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**LESSONS LEARNED FROM
THE INTRA-AFGHAN PEACE
NEGOTIATIONS OF THE 1980s AND 1990s**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
<hr/>	
PDPA GOVERNMENTS AND THE MUJAHEDIN FACTIONS	4
Parallels	6
Divergence	7
Failures for peaceful transition of power	9
The role of regional and international actors	12
The role of mediators, monitoring and implementation mechanisms	12
<hr/>	
LESSONS LEARNED FROM PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AMONG VARIOUS MUJAHEDIN FACTIONS	14
Political disputes and failures of accords and ceasefires	14
What compromises were made by parties to the conflict?	16
The role of mediators and backchannels	16
<hr/>	
LESSONS LEARNED FROM PEACE NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE MUJAHEDIN FACTIONS AND THE TALIBAN	17
Political Disagreements	18
Failures of negotiations	19
The role of regional and international actors	20
<hr/>	
CONCLUSIONS	21
<hr/>	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	22

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study is to identify the gaps, strengths and weaknesses of previous intra-Afghan negotiations and to provide analysis that informs the practice and policy relevant to present intra-Afghan peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Using literature review and in-depth interviews with former officials who participated in past intra-Afghan peace negotiations, this paper presents lessons learned from past intra-Afghan peace negotiations, which occurred in the 1980s, 1990s and up to 2001. These negotiations primarily involved prominent political groups in Afghanistan and focus on three periods of negotiations, including those between (1) the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) Government and the Mujahedin factions; (2) among the various Mujahedin factions which succeeded the last PDPA Government of Dr. Najibullah; and (3) between the Taliban and the Mujahedin factions.

PDPA GOVERNMENTS AND THE MUJAHEDIN FACTIONS

Under the PDPA, for the first time, a non-violent, political solution was proposed by the then-president Babrak Karmal on May 14th 1980. In his statement, he proposed a bilateral agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which then harbored the various anti-government Mujahedin groups, in order to normalize relations between the two countries. This statement was the first public step toward a political solution in the four decades of conflict and provided ample grounds for subsequent peacemaking efforts.

Nevertheless, during the time of the PDPA governments, there were very few opportunities for intra-Afghan negotiations. This was largely due to distrust between both sides and hesitation on the part of the Mujahedin side to be seen to confer legitimacy or recognition to the PDPA by negotiating with the Karmal Government. The first exception occurred in the early years of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan when the Soviets negotiated a truce in the Panjsher Valley with a prominent commander of Mujahedin, Ahmad Shah Massud, in February 1983. The deal effectively resulted in a one year ceasefire as Massud reportedly rejected direct talks with Karmal's government and the extension of the ceasefire for another year.¹

In August 1984, the UN kicked off the first round of talks between representatives of the Afghan and Pakistani governments in Palais des Nations in Geneva.² Subsequently, in November 1985 Karmal's government made another proposal called the ten-point reconciliation program, an initiative suggested by the Soviet Union. The program entailed the return of refugees, agreement on a political compromise, and broadening the base of the government. As a token of change,

Karmal appointed to the government a non-Communist deputy prime minister and twelve non-Communist ministers, deputy ministers, and advisors.³ The ten-point reconciliation program under Karmal accomplished little and was largely handicapped by lack of visible progress in the ongoing Geneva negotiations.

¹ Imtiaz H. Bokhari, "Evolution of a Dual Negotiation Process: Afghanistan," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 518 (1991): 60.

² Amin Saikal and William Maley, *Regime Change in Afghanistan: Foreign Intervention and the Politics of Legitimacy*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2019), 95.

In those negotiations Pakistan refused to recognize the government of the PDPA and rejected Karmal's demand for direct talks which were viewed as an attempt to legitimize the PDPA government. Karmal's insistence on direct talks with Pakistan and his resistance to Soviet troop withdrawal resulted in a decision to remove him from the posts of General Secretary of the PDPA and President of Afghanistan.

Karmal was replaced on May 4, 1986 under pressure from Moscow by Dr. Mohammad Najibullah Akhmadzai, who was expected to be more flexible than his predecessor in the peace negotiations.⁴ Dr. Najibullah developed the initiative of reconciliation further and labeled it *Ashti-ye melli* (National Reconciliation).⁵ The pursuit of National Reconciliation played a key role in prolonging the lifetime of Dr. Najibullah's government after the Soviet withdrawal.⁶ In doing so, he adopted various strategies of reconciliation such as subjugation and co-option. In the last years of his government, he leaned toward accommodation – another strategy that required his government to display more flexibility and give way to the participation of all political forces. In terms of political accommodation, one landmark event was the convening of the *loya jirga* on November 29, 1987 in Kabul, which made amendments favorable for political change and offered concessions to the armed opposition groups, as described by Heela Najibullah:

“At the *loya jirga*, concessions were offered to the opposition for implementation of the [National Reconciliation Policy] NRP. First of all, the Mujahedin groups were called opposition groups. As a sign of goodwill and building trust, opposition leaders who were sentenced to death were given amnesty and political prisoners were freed. Other measures to demonstrate the commitment of the government to NRP included the following:

- Extension of the ceasefire by another six months provided the opposition refrain from ‘combat activities’
- Inclusion of all political forces who desired peace and were willing to cooperate with the government
- Initiation of dialogue to explore ways to arrive at a national agreement on a peaceful solution
- Formation of a coalition/ broad-based government with local administration
- Organization of free, fair and democratic elections to the National Assembly
- Provision of assistance to, and protection for, returnees.”⁷

Most of these measures did not materialize and were plagued by dispute. The Mujahedin factions rejected the ceasefire and, equally damaging, the government did little to broaden its political base. In many ways, the process of peace making at the time resonates with patterns in the present peace process, discussed below.

One last attempt at an intra-Afghan negotiation between the delegation of Dr. Najibullah and Hezb-e Islami in 1989 was facilitated by Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat. The talks were covert and there was no subsequent media release,⁸ “...I participated in the negotiations in Iraq, Libya, Iraq, and Tunis that were facilitated by

³Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 203.

⁴Cordovez and Harrison, 203-5.

⁵Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, 18.

⁶Semple, 16.

⁷Heela Najibullah, *Reconciliation and Social Healing in Afghanistan: A Transrational and Elicitive Analysis Towards Transformation*, Masters of Peace (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017), 91, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-16931-2>.

⁸Bokhari, 61.

Saddam [Hussain], [Muammar] Qaddafi, and [Yasser] Arafat, and from the PDPA side there were Sulaiman Layeq, Yaqubi, Watanjar, and Kawyani,” recalled a senior negotiator of Hezb. With these exceptions, there were no other intra-Afghan negotiations between the two sides. According to a senior member from the Mujahedin factions, “Najibullah offered talks with Mujahedin, but Mujahedin refused to talk.”

Parallels

One of the similarities to be drawn is between the institutions involved in the peace making in Dr. Najibullah’s time with the institutions involved in today’s efforts. For example, when Dr. Najibullah’s government launched the National Reconciliation Program (NRP) in 1986⁹, it was associated with a National Reconciliation Commission which has some similarities with today’s High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR). However, there is an important difference; the NRP brought on Abdul Rahim Hatif, a former MP with no affiliation to the PDPA as the Chairman of the Commission.¹⁰ Today Dr. Abdullah, Chair of the HCNR, is a key leader in the government.

