

US-Taliban Peace Agreement: A Study of Economic and Strategic Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

The competition among the regional stake-holders cannot be neglected because they can sabotage the peace process by delaying the focused intra-afghan dialogue. It is, therefore, argued that only Afghans can dilute the influence of external actors and keep them away from interfering in the internal politics of Afghanistan. Without the active participation of Pakistan objectives for durable and long-standing peace cannot be achieved. Pakistan not only provided its good-offices for the negotiation between the parties at different forums but also influenced and persuaded the Taliban factions for negotiations. The question arises that what will be the implications of this deal on Pakistan and how it can play plank the fruitful outcomes from this deal. The results shows that the deal between the US and Taliban has deep-down strategic and economic implications on Pakistan and with better strategy Pakistan can create win-win situation for the other regional stakeholders. Furthermore, the current research is qualitative in nature in which the empirical data and popular literature have critically analyzed to understand the peace agreement in Afghanistan with its different dimensions and perspectives. Policy recommendations are the part of discussion, however paper focuses fundamentally on possible ramifications of Doha peace deal.

Keywords: Afghan Peace Process, Negotiations with Taliban, Afghanistan Conflict, Doha Agreement, Pakistan's Role in Afghan War.

1. Introduction

Nearly two decades ago, US attacked Afghanistan and toppled Taliban government backed by the international consensus to dismantle Al-Qaeda and other affiliated conglomerates allegedly involved in 9/11 incidents. This objective was undoubtedly, accomplished soon, but later on, the nature of goals changed from defeating Al-Qaeda to state-building projects in Afghanistan. The settled long-term objectives were to introduce liberal democracy, principles of rule of law, inclusivity of various ethnic factions, women rights and infrastructural development of war-torn country (Raza, 2019). After ousting the Taliban government from Kabul by the US, the world community was hoping that this would ultimately bring peace and stability in Afghanistan. Reconstruction started at various level including reforms in administration so that to plug-in the governance gape by the US and international community.

Nonetheless, stability was not in the offing because of the stiff resistance by the Jihadi-driven Taliban. Achieving the ambitious projects was not a piece of cake amidst surmountable insurgency, ethnic rivalries and rampant corruption which made the US war much prolonged in Afghanistan (Global Witness, 2016). As the war prolonged, rising cost of the intervention led to decline in the popularity of this endless US adventure. Pew Research Centre argued that in 2018 only 45 percent Americans believed that the US had made the right decision of using military might in Afghanistan, whereas 70 percent believed so in 2006. Likewise in 2009, 62 percent Americans believed that the US would succeed in Afghan war. However, this percentage fell sharply to 49 percent in 2018 (Raza, 2019).

When Washington decided to target Taliban and other militant groups hiding in Afghanistan, her sole mission was to eliminate the militant outfits which were considered direct threat to global peace. The US Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was, in fact, Al-Qaeda focused and the US with the assistance of NATO troops achieved this objective soon but Americans got entangled into a permanent battle with Taliban (Shahzad, 2011). Many times, security managers and government officials of Pakistan tried to convince the US authorities to engage the Taliban in dialogue process so that long-term enduring peace could be achieved. However, the US continued its militaristic policies in Afghanistan. Emergence of neo-Taliban with fierce strikes on foreign forces and acceleration of search operations by the allied forces further aggravated the situation (Schaffer & Schaffer, 2011).

Nevertheless, in 2009 when Barak H. Obama assumed the office of president Afghanistan was his central concern. By adopting two-way policies, first he increased number of troops in Afghanistan to hunt down the Taliban and at the same time, secondly, gave task of negotiation with the Taliban to his special representative for Pakistan-Afghanistan Richard Holbrook. First-ever contact between the Taliban and the US took place in 2009 (Woodward, 2011). Obama administration realized that Afghan conundrum cannot only be solved through militaristic approach and it needs amicable means as well. In the same year office for the Taliban was opened in Qatar so that process of peace could be initiated (Reuters, 2013).

