there is an ongoing battle between the Taliban and the Afghanistan provincial officials for control of the lucrative drug traffic. Corruption is endemic and illicit profits from the drug trade are shared by provincial officials with their seniors in Kabul which ensures the opium continuation of the drug trade. The Taliban is also hands in glove with the Ghani government in some areas when it comes to the narcotics trade. It collects a 10% tax on opium cultivation, controls heroin laboratories and acts as guarantor for the trafficking of raw opium and heroin out of the country. Thus, in some places the Taliban works as a typical drug cartel with connivance of the Ghani government. The drug money is financing the Taliban war effort in Afghanistan. Drug money and the Taliban in complicity with Ghani government corruption will remain a factor in the complexity of the Afghan conflict.

If the Trump administration was to provide alternate to opium crop cultivation for the impoverished Afghan farmers through sustained agriculture and rural development, then Afghanistan can indeed stop being the world's leading narco-state. Violent conflict will thereby be reduced.

Notwithstanding views of President Trump, it would be prudent to emphasise peace talks with the Taliban to reach an ultimate peace deal with the militant group. The Taliban is largely a Pashtun movement. Overall, most of the Taliban's top leadership is Pashtuns from Kandahar Province. The Taliban can be pushed to begin peace talks with the help of Pakistan and China. Some sort of power-sharing arrangement can be made with the group. Several concessions from the Afghan government and its allies can be made such as an increased role for Islamic law in Afghan institutions, the integration of some Taliban officials in government posts, even a regional government in south east Afghanistan in the Kandahar and adjoining areas. Many conflicts like the IRA in Ireland, FARC in Colombia, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka had eventually been resolved through serious peace negotiations. Afghanistan has suffered immensely from nearly 40 years of conflict and it is time to end it now. The focus of the Trump administration must be redirected to achieve this end. It must rethink its China and Pakistan policies as the United States needs to partner with Pakistan and China to resolve the conflict. The chances of that happening in the foreseeable future is very dim, however. The Trump administration is making enemies unnecessarily, to say the least. There is an opportunity cost of taking an overly militarized view of the Afghan conflict. A greater focus on governance, economic development and conflict resolution through peace deals is the way out of the Afghan mess. Nothing else will do.

There were unsuccessful attempts to bring them to the table by Pakistan a few years ago. Later, China tried its hand also. Enough pressure by Pakistan and China can yet start the process of peace talks yet again. The Afghan government may negotiate a power sharing arrangement at the provincial level only. It is conceivable to share power with them in areas where they retain public support. The Taliban are Pashtuns and have support in Pakhtun areas like Kandahar and some areas in eastern Afghanistan where Pashtuns are an overwhelming majority of the local populace. However, the new Taliban leadership has officially shunned peace talks with the Afghan government. They can be persuaded if a greater effort is made by China, Pakistan, USA, and perhaps other NATO countries, like UK

The Taliban have previously offered direct talks with the United States, but the Trump administration has declined saying that the group must hold talks with the Afghan government first. The Ghani offer of talks "without preconditions" takes that a step further.

The Taliban have tried to convince the United States that it cannot win the Afghan war and arguing that in 2017 some 3,546 troops have been killed and there was an 87% increase in drug production in the country. The Taliban also claim that they have increasing support from

the international community which was now supporting, what they consider as, their correct struggle. Recently, the Taliban had invited Rand Paul to meet the group at their Qatar office. Earlier, Paul has stated that the planned billions of dollars of spending in Afghanistan over 2018 as money wasted. Also, recently, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has reminded the Taliban that the United States is ready to negotiate, even saying that the group could join the Afghan government on the condition that it renounced its violence and extremism.

Tillerson also claims that the United States desires to make it clear to the Taliban and other militant groups that it was going to stay in Afghanistan for the long and that the militant groups would not succeed militarily. There is no doubt that the rag tag militant groups cannot defeat the United States and its NATO allies in Afghanistan, but it is also true that the United States and NATO allies cannot also eliminate the Taliban. Given its resilience, the Taliban will also keep on fighting for long. Hence, the added significance of the diplomatic moves to bring peace to the country. It is yet possible that a peace deal may be achieved when the United States changes direction and manages to partner with other regional players to achieve it.

There is still hope for peace and stability in Afghanistan provided intensive diplomacy is given another chance.