After declaring the program of national reconciliation, Dr. Najibullah proposed a ceasefire aimed at persuading the Mujahedin to lay down their arms. The Mujahedin refused, and insisted on waiting until the full withdrawal of Soviet troops.¹¹ This pattern of unilateral ceasefire offers by the government being rejected by the armed opposition groups is familiar; the Taliban have shown reluctance to accept a ceasefire and have doubled down with attacks and targeted assassinations despite frequent requests for a ceasefire or reduction in violence made by Afghan and international stakeholders and the Afghan people. Thus, in both examples, the government sides exercise less control over ceasefires, while armed opposition groups have been able to use their refusal to agree to a ceasefire as a means to pressure the governments for more concessions.¹²

A senior former PDPA official noted, “The first similarity is that both superpowers concluded that they cannot defeat the enemy and dominate the region through allied Afghan regimes; second is the [their own] domestic discontent that caused both superpowers to focus somewhere else; third the “boots on the ground” will not be a viable policy, [saying] let’s leave but try to preserve the gains [i.e. you cannot preserve gains without occupation]; fourth, the Americans have replicated the Soviet strategy of establishing clandestine links with the opposite side to simply enable intra-Afghan negotiations and then leave.”

⁹Shubhangi Pandey, “Exploring the Prospects for a Negotiated Political Settlement with the Taliban: Afghanistan’s Long Road to Peace,” ORF, 4, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/exploring-the-prospects-for-a-negotiated-political-settlement-with-the-taliban-afghanistans-long-road-to-peace-48411/>.

¹⁰Heela Najibullah, “President Najibullah and the National Reconciliation Policy | Conciliation Resources,” June 2018, <https://www.c-r.org/accord/afghanistan/president-najibullah-and-national-reconciliation-policy>.

¹¹Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, Second Edition, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 172.

¹²Sharif Amiry, “Taliban Attacks Span 24 Provinces in Past 24 Hours: MoD,” TOLONews, October 22, 2020, /afghanistan-167244.

Divergence

Key differences are found in the current talks. The Taliban have benefitted remarkably from the recognition granted in signing the February 29 agreement (the Doha Agreement) with the US Government. They went from being treated as a terrorist group to designation as a political opposition entitled to negotiate a power sharing agreement with an elected, internationally-recognized government. In contrast, during the Geneva peace negotiations, the Mujahedin were not granted the role of a negotiating party. Instead the talks were between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan with the mediation of the United Nations. Another difference, is the seeming convergence of US interests with those of the Taliban. According to the Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban, the Taliban are expected as a military group to prevent Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups from operating in Afghanistan after the US exit. “Americans negotiated directly with the group that they fought, unlike the Russians who became a mediator in the negotiations and declared the withdrawal,” stated a former senior PDPA official.

The Soviet Union made no attempt at an alliance with the Mujahedin nor did it seek any commitments for the period of time after their withdrawal.¹³ There is irony in the present situation in which the US Government is treating the Taliban, their former enemy of two decades duration and a designated terrorist entity, as an ally that is expected to support counterterrorism.

Another major divergence in the two negotiating scenarios is the nature of patron-client relations during the era of the Soviet Union and that of the US and its allies. The Soviet Union defended a client regime with military intervention but largely devoid of democratic process, while the US supports a government in Kabul whose legitimacy is based on elections and elected institutions. When seeking to withdraw its troops, Soviet authorities did not hesitate to remove any political obstacles in order to arrive at an agreement and achieve “face-saving,” such as replacing the PDPA President Karmal with Dr. Najibullah, whom the Soviets regarded as more malleable.¹⁴

In contrast, in the relationship between the US and Afghan Governments, Afghan self-determination is cited as the shared goal. The US has respected the sovereignty of Afghanistan except as seen in its actions after the 2014 and 2019 elections, which are widely perceived by the Afghan public as a sign of US interference in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan.

It remains to be seen how US actions with respect to the Doha negotiations and troop withdrawal will compare to those of the Soviet Union as parties to the negotiations confront difficult political obstacles. Will the US react like the Soviet Union and insist on the removal of perceived political obstacles to its plans? For example, President Ghani is seen by some to take increasingly rigid positions pertaining to the idea of an interim government. For the US, this may mean a delay in withdrawal and possibly a total failure of the talks. How will this affect relations between the US and the Republic? According to leaked documents, Washington has called on Ghani to “be ready to pay a price.”¹⁵ It remains to be seen how the US government will react if President Ghani is not seen as a cooperative partner and supportive of a political settlement.

¹³Saikal and Maley, *Regime Change In Afghanistan*, 100-101.

¹⁴Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 203-5.

¹⁵Lyse Doucet, “Afghanistan’s Ghani Sees ‘window of Opportunity’ for Peace Process - BBC News,” February 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56144795>.

A major distinction is the shift from supporting an insurgent movement to opposing another one in Afghanistan. When the Mujahedin fought the PDPA, they were perceived as ‘freedom fighters’ in the eyes of Americans and the Western bloc in general, and in the context of the Cold War era, it was a justified war for a legitimate goal of liberating a country from the invasion of so-called “bloody communists.” In contrast, the Taliban “jihad” against the Republic has never been justified in any terms similar to those concepts, and almost every country in the West looked at it through the lens of an extremist religious group fighting democratic values and a terrorist group that is a menace to international security; it was shifting a worldview from legitimization of one war to condemnation of another one. Thus, this conception has also spilled over on the table of negotiations both in the Geneva and Doha processes, which, “at that time, the whole world was with the Mujahedin and an advocate of removing the government of Najibullah, however, now the whole world is with the Afghan government, and against the Taliban,” stated a former senior military official from the PDPA. He also offers his views on what he notes as differences between the Soviet and US withdrawals, saying, “there was a conference in Boston in 2009, [and] I mentioned the differences between the two: first, when the Soviet troops came to the country, there was a standing government, however, when the US invaded the country, there was no functioning state, second, when the Soviets left Afghanistan, the country was celebrating, now the withdrawal of US is sad news for Afghan people, third, the withdrawal of the Soviet troops was clear and everyone knew that Soviets had completely left the country, but now, we don’t know how many of the US forces are left, totally unclear. After all, the Soviets submitted their military armaments to the government before leaving, in contrast, the American forces destroyed remaining military material and did not act as transparent[ly] as the Soviets did.”

Failures for peaceful transition of power

Part of the failure is attributed to the Geneva Accords, signed on 14 April, 1988. The accords were signed between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan with the US and the USSR acting as guarantors. However, the players on the ground were excluded; the Mujahedin factions were neither included in the negotiation process of the Geneva accords, nor did the accords mention how they would partake of the power sharing after the Soviet withdrawal.¹⁶ In effect, the problem was multi-dimensional and there were various actors aiming at total control.