The US and Taliban signed a historic peace agreement in the presence of international guarantors at Doha after eighteen-month of long negotiations. As per the deal, the US is ready to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan with the assurance by the Taliban that they would not allow al-Qaeda and other affiliated conglomerates to use Afghanistan's soil against the US and its allies. Needless to say, that Doha agreement provides a chance to the Afghans to decide their future but at the same time the deal is considered precursory in its nature which is based on inter-connected sections of the agreement.

2. Literature Review

As the research is related to current issue that is US-Taliban peace agreement so most of the literature consulted during research work is based on newspapers, electronic media, magazines and very few of the books which helped in providing some historical background related to the thesis. The book "*How Pakistan Negotiates with the United States: Riding the Roller Coaster*" by Schaffer, H. B. & Schaffer, T. C. highlights the negotiating history of Pakistan with the United States which was mostly shaped by the Pakistan's distinctive history, geography and political culture.

Saleem Shahzad book "*Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11*" gives

a detailed description about Al-Qaida's strategy of dealing with the US and NATO alliance. Their objectives of how to defeat the Western forces, to impose Sharia law and also to fight the Muslim elites who are in alliance with the Western powers has been elaborated in the book. The book gives a clear picture of the scenario before and after 9/11 incident thus helps us understand the Afghan Taliban's mindset.

"US and Taliban reach an agreement 'in principle' on Afghanistan, envoy says." A CNN news report mentioned that the US envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad stated that the US longest war will finally come to an end as it has caused an expense of billions of dollars to the American exchequer and also lost thousands of Americans lives. The report also highlighted that US troops withdrawal will be finalized once peace negotiations with the Taliban begins and materialized.

A news report in The Express Tribune titled "Burdened Economy: Pakistan Has Spent \$200b on Afghan Refugees" elaborated on the issue of the Afghan refugees wherein it has been mentioned that for 30 years Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees which cost it \$200 billion. Once, peace is restored in Afghanistan only then it can be possible for the Afghan refugees to repatriate.

Reuters (2003) report titling "Afghan Taliban opens Qatar office, says seeks political solution" mentioned that Taliban wanted a just solution to the war torn Afghanistan where foreign occupation could come to an end. United States on the other hand stated that the peace process could be lengthened and wanted the Taliban to break ties with al Qaeda, end violence and accept the Afghan constitution.

An international online news magazine in one of its article titled "What has Pakistan gained from the US-Taliban Peace Deal?" posted on March 6, 2020 stated that the peace process will certainly bring tranquillity in the region. Pakistan's role in all this process was adamant as when asked Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi in Doha by one of the journalist about the role of Islamabad in reaching out the peace deal. Qureshi replied this "wouldn't have happened without Pakistan".

Most of the literature deals with what is happening and gives journalistic opinion about the issue. The research paper gives a detailed account of the peace process and highlights the economic and strategic implications of all this process for Pakistan.

3. Research Methodology

Research is qualitative and descriptive in nature in which the already available facts and information about the contents are critically analyzed. The data is collected through secondary sources as it was not possible to collect primary data due to lack of resources and other security limitations. Secondary data includes various books, magazines, experts' discussions, research articles, internet websites and newspapers. Apart from this popular literature is also the part of discussion. The research is divided into different section ranging from US-Taliban peace agreement to possible strategic and economic implications. To understand the different perspectives and identification of research gap literature review has been incorporated. Like all conflict studies this research does not claim to address the issue in completeness but one of the ways forward to understand the pros and cons of US-Taliban peace deal and its possible outcomes for Pakistan.

