

# QUAD-PLUS Dialogue



## The New Afghanistan's Potential for Regional Economic Cooperation and Connectivity<sup>1</sup>

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**Quad-Plus Dialogue  
Sydney, Australia  
Feb 20-21, 2019**

### Abstract

*This paper presents a situational analysis of Afghanistan's present political state of affairs. The current political context is marked by the confluence of three factors: ambiguities regarding the elections, the peace process, and regional engagement. Looked at more closely, these include the unannounced parliamentary election results from 2018, the presidential elections which is delayed until September 2019 (as of now), and an uncertain peace process where multiple and competing national, regional, and global actors are engaged in a race to secure a peace deal to end forty years of war in Afghanistan.*

*While the first section of this paper will make an attempt to capture the key factors that characterizes Afghanistan's internal political dynamics and its potentials for a lasting peace and stability, the second section of the paper will primarily focus on unpacking the complexity of Afghanistan's position in the current regional political context.*

*The paper concludes with number of recommendations based on the analysis.*

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was presented in a Quad Plus meeting hosted by the ASPI (Australia) held in Sydney from February 19–21, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/the-quad-plus> (accessed October 8, 2019).

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## **Introduction**

Upon the major drawdown of international security forces in 2014, Afghanistan was predicted to be the most challenging country with further deterioration of security situation, political instability, and according to some, the government could “collapse” as a whole by 2014 (North, 2012). Although, despite significant challenges such as massive deterioration of the security situation (UNAMA, 2018) and a big dispute in the elections result in 2014 which led to direct U.S. intervention forming the National Unity Government (NUG), the country as well as the government managed to survive up until now. This paper will discuss the current state of affairs in Afghanistan that is a combination of hope and despair for its population, the hope for a lasting peace that is being given a real chance since the fall of Taliban regime in 2001 and that of despair and fear about the risks for history to be repeated or major compromises to be made with no real stability and lasting peace.

The paper aims to answer the question: *What should be the goals of coalition forces in Afghanistan and how can the Quad countries contribute?* An analysis of the current situation politically, in terms of democratic processes (parliamentary and presidential elections) and the ongoing efforts for peace and a new deal in the making with the Taliban to end the violent conflict, is discussed in the first section. The second section will look at Afghanistan’s place in the regional context by providing an analysis of the current power dynamics in the region and proposing potential options for strengthening Afghanistan’s place in the regional economic cooperation in (re)connecting south and central Asian countries—as the paper will argue, the viability of a political solution between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been proved to be an impossible mission so far. The paper will conclude with some key recommendations on *how the Quad countries can contribute in ensuring to achieve better relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the region and end the existing violence (if not) conflict through a peaceful means.*

## **The Afghan Internal Political Dynamics**

Before entering into a discussion about the current state of affairs, it is important to remind ourselves of some relevant contextual background. Afghanistan’s internal political relations is best characterized as patron-client relations. (Scott, 1972) In a developing country such as Afghanistan, patrimonial systems of governance is used in part to control violence to ensure secure ways of the distribution of resources. However, an important distinction needs to be made between typical patron-client relations and the one in Afghanistan. Decades of war, migrations, evictions, and changes in the social structure of the society in Afghanistan resulted in the emergence of non-traditional elites who did not necessarily build social contract with citizens through their access to conflict goods. (Roy, 1985:2); (Cramer, C & Goodhand, J, 2002)

Political economy scholars such as Di John and Putzel’s (2009) define elites as: those in possession of valued assets in agriculture, manufacturing, services (main capitalists); those who wield substantial power of adjudication over the distribution and allocation of property rights (traditional chiefs, landlords, regional political leaders); those who possess authority to bargain on behalf of rural communities or organized religious communities (traditional leaders, religious leaders); and those who lead political party organizations. (Di John, J. & Putzel, J. , 2009) However, one main point missing from this definition of elites, at least in the case of Afghanistan’s recent past, is the external dependencies of the political elites. As since the anti-Soviet war era, different factions and sides of war have been financed by different international power hubs. For instance, during the cold war, the two blocks financed and supported the two sides of conflict; during the 1990s, the regional powers supported and financed different

factions, that followed by the Taliban ruling where the main part of funding came from Pakistan and gulf countries; and finally in the post-2001 context, too, the state as well as armed opposition groups have all been externally funded.