The Americans assumed that once the Soviets left, their client regime in Kabul would immediately collapse. Thus, when a coalition government was proposed in the Geneva negotiations comprised of King Zahir Shah, a moderate Mujahedin, and a “legal modest role” for the PDPA, the Americans refused. The Reagan administration wanted a total replacement of the Kabul regime and to see a new government structure built from scratch.¹⁷ The Americans did not make a critical assessment of the possibility of such a scenario and particularly whether the Mujahedin factions, which had proven militarily resilient against the PDPA would be able to succeed politically in creating a new government.

Another bitter reality is that the Americans followed in the footsteps of Pakistan as far as creating a coalition government was concerned. The ISI rejected the Zahir Shah

¹⁶Pandey, “Exploring the Prospects for a Negotiated Political Settlement with the Taliban,” 4.

¹⁷Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 253.

option allegedly based on the traditional fear that the King would be sympathetic to the nationalist cause of Pashtuns living along the Durand line. In that view, when a top US official was asked about the Zahir Shah option, he replied, “the resistance is the only game in town, and you know how the ISI feels about Zahir Shah.”¹⁸ Likewise, the many Mujahedin factions opposed Zahir Shah. One member describes how they were divided on the Zahir Shah option: “Mojaddedi’s party, Gailani, and Mohammadi’s party were in favor of Zahir Shah to come back and take power in Afghanistan, but other Ikhwani parties disagreed.”

At that time, the US was focused on withdrawal, and the issue of a political settlement among Afghans was a secondary item. When the Soviets made the withdrawal contingent on a transitional settlement, the Americans resisted such linkage claiming that, “discussion of interim government arrangement [could go on] indefinitely but it is the completion of the withdrawal that’s important.”¹⁹ However, in retrospect a successful transitional agreement should have been prioritized over the withdrawal as it could have saved Afghanistan from a brutal civil war and the extremist Taliban rule that gradually turned the country into a global security threat, which led to yet another intervention by a superpower.

On the Pakistani side, the Afghan policy was to replace the PDPA with a ‘fundamentalist-dominated regime,’ which would be an ally to Islamabad. The protagonists of this view were the ISI of Pakistan and President Zia-ul-Haq. Arguably he had a lofty ideal – a pan-Islamic confederation of Pakistan and Afghanistan that would increase the influence of Pakistan in the region. The ISI was looking forward to the Shura of Mujahedin based in Peshawar as a shadow government to take over as soon as the PDPA collapsed. Even in the last hours leading up to signing the Geneva Accords the Pakistani ISI believed that the Mujahedin were capable of defeating the PDPA militarily and therefore believed that the Accords were not needed.²⁰ However, other institutions in Pakistan had contradictory views to ISI. For example, Pakistan’s Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yaqub were in favor of a neutral government comprised of the former King Zahir Shah, other neutral personalities, and moderate Mujahedin elements,²¹ a model which was close to the UN’s informal proposal.

Mohammad Hassan Sharq (who served for seven months as the Prime Minister of Afghanistan preceding the withdrawal of Soviet troops) recalled his meeting with Diego Cordovez, the UN diplomat who mediated the Geneva process from 1982 till 1988. Cordovez told Sharq that he had talked to thirty Afghan personalities with no political affiliation to any of the parties in the conflict. He believed that the Kabul government should be delivered to those thirty neutral personalities, which would pave the ground for the UN to conduct an election and lead to a legitimate government.²² This idea was accepted by Sharq and he campaigned for it on various occasions including in UN headquarters in New York and in an address to the Council on Foreign Relations. However, it bore no fruit and increased the suspicion of Dr. Najibullah, which finally led to his removal as Prime Minister.²³

Almost all parties to the conflict contributed to the failure of a peaceful transition of power in one way or another and Dr. Najibullah was not an exception. The PDPA leadership lacked the will to make concessions and voluntary changes. Dr. Najibullah was constantly subject to and acted under pressure from Moscow. On July 20, 1987, Gorbachev summoned a high

¹⁸Cordovez and Harrison, 256.

¹⁹Cordovez and Harrison, 254.

²⁰Said Reza Kazemi, “Peace and Power-Sharing Accords on Afghanistan: An Analysis and Implications for Ongoing Peace Efforts” (Bishkek, OSCE Academy, 2012), 20.

²¹Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 257-58.

²²Mohammad Hassan Sharq, *T'alol dar Mosaleh-e Mille (1367 -1371) wa A'wagebe Khonbare an dar Afghanistan (Delay in the National Reconciliation 1988-1992 and its Bloody Consequences in Afghanistan)* (Kabul: Rah-e Parcham Publication, 2020), 12, <https://bit.ly/3pH6R1k>.

²³Sharq, 24.

delegation of the PDPA to Moscow, and told Dr. Najibullah, “you had better be ready in twelve months because we will be going whether you are ready or not. You must strengthen your political base.”²⁴ One day later, Dr. Najibullah announced that he was relinquishing several cabinet posts while keeping key powerful ministries under the control of the PDPA. Under pressure, the *loya jirga* was convened to legalize political parties, although the PDPA retained its organizing and leading role pursuant to the constitution.²⁵

Dr. Najibullah agreed to give an honorific position to King Zahir Shah as the father of the nation, and under Soviet pressure, he agreed that the King would appoint the Prime Minister and the Interior Minister. The posts of Foreign and Finance Ministers would remain negotiable, however the Defense Ministry, state security Khad, and the Presidency would remain under the control of the PDPA. When the King was consulted on the proposal, he promptly rejected it.²⁶

The PDPA widely viewed the Peshawar-based Mujahedin as proxies of foreign countries. In a speech to a local audience in Kabul on March 3, 1988, one month before the conclusion of the Geneva Accords, Dr. Najibullah said, “our people will never agree to a government made somewhere else and exported to Afghanistan. This is illogical and unrealistic; have we ever exported such a thing?”²⁷ Likewise, the Mujahedin factions shared their views through Radio Peshawar. They argued that “Najib killed vast numbers of Afghan people while he was in Khad. As long as he is in power, the Mujahedin will not accept reconciliation and we will not cease to fight against this regime until its collapse.”²⁸

The Soviets had offered various proposals from the beginning and its position evolved gradually depending on the reactions from the US, Pakistan, and PDPA leadership. In mid-1986, Gorbachev called for the formation of an Afghan government supported by political forces living abroad. His proposal was rejected by the US and Pakistan; both countries emphasized the need for a political arrangement that is “acceptable to the Afghan Mujahedin.”²⁹ Having ceded the bargaining power to the Mujahedin, the US and Pakistan had less room to maneuver in response to the Soviet position. Some members of the Soviet Politburo proposed a government of national unity containing all political forces, where the PDPA would be given a minority role. This was soon rejected by the US, declaring that they opposed any arrangement shaped “around or under the leading role” of the PDPA. Some high ranking Pakistani officials argued that the Soviets had lost on the battlefield and now they wanted to win in the political realm.³⁰ However, other institutions in the Soviet Union, such as the Foreign Ministry and the KGB remained pragmatic. They believed that Dr. Najibullah’s government could survive only by giving away the “powerless ministries” to non-party elements and retaining the key posts in the PDPA grip.³¹

Among all informal proposals to the parties, a final one was made by UN mediator Cordovez for a transitional arrangement, which he cautioned was not to be “discussed at higher levels.” According to this proposal all the Mujahedin factions would attend a meeting in Geneva to agree on a power sharing accord. Based on this accord a “predominant role”

²⁴Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 250.