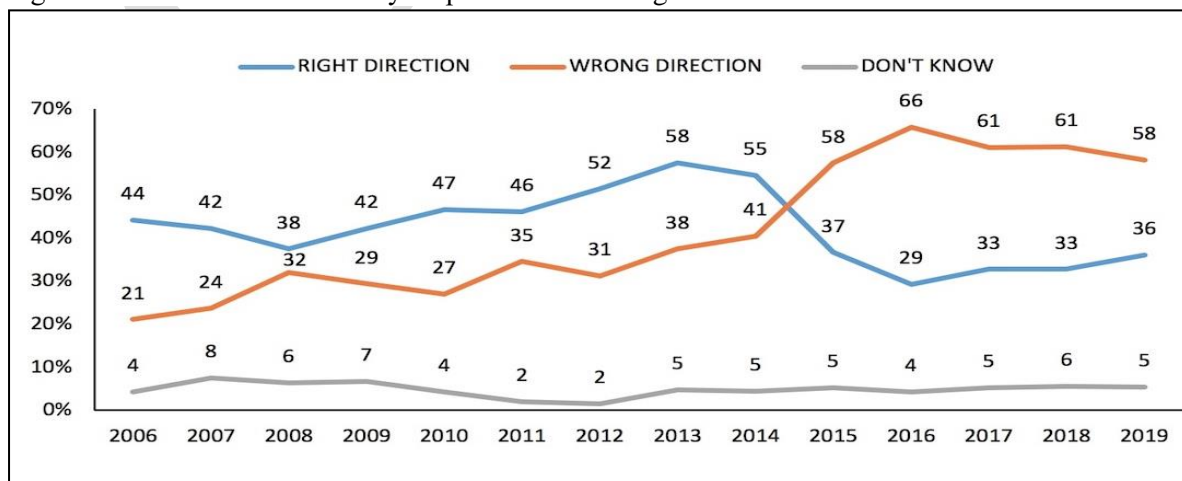
4. Discussion and Findings

4.1. Afghan Peace Process: A Brief Overlook

Peace efforts in Afghanistan got impetus in 2018 particularly when ‘Peace March’ initiated by the people of Afghanistan in Helmand in response to a car bomb blast in Lashkar Gah. In this attack nearly 14 people were killed and many were wounded. This march also called “Helmand Peace Convey” (Business Standard, 2018, June 19). The protesters not only met Ashraf Ghani in Halmand but they also observed sit-in in front of UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. The protest turned out to be a leading inspiration for other peace movements in different parts of Afghanistan. In response to the peace march, Taliban and Ashraf Ghani inked a cease fire agreement in June 2018 so that the people can enjoy the celebration of Eid-ul-Fitar without any fear. Taliban moved together with general public and met security forces of the state. Civilian population demanded the extension of cease-fire and permanent peace but Taliban refused the proposal and started attacks on security forces (Business Standard, 2018, July 7).

The US official started back-channel contacts with Taliban in Qatar office in July 2018. Following these meetings, in September 2018 President Donald Trump appointed special advisor to Afghanistan Zelmly Khalilzad to further precede the talk with Taliban and to convince them for intra-Afghan dialogues (Sen, 2018). In October 2018, Khalilzad arranged talks with the Taliban and the US at Doha. On the other hand, Russia also remained active energetically in Afghan politics and hosted talks in Moscow between the Taliban and the members of Afghanistan’s High Peace Council. Although, talk’s sessions continued in December and January 2018 in spite of Taliban refusal to meet Afghan government officials since they considered them as stooges of the US, Taliban spoke to the ex-president Hamid Karzai at Moscow (Karzai, 2018). Further progress took place in February 2018 when on the request of the US, Pakistan released Mula Abdul Ghani who, later on, participated in peace negotiations. Optimism for peace was not only high at parties’ level but also among the masses (see figure 1). Khalilzad, after the talks, stated that the talks were productive this time round and peace draft was mutually agreed by the parties. The draft includes the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan in the agreed time and the soil of Afghanistan would not be used for the radical Jihadists groups. Taliban officials, later on, formally indicated the continuation of dialogue process in the future (BBC News, 2019).