It is also important to note that historically, particularly since late 18th century, Afghanistan has always been subject to external interventions and depended on external funding whether to rule the country and build the state or to organize rebellions in order to oust the ruling power. (Nemat, 2015) Hence, the patrons in Afghanistan do not necessarily take their legitimacy, power, and authority from internal sources such as economic resources (class based), social status (ethnic and tribal basis), or cultural and ideological basis (religious or other) but rather, or as well, from their dependency on external actors with particular interests in the country. For instance, if we look at the history of external dependencies of key political actors, mostly they have links to economic and political sources outside the country which enables them to mobilize and organize people in the country under different names and labels. The Taliban, the Mujahidin, and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan members are all good examples of this over the past forty years of war. Dependency in this paper refers to both overt and covert economic and spatial, as well as political support that is provided to wartime leaders to mobilize people around themselves in order to control (or cause) violence, maintain a stronger position in the existing political system, and secure the strategic interest of their patron or donors.

It is interesting to see how such dependency is taking shape in the post-2001 context, where many new groups of actors have also emerged such as technocrats mostly representing the younger generation with no or much less dependency on local patronage networks, women leaders and groups, civil society activists and organizations. It is certain that the pre-2001 patrons of Afghan politics have not only disappeared from the scene but have been a strong party to the post-2001 political settlement—some maintaining their relations with original patrons, while others aligning themselves with supporters of the Afghan state. It may well be beyond the space capacity of this paper to properly assess various political leaders of these newly emerging groups and their relations with older politico-military groups; however, an important point to be highlighted here is the complexity that demonstrates the representation of Afghan leaders and political elite of today. This is particularly complex in the understanding of wartime politico-military leaders. While some have still been struggling to keep alive the rhetoric of anti-Soviet war (also known as Jihad), others have maintained the rhetoric of defending democratic values and preserving the key achievements of post-2001. This block including the newly emerged leaders and wartime is supported by the U.S. and its allies.

The Taliban in this context are also not exempted from their external dependencies for disrupting the country's stability, using terrorism as their means to maintain influence within the country and against the international allies in Afghanistan, the Afghan state, and the Afghan people while enjoying safe sanctuaries and financial and military support from regional and global players such as Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and Gulf countries to name a few.

Therefore, the political elites in Afghanistan, whether in government, its opposition, or its armed opposition, carry a higher degree of external dependencies which should be considered as a key starting point to discuss, analyze, and understand the current Afghan context and how to achieve this goal of ensuring a lasting peace in the country.

## **Latest on Elections and Democratic Processes**

**Parliamentary Elections.** The parliamentary elections, although was held in October 2018, the final results are still disputed and not out in public. The studies show around 8.5 million people have registered as voters for the parliamentary elections. However, this number has decreased on the final list of voters due to poor performance of the electoral staff and some technical challenges they faced on the election day. It is important to note that on the election day, Afghans with their massive and nationwide participation demonstrated that they were fully ready to accept the risks and participate in the elections and elect their representatives to the Parliament despite serious security threats and flaws in the electoral management. However, the government, in particular the IEC, has failed to deliver free and fair elections. The IEC staff for the election day were late or did not show up at voting centers. Unable to prevent fraud and misconduct and facilitate the elections with a comprehensive plan, they came under threat by armed candidates and their voters and they also failed to announce the final results months after the elections were held.

**Four Elections at Once Promised.** The initial date for presidential elections was April 2019, but looking at the poor performance of the IEC leadership, it was predictable that it is far from reality to expect another round of elections could happen in the next three to four months. The president has announced recently that the election is postponed for July 20, 2019. There will be four elections happening at the same time: the presidential elections, Ghazni province (parliamentary elections), provincial council, and district council elections will all be held at once on July 20, 2019, as scheduled. However, there were much less visible activities on the other three elections as opposed to the presidential elections for which a number of 18 candidates have been listed as initial registered candidates.