²⁵Cordovez and Harrison, 250.

²⁶Cordovez and Harrison, 251-52.

²⁷Afghan Historians, “the government of Afghanistan & Pakistan ...,” Twitter, 8:26pm, February 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/AfghanHistorian/status/1360981153621159944>.

²⁸Sharq, *T’alol dar Mosaleh-e Mille (1367 -1371) wa A’wagebe Khonbare an dar Afghanistan (Delay in the National Reconciliation 1988-1992 and its Bloody Consequences in Afghanistan)*, 72.

²⁹Bokhari, “Evolution of a Dual Negotiation Process,” 66.

³⁰Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 253.

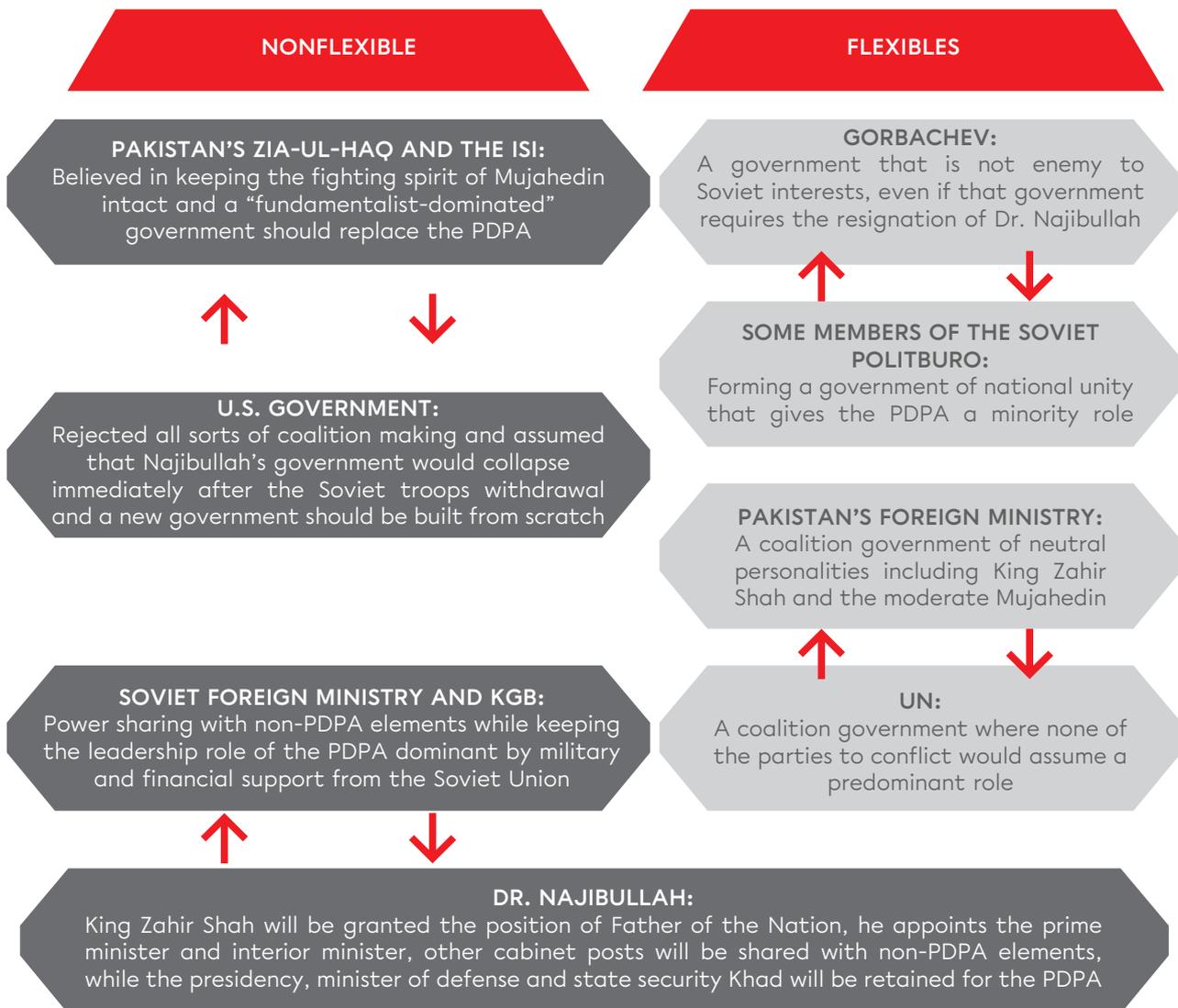
³¹Cordovez and Harrison, 249.



would not be given to any party to the conflict and Dr. Najibullah would not control the presidency and the armed forces – two positions of power that he resisted surrendering until the fall of his government.³² Unfortunately, no one seemed to be satisfied with this proposal either, and with that the energies of all parties including the UN were exhausted in terms of reaching a transitional arrangement.

In this environment of mistrust characterized by each party maximizing its gains and rejecting the proposals of others, Afghanistan was headed into another disastrous conflict. The failed peace negotiations during the 1980s between all four key players gave significance to the interests and concerns of foreign and regional powers while paying little attention to the implications for Afghanistan and the Afghan people.

Figure 1: How different stakeholders involved in the Geneva Accords saw a transitional settlement before the Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan: divided into two camps of flexible and nonflexible and the views are correlated based on their proximities



³²Cordovez and Harrison, 254.

The role of regional and international actors

A handful of countries and the UN had the most significant roles. First, Pakistan played a double role of negotiating on behalf of the Mujahedin and providing military and logistical support to them to undermine the Kabul regime. In pursuit of its second role it was vigorous to the extent that, “we had intelligence information that Pakistan wanted a silent coup to topple the PDPA government,” remarked a former PDPA official. The US was primarily focused on Soviet troop withdrawal and relied on Pakistan’s Afghan policy to determine the transitional arrangements.

Regarding the role of other regional countries, a former PDPA official noted, “Iran actively took the side of Pakistan until they found that they supported hardline Sunni groups, however for the purpose of getting out the Soviets they supported both the Shia and Sunni Mujahedin. China provided arms and training camps in Pakistan for Mujahedin because they were worried about the Soviet Union, however, later on, after the Soviet withdrawal the Chinese paid a visit to Kabul and gave assurances that they would discontinue their support to the Mujahedin. India had large stakes, but they cared less about the form of government, whether it’s theocratic or democratic, as long as the regime in Kabul was not aligned with Pakistan’s ambitions.”

The role of mediators, monitoring and implementation mechanisms

“There was a flaw in the implementation of the Geneva Accords; all parties meticulously oversaw the Soviet troop withdrawal, however they failed to monitor carefully Pakistan’s support to the Mujahedin. The interference of Pakistan in Afghan affairs was one of the main components of the Accords that was supposed to end, but Pakistan’s support to the Mujahedin still continued after the troops’ exit,” stated a former senior official of PDPA, adding that, “the problem was that the US did nothing with regard to Pakistan’s interference after the Soviet withdrawal, and finally they saw the fatal consequences like the 9/11.”

