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Policy Brief 1:

Forging a durable peace in Afghanistan

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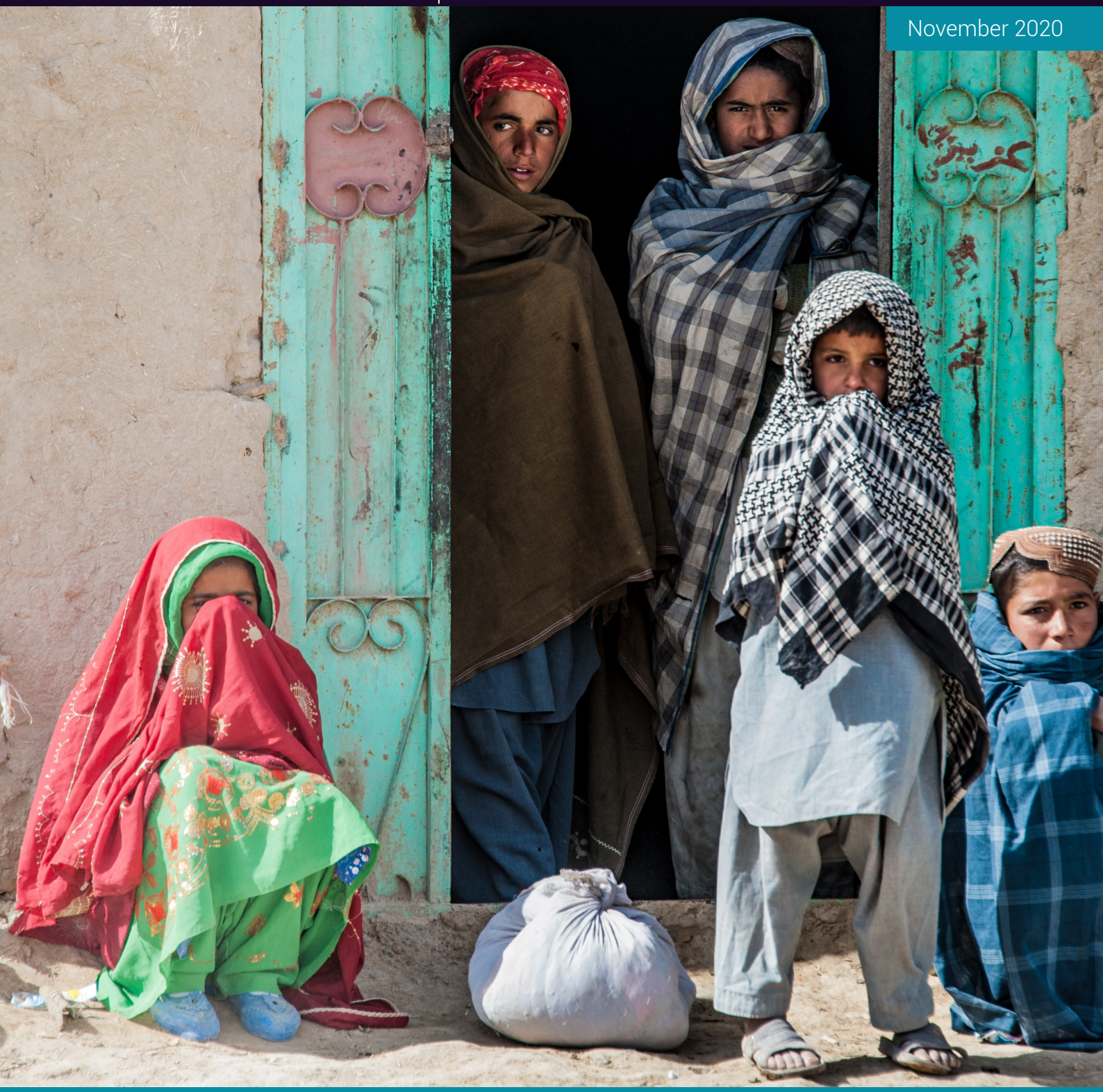

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Executive Summary:

Conflict in Afghanistan has been exacerbated and prolonged by extensive interference from international actors, but after decades of war in Afghanistan, recent steps have been made towards peace. The 1979 Russian invasion saw Afghanistan become a battlefield that drew in regional powers Pakistan, Iran and the Gulf states, with the US weighing in to support militias fighting its Cold War rival, the Soviet Union.