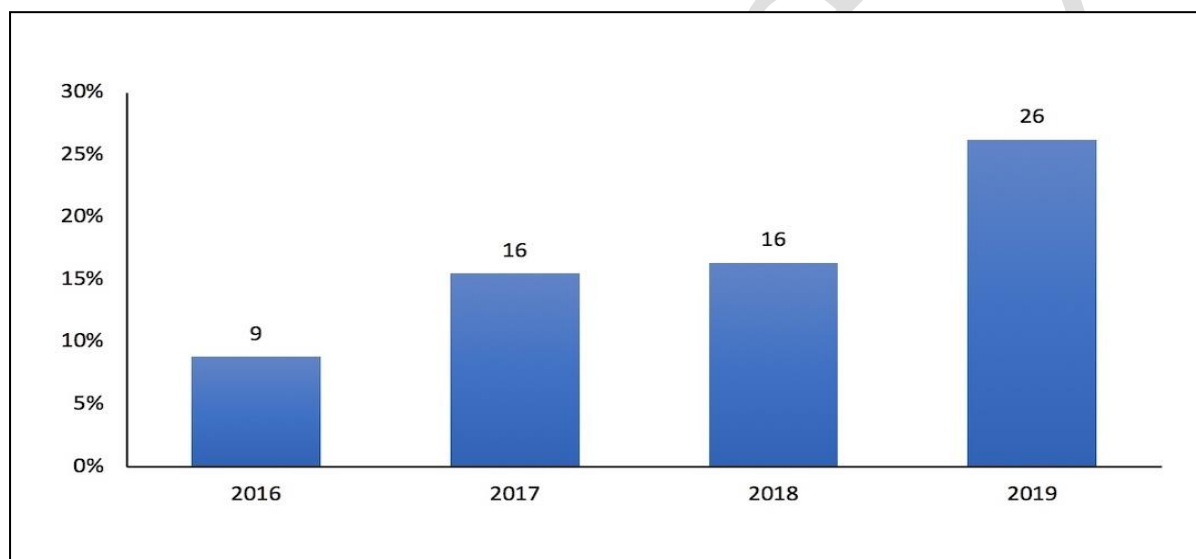
Figure 1: Direction of the country’s optimism about Afghanistan.



Source: The Asia Foundation (2019, December 4)

Afghan government hosted four days peace talks of Loya Jirga between April 29 and May 2019 in which Taliban were invited but they refused to participate. Later on, Russia provided good offices and arranged talks between the Taliban and members of Afghan politicians (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2019). In the eighth round of talks which were held in Qatar between the US and Taliban in August 2019 which gave silver-lining to peace in Afghanistan as reported by Washington post that the US and Taliban are near to sign agreement whereby the US withdraw its 5000 troops and the land of Afghanistan will not be used for the terrorist activities especially against the US (Gaouette, 2019). It was acknowledged even by the Khalilzad that agreement is almost final and pending for the approval of president Trump who, however, cancelled the deal after the attacks on the American troops by the Taliban less than a week later. However, Taliban sent their delegation to Russia to discuss the future prospects about peace where they stated that their doors were open for the talks and it was now up to Washington to resume the talks. In this regard country profile mood shows that in years of 2018 and 2019 people were much hopeful about the enduring peace (see figure 2). Resultantly, dialogue process started in December 2019 which was concluded with the US-Taliban historical peace deal at Doha on 29th February 2020 (Qazi, 2020).

Figure 2: Country's mood that Afghanistan is moving in right directions especially in 2019.



Source: Survey of The Asia Foundation (2019, December 4)

4.2. US-Taliban Historic Peace Deal at Doha

On February 20, 2020 The US and Taliban signed a peace deal in Doha in the presence of international guarantors. Originally the draft agreement consists of four parts which is translated into Pashtu and Dari text as well. The four parts are interconnected which are majorly depends on the commitment of each party. Part one deals with commitments of the US while part two provides information regarding commitment of Taliban. The remaining parts are dependent on the successful completion of the first two parts. Summary has been extracted from the original agreement¹ which is as follow:

- The US will withdraw all its military forces including the forces of its allies and coalition partners. Moreover, non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private contractors, and other supporting staff will also pull out within fourteen months following announcement of this

agreement. For this the mechanism has been adopted that the measures will be taken within 135 days after the announcement of the deal. It has been mentioned further that US forces will be reduced to eight thousand six hundred.