Stakeholders in achieving a peaceful Afghanistan, both regional and international, intervened in the peace negotiations formally or informally to secure their interests and to ensure that the succeeding political system after Dr. Najibullah’s government would not become an enemy. The role played by the UN was significant, albeit eventually unsuccessful. The narrow-mindedness and bias of several UN mediators were perceived by some as the main causes of the failure.

The two UN mediators critical to the peacemaking efforts during the Dr. Najibullah government were Diego Cordovez and Benon Sevan. Cordovez’s approach toward the Afghan conflict was flawed in the sense that he viewed it through the lens of the Cold War and superpower rivalry while underestimating the needs and realities of Afghans on the ground. He based his efforts on the narrow assumption that a Soviet withdrawal would be the silver bullet to the Afghan problem. He disregarded or underplayed other social and political dynamics that were embedded in the reality of the Afghan conflict. He excluded the Mujahedin in the peace negotiations and underestimated the religious sensitivity of the Afghan public toward the PDPA, a sensitivity which underscores the unlikelihood of the survival of an atheist regime in Afghanistan. The Geneva agreements, accordingly, achieved

what was agreeable for great powers while remaining vulnerable to the views of the Afghan people and deaf to the fate of the country.³³

The consensus among great powers was both critical to, and consequential for the prospect of succeeding peace deals. Cordovez had the support of both powers in securing the Soviet withdrawal. On the one hand Gorbachev was desperately looking for a ‘face-saving’ disengagement, and on the other hand Americans did not want Communist control of Afghanistan anymore. Thus, while the Geneva Accords successfully resulted in Soviet troop withdrawal, it brought neither the cessation of Pakistan’s interference in Afghanistan nor the termination of US-supplied weaponry to the Mujahedin.

Succeeding Cordovez, Benon Sevan applied strategies identical to those of his predecessor. The UN mandate pushed for the formation of a ‘neutral body’ and a general election to be conducted to create a broadly-based government. In that framework, Sevan consulted with Dr. Najibullah, the Soviets, Pakistanis, Afghans in exile particularly Zahir Shah, and Peshawar-based Mujahedin leaders. Among those consulted, the Mujahedin were not ready to accept the UN proposal, given the fact that they were under pressure from Pakistan to veto any nominees coming from the Zahir Shah team. Further, the Mujahedin were embroiled in power sharing rivalries among themselves from the beginning. Sevan committed another error in not consulting field commanders who were on the front lines, including Massud, who was not consulted apart from a frantic attempt in the last minutes before Dr. Najibullah’s fall when it was too late.³⁴

Sevan was arguably biased in favor of Dr. Najibullah as a secular leader and was perhaps overly reliant on his diplomatic capabilities and supportive of his reconciliation scheme. He may have been influenced by his family history of victimhood at the hands of Islamist forces after the collapse of the Ottoman empire. Sevan was from an Armenian family. His ancestors were victims of atrocities committed against ethnic Armenians after World War I in what is now Turkey. He heard these stories from his parents, which may have shaped his critical attitude toward Islamists from a young age. Those personal opinions may have influenced his position as a mediator between secular-minded supporters of Dr. Najibullah and Islamist Mujahedin rebels, and prevented him from being an impartial actor.³⁵ Sevan emphasized the importance of installing a neutral authority in Kabul, one that would be primarily reliant on Afghans living abroad who had little or no relation to the Mujahedin. His proposal was rejected by Mujahedin leaders. His efforts failed in contrast to Cordovez, who at least negotiated the basis for the Soviet withdrawal. A potential lesson from this is the importance of background checks for mediators in the peace negotiations, including foreign diplomats, because their personal biases may compromise the principle of neutrality and impartiality in mediation.

Dr. Najibullah must share a large part of the blame for the failure of a negotiated peace. He would not give up power until forced to and relied on his national reconciliation program to deliver Mujahedin support long after it was clear it had failed to do so. “Najibullah tried track 2 negotiations with the Mujahedin but avoided official talks as he was not ready for compromise and he was trying to weaken the resistance,” said a politician who participated in the intra-Afghan negotiations of the 1990s. The exception was the co-opting/buying off of local commanders by Khad and signed protocols that secured non-aggression pacts between the PDPA and the local commanders, in exchange for cash funded by generous annual Soviet subsidies of 4 to 5 billion USD.

³³Amin Saikal, “The UN and Afghanistan: A Case of Failed Peacemaking Intervention?,” *International Peacekeeping*, November 8, 2007, 25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533319608413592>.

³⁴Saikal, 28.

³⁵Sharq, *T'alol dar Mosaleh-e Mille (1367 -1371) wa A'wagebe Khonbare an dar Afghanistan (Delay in the National Reconciliation 1988-1992 and its Bloody Consequences in Afghanistan)*, 28.



These subsidies continued until 13 September 1991 when the collapsing USSR signed an agreement with the US to cut off the supply of weapons to both sides of the Afghan conflict and eventually a total end of financial assistance to the Najibullah government.

With the flow of Soviet aid to the PDPA ended, Dr. Najibullah's government was in a dire situation. Seeing that it was hopeless to talk to the Mujahedin, he sought a solution that did not rely on the PDPA. In February 1992, two months before the fall of his regime, Dr. Najibullah sent his decades-long comrade Sulaiman Layeq to Washington to broker a deal with the US. After his one week stay, full of acrimonious exchanges with the Americans, Layeq brought a message back to Dr. Najibullah in Kabul: "The Americans cannot envisage peace while you exist."³⁶

With the failure of peace negotiations and the dissolution of the USSR in late 1991, the PDPA's last government under Dr. Najibullah could not survive more than four months. In the absence of an agreed framework for political transition that was guaranteed by international and regional powers, Afghanistan descended into chaos as fighting broke out among various Mujahedin factions who took over after Dr. Najibullah's fall.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AMONG VARIOUS MUJAHEDIN FACTIONS

In contrast to the PDPA, the Mujahedin were deeply divided along ethnic, linguistic, regional, and religious lines. When they were close to victory against a common enemy, they scrambled to recognize their fellow jihadists. However, when Dr. Najibullah's government collapsed everyone sought to be the first to enter Kabul. The fighters of one faction seized the Palace and Ministry of Defense, while another controlled the airport and the Central Bank. They soon became sworn enemies and divided Kabul into fiefdoms. Their quest to replace the Communist regime in Kabul with a stable Islamic government failed miserably. Among all the Mujahedin factions, there were three actors who played significant roles in the political events, which unfolded in the post-Najibullah era, widely known as the civil war period in Afghanistan: Hezb-e Islami's Hekmatyar, Jamiat's Massud, and Rabbani. The former acted more confidently owing to Pakistan's support, while the latter played skillfully and strategically at least in military terms. Needless to say, the power struggle between these two factions resulted in succeeding cycles of fight-and-negotiate that passed for intra-Afghan negotiations during that period.