The US-led war of 2001 and subsequent NATO-led security mission succeeded in dismantling the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, but removing the Taliban regime did not ensure peace due to a range factors, particularly the involvement of numerous external actors. Afghanistan has been a proxy battleground par excellence. Through it all, the Afghan citizenry has endured the depredations of warlords, proxy forces and international machinations.

The length of the war, the disparate goals of multiple interested parties and the devastating impacts on Afghanistan's infrastructure, institutions and people have made conflict resolution fiendishly difficult. If new peace initiatives are to succeed, it is essential to take into account these complex dynamics.

A US–Taliban agreement signed in early 2020[1] may represent progress, but it is notable as much for who was not involved in the negotiations. Without the involvement of the Afghan government or other representatives of the Afghan people, there is a real risk that a proxy peace, one imposed from outside and not cognisant of locals' goals and concerns, will replace the current environment of proxy war(s). Such an arrangement cannot bring lasting security or prosperity for the Afghans.

At the same time, external actors who have long interfered in Afghan affairs must be brought to the table to ensure the mitigation of regional competition and the establishment of a dynamic that supports and nurtures a peaceful Afghanistan. The victory of Joe Biden in the 2020 US presidential election perhaps portends a hopeful future, as it may be anticipated that under Biden the US will pursue a more conciliatory and measured foreign policy.

Key Recommendations

To ensure that an enduring peace is established in Afghanistan, one that is acceptable to all actors, we recommend that the following measures be taken:

- Engage a range of Afghan actors from across the political, religious and ethnic spectrum, including civil society and non-government organisations, in discussions. Negotiations between the US and the Taliban are too limited.

- Recognise that key international actors – Pakistan, Iran, India, China, Russia and the US – have much at stake in Afghanistan. Any peace agreement within Afghanistan must be accompanied by negotiations among these powers and the reconciliation of their respective positions.

- Understand that should NATO withdraw abruptly, a security vacuum will arise, one that would shift regional dynamics and jeopardise any peace agreement. Even if the US is keen to depart Afghanistan, doing so too swiftly will be counterproductive.

- Adopt an institutional approach to establishing peace. The collective guidance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and its Afghan Contact Group could be instrumental in negotiations rather than allowing individual countries to dominate discussions and push specific agendas.

- Accentuate that peace in Afghanistan is in the interests of all involved parties. International actors have sought advantage through decades of conflict, but it must be recognised that stability and prosperity in Afghanistan will bring long-term benefits to the region.

Background

Afghanistan has been the scene of largely uninterrupted conflict for more than four decades. Broadly, conflict has unfurled in three phases: the Afghan–Soviet war from 1979 until 1989; the civil war that erupted after the departure of Soviet forces and led to the rise of the Taliban; and the US-led invasion of 2001, initially intended to oust the Taliban but which continues to the present.

What is notable about the conflict, through all of these phases, is the involvement and machinations of international actors. War erupted in 1979 when the army of the Soviet Union intervened on the side of the Afghanistan government in the face of popular uprisings. Thereafter anti-government forces, popularly known as the *mujahideen*, won support from the US and the UK, opponents of the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Pakistan and some Gulf states also lent support to the *mujahideen*, and a range of foreign fighters rallied to a cause portrayed as a struggle between Islam and Communism. In this way, Afghanistan became the domain upon which broad geopolitical battles were carried out. In a state plagued by internal disruption, fragile institutions and a disenfranchised citizenry, the scene was set for intractable proxy conflict.

Even after the departure of its forces, Soviet Russia continued to back Afghanistan's government. This ended with the fall of Kabul in 1992, but continued hostilities between an array of Afghan factions, variously supported by Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, allowed no end to the conflict. The Taliban emerged with Pakistani backing, taking Kandahar in 1994, thereafter extending its control over much of the country and declaring the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban imposed law and order, initially winning some support from locals, but its brutal, intolerant rule brought new hardships to the Afghan people while offering safe haven to Al Qaeda.

