



Conventional Approaches to Conflict Settlement and the Quest for Sustainable Peace in Afghanistan

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Abstract:

In the contemporary global arena, the conflict spectrum has transformed substantially, with the phenomenon of inter-state wars being replaced by the intra-state violence as the predominant form of combat. Since the conflict paradigm is constantly evolving, especially with the increasing participation of diverse actors besides the nation states, so has been the corresponding evolution of the settlement mechanisms. However, Afghan conflict seems to have defied the widely accepted norms of conflict resolution diplomacy thus far, and the peace negotiations among the belligerents have mostly been taking place informally without any conventionally structured methodology. The departure of American-led-coalition forces resulted in the military takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, without any power sharing agreement through a formal conflict resolution mechanism. Thus, in the face of persistent internal fissures, discord as well as external intrigues, the peace and stability of Afghanistan would continue to be fragile without a consensual settlement process.

Keywords: Afghanistan, conflict settlement, internal wars, negotiations, mediation, reconciliation

INTRODUCTION

The occurrence of conflicts is a perpetual phenomenon, which is regarded as a constant feature of the history and has been existent ever since the creation of humans. For nearly two centuries, wars have been waged by the states or sovereigns for gaining territorial expansions, control over resources and greater influence compared to the adversaries. In the pre-World War II global arena, outbreak of hostilities resulting into armed combat among the nation states has been the principal form of warfighting and systematized violence. Subsequent to the last Great War culminating in 1945, the phenomenon of large scale inter-state military conflicts has substantially declined and ventures aimed at violating the territorial integrity of the nation states are least accepted. Hence, the majority of post-World War II conflicts have been internal and aimed at gaining control over the state structures as well as replacing either the leadership or the ideological orientation (Lipschutz 1998, 7). These conflicts are caused by various factors including ethnic polarization, religious fanaticism, political repression, financial inequality, scarcity of resources, and even due to endemic corruption by ruling elites (Dolgopol & Gardam 2006, xv).

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In the contemporary world, prospects of the outbreak of hostilities among the 44 wealthiest nations are regarded as virtually non-existent, with phenomenon of violence almost exclusively occurring within 'fourth world' of the least developed Third World countries (Rupesinghe 2016, 9). According to the considered opinion of analysts, a vast majority of conflicts ensuing internationally at present are internal ones, with enhanced potential of making spill over into the global system (Burton 1991, 63). While occurrence of conflicts in any form is not an unusual phenomenon, its settlement, which is sought through various methodologies and approaches, can also be expected as a predictable development. It is claimed that civil conflicts are settled when some of the specific persons, influential and communities, who have both power as well as authority, reckon that peace can offer more incentives as compared to the continuation of violence (Lipschutz 1998, 6). Historical precedence somehow validates this argument as neither the war fatigued communities nor any mass anti-war mobilizations are credited for ending the conflicts or bringing about peaceful resolution of the issues. The decades of Afghan violence can be bracketed with the intra-state conflicts that have commenced amid cold war dynamics and continued getting influenced by the global events thereafter.

The violence in Afghanistan appears to be an internal conflict, which has mainly origin in domestic instead of systemic dynamics and contain politically inspired bloodshed within the geographical boundaries of a single nation state (Jackson 2001, 65). While the fall out of such violence is hard to contain from proliferating in the neighbourhood, and may embroil the external actors as well, however, it is still categorized as an internal conflict. The four decades long Afghan imbroglio ensued with the Soviet occupation in 1979, shaped in to civil war during nineties, infighting continued during presence of American-led-coalition and the country is far from stability even after return of the Taliban. Over nearly forty years of violence, there has been several initiatives, which pursued the settlement of Afghan conflict but without any worthwhile as well as sustainable breakthrough. In the hindsight, the peace efforts in Afghanistan mostly sought momentarily relief in the violence, rather than addressing the deep rooted conflict environments and have not therefore been much productive. Following the exit of Coalition Forces without adequately resolving the conflict, Afghanistan is facing yet another phase of chaos and instability, which has all the potential to spill over in the region and beyond. This paper evaluates the prospects of peace in Afghanistan and contends that notwithstanding momentary respite in the violence, sustainable resolution of the conflict is improbable without devising and adhering to a structured conflict settlement mechanism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Debate over various dimensions of conflict and its settlement mechanisms has been a very popular subject, especially in the post-cold war arena wherein the concepts of responsibility to protect and humanitarian interventions gained currency. Mary Ellen O'Connell (2008), Johan Galtung (1965) and Eileen Babbitt (2009), have highlighted different aspects of the 'armed conflict,' terming it a 'system with two or more incompatible goal-states,' and 'international if ensuing across national borders.' John Burton (1991) have explored the dynamics of conflicts that are 'internal ones' while Ho-Won Jeong (2008) and Richard, Jackson (2001) suggested that conflict is 'a struggle over values.' Galtung (1965) and Babbitt (2009) talk of 'conflict management' and role of 'international conflict resolution (ICR)' in the settlement of the conflict. Tom Woodhouse (2000) underlines 'war