Political disputes and failures of accords and ceasefires

Mujahedin parties made political agreements at every step, from the eve of the Soviet withdrawal to the last years of their contentious and conflicted government in Kabul through its collapse at the hands of the Taliban. Political agreements were largely flawed, biased, exclusive of other actors and struck under conditions of mistrust and pressure. The first accord was signed on February 10, 1989 in Rawalpindi. It created the Mujahideen's Afghanistan Interim Government (AIG). The accord reflected the favoritism of its two patrons (Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) to Sayyaf and Hekmatyar, at least on paper, giving

³⁶Chris Sands and Fazelminalah Qazizai, *Night Letters: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Afghan Islamists Who Changed the World*, Illustrated edition (London: Hurst, 2019), 293.

them disproportionate power, while excluding those who held real military and manpower on the ground such as Massud and Rabbani. The AIG tested its power against Dr. Najibullah in the Jalalabad and Khost campaigns. On both fronts, the AIG forces were routed miserably by government forces – which set in motion the failure of the accord.³⁷ The problem of perceived exclusion –albeit not necessarily broadly perceived– remains relevant to the present intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha, as highlighted by an Afghan politician, “The problem with current negotiations in Doha is that the Republic team is disproportionately represented, the Jamiat party is over-represented in contrast to other parties; there are 4 Shias and Pashtuns are under-represented as was the case in the Bonn conference in 2001, when the Hezb were excluded. So the Doha talks are not inclusive.”

The second accord was signed on April 24, 1992 between Peshawar-based Mujahedin leaders and is known as the Peshawar Accord. The accord was negotiated and signed in haste in an atmosphere of mistrust and uncertainty. Hekmatyar was given the post of Prime Minister in his absence, while he was physically approaching Kabul to seize power and make himself winner in a zero-sum game against his fellow jihadists. On the other hand, Massud had just formed the Northern Alliance in Parwan including Jamiat, Dostum’s Junbish and Mazari’s Wahdat. Dostum was a militia commander who had defected from Dr. Najibullah’s government. He commanded a formidable force of Uzbek and Turkmen fighters located in Northern Afghanistan. Wahdat was an ethnic Hazara political party based in Central Afghanistan. All three parties were decisive in forming a bulwark against Hekmatyar and prevented his seizure of Kabul. Massud was most concerned about protecting his role in the future Mujahedin government. He had previously raised this point in a secret discussion in Peshawar reportedly saying that, “if various Mujahedin parties could not agree on a new administration soon, and guarantee him the job of Defense Minister, he would form a government himself.”³⁸ That said, the Peshawar Accord successfully positioned Sebghatullah Mojaddedi for two months as the President. During this time, the Accord failed to prevent Hekmatyar from shelling rockets on Kabul to demand that Dostum’s militia should leave Kabul. Dostum’s militia had supported Massud’s campaign to seize Kabul from the hands of Hezb fighters.

As one high ranking official of Mojaddedi’s government recalls of that time, “Hekmatyar was very power greedy and for him ends justified the means and he did everything to come to power. Most conflict took place over the control of territory in Kabul.” According to this source, “Professor Mojaddedi told the Mujahedin, “Fellows! since we liberated the country from the Russians and communists, now if your brother Mujahedin control parts of Kabul, just leave it to them. The reason for conflict was only due to selfishness and the quest for power among the Mujahedin factions.”

Thus, the lesson learned here is that rogue players must be identified and should be isolated by all stakeholders including regional and international stakeholders. The obstructionism and subversion of one actor can undermine the whole process. At the same time, in the absence of a regional and international consensus, neighboring and regional powers acted in their own interests, picking their favorite proxies and sidelining the other. This proved fatally detrimental to a resolution of the Afghan conflict.

It is noteworthy that a regional laissez-faire approach does not work either. In the past two Rawalpindi and Peshawar processes the Mujahedin leaders negotiated only under pressure from regional powers.

³⁷Kazemi, “Peace and Power-Sharing Accords on Afghanistan: An Analysis and Implications for Ongoing Peace Efforts,” 26.

³⁸Sands and Qazizai, *Night Letters*, 298.



When Massud's Northern Alliance forced out the Hezb fighters from Kabul, resentment against Hekmatyar was severe. His forces switched to an indiscriminate campaign of shelling Kabul city, firing blindly at Kabul with rockets to force Massud to make concessions. Although he did not describe his demands explicitly, he was given the post of Prime Minister based on the Peshawar Accord. However, he remained at odds with Massud. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia called both opponents together for negotiations, which forced Hekmatyar and Massud to meet face to face on May 25, 1992, when they agreed on a ceasefire. The agreement retained the Prime Minister post for Hezb, and called for a national election to be held within six months. However, without sufficient regional and international guarantees, the truce failed and gave way to continued belligerence between the two sides.

What compromises were made by parties to the conflict?

Massud's rigidity resembled Dr. Najibullah might have agreed to share power with the Mujahedin he was unlikely to submit the posts of President, Defense Minister and State Security. Massud was the Defense Minister in charge of the armed forces, and Rabbani from the same Jamiat party was the President. Massud was unwilling to hand over the department of security to another Mujahedin party. In one sense, the actions of the Mujahideen and the PDPA were similar in that neither player demonstrated a willingness to commit to inclusivity and compromise with their opponents. For example, when Abdul Ali Mazari, the leader of the ethnic Hazara party asked Massud to give the intelligence department to the Hazaras as a token of power sharing with other Mujahedin parties, Massud refused. This led to a series of disastrous armed clashes between both sides which resulted in vast killings of civilians.³⁹

One lesson learned can be drawn from the consequences of failure to share power after opponents reach agreement at the negotiating table. Following the denial of power sharing to Mazari, he entered into negotiations with other factions such as Hekmatyar and Dostum, both opponents of the Massud-Rabbani government. The brutal fight that followed among the four factions created a bloodbath in Kabul starting in January 1993. Only then did regional powers express concern at the scale of the violence in Kabul. Iran joined Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to broker a peace deal in March 1993 called the Islamabad Accord. Regrettably no significant changes resulted and it led to yet another conflict between Rabbani and Hekmatyar when the former rejected the cabinet proposed by Hekmatyar. Two other minor agreements were concluded in Afghanistan, one in Jalalabad and another in 1995 in Mahipar. They proved futile and ineffective in stopping the volatile state of war among the factions until everyone looked to a new player to take over as the Taliban approached Kabul.

The role of mediators and backchannels

In the mediation and facilitation of peace negotiations between the warring parties, there were two categories of actors involved. First the regional countries and second the United Nations. Both actors have contributed to intra-Afghan negotiations during the Mujahedin era in the form of mediation and facilitation that ultimately proved ineffective and doomed to failure. With respect to the regional countries, many among the Mujahedin factions viewed their interventions negatively and as a cause of internecine conflicts among the

³⁹Sands and Qazizai, 331.

factions. These came to be seen as a ‘civil war,’ a phrase opposed by some Afghan politicians who worked in the Massud-Rabbani government. One noted, “I’m against the phrase ‘civil war’ because the current war and the war at that time was pursued by foreign countries and serving their interests, therefore it was a war of others on our soil.” In effect, the line in that distinction is blurred, since both domestic and external forces contributed to the war.