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The US-led Operation Enduring Freedom of 2001 swiftly led to the ousting of the Taliban, but the international community's broader goals of bringing peace and security to Afghanistan have proved unreachable. Some 20 years on, little progress has been made. This may be explained by the complexity of intra-Afghan dynamics, where competing grievances, tensions and political aspirations make finding solutions all the harder. Similarly, the extent and entangled nature of international interests that are invested in Afghanistan, the number of proxy forces involved, and the impacts of geopolitical currents that wash over Afghanistan confound efforts to establish peace. Reconciling these conflicting demands and balancing the influences of this range of actors – domestic and international – remains the task of those who would establish peace.

During the years of conflict, the intervention of international actors, resulting in the manipulation of local proxies, has often seen international interests take precedence over those of the Afghans themselves. This has made the conflict all the more intractable. It is thus essential that the same dynamic – the prioritisation of the interest of powerful external actors over those of Afghan citizens – does not prevail during peace-making processes, because as long as local grievances remain unaddressed the triggers for further conflict remain potent.

The US position

US involvement in Afghanistan dates back to the Afghan–Soviet war of 1979, when Washington sponsored and supplied resources to Afghan forces to attack the Soviet military apparatus. America's military and political commitment to Afghanistan has waxed and waned over time according to its own priorities. When Washington's regional interests were threatened by the Soviet invasion of 1979, it invested heavily in arming the Afghan *mujahideen*, but its support tailed off once the Soviet threat receded.

The pattern has since been repeated in what has become America's longest war,[2] initiated in October 2001. After the rapid overthrow of the Taliban and defeat of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the US declared major military operations over in Afghanistan in 2003,[3] just as they were scaling up in Iraq. Thereafter some progress was made in creating stability, with institution building receiving NATO backing through the commitment of the International Security Assistance Force[4] and notable political milestones, such as the establishment of a new constitution and first democratic elections in 2004. But progress has been patchy, and US involvement has drifted between troop surges, draw downs and plans to withdraw. US commitment to Afghanistan is again in question. Under the Trump presidency there was much talk of the US extracting itself. In October 2020, President Donald Trump declared that he wanted to bring troops home "by Christmas".[5]

While it remains unclear what policy the incoming administration of Joe Biden will adopt, Trump's declaration of his intention to extract the US demonstrates the fickle nature of America's attitude to and engagement with Afghanistan. Further indication of the US's changeable approach has been seen in its recent willingness to negotiate with the Taliban. A key goal of the invasion of 2001 was to remove the Taliban from power, thus ensuring that Al Qaeda could no longer find safe haven in Afghanistan, but in its eagerness to remove US troops, the Trump administration was prepared to negotiate with America's erstwhile enemy. In February 2020, America and the Taliban signed an agreement in Doha that would see the departure of US and NATO troops within 14 months.[6]

America's military and political commitment to Afghanistan has waxed and waned over time according to its own priorities

Notably, the agreement was reached between the US and the Taliban only. This is concerning given the range of relevant stakeholders who were not a party to the talks. As Shakti Sinha argued at a Deakin University policy dialogue, the US has four goals in Afghanistan: to bring troops home; to interrupt supply lines for terror groups; to effect a durable ceasefire; and to facilitate reconciliation between actors across Afghanistan.[7] Washington's emphasis on negotiating with the Taliban, to the exclusion of any other parties, suggests that it is prioritising the first goal with little regard for long-term goals or the ongoing stability of the Afghan polity.

Such an approach from Washington does not bode well. If the US were to leave abruptly, with so much yet unresolved, the prospects of a re-ignited conflict are very real.[8] The steadying hand of the global super power is still required. Gains are delicate and the departure of a US military presence would invite competition between the Taliban, the Northern Alliance and other local militias. Any resulting conflagration would only attract further machinations from external actors while also allowing opportunity to terrorist elements to re-emerge.