Finally it can be argued that the challenges in fulfilling the completion of elections as a democratic process is rooted in a number of issues: the broader lack of stability across the country and the government's distraction by other processes happening; the struggle for survival by current parliamentary members who cannot run for another round and hence struggle to maintain their role beyond any legal grounds, thus caused issues in the process; and the government's lack of ability to bring in stronger and experienced managers to lead such an important national process. The key points to be noted here is that despite administration challenges that the election faced, there is no sympathy for any other alternatives under such politically fragile circumstances to replace elections with. Also, the fact that Afghan people who took part in the elections as voters have shown by accepting the risk to their lives that they are ready for a democratic process even though broken and misconducted.

**The “Peace Process.”** The peace process in recent months have taken a momentum particularly after the EidulFitr cease-fire experiment in 2018. Both government and the Taliban have benefited massively from the positive results of the cease-fire being fully respected for the three Eid days across the country. Interestingly, everyone had their own interpretation of why and how has that cease-fire worked. For ordinary people, it was a hopeful sign that there is still a chance to stop the bloodshed. For the Taliban, it was celebratory to show they are still under one command and can order their people not to fire if they want and finally for government forces to show that they are serious about peace and ending this violence. This three days of peace during Eid is obviously open for any further interpretation, however, the key point here is that we all know the cease-fire was experimental by all parties and not well planned. Each party aimed to test the water and if an expansion of this was to be sought, that would not look feasible because of multiple reasons. The U.S. talks with the Taliban are seen as a positive attempt which demonstrates this real opportunity for peace, however, continuation of talks in the absence of the Afghan government as a leading party can be a matter of concern. By now, everyone knows that “Afghan led and Afghan owned” is nothing more than a rhetoric used for media and public relations by most parties. However, for a serious discussion about next phases in pre-negotiations, the cease-fire phase, and the actual negotiations and its implementation, it is crucial that talks happen directly between all parties to conflict (the Taliban, U.S. and its allies, and the Afghan government as well as representatives of political and civil society groups).

**Why Regional Political Cooperation Is Unviable.** There is much speculation about whether the peace talks with the Taliban could end 40 years of conflict in Afghanistan. The shuttle diplomacy taking place in the region has all the major actors talking to each other and the Taliban with the exception of India. One European diplomat characterized the talks as “everyone is talking to everyone but the Afghan government,” which is to a large extent an accurate observation as the Taliban have vowed to reject any discussion involving President Ashraf Ghani’s government. Six rounds of talks between the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban have taken place in Qatar, with a seventh due to take place at the end of June 2019. A consistent position the Taliban have maintained in these engagements is their rejection of direct talks with the Afghan government. The absence of the Afghan government in the negotiations is troublesome itself as no peace deal is likely to hold without the backing of the elected government. An Afghan diplomat who spoke on the condition of anonymity made the point, “When has the losing side [U.S.] ever secured favorable terms in a peace deal? Never.” The diplomat underscored that the broad framework of the peace talks is flawed because it presents the Afghan government, Afghans security forces, and Afghan citizens who are opposed to Taliban terrorism as warmongers, adding, “when did fighting terrorism become an unworthy fight?”

There is also considerable debate about the Taliban’s so-called concession of distancing itself from al-Qaeda and whether it would deny territory to all terrorist groups and stop them from using Afghanistan as a launchpad for terrorist attacks. The problem with this “concession” as well as believing that the Taliban’s idea of peace is equivalent to those of the negotiators’ is threefold: (1) there is nothing that says that the Taliban would deny *all* Islamist extremist groups from operating on Afghan soil; (2) the U.S. has signaled that it sees the Taliban as the decider of Afghanistan’s future and hence has abdicated its responsibility for securing the continuity of the Afghan state in its current form; and (3) it demonstrates the U.S. capitulating to a terrorist organization which would only serve to embolden extremist groups worldwide.

