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[Home](#) > Reconciliation Process in Afghanistan: Will it Work?

Reconciliation Process in Afghanistan: Will it Work?

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Pakistan's recent efforts through its foreign minister Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi visit to Afghanistan to convince Afghan Government about Pakistan's efforts to bring lasting peace and to play a constructive role in negotiating a reconciliation process in Afghanistan is more a farce and is far from reality. Pakistan is not going change its ways despite warnings from US even after the recent visit of Mike Pompeo. This is clear to those in India and even in Afghanistan, but does not appear to be so to those in United States.

During US secretary of state Mike Pompeo's recent visit to Islamabad, the demands of the US included-

1. Decisive action against the terror group- the Haqqani network.
2. Pakistan to press Afghan Taliban to go for negotiations.
3. Pakistan needs to do more against terror groups and designated individuals like Lashkar, Hizbul, Jaish and Hafiz Saeed, Syed Salahuddin etc.
4. Release Dr. Shakil Afridi from custody.

Of these, Pakistan appears to have pushed Taliban to negotiate with US on a limited objective relating to exchange of prisoners. This suits Taliban -as compared to a few Afghan soldiers in their custody, a large number of Taliban prisoners are in the custody of US/Afghanistan. It remains to be seen how the US is going to react to it. Besides a large number of Taliban Prisoners, the most important catch is that of the Anas Haqqani, the youngest son of Haqqani with the US. In a way the demand is – Release Anas or else there will be no further talks! This demand looks to be on the instructions of ISI!.

The US is yet to confirm the schedule for the talks as well as on the demand on exchange of prisoners- especially Anas Haqqani. The US is well aware that whole sale release of Taliban prisoners will only worsen the current situation and therefore is not likely to accept the demands. This suits Pakistan too as Pakistan is not likely to give in to US demands and cooperate in bringing peace to Afghanistan.

In this context, what is to be understood is that in Pakistan though the Government has changed but not the masters. The Power centre was and will continue to be in the hands of Pakistan Army and its ISI. One good recent example will suffice. When one of the senior leaders of the establishment complained about the Chinese companies and some Lahore Lobby benefitting on the CPEC corridor, leaving the traditional industrial lobby of Karachi in lurch, it was the Chief of Army who was briefed by the Chinese Ambassador soon after, clarifying the Chinese position!

As I had mentioned in my earlier paper in SAAG "<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/2338> [1]" unless Pakistan is able to make progress in the six points made earlier there is no likelihood of Taliban coming for any credible negotiation or stop Pakistan from supporting the Taliban. The visit of the Pakistan's Foreign Minister as mentioned in the beginning of this paper is not meant to solve the issue but to make an assessment of the developments in Afghanistan and the presence of US Forces aiding Afghanistan.

The six point agenda of Pakistan, as is known is as follows.

1. A pro Pakistan government in Kabul.
2. To reduce Indian influence if it cannot be eliminated
3. Afghanistan to eventually serve Pakistan's economic interests.
4. Some way to make The Durand Line acceptable to the Government in power in Afghanistan.
5. To deal better with the Secessionist movement of Balochistan and prevent Afghanistan not providing shelter to Baluchistan insurgents.
6. To prevent any consolidation of moves for a greater 'Pashtunistan'

In the visit of US delegation led by Secretary of State, Pakistan got what it wanted in getting an assurance from Pompeo that US will not stand in the way of an IMF bail -out though on another occasion he had warned that the US would ensure tightened conditions for the bailout from the IMF.

Interestingly, the Prime Minister of Pakistan admitted in his 6th September speech at the Defence day event and blamed outsiders for

creating a Jihadi force and later they were to be hunted as terrorists.. The wording from the one of his tweets of Prime Minister Imran Khan confirmed his view that “Lesson to be learnt by us is never to be used by others for short term paltry financial benefits ever again. Our society became radicalised and polarised as we helped CIA create jihadi groups; then, a decade later, we tried to eliminate them as terrorists.”

The problem is that many US presidents in the past have tried to wean away Pakistan from supporting the terrorists and have not succeeded. Nether the carrots nor the sticks have worked. It remains to be seen how Trump is going to tackle Pakistan as it should be clear by now that the problem of Afghanistan lies in Pakistan and not elsewhere and unless this is sorted out there could be no peace in Afghanistan

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Tags:

[Pak-Afghanistan](#) [3]

[US](#) [4]

Category:

[Papers](#) [5]

Countries:

[United States](#) [6]

[Pakistan](#) [7]

[Afganistan](#) [8]

Topics:

[Strategic Affairs & Security](#) [9]

[Political](#) [10]

[Economy](#) [11]

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- [3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1950>
- [4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/104>
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- [6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/united-states>
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- [10] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/political>
- [11] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/economy>