Nonetheless, perhaps indicative of a more promising multilateral approach to the region, the US engaged in three-way talks between the US, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan in May 2020. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for Central Asia, Jonathan Henick told reporters that the initiative was intended to create a partnership for "peace, security and prosperity in Central Asia and Afghanistan."[9]

Given the tangled nature of relationships and rivalries both in Afghanistan and its immediate neighbourhood, US attempts to engage with a range of actors must be applauded. With the end of the Trump presidency and the installation of Joe Biden, noted as a conciliator, it is to be hoped that US priorities in Afghanistan will shift from solely focusing on the extraction of troops to broader considerations of conflict resolution and how to establish and promote development and stability.

Next door neighbour: Pakistan's perspective

Like the US, Pakistan has long been a major player in Afghanistan. This dates back to the Afghan–Soviet war, when Afghan *mujahideen* made use of the porous border to seek refuge and regroup in Pakistan. With time, rather than just hosting Afghan elements, Pakistan has become more assertive in involving itself in the affairs of its land-locked neighbour. In particular, the extent and depth of the activities of Pakistan's security agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has been questioned, amid accusations of nurturing and supporting the Taliban.[10]

Many in Afghanistan remain suspicious of Pakistan's actions and intentions. In 2011, then-president Hamid Karzai said Afghanistan was being played in a "double game", highlighting a lack of cooperation from Pakistan on security issues.[11] At times, the US has also blamed Pakistan and ISI for interference and escalating violence.[12] Accusations against Pakistan have continued – in 2017, Ashraf Ghani claimed that Pakistan was carrying out an "undeclared war… against Afghanistan"[13] through its support of the Taliban and other elements that undermine Afghanistan's security situation.

Pakistan has become more assertive in involving itself in the affairs of its land-locked neighbour

At the same time, it is understood that Pakistan is wary of encroachment from India and, in particular, India's attempts to establish strong relations with Afghanistan.[14] It is apparent that India's footprint in the region is the overarching concern of Pakistani foreign and defence policy. To that end, Pakistan desires a friendly – or amenable – government in Kabul. For Islamabad, this is preferable to an India–Afghanistan alignment, which would represent encirclement of Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs states, "Building close cooperative relations with Afghanistan is a high priority of Pakistan's foreign policy and a vital component of our vision of a 'peaceful neighbourhood.' Pakistan continues its efforts for forging a friendly and good-neighbourly relationship with Afghanistan, on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity."[15]

Similarly, on a recent visit to Pakistan, the chief of Kabul's peace negotiating team, Abdullah Abdullah, said it was time to put rhetoric and suspicions in the past and forge a new relationship with Pakistan based on "mutual respect, sincere cooperation and shared prosperity."[16]

It is clear that Pakistan has played an important role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan has long been critical of the US approach in Afghanistan, and the War on Terror more broadly. Yet a more nuanced diplomatic approach from the US has led to conciliation between Islamabad and Washington, which in turn has created more productive engagement and spurred endeavours to find solutions in Afghanistan.[17]

As Dmitri Trenin noted at this project's Policy Forum, "One cannot hope to achieve one's objectives in Afghanistan without regard to—and corresponding action toward—Pakistan."[18] Engaging effectively with Pakistan is essential for establishing enduring peace in Afghanistan, but at the same time, Islamabad must be encouraged to recognise the myriad interests at stake in Afghanistan and, accordingly, to act in a conciliatory manner in order to resolve differences and tensions.

The regional heavy weight: Iran

Sharing cultural, linguistic and ethnic ties, and a long border, Iran and Afghanistan are of considerable importance to one another. An estimated 2.5 million Afghan citizens have sought refuge in Iran since 1979, many of them finding work within the Iranian economy.[19] During the struggle against the Taliban from the late 1990s, Iran was a key backer of the Northern Alliance,[20] and Tehran offered logistical support to the international coalition that deposed the Taliban and dislodged Al Qaeda in 2001. This came in the wake of intense enmity between the Taliban and Tehran, antagonism inflamed by the Taliban's 1998 murder of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i Sharif and targeting of Afghan Shiite civilians.