Overall, the entry of the Taliban into the Afghan political system poses an existential challenge for the Afghan government in that it will fundamentally and irreversibly alter the nature of the state.

**Preparing the Ground for the Taliban’s Return.** Americans will not be the ones sharing or living the peace with the Taliban, but Afghans will and so will the region. Any negotiated agreement that returns the Taliban to power irrespective of its political design is likely to be contingent on the withdrawal of American and international security forces from Afghanistan. This withdrawal is certain to happen unless the Taliban reneges on one of their central objectives that seeks the removal of U.S.-led international forces and instead sanctions the basing of foreign forces in the country. The notion of an American withdrawal and a Taliban comeback in any form has Afghanistan’s immediate and near neighbors scrambling to protect their positions, secure their interests, and find stakeholders (local and international) that they can work with to retain their spheres of influence. Afghanistan’s neighbors are cognizant that the folding of the American security umbrella over Afghanistan will create a political and military vacuum that is likely to heighten competition among certain regional rivals such as India and Pakistan as well as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Although these states have competed for influence in Afghanistan, each has done so differently and for distinct political objectives. Similarly, Russia, China, and some of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are looking to cultivate ties with the Taliban or with other regional states and local actors in Afghanistan to safeguard their standing as America begins its retreat.

States that once opposed the Taliban are open to working with them. Russia and Iran, which previously supported the erstwhile Northern Alliance along with India and Tajikistan in their joint efforts to counter the Taliban, are two such states that have changed their positions. The shift in the calculi of Moscow and Tehran is a propaganda coup for the Taliban’s leadership, but this change is predicated more on strategic considerations than a change of heart.

Russian and Iranian governments are concerned about the rise of Sunni violent extremism in their countries and in particular the threat posed by the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) or *Wilayat* Khorasan that established itself in eastern Afghanistan in 2014. Consequently, Moscow and Tehran consider it practical to develop friendly relations with the Taliban for two primary reasons based on the changing political and security landscape. First, the Taliban are opposed to ISKP and are engaged in offensive operations against this group. Incidentally, the Taliban’s targeting of ISKP have complemented the U.S.-led counter-terrorism strategy against ISKP.<sup>3</sup> Second, Russia and Iran appear to have calculated that by offering the Taliban political access and treating them as an equal would translate into goodwill which they could bank on when the time comes. Moreover, both seem to have determined that it is better to establish ties with the Taliban when they have the upper hand, particularly as the insurgent group is still vying for legitimacy. However, the danger of backing the Taliban at the cost of the Afghan government is that all and any commitments they make during this period are reversible.

The Taliban’s quest for regaining power dovetails with Pakistan’s aim of seeking a regime of its choice in Kabul. Their positions stand apart from the objectives of the regional actors who support the status quo. Revisionist or anti-status quo actors that define their security requirements in absolute terms are neither security seekers nor power seekers. Instead, they fit

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<sup>3</sup>Paul Lushenko, Lance Van Auken, and Garrett Stebbins, “ISIS-K: Deadly Nuisance or Strategic Threat?,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2019), pp. 265–278.

Charles L. Glaser's description of "greedy" actors who have non-security goals and pursue revisionist policies motivated by greed, power, ideology, expansionism, and subversion to overturn the status quo fundamentally.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Afghanistan faces dual challenges of having to deal with varying gradations of benign and malign actors that also project their strategic competitions into its territory. What this demonstrates is that Afghanistan faces multiple interlocking security challenges that are transnational in character.

**Kabul's Desire to Engineer a Regional Safety Net under the Taliban's Shadow.** Since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in late 2001, Afghanistan has sought to address the region's tensions via the cultivation of a regional political framework designed to knit the region together, but its efforts have shown little success. Moreover, Kabul's push to energize its existing institutional memberships and the formation of new regional contact groups demonstrates its desire to craft a safety net for the country as the U.S.-led coalition disengages from its longest war. As Kabul pursues its regional and international diplomatic engagements for regional cooperation, an analysis of the primary objectives of Afghanistan's principal stakeholders will highlight as to why initiatives like the Heart of Asia/Istanbul Process are unlikely to gain traction.