- The US agreed to completely pull out its troops from five military bases.
- All the remaining forces of the US and coalition partners will be withdrawn within nine and half months including from the military bases.
- The US will release Taliban pensioners up to five thousand by March 10, 2010. However, on the other hand, Taliban will also release one thousand prisoners of its side. It has further been committed that both the sides will release the remaining prisoners in the following three months. Nevertheless, it has categorically incorporated that in the deal that the released prisoners of Taliban will not be engaged into militant activities which pose direct threat to the security of the US and its allies.
- US will review the sanctions inflicted on Taliban as soon as Taliban will involve in the process of intra-Afghan dialogue by August 27, 2020. Furthermore, US will start diplomatic engagement with the members of UNSC and the members of Taliban from the sanction list with the aim to achieve the objective of peace. In addition, US and its allies will not use force and intervene in domestic and political affairs of Afghanistan.
- Conversely, Taliban will not permit and cooperate with the individual and groups including al-Qaeda to use the soil of Afghanistan especially the areas which are in the control of Taliban to threaten the security of the US and its allies. Further, Taliban will not provide asylum, protection and residence to those who pose threat to the security of the US and its allies even they will not provide visas, passport and travel permits to such kind of criminal elements to enter into Afghanistan.

Arguably, the peace deal is good omen for the regional stakeholders in general and for domestic actors of Afghanistan in particular. Nonetheless, the deal is mostly perceived to be precursory one because its major sections especially part three and four depends on the fulfillment of first two parts. Apart from this, the regional players' competition in Afghanistan cannot be ignored which directly will affect internal politics of Afghanistan. Taliban enjoy favorable support of Pakistan and to the great extent of Russia. On the other hand, Northern Alliance still gets support from India and Iran against the Taliban (Syed, 2020). These actors have a great influence over the parliamentarians of Afghanistan because of their financial investment. It is therefore, significantly argued that Doha deal cannot be survived amidst debilitating competition among the regional stakeholder. Thus, international community should also convince these players to signed an agreement of non-interference and let the chance be given to Afghans to decide their destination in the pretext of Doha peace agreement.

4.3. Economic and Strategic Implications of Doha Peace Deal for Pakistan

US-Taliban peace deal will have immense implications for Pakistan. Pakistan being bordered with Afghanistan will certainly been positively affected by this peace deal. Peace in Afghanistan, if prevails, will boost trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The North West Frontier region now called as the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is bordered with Afghanistan and which is directly affected whatever happens in Afghanistan. It was this bordered area especially the erstwhile FATA region that bears the brunt of war in Afghanistan. Millions of refugees crossed the border and entered these areas during the conflict. The refugees in millions affected the scanty resources of Pakistan especially the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The peace deal will help in improving trade between the two neighbouring

countries. Afghanistan as not having direct access to the sea depends on Pakistan which provides it a short and direct access to the Indian Ocean. Exports and imports of Afghanistan will boost which in turn will reduce the trade deficit between the two countries (The Express Tribune, 2013).

The peace deal will flourish peace in the region which will improve the financial and economic conditions of both the states. Successful peace deal if prevails will also increase cultural and social contacts between the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan. As people on both sides of the Durand Line have cultural and linguistic similarities, cordial relations between them will further be strengthened. Peace deal between US-Taliban will also have implications in terms of peace in Pakistan where terrorist activities will be alleviated and relief will prevail in the tribal region bordered with Afghanistan.

