

Afghan Peace Process and the Role of Turkey

Policy Brief

This policy brief reviews the role of Turkey in Afghan Peace Process in the context of Intra - Afghan talks that will be hosted by Turkey in April 2021. The purpose of the review is to find out the historical, social, cultural, religious and political factors that make the case for Turkey in a mediating role in the Afghan peace process. In addition, it aims to address the opportunities, challenges and potential threats for Turkey in hosting one of the most complex negotiations that has serious implications both at regional and global level.

Institute of Policy Studies has prepared this brief in the format of an essay supported with relevant data such as expert's opinions, research articles, news articles and policy briefs mentioned in footnotes.

Background:

After intense review of Trump's administration Afghan peace process by the new Biden administration, President Biden has finally declared his plan for Afghanistan. The US is resuming the Afghan Peace Process through Doha Agreement where Trump left.¹

In a letter to the Afghan government, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has outlined a four-step proposal that the US believes will help in accelerating the stalled peace process.²

In July 2018, the Trump Administration entered into direct negotiations with the Taliban, without participation of Afghan government representatives, reversing the long-standing U.S. position prioritizing an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process.

Though regional countries such as Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia have been actively involved in the Afghan Peace Process a new emerging actor in the peace process is Turkey which is expected to host the

Intra-Afghan meeting in April 2021. As part of the peace process, two peace treaties have been signed so far. On September 22, 2016, the first treaty was signed between the Afghan government and the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin militant group.³

On February 29, 2020, after more than a year of official negotiations between U.S. and Taliban representatives, the two sides concluded an agreement laying the groundwork for the withdrawal of US armed forces from Afghanistan, and for talks between Kabul and the Taliban.⁴

Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan Doha, Qatar:

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha, Qatar, officially titled the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan. The provisions of the deal include the withdrawal of all American and NATO troops from Afghanistan, a Taliban pledge to prevent al-Qaeda and other groups from operating against the security of the

¹ Ward, A. (2021, March 8). Biden's leaked Afghanistan peace plan, explained: A "Hail Mary" bid to bring Ghani and Taliban to an agreement - Vox. Vox; Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2021/3/8/22319420/afghanistan-blinken-letter-leak-peace-plan>

² Blinken proposes plan to accelerate peace process in Afghanistan | Conflict News | Al Jazeera. (2021, March 7). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/7/blinken-proposes-plan-to-accelerate-peace-process-in-afghanistan>

³ Afghanistan signs deal with militant Hekmatyar - BBC News. (2016, September 22). BBC News; BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37438674>

⁴ (Congressional Research Service, 2020). Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>

United States and its allies, and talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.⁵

A comprehensive peace agreement is made of four parts:

- 1) Guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.
- 2) Guarantees, enforcement mechanisms, and announcement of a timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan.
- 3) After the announcement of guarantees for a complete withdrawal of foreign forces and timeline in the presence of international witnesses, and guarantees and the announcement in the presence of international witnesses that Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 15, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 20, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar.
- 4) A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. The participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms, which will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.

The four parts above are interrelated and each will be implemented in accordance with its own agreed timeline and agreed terms. Agreement on the first two parts paves the way for the last two parts.⁶

By July 2020, The United States agreed to an initial reduction of its force level from 13,000 to 8,600,

followed by a full withdrawal by 1st May, 2021, if the Taliban keeps its commitments.

The United States also committed to closing five military bases within 135 days. and expressed its intent to end economic sanctions on the Taliban by August 27, 2020. US and Taliban had agreed that 5,000 Taliban prisoners would be released before Taliban and Afghan government enter into negotiations.

Intra-Afghan Dialogue:

As per Doha agreement, Afghan government and Taliban entered into Intra-Afghan negotiations to decide the modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.⁷

In March 2020 talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban were meant to begin but were repeatedly delayed by a dispute over prisoner exchange arrangements, as well as violence in the country.

On September 12, 2020 historic talks between the Afghan government and Taliban began in Doha, Qatar. It was the first time both parties were meeting after the Doha Peace Agreement for Afghanistan.