Shared enmity with the Taliban saw a degree of cooperation between Washington and Tehran, which would previously have been unthinkable

After the ousting of the Taliban, Iran was an active contributor to rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. Indeed, shared enmity with the Taliban saw a degree of cooperation between Washington and Tehran, which would previously have been unthinkable. This was not to last long, however. US President George W. Bush's 2002 'Axis of Evil' speech, within which Iran was included, led to a souring of relations. Unease in Tehran at the presence of large numbers of US troops in Afghanistan can only have been heightened by America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, giving rise to the impression that Iran was encircled by the American military.[21] Nonetheless, Iran continued to play a role in Afghanistan's development, contributing to aid programs and establishing trade deals that saw considerable expansion in Afghan–Iranian trade.[22]

As the war in Afghanistan has dragged on, Iran's misgivings have grown over the extended US presence and establishment of foreign bases in Afghanistan.[23] Since 2003, and during the presidencies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran and Donald Trump in the US, relations deteriorated significantly. To this end, the two states no longer see themselves as having common goals in Afghanistan. Where once shared opposition to the Taliban and Al Qaeda saw a convergence of interests, Afghanistan has become an arena of contestation between Washington and Tehran.

As a consequence of heightened tensions with the US, but also a reflection of increased pragmatism in Tehran, Iran has apparently put aside its previous misgivings and developed a more productive working relationship with the Taliban in recent years, while also remaining a champion of Afghanistan's Shiite Hazara minority.[24]

While Iran was never in a position to single-handedly determine the course of events in Afghanistan, Tehran's pragmatism appears to extend to its recognition that it is for the people of Afghanistan to resolve outstanding issues.[25] Moreover, for some time it has been apparent that Tehran understands that a lasting peace in Afghanistan is contingent on the establishment of political consensus among the diversity of Afghan actors, rather than military domination by a single player, and that such a peace, in turn, would enhance Iran's own position.[26]

Iran has observer status at the SCO, thus productive relations with Russia and China. From such a position, Iran may be well placed to play a constructive role in negotiations towards a lasting peace in Iran. As the regional calculus changes with the imminent arrival of Joe Biden in the White House, circumstances may be conducive to greater cooperation between Washington and Tehran, including towards building peace in Afghanistan, something that both would benefit from.

Russia and Afghanistan

Russia does not actively sponsor any particular actors within the Afghanistan conflict or, indeed, its political arena

After withdrawing Soviet troops in 1989 and support for the central government after the fall of Kabul in 1992, Russia has steadily retreated from Afghanistan. Yet Afghanistan remains a foreign policy concern for Moscow. Russia was broadly supportive of international efforts to combat the Taliban from 2001, however, as the same time, Moscow was no doubt concerned at the increased US military presence in Central Asia, traditionally considered Russia's backyard.

Speaking at a Deakin University policy dialogue, Dmitri Trenin noted that, four decades after the beginning of the Afghan–Soviet war, it is widely agreed in Moscow that in Afghanistan "politics, and the politics of peace, is for Afghans to decide."[27] Moscow recognises that Russia has an important yet modest role to play in Afghanistan, but it has no intention of interfering, according to Trenin.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia no longer has a direct border with Afghanistan, nonetheless Russia remains watchful of the situation in Afghanistan due to the ripple effects that might emerge. Indeed, Russia views Afghanistan through a security prism, for several reasons, not least among them the calamitous war of the 1980s, an experience that some argue gave rise to an "Afghan syndrome" among Russian policy makers. This wariness of local insurgencies in the region has since been compounded by Russian experiences in Dagestan and Chechnya, which feed broader concerns about instability in Central Asia and the repercussions for Russia. There is also considerable apprehension in Moscow about the threat that the flow of drugs out of Afghanistan poses to Russian society, the very real impacts of which have already been witnessed.[28]

It must also be recalled that Russia was historically the dominant power in Central Asia and some in Moscow would like to rekindle that role, thus the US and NATO presence in Afghanistan creates an unwelcome dynamic for Russia. Despite these concerns, Russia does not actively sponsor any particular actors within the Afghanistan conflict or, indeed, its political arena. To this end, Russia remains an interested, if not involved, party. Moscow takes no particular side in the conflict in Afghanistan, as it is not concerned with what type of regime is in power in Kabul, however, it fears state collapse and an ensuing power vacuum that could have regional repercussions.[29]