The Taliban have always been clear about what they want, total power and not shared power. From their first emir, Mullah Mohammad Omar, to current leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's leadership has been candid about its aims: monopolizing power, driving out international military forces, dissolving Afghanistan's security apparatus, and implementing a literalist version of Islamic rule across the country.<sup>5</sup> Taken as a whole, the Taliban's end goal is absolute state power, a point that Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, a leading member of the Taliban negotiations team in Qatar, underscored in an interview.<sup>6</sup>

The Taliban have demonstrated ad infinitum their aims are non-negotiable in the nearly two-decade-long insurgency. A Taliban attack on the USAID-funded nongovernmental organization, Counterpart International, in Kabul on May 8, 2019, for promoting "open inter-mixing" between men and women underscores this point. It is a misconception that the Taliban have softened their ideology when their trail of violence is brought into perspective. Take these attacks for instance: killing more than 50 National Directorate of Security recruits at a training facility in the city of Maidan Shahr (about 50 kilometers from Kabul) in January 2019; attacking the Inter-Continental Hotel in Kabul that killed more than three dozen civilians in January 2018; bombing the American University of Afghanistan in August 2016; overrunning Kunduz in September 2015 and holding it for two weeks; and capturing several districts in Helmand since mid-2015.

The Taliban's violence strongly indicate that the goals of the core leadership are fixed. Moreover, there is nothing to suggest empirically that the Taliban's core leadership or rank and file can somehow be disarmed, demobilized, and reintegrated into the Afghan political

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<sup>4</sup>Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Oct 1997), pp. 171–201.

<sup>5</sup>"Statement of Islamic Emirate Regarding Inauguration of Al-Fath Jihadi Operations," *Voice of Jihad*, April 12, 2019, <http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=44375> (accessed October 8, 2019); "Complete Transcript of Speech Delivered by Delegation of Islamic Emirate in Moscow Conference," *Voice of Jihad*, February 5, 2019, <http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=41268> (accessed October 8, 2019); "Muslimiyar Denounces Taliban Reps Remark on Afghan Army Dissolution," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2019/02/01/muslimiyar-denounces-taliban-reps-remark-afghan-army-dissolution> (accessed October 8, 2019).

<sup>6</sup>Interview with head of Taliban negotiation in Qatar Sher M. Abbas Stanekzai with NunnAsia.Com, published on January 29, 2019, <https://youtu.be/X1-lxVfZjFM> (accessed on October 8, 2019).

mainstream without them regaining significant coercive power. So long as the Taliban champion the violent transformation of a society in pursuit of total power and view all negotiations as a zero-sum game, they fit Glaser's description of a greedy and revisionist actor. Unfortunately for Kabul, until the Pakistani military decides to stop backing such malign actors, they cannot be accommodated or forced into any compromise.

For Pakistan, the Taliban represents a strategic actor that enables its military to pursue their common revisionist agendas in Afghanistan. Although some change in rhetoric has manifested after Imran Khan took power, such as public statements about building trust, to this date there is no clear sign of any practical step being taken that would indicate a significant shift in Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan or its support for the Taliban.

Pakistan's goal in Afghanistan is to weaken or to disband the current Afghan government. This was made clear by Prime Minister Khan when in a media interview he stated, "The Afghan government was a hurdle in [the] peace process that was insisting the Taliban should talk to it."<sup>7</sup> This statement underscores Pakistan's consistent position relating to what it has been seeking in Afghanistan, a weak and pliant government of its choice, and provides an insight into Islamabad's three primary goals that it aspires to achieve across the Durand Line.