On January 5, talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban resumed in Doha, Qatar. The talks have so far not met the expectations and are moving slowly, beset by widely different priorities and continued violence in Afghanistan. The Afghan government negotiating team insists that a ceasefire must be a priority in the talks, while the Taliban want discussion of a ceasefire to come after an agreement on the shape of a future government.⁸

On March 6, 2021, Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani expressed that his government would be taking forward peace talks with Taliban, discussing with the insurgent group about holding fresh elections and forming a government in a democratic manner.⁹

⁵ 4. Lamothe, S. D., Susannah George, Dan. (2020, February 29). US, Taliban sign Afghanistan peace deal in Doha The Washington Post; The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-us-taliban-peace-deal-signing/2020/02/29/b952fb04-5a67-11ea-8efd-0f904bdd8057_story.html

⁶ (Congressional Research Service, 2020). Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>

⁷ Hussain. Abrar. (2021, March 26). [Panel Discussion]. The Role of Turkey in Afghan Peace Process, IPS, Islamabad. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOTGJ-wg-b0>

⁸ Putz, C. (n.d.). Latest Phase of Intra-Afghan Peace Talks Off to Slow Start – The Diplomat; for The Diplomat. Retrieved March 29, 2021, from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/latest-phase-of-intra-afghan-peace-talks-off-to-slow-start/>

⁹ Greenfield, H. S., Charlotte. (2021, March 6). Afghan president says ready to discuss elections to advance talks with Taliban | Reuters. U.S.; Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-politics-ghani-idUSKBN2AY0BI>



On March 12, 2021 Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced plans to host Afghanistan peace talks in Istanbul in April, 2021.

On March 18, 2021 Moscow Conference on Afghan Peace was held. Representatives of Afghan government, Taliban, United States, Russia, China, India and Pakistan participated in the conference.

On March 27, 2021 Turkey and US Officials met in Dolmabahce Palace, Istanbul in which recent developments in Afghanistan and the details of Afghan peace talks that Turkey plans to host in Istanbul were discussed.¹⁰

More than a year after the US and the Taliban signed an agreement in Doha to pave the way for a reduction in both Taliban violence and the American troop presence, progress on intra-Afghan talks remains limited and the security situation remains fragile.

Relations of Turkey and Afghanistan:

Turkey and Afghanistan are not new for each other. The relations of Afghanistan and Turkey spans several centuries, as many Turkic and Afghan people ruled vast areas of Central Asia and the Middle East, particularly the Ghaznavids, Seljuks, Khilji, Timurid, Lodhi, Mughal, Afsharid, and Durrani empires. Throughout its long history, many Ottoman officials were in close contact with Afghan leaders.¹¹

As an historic ally of Afghanistan Turkey has been proactively engaged in Afghanistan at multifold level. After Soviet Union, Afghanistan was the second nation to recognize the Republic of Turkey in 1921. Both countries further strengthened their relationship with the signing of the Turkey-Afghanistan Alliance Agreement on March 1, 1921. The two countries still celebrate, March 1st as Turkish-Afghan Friendship Day.¹²

Turkey has strong ethnic, religious, cultural and etymological links in Afghanistan as a considerable percentage of Afghan population are ethnically Turk.

In the 1930s, Ankara supported Afghanistan's modernization efforts by sending military and development experts for training and modernization of the Afghan armed forces. Turkey strongly opposed the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In November 2001, Turkey became the first Muslim country to join the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan and currently runs NATO's Train Advise Assist Command – Capital in Kabul. Turkish troops have not participated as combat forces but rather as logistical support and training Afghan personnel. Over 12,000 Afghan soldiers and police have been trained. Turkish construction firms have subsequently also become active in the country. Turkey is responsible for maintaining security around Kabul, providing training for the Afghan Armed Forces and Afghan National Police and have undertaken a number of reconstruction projects in the fields of education, health and agriculture.¹³

Why Turkey?

Turkey has participated in all international efforts for the restructuring and development of Afghanistan since 2002. Turkey has given more than one billion dollars in aid to Afghanistan since 2002 for its security, infrastructure, health and education.¹⁴ Historically, Turkey is perceived a friend by Afghan government and people. Educational institutions established by Turkey in Afghanistan were functional during the Taliban regime.¹⁵

Afghanistan and Turkey officially launched an initiative, The Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) at a conference hosted by Turkey in Istanbul on 2 November 2011. It is a platform for promoting regional security, economic and political cooperation centered on Afghanistan through dialogue and a set of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs).¹⁶

In recent years, Turkey has emerged as a dynamic and engaging new peacebuilding actor, combining the priorities characteristic of other rising powers and

¹⁰ Top Turkish, US officials discuss Afghan peace talks. (n.d.). Anadolu Ajansı. Retrieved March 29, 2021, from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/top-turkish-us-officials-discuss-afghan-peace-talks/2190091>

¹¹ Islam. Fakhar. (2021, March 26). [Panel Discussion]. The Role of Turkey in Afghan Peace Process, IPS, Islamabad. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOTGJ-wg-b0>

¹² Turkey-Afghanistan Bilateral Political Relations / Rep. of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (n.d.). Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Retrieved March 29, 2021, from http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_afghanistan-bilateral-political-relations.en.mfa