Pakistan being the prime facilitator in all this peace process will surely get much benefit. The people of Afghanistan have realized that it is now in their interest to focus on their internal matters and assured the international community that their soil will no longer be used by terrorists. The peace deal will further help in manipulating the mindset of the Afghan government where they will realize that borders of the country should be made safe and secure to stop the miscreants from their heinous activities (Yousafzai, 2017). This will help in future to make border management force on both sides of the Durand Line. Once this is achieved, security situation in the erstwhile FATA region will improve which in the long run will boost economic activities in these areas. The tribal area is rich in natural resources like coal, chromites, marble and other untapped resources which can be exploited for betterment of the tribesmen and the country as a whole once peace is fully restored (Yousafzai, 2017).

Another impact of the peace deal will be in the form of refugees' repatriation. Millions of Afghan refugees for decades have been living in Pakistan. Their presence added hardships affecting the local population as they overburdened the already strained economy, services and infrastructure. The large concentration of refugees has also damaged the environment where they used woods as the primary source of fuel for their comfort. Their waste products added to the pollution factor. Repatriation now seems to be a viable solution to all these problems. Voluntary repatriation can only be possible if the peace deal last for long. The implication of this on Pakistan will be that environmental degradation will stop if millions of refugees go back to their home country. The meagre resources of Pakistan where local population is short of jobs, labour work and small business opportunities will be saved. The locals will get all those opportunities of labour and businesses which the Afghan refugees have occupied (The News International, 2019).

Another implication of the peace deal for Pakistan will be in relieving burden from the hospitals and paramedics especially of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The hospitals of Peshawar, a capital city of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, are extremely over populated because of patients from Afghanistan and refugees. Repatriation of Afghan refugees will certainly ease that tension. This in turn will relieve much of the burden from doctors. Once that burden diminishes, doctors' efficiency will be improved. Health infrastructure will improve and proper attention and care will be provided to the local patients. The peace process if successful will also instigate the Afghan government to focus on establishing their own hospitals and health facilities for their own people. Peace anywhere begets developments and investments. Situation related to health will certainly improve on both sides of the Durand Line (40 Years of Afghan Refugees, 2019).

Refugees compete with the local population for resources like water, energy, food, housing, medical services, transport, social services and employment. Repatriation will certainly reduce this competition. Hikes in prices of different commodities will automatically fell down. Rents of houses and other properties will be reduced which will also help the poor strata of the host country (Pakistan).

For decades Afghan refugees have been accommodated by Pakistan government wherein large number of them in the rural areas maintained pressure on the local administration. This has put additional costs on the exchequer of the government. Repatriation will reduce that pressure from the government's shoulders. The threat to the eco system, caused by about two million Afghan refugees who accelerated the wear and tear of roads and canals and significantly consumed fuel and fodder resources, will certainly be removed once the US-Taliban peace deal become a success (The News International, 2019). The common problems caused by the refugees are deplorable law and order situation which added to theft, murder and crime rates etc. Repatriation thus will have positive social impact in Pakistan where such type of problems will be reduced if not eliminated completely

On the external level the implications of US-Taliban peace deal will be far better for Pakistan. The role that Pakistan played in facilitating this peace deal has brought its importance on the international platform. Pakistan during this process emerged as a prominent actor of the region. It was realized by the international community particularly the United States that without Pakistan, it would not be able to broker a peace deal with the Taliban. One of the journalists asked Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi in Doha during a signing ceremony about Islamabad's role in reaching the deal. Qureshi remarked, "This would not have happened without Pakistan" (Jamal, 2020). Pakistan's importance cannot be denied in the affairs of Afghanistan. Pakistan's stance is that peace in Afghanistan is its first priority as it means peace and stability inside its own borders as well. A stable Afghanistan means a stable Pakistan (Jamal, 2020).

On the international platform United States in reciprocity helped Pakistan on the FATF (Financial Action Task Force) issue. Pakistan has worked and is working a lot to fulfill all the requirements to be not included in the blacklist of FATF. Pakistan during US-Taliban peace deal has restored its own relation with the United States. It is because of this that the US President Donald Trump repeatedly offered his role as a mediator on the issue of Kashmir between Pakistan and India (The News International, 2020).