In effect, countries in the region saw post-Soviet Afghanistan as an opportunity to promote their strategic interests and use it as a client state in their regional rivalries. Therefore, those having previous military and ideological rapport with the Mujahedin leaders during the anti-Soviet war, scrambled to put their agenda first. In the intra-Afghan negotiations that was mostly hosted by Pakistan and partnered with Saudi, both handpicked their clients from the Mujahedin factions, however their clients failed to seize power in Kabul and ruined the country. Peace negotiations mediated by Pakistan and other countries in the region including Saudi Arabia and Iran failed. From the beginning these countries that mediated the Afghan conflict were in conflict between themselves and thereby pursued conflicting agendas in Afghanistan. Further the peace deals lacked regional guarantees and consensus. Other international actors including the UN proved no better in getting agreement on a framework than countries in the region.

For example, Mahmud Mestiri, the UN envoy to Afghanistan failed largely due to his conviction that the Rabbani-Massud government was related to ethnic Tajiks. Mestiri was under the influence of three forces (1) the US embassy in Islamabad; (2) the Zahir Shah team in Rome; (3) and Pakistan, all sources which favored a Pashtun-dominated regime in Kabul. In retrospect, the failure of Mestiri’s mission can be traced back to his speech in Stockholm in June 1995, when he remarked that the Kabul regime was controlled by Tajiks. The speech was undiplomatic and did not reflect the realities of Afghanistan at that sensitive juncture. The Rabbani-Massud government regarded him as biased, and this discredited the UN as an honest broker in the eyes of those in Kabul. This undermined the prospects for agreement and complicated the situation.⁴⁰ With the UN mission deadlocked, Afghan factions continued fighting which increasingly escaped attempts at control by Pakistan and other countries in the region. Thus, Pakistan was motivated to find another ‘well intentioned’ client – the Taliban.⁴¹

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PEACE NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE MUJAHEDIN FACTIONS AND THE TALIBAN

Initial intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and Mujahedin factions date back to before the Taliban’s seizure of Kabul when Massud was forced out of the city in September 1996.⁴² His successor Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef who had taken on the post of deputy Minister of Defense of Afghanistan under the Taliban approached Massud and his men in Bagram, Parwan province. Both sides sat cross-legged, Afghan style in the middle of the night. What amounted to a track 1 dialogue continued for four hours as both parties claimed to be formal representatives of the Afghan state (a claim they made until the collapse of the Taliban government in 2001). A successful outcome proved elusive. Massud proposed a ‘united military coalition.’ This was rejected by Mullah Omar who reportedly consented only to a civil and political post for Massud, keeping the military chain of command under

⁴⁰Saikal, “The UN and Afghanistan,” 30–31.

⁴¹Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2004), 155.

⁴²Some earlier talks occurred between the Rabbani government and approaching Taliban in Maiwand Wardak.



his control. After bearing no result, the second informal negotiation followed a couple of months later, when both sides met on the frontlines between the Taliban controlled territory and Massud fighters in Charikar, Parwan. Massud's delegation proposed the right to appoint half of the Ulema council. This was rejected by the Taliban who were fearful that Massud would conspire to create a religious legitimacy to regain power.⁴³

The Taliban became increasingly determined to achieve a military victory over the United Front (mainly Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara factions, a military arrangement orchestrated by Massud within weeks after the fall of Kabul). They grew less open to talks and negotiations. This trend even intensified along with its brutal actions - including the execution of former President Najibullah and disrespecting the diplomatic immunities of UN premises in Kabul, an act which sparked international condemnation and criticism. In addition, there was growing concern among the countries in the region - Russia, Iran, and Central Asian countries - about the threat posed by a radical Islamist regime. They warned that they might support the anti-Taliban United Front if the Taliban refused to compromise and accept a ceasefire. The response from the Taliban leader Mullah Omar was negative.⁴⁴

The UN was mistrusted in the eyes of the Taliban leadership due to the refusal to recognize the Taliban government as the legitimate successor of the Rabbani government (which continued to occupy the Afghan UN seat). An attempt was made by the UN in April 1998 to address the issue, triggering US pressure on the Taliban to hold a meeting with the United Front. In response, the Taliban proposed a Ulema meeting of both parties in Islamabad. After four days of talks, both sides agreed to nominate a 20 member Ulema for a peace commission that would discuss a ceasefire and prisoners release. The Taliban shortly after refused to nominate their delegation.⁴⁵ Tensions escalated and the Taliban increased their campaign against the United Front in the north and central Afghanistan, perpetrating massacres of civilians, the killing of Iranian diplomats, offering refuge to Bin Laden, and an unprecedented level of repression and purges against women rights. These actions turned the region and the world against the Taliban's Islamist cause.

The UN, US and countries in the region had few options in hand beyond a call for a bilateral intra-Afghan negotiation between the Taliban and the United Front for a prospective ceasefire. The Ashgabat, Turkmenistan talks, held on March 11, 1999 remain the only landmark diplomatic event of intra-Afghan negotiation during the Taliban era that allowed senior political representatives of the warring parties to sit at one table. Several items on the agenda of that negotiation are worth reviewing.

Political disagreements

Under UN mediation, delegations from the Taliban and the United Front met in Ashgabat. Reportedly both sides reached significant power-sharing agreements, remarked a senior member of the United Front negotiating team. "It was in this negotiation that the Taliban agreed to shape a Dawalat-e Mushtarak (joint State) with us, including a national unity parliament, a national unity judiciary in which all the ethnic and religious segments of the society should have participation, and we also agreed on a complete ceasefire to end the continuing conflicts. However, we failed to convince each other on who should lead the

⁴³Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, 1st edition (London: Hurst, 2011), 87-90.

⁴⁴Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Second Edition, Second edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 85-86.

⁴⁵Rashid, 107-8.



political order and the state apparatus as a whole; we insisted on Ustaad Rabani who had an international recognition, in contrary, they emphasized on Mullah Omar.” On the Taliban side, “one side of the negotiation wanted to dictate its demands forcefully on the other side. The Islamic Emirate suggested that the position of Prime Minister, which at that time was held by Mullah Mohammad Rabani from the Islamic Emirate to be given to Ustaad Rabani from the Mujahedin. In contrary, the Mujahedin did not accept the deal, and they wanted Ustaad Rabani to be appointed as the president of Afghanistan,” recalled a former senior Taliban official.

With that result, the incentives for the continuation of negotiation remained limited as both sides pounded each other with heavy offensives in the forthcoming spring of 1999. Not controlling Kabul, Massud however, increasingly embarked on a series of diplomatic endeavors that expanded his relations with the outer world remarkably. Russia and Iran supplied arms and ammunitions, India gave signals of support in the face of a Pakistani proxy take over, the UK and US were open to Massud’s diplomats who were shuttling between Panjshir, Washington, and London, and lastly good relations with the EU and France turned the capitals of European countries into a venue for Massud’s appeal to a global audience including the Afghan diaspora to join him in his anti-Taliban cause. These diplomatic breakthroughs of Massud cost the Taliban. They increasingly found that the Emirate was isolated, mainly caused by its support for global and regional terrorists and for its extremist domestic policies and human rights violations.⁴⁶

Apart from the Ashgabat talks, other abortive attempts made by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) for indirect talks between the Taliban and the United Front in Jeddah in March 2000 resulted in no outcome. The Taliban seemed less motivated to agree a political settlement since it had made considerable military progress in late 2000. They had routed all the armed opposition groups including Massud from most of their strongholds in September 2000 and gained a dominant military position in the whole country. Despite those military achievements, the Emirate struggled with numerous domestic and foreign policy issues that were sources of contention between the world and the Taliban. This left only Pakistan as an ally to the Emirate as the rest of the world increasingly became critical.