¹³ Hussain. Abrar. (2021, March 26). [Panel Discussion]. The Role of Turkey in Afghan Peace Process, IPS, Islamabad. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOTGJ-wg-b0>

¹⁴ Afghanistan Overview. (n.d.). World Bank. Retrieved March 29, 2021, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

¹⁵ Hussain. Abrar. (2021, March 26). [Panel Discussion]. The Role of Turkey in Afghan Peace Process, IPS, Islamabad. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOTGJ-wg-b0>

¹⁶ HEART OF ASIA - ISTANBUL PROCESS - HEART OF ASIA - ISTANBUL PROCESS. (n.d.). Retrieved March 29, 2021, from <https://www.hoa.gov.af/about-us/about-hoa-ip.html>



traditional donors. Turkey's twofold approach to peacebuilding encompasses state building support and peacemaking within societies. Infrastructure projects and technical assistance are accompanied by culturally sensitive engagement through education programs and religious projects.

Geographical, political, religious, ethnic and historical characteristics of Turkey predict the suitability of Turkey to play an active and important role in the Afghan peace process.¹⁷

The choice of Turkey as an acceptable and neutral third party to host the meeting is interesting given that Ankara and Islamabad, which is important actor of Afghan peace process are close allies and have strengthened their military and defense cooperation in recent years.

During the tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2006-2007. Turkey played a vital role in mediating the tensions between the two countries. Trilateral Ankara Summit Process was launched in April 2007 and subsequent trilateral summits have been hosted by Turkey. Turkey, besides having close cultural relations with the two countries is also a part of the US-led NATO force in Afghanistan and has sought to raise its international standing in recent years by playing host to a series of high-level diplomatic events in the region.

Nonetheless, the choice of Turkey being the host for Intra-Afghan talks is because, Turkey enjoys the acceptability of both parties in Intra-Afghan negotiations, the Afghan government and Taliban, its stable ties with other regional and global actors such as Iran, China and Russia. Turkey is a Muslim-majority nation; a member of NATO; and a significant donor in terms of aid and troops to Afghanistan, all these factors make a strong case for Turkey to be a neutral third party in the Afghan peace process.

Turkey's emergence reflects its economic development, regional influence, a realignment of foreign policy priorities and international shifts in power. Instead of identifying and analyzing the role of Turkey as merely hosts of the intra-Afghan peace

talks, Ankara's potential as a mediator should be recognized too.

Intra-Afghan peace talks face various obstacles before any breakthrough can be reached between the Afghan government and Taliban.¹⁸ There is no clear prospect for the Taliban in Afghanistan, as the group faces the dilemma of reconciling its values between democracy and sharia (Islamic Law). Deadlocks on issues of permanent ceasefire, and future political road map still exist. Biden's announcement of possible delay in the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan by deadline May 1, 2021, increase in violence and issues of power sharing and future political roadmap of Afghanistan are still in stalemate. The limited role of International organizations such as UN, EU, OIC and other regional and international organizations in the Afghan peace process make it vulnerable to be implemented and sustained.¹⁹

Within this complex dynamics of Afghan peace process, Turkey will host the Intra-Afghan talks. Turkey has attached great importance to the role of mediation in the recent past as evident in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, sectarian issues in Iraq and the Astana process.

Turkey have comparatively better relations with Western countries and has the acceptability in the Muslim world for being a proactive Muslim country.

Hosting intra-Afghan peace talks in Ankara may lead Washington to reassess the relationship and serve as a reminder of Turkey's significance in global affairs.

The last decade of Turkish foreign policy could be deemed a successful chapter in its history with regard to the international initiatives of Turkey, which eagerly has been taking the third party role for the resolution of international conflicts. The conflict of Afghanistan is one of the most protracted and complicated. The resolution of the conflict will take time, patience and keeping away the spoilers that can sabotage the fragile and vulnerable peace process. The Intra-Afghan talks is huge opportunity for Turkey to consolidate its role as regional and international power.

¹⁷ Rehman. Khalid. (2021, March 26). [Panel Discussion]. The Role of Turkey in Afghan Peace Process, IPS, Islamabad. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOTGJ-wg-b0>

¹⁸ Upcoming Afghan peace talks in Turkey key opportunity: UN | Daily Sabah. (2021, March 24). Daily Sabah; Daily Sabah. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/upcoming-afghan-peace-talks-in-turkey-key-opportunity-un>

¹⁹ Rehman. Khalid. (2021, March 26). [Panel Discussion]. The Role of Turkey in Afghan Peace Process, IPS, Islamabad. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOTGJ-wg-b0>

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