First, Kabul must not be hostile towards Pakistan and should not allow its territory to be used to undermine Pakistan's interests. Official statements from Pakistan commonly disguise this goal by remarking that the country wants a "friendly government" in Afghanistan, but this usually means "friendly to them" but "hostile to their adversaries." Second, the Afghan government should ensure adequate Pashtun representation. By supporting the call for an ethnically Pashtun regime in Kabul, Pakistan seeks an ideologically driven setup, meaning the Taliban, as opposed to a nationalistic regime, to curtail an irredentist threat arising from Afghanistan's non-recognition of the Durand Line. Third, India's engagement and influence should be limited in Afghanistan. However, this goal constricts Afghanistan's ability to have control over its sovereign affairs. Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan reveal that its strategic orientation does not have benign characteristics given that it seeks the partial or full surrender of its neighbor's sovereignty.

New Delhi looks at Afghanistan from a regional perspective and supports an Afghanistan that is capable of making its decisions. It is thus unsurprising that New Delhi's goals are fundamentally opposite to Pakistan's objectives and favor the elected government of President Ghani.

The main objectives for India in Afghanistan are fourfold. First, restraining and, if possible, reversing the surge of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan and the region. New Delhi favors the permanent marginalization or ruin of groups like the Taliban as they pose a threat to India and its overseas interests. This concern is predictable as General Pervez Musharraf, the then-Pakistani army chief, told a group of retired military officers in 1999, "Taliban are my strategic reserve and I can unleash them in tens of thousands against India when I want."<sup>8</sup> Second, helping to establish an independent, plural, inclusive, peaceful, and secure Afghanistan that can govern itself free from external interference. Third, building closer relations with Kabul

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<sup>7</sup>"Afghanistan Recalls Envoy in Row Over Pakistani PM's 'Irresponsible' Remarks," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-recalls-envoy-pakistan-imran-khan-irresponsible-remarks/29843544.html> (accessed October 8, 2019).

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Hassan Abbas, *The Taliban Revival: Violence and Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 96.



and the region on trade, transit, and energy as exemplified by the 215-km-long Zaranj-Delaram Highway, which links to an Iranian highway and connects to the Iranian port of Chabahar. This route is strategically significant as it lessens Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistani ports and allows India to skirt around Pakistan to access Afghanistan and the CARs. Fourth, promoting enduring engagement to ensure the international community does not abandon Afghanistan again. Furthermore, the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between India and Afghanistan, which was Kabul's first in October 2011, underscores the convergence of their interests. As a demonstration of its ongoing commitment to Afghanistan, India is Afghanistan's largest regional donor and has committed over \$3 billion in capacity-building aid, and also delivered its first shipment of offensive armaments, four Mi-25 helicopter gunships, to Kabul in 2018.

Like the India–Afghanistan SPA, Iran and Afghanistan signed an SPA in August 2013 that explicitly singles out India and Russia for closer cooperation due to a convergence of historic interests. However, as mentioned earlier, Iranian and Russian direct engagement with the Taliban has largely meant that the original rationale behind Iran's SPA is no longer the case. Although questions remain about how much of the agreement's text is still alive and operational, Tehran is unlikely to allow it to collapse entirely as it remains an access point through which to have sway over and knowledge into the Afghan government's thinking about the Taliban and its next moves. Despite Iran's engagement with the Taliban, it is still wary of their return as it remains unconvinced that the Taliban have detached themselves from their anti-Shia stance. Tehran remains cognizant of the risk the Taliban pose, but they are willing to seek an accommodation with them primarily in the context of a hostile U.S. policy under President Donald Trump which has ended the Iran-nuclear deal, and an aggressive coterie of Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Sultan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain. Given the regional context, Iran is seeking to close a deal with the Taliban while it is in a relatively weaker position and before resource-rich Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain persuade the Taliban to abandon Tehran in their favor.