Another implication of the peace deal for Pakistan will be in the form of diminishing Indian's role in Afghanistan. Pakistan time and again has reiterated that India has created intelligence network in Afghanistan to destabilize Islamabad through cross border terrorism. Taliban being close in relation to Pakistan is recognized by the international community as a force. Taliban's presence in the new Afghan governmental setup can help Pakistan to counter the Indian influence in Afghanistan. India on the other hand has already realized during the peace process that they have been side lined (Haidar, 2020). Peaceful Afghanistan will also boost tourism sector of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The natural beauty of the bordered areas of Pakistan and the beauty and serenity of Afghanistan will attract tourists from all over the world. This will boost tourism industry of both the countries and will help in generating billions of dollars. Trade and cultural activities will be enhanced between the two states. In peaceful circumstances Pakistan will provide easy visa regime and medical tourism to the people of Afghanistan which in turn will help Pakistan in revenue generation (Rehman, 2017).

The peace deal aims peace and stability in Afghanistan. Strategically Afghanistan being a landlocked country needs access to the sea for its maritime activities. Pakistan provides a short route for Afghanistan to the Arabian Sea. Pakistan on the other hand can get access to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) through Afghanistan. Pakistan's emerging economy is in need of natural resources which it can get from the resourceful countries of CARs. Even if peace prevails the untapped natural resources of Afghanistan can be exploited for the benefit of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

5. Conclusion

Nearly eighteen years back when the US attacked Afghanistan, it convinced its masses that the annihilation of Al-Qaeda is essentially important for global peace and especially for the security of the US. Osama Bin Laden was not handed over to the US which consequently toppled Taliban government. Resultantly, the people of Afghanistan bore the brunt of the catastrophic incidents nearly for two decades. In this entire episode, Pakistan played a role of frontline state and suffered greatly in terms of human and financial losses. During Afghan imbroglio Islamabad sporadically tried to convince Washington to engage in negotiation process with the Taliban but Bush administration ignored the mechanism. However, Obama Administration first time realized the significance of dialogue and gave task to its special representative to start negotiation process with Taliban. In this context, Pakistan's role was inevitable because it was in a position to persuade Taliban and bring them to the negotiation table. Evidently, Pakistan's consistent efforts for peace bore fruit with Doha agreement.

Peace in Afghanistan, is no doubt, a win-win situation for all the parties, particularly, the people of Afghanistan. It will not be untrue to say that Doha peace deal will bring positive strategic and economic implications for Pakistan and the region. On strategic front, Pakistan can get direct access to Central Asia as well as expand its CPEC project to Afghanistan, CARs and Russia. Long-standing hostile issue of border-management can also be resolved amicably by applying cultural diplomacy. Further, Pakistan will reduce its armed troops from its western border and will focus on its eastern border. Economically, repatriation of Afghan refugees to their country not only will reduce the burden on the economy of Pakistan but at the same time trade with Afghanistan will further boost-up economic activities between the two countries. Doha Peace deal became possible because of a change in Pakistan's foreign policy which was previously based on security-oriented approach whereas now the focus is on economic orientations and dimensions.

The US-Taliban peace deal signed in Doha though signaled some hope for restoration of peace in the region but with some unpredictability and doubts. The situation may probably be exploited by some miscreants and armed groups who are not in favor of peace and stability in Afghanistan. Some of the armed groups are not aligned with the Afghan government and the Taliban. Most of these groups are involved in smuggling and narcotics trade whose financial interests could certainly be jeopardized in peaceful Afghanistan. They for sure will try to protect their financial interests through violent means. Outcome of the peace deal will only be successful and visible if intra Afghan talks begin. The direct impact of the peace deal will certainly be on the Afghan neighboring country Pakistan. If successful and last for a long time the peace deal will for sure has positive outcomes and implications for Pakistan's interests in the region and beyond.

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Note:

¹ Agreement for bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan which is not recognized by United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America: February 29, 2020 which corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar Calendar and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.