Since late 2018, Russia has become more active, facilitating its own peace talks in Moscow with the Taliban[30] and, in so doing, reasserting its position as a regional power broker.[31] Moscow appears to have increased its footprint as the US, under Trump, has averted its gaze, but it is notable that Moscow's overtures have been inclusive, to the extent that China, Pakistan, Iran and US representatives were in attendance at the Moscow talks with the Taliban.[32] This is a step in the right direction. Concerted efforts at multilateral engagement are required to find solutions here. Russia, through its membership of the SCO, is well placed to contribute to peace-making initiatives.

Conclusion:

At a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Kathmandu in 2018, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani called on his fellow South Asian leaders to "change the rules of the game and the playing field among the nations from confrontation to cooperation."[33]

Most interested actors appear to have one thing in common: an understanding that a peaceful Afghanistan is to the benefit of all. At the very least, they all pay lip service to it. Some advocate that the Afghans themselves can and should be left to establish the outlines of an enduring peace internally and without interference, but some external actors remain entwined in attempts to pursue peace and exclude important players—including key Afghan stakeholders. Just as the Afghan conflict has been multifaceted, often conducted and manipulated by external players, the peace process, under way since 2012, has been equally fraught and subject to derailment by vested interests.[34]

What is required is a recognition from all parties of the concerns and fears of the others, to allow wide-ranging negotiations to address complex geopolitics, while also taking account of all Afghan actors—those who have the highest stake in establishing peace and have endured the depredations of over four decades of war—and therefore establishing a peace that can benefit all.

Some progress has been made on the path to peace, not without considerable courage and sacrifice from the Afghan people. Pitfalls remain, not least the ongoing Taliban violence despite its earlier undertakings to adopt a non-violent approach. Reconciling competing agendas in Afghanistan make it hard to find long-term solutions, but such solutions remain essential. As Afghan President Ashraf Ghani recently observed, "Though we are facing multiple forms of turmoil, peace remains our most urgent and important priority."[35]

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About the Project:

From January 2018 until December 2020, the research team of Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh, Dr Dara Conduit and Dr Zahid Shahab Ahmed conducted the project, "Assessing the impact of external actors in the Syrian and Afghan proxy wars", facilitated by Carnegie Corporation of New York. The project undertook a comparative analysis of the proxy wars in Syria and Afghanistan in order to examine the impact that external players have had on the conflicts, and to advance new understandings on the evolving role of state and non-state actors in the regions.

This report draws on a multifaceted research methodology. In the project's initial phase, Deakin University worked in collaboration with local partners, Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) and the Afghan Institute of Strategic Studies (AISS) to gather data through archival research and interviews in Kabul, Islamabad and Peshawar. Data collection was led by Dr Zahid Shahab Ahmed, Dr Dara Conduit and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi. Dr Shabana Fayyaz of QAU and Mr Muhmmad Amir Rana of PIPS in Pakistan, and Dr Davood Moradian and Dr Omar Sadr of AISS in Afghanistan facilitated the data collection through in-person interviews and archival research. The project agenda and priorities were established with a gathering of policy makers and scholars from across South Asia and the Middle East in Islamabad in February 2019. A concurrent conference, organized in collaboration with PIPS, on 'Strategic dimensions of peace and conflict in South Asia and the Middle East' saw experts on Afghanistan and Syria from Australia, Qatar and the UK present research papers. Most recently, the project proceeded with two online policy dialogues bringing together a range of expert voices from those working on the ground and within academic and policy-making circles. Offering their insights on Afghanistan were Afghan politicians and political advisors, Indian diplomats and policy researchers, advisors to the Pakistani prime minister and members of the Pakistani military.

Deakin University funded a PhD scholarship for Abbas Farasoo to also work on this project. He has also been instrumental in building the project database alongside Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi, Dr Taghreed Jamal Al Deen and Neda Zeyghami from Deakin University, Narmeen Fayyaz and Mahnoor Rasheed from QAU, and Hadi Ayoobi and Homaira Sidiqee from AISS.

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