Keeping in mind the regional dynamics, Iran's goals in Afghanistan are threefold. First, preventing the return of an anti-Shia regime. A key reason why Tehran is concerned about a Taliban comeback is primarily due to their anti-Shia orientation. For example, Taliban fighters massacred thousands of Hazaras (a Shia ethnic minority) in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998 and killed nine Iranian diplomats posted to their consulate in the same city that same year. Second, denying the space for anti-Shia and anti-Iranian groups like Jundullah and Jaish al-Adl, Sunni secessionist groups based in Pakistan, which Tehran alleges receives official support from Riyadh and Islamabad. This concern was made evident when Jaish al-Adl claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing that killed 27 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps members on February 13, 2019. Iran's parliamentary speaker, Ali Larijani, issued a strongly worded statement that the Pakistani government should be held to account for the terrorist attack, "The Pakistani government should be accountable for this act involving the group orchestrating and conducting the operation from their territory."<sup>9</sup> Third, promoting economic, transit, and energy linkages across the region, which would benefit Afghanistan and raise its economic well-being so that it can curb foreign influence, particularly in the form of Saudi Arabia's ability to project its ideologically laden economic interests in Afghanistan. Given the strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the latter's recognition of the Taliban regime (along with Pakistan and the UAE), Tehran remains watchful of Riyadh's activities in

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<sup>9</sup>"Iran Summons Pakistan's Envoy to Protest Deadly Suicide Attack," *Al Jazeera*, February 17, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/iran-summons-pakistan-envoy-protest-deadly-suicide-attack-190217103658280.html> (accessed October 8, 2019).

Afghanistan and has no interest in seeing Afghanistan turn into a “failed” entity again.

Saudi Arabia’s enmity with Iran and its warm relations with Pakistan, which protects the House of Saud, influence its engagement with Kabul. At the same time, Riyadh is dependent on the U.S. for its security, which allows it to have substantial weight and confidence in its competition with Iran. Riyadh’s strategic weight gained a fillip following the arrival of President Trump who terminated President Obama’s nuclear agreement with Tehran and re-imposed economic sanctions that had been lifted. Both of these moves under Obama deeply angered the Saudis and to them signaled America’s abdication of responsibility towards its allies. Riyadh feared that as Obama’s policies gained traction and as the international community lifted the sanctions imposed on Iran, Tehran would be able to pursue its regional ambitions more vigorously which is a cost the Saudis are unwilling to tolerate. The Saudis also feared that American cooperation with Iran on its nuclear program had the potential to open possibilities for cooperation in other matters, namely in countering Sunni-inspired violent extremism, which Saudi Arabia has championed in pursuit of its regional ambitions.

The leadership change in the White House and Riyadh, however, changed the Kingdom’s calculi and gave it the greenlight to pursue its regional strategy more vigorously. The anointment of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman has replaced the previous cautious diplomatic stance of previous Saudi leaders within the royal family with a more muscular approach. Crown Prince Salman’s policy of intervention via his decision to intervene in Yemen, blockading Qatar, detaining Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, arresting business leaders and political elites in Riyadh, imprisoning and torturing women and rights activists, and the killing of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Kashoggi demonstrates that the Saudi government is least interested in regional cooperation due to its strategic competition with Iran. It is thus unsurprising that Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy towards Afghanistan falls into a wider context of regional and strategic considerations that are primarily Iran-centric. Riyadh has three strategic identifiable aims relating to Afghanistan. First, limiting Iran’s influence in Afghanistan to spoil its regional aspirations. Second, as one of three countries to have recognized the Taliban regime, Riyadh still looks at the Taliban as a legitimate political actor, despite having its hands burnt over the latter’s refusal to surrender Osama bin Laden. The Taliban’s literalist reading and practice of Islam was of little issue for Saudi Arabia given their ideological congruence and mutual antipathy for adherents of Shi’ism. Third, providing Afghanistan with humanitarian, reconstruction, and infrastructure aid to advance its strategic influence and ideological Salafist worldview to counter Iran’s sway in the country. Riyadh’s support for anti-Shia groups and anti-Shia rhetoric contravenes Kabul’s objectives for inclusivity and pluralism. What this demonstrates is that the Saudis have a destabilizing effect on Afghanistan owing to their revisionist orientation towards Iran.