Failures of negotiations

Negotiations between the Taliban and the United Front failed for a number of reasons, including lack of trust, the desire for military victory, deep ethnic, language, and political divisions and a number of other technical factors such as “(1) when a negotiation is not guaranteed by a third party, there are high chances of denial or diversion by one of the parties; (2) both parties to the negotiation should have full authority and independence over agreements and decisions they make, otherwise negotiations will bear no results at the end. Therefore, there is no guarantee that the Taliban agree on an issue today, and come to deny it tomorrow. For instance, the Emirate was not debated in the first days; however, later on, the Taliban included the Emirate in their negotiation agenda. It’s all about external pressure and a halqa-e mafqooda (clandestine circle) that induces the agenda for the Taliban,” pointed out a senior member of the United Front negotiating team.

⁴⁶Romain Malejacq, “From Rebel to Quasi-State: Governance, Diplomacy and Legitimacy in the Midst of Afghanistan’s Wars (1979–2001),” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 4–5 (September 3, 2017): 878–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1322332>.



That aforementioned source also adds that a, “lack of a guarantee to make decisions binding on both sides, and at the same time the lack of authority and independence on the part of one side,” were insurmountable gaps in the intra-Afghan negotiations with the Taliban. He noted, “our negotiations with the Taliban could have better results, if the Taliban side had enough authority over their decisions, or a powerful third-party mechanism that could prevent the Taliban from denial of what had been agreed.”

The role of regional and international actors

The number of stakeholders in Afghanistan’s conflict during the Taliban era, increased dramatically. On the one side are those who supported the Taliban and on the other those who opposed the Taliban’s rise and promotion as a religious extremist group which could trigger security threats for them.

In the first group, a number of countries supported the Taliban to establish a client regime in Kabul for the pursuit of their strategic interests in the region, chief among them Pakistan followed by Saudi Arabia. Both financed and supplied arms and men to the Taliban in its campaign against the United Front. Saudi Arabia remained a supporter of the Taliban until the Kingdom learned that the Taliban had offered refuge to a domestic dissident. Thus a bitter exchange between the Taliban leadership and the Saudis led to a diplomatic boycott due to the presence of Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan. This resulted in the closure of the Saudi embassy in Kabul. However, Pakistan did not halt its support to Taliban up until its demise in 2001.

In that context, in the very few chances of peace negotiations facilitated between the Taliban and the United Front, Pakistan remained the agenda setter for the Taliban delegation. In contrast, the United Front found it increasingly difficult because it argued it was not talking to an independent Afghan party.

In the second group, the number of actors whose interests were threatened by the growth of the Taliban ranged from the most immediate neighbors in the region like those of Central Asian countries, Russia, India, Iran to the distant world such as the UN, US, and European countries. Russia and Central Asian countries extended their military and air support to the United Front under Massud. Turkmenistan provided diplomatic support for intra-Afghan negotiations, however they remained alert to the spillover of Taliban’s Islamist radicalism. Iran was furious after the execution of its diplomats by the Taliban and it provided military supplies to the United Front but made no considerable effort to support peacemaking between the warring parties.

The UN failed to broker a peace deal between the warring parties from the beginning. Norbert Holl, the UN envoy for Afghanistan could not convince the Taliban that the UN was a neutral broker, nor could he pressure regional countries to stop supplying arms to the Taliban. He resigned a couple of months after the Taliban take over. On the other hand, the Taliban widely distrusted the UN’s neutrality, given the fact that the UN denied a seat for the Emirate in the organization. Successors to Holl, including Lakhdar Ibrahimi and other UN diplomats were no more successful.

The US contribution to peacemaking in Afghanistan during the Taliban Emirate remained limited. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops, Afghanistan was not considered a foreign policy priority for US administrations. However, two controversial issues brought the Taliban more to the attention of US officials – first women rights and second Osama Bin Laden.

The US administration grew critical of the Taliban's misogynistic policies, condemning them as 'despicable.' Following the attacks on US embassies in Africa, Osama Bin Laden was identified as its perpetrator and was considered an imminent threat to the US national security. Despite the fact he was treated as a respected guest of the Taliban the US was not motivated to take a powerful stance in the Afghan conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

In the last forty years of armed conflicts between the Afghan state and armed opposition groups intra-Afghan negotiations can be divided into three historical periods, first between the PDPA governments and the Mujahedin factions in the 1980s through the early 1990s, second between various Mujahedin factions in the mid 1990s, and third between the Taliban and the United Front in the late 1990s. The negotiations in those three periods are largely characterized as failures influenced mainly by three dynamics - the mediators, international and regional stakeholders, and Afghan parties to the conflict. Taking these dynamics into account, the failures of the past intra-Afghan negotiations in those three periods could be described as the following:

Given its notoriety, the PDPA governments struggled to secure direct negotiations with the prominent Mujahedin factions. They merely negotiated with less significant groups of fighters who were co-opted to the regime in return for financial rewards. The government re-branded its ideology and made cosmetic efforts to win the confidence of opposition groups. However, it retained the significant military and political power of the PDPA. The UN acted as an effective mediator in the Soviet troop withdrawal, but it failed to establish a transitional arrangement prior to the withdrawal. Pakistan played a subversive role, such as its rejection of proposals in support of a neutral government that could have saved Afghanistan from the ensuing civil war. The US prioritized the Soviet withdrawal, and with regards to the transitional settlement it relied on Pakistan. The Soviets had a weak position and they were preoccupied with the withdrawal of their troops and the domestic crisis back home. Therefore the US and Pakistan exploited that weakness, and left no option for the Soviet Union but an irresponsible disengagement.

In the Mujahedin era, great powers saw no stakes in Afghanistan and the country fell into the hands of regional powers. Intra-Afghan negotiations during this period were characterized by indefinite cycles of fight-and-negotiate between warring parties.

Military power proved decisive and those with robust military and organizational skills enjoyed large chunks of power. The negotiations between warring parties were conducted in short spurts almost annually. Ceasefires were broken one after the other. UN mediation failed to provide a viable solution and UN mediators increased their criticism of the factions. Opportunism on the part of neighboring countries revealed itself through the proxy wars prosecuted by Afghan factions they supported.

The Taliban had merely tested their muscles in the battlefield and an all-out military approach was more preferable for its leadership than negotiated power-sharing. Being in a perpetual state of war against the United Front forces in the north, this left few opportunities for political settlements. The isolated nature of its Emirate and the distrust towards international organizations like the UN provided little ground for diplomatic efforts. The exception was one opportunity in Turkmenistan that ended with no result because the Taliban and the United Front could not agree on who should lead the country.



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