In sum, the presence of deeply entrenched, multiple-interlocking competitions and rivalries amongst Afghanistan’s stakeholders militates against the prospect for regional cooperation. The most pressing problem stems from Pakistan’s revisionist agenda which overwhelms regional actors’ mutual equities. Pakistan’s persistent effort to seek a regime of its choice in Kabul reflects it is pursuing goals that have less to do with security and more to do with being a greedy actor. Consequently, it is natural for Kabul to resist the usurpation of its sovereignty by a hostile neighbor and to use regional diplomacy to prevent a strategic relapse. However, due to the prevalence of the strategic rivalries discussed above, regional diplomacy per se is unlikely to have the capacity to engineer a regional political solution, but perhaps able to fashion regional economic cooperation as that is relatively a less politically charged matter.

## **Recommendations**

Below are some key recommendations proposed:

**Preserving the Current Political Order (Nizaam).** Recognizing that the existing political order has its faults and shortcomings, similar to many others across the world, however, putting change in the political system on the peace table is not only destabilizing the existing political system further, but it also can have serious aftermaths knowing the nature of ideological thinking behind the Taliban and their sponsors. It is acknowledged that maintaining the current political order may be costly and it has to be rethought in light of a self-reliance strategy on which there has been some efforts in the recent years. No doubt, reform and improvement are required to make this system stronger, more inclusive, and accountable, but toppling it is not an option.

**Supporting a Responsible Withdrawal of International Military.** History is too fresh in the Afghan minds to be allowed to be repeated again on complete withdrawal of international troops immediately. Afghanistan as a nation is envisioning a self-reliant future defined in phases. The presence of international forces in Afghanistan is not a favor to the Afghan people specifically, but it is to level the playing field between Afghanistan and its immediate and broader regional neighbors and global actors involved. With India and Pakistan conflicts, Pakistan and the U.S. issues, and Saudi and Iran conflicts, Afghanistan is in need of a guarantor who can ensure that with the withdrawal of international forces, the country will not be trapped into a front line for multiple conflicts finding an open and easy ground over the Afghan people and territory.

**Supporting Further Investment on the New Generation of Afghanistan (Women and Youth, Especially).** The history of Afghan women's struggle for their rights could not be simply seen through the lens of post-2001 context alone in which massive funding and support have enabled women and girls to get back to their public life as students, teachers, laborers, and, indeed, as strong leaders in their community—at the national level or globally, representing their country in politics, business, sports, and cultural activities. Youth representing over 65 percent of the population (half of which are also female) are a critical catalyst for the future of a stable and prosperous Afghanistan. Inclusivity is key to stability and the country should move beyond hostage takers of ethnic and political identities. If Afghan elites really care about a majority of ordinary Afghan killings, it is about time for them to unite under one flag and constitution and invest in the new generation of their country.

**Supporting the Principles of Constitutional Reform and Amendments.** The 2004 constitution is based on the pre-war (1964) constitutional fundamentals, and as a result of a broad consultation process across the country and not simply owned by any political party, group, or government. Preserving the values, legal framework, and obligations in this constitution is the job of each and every Afghan. Any change or amendment of the constitution should be based on principles of preserving fundamental human rights and in line with its articles 149 and 150.

**Supporting Regional Economic Cooperation and Connectivity.** As this paper discussed, the presence of multiple interlocking competitions and rivalries amongst Afghanistan's immediate and broader neighbors, and partners and the uncompromising nature of the conflict between those countries (unrelated to Afghanistan), cannot leave a safe and feasible space for a real lasting regional solution. The goal at the regional level should at this stage aim at stopping the bloodshed and violent conflict rather than resolving the conflict matters. Hence, it is

recommended, especially for the Quad countries, to focus on strengthening Afghanistan's position in regional economic cooperation schemes and connectivity which can in the longer run also reduce the financial dependency of Afghanistan's state and institution building.