lord insurgencies,' a phenomenon quite akin with Afghan conflict, while David Shearer (2021) highlights inadequacies in the approaches that are designed to 'rely solely on negotiations' but thinks that 'mediation' process can yield desired outcome. Christopher Clapham (1998), William Zartman (2007) and Gerald Cormick (1989) are of the view that 'negotiated solutions' can lead towards 'political process,' and 'third-party intervention.'

Stephen Ryan (1990), Margot Light (1984) and Ronnie Lipschutz (1998) regard 'management of conflict' as the initial step of the 'conflict resolution' suggesting that it 'offers a more viable outcome to conflict' through 'a process of bargaining'. For Kumar Rupesinghe (2016) 'violent conflicts' are getting more frequent as well as intense, while Charles Webel and Johan Galtung (2007) identify novel 'conflict management approaches' with the greater involvement of the UN, individual states as well as NGOs. Roy Licklider (2005) believes that the wars ending with 'military victories' are more sustainable than those culminating with 'negotiated settlement,' while Caroline Hartzell and Hoddie Matthew (2007), Paul Pillar (2014), Barbara Walter (1999), James Fearon (1998) and Chandra Sriram (2008) highlight 'indivisible stakes' including 'high value 'on military' gains that can undermine 'sustainable cooperation' and essence of comprehensive 'reconciliation' process. In sum, there is very elaborate and immensely well-researched work available on the intricacies of conflict and its settlement methodologies, however, a need was felt to correlate it with the post-American exit Afghanistan, where Taliban's return at Kabul has not been through some formal power sharing agreement with their domestic opponents.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is undertaken in the descriptive form, which seeks to investigate the phenomenon of conflict settlement in Afghanistan by primarily relying on the qualitative method. Descriptive research design is employed for understanding the current status of the subject under investigation thereby elaborating the dynamics of Afghan conflict as well as the fate of various peace endeavours in the country. As broadly accepted, this technique is resorted to for describing the prevalent dynamics of a situation at a particular stage, while discovering the causes leading to a specific phenomenon. Thus, the research aims at analysing the conventional mechanisms of conflict settlement and its application in post-American exit Afghanistan, where the peace efforts have essentially been limited to management rather than seeking a resolution. In order to comprehend the factors influencing the quest for sustainable peace in Afghanistan through conflict resolution, available input from sources like books, articles, biographies, newspaper reports, maps and photographs has been consulted and referred to, while suggesting a way forward.

UNDERSTANDING AND CATEGORIZING AFGHAN CONFLICT

In the post-World War II arena, outbreak of international conflicts has mostly been witnessed in the global periphery that maintained an intra-state disposition, or possessed a significant intra-state dimension, even if these appeared to be inter-state disputes (Jackson 2001, 65). Consequently, violence in Afghanistan can be a typical manifestation of present day armed conflicts, where the physical engagement of nation state militaries against each other is not viewed but involvement of all the actors to a conflict, whether state or non-state, is abundantly perceptible. Present Afghan conflict was instigated with the involvement of erstwhile Soviet Union through the patronage of Saur revolution in the country, which later turned into a proxy war between the Communist and

Capitalist blocks. Essentially, the violence in Afghanistan had ensued domestically between the pro-Moscow rulers and the Islamist Afghan groups, supported by the US led West and the regional countries opposing expansionist Marxism. Later, during the post-9/11 global dynamics, the US led Coalition forces collaborated with the mainly non-Pashtun Afghan resistance groups, which were active internally for the ouster of the Taliban.

The post-9/11 Afghan conflict, where the Kabul Regime was backed by the American led allies, cannot be termed as international conflict in classical sense, as it did not contemplate a physical armed engagement among sovereign states. Whereas in the hindsight, the conflict in Afghanistan did not involve two or more sovereign states in a direct engagement across international borders, however, its influence has always been regarded as regional or even to the extent of being global. According to the accepted understanding, a conflict is considered 'international' if it ensues across national borders with primary actors being the sovereign states; or even a violence taking place within the borders of a particular nation state, but drawing in external actors either mediators or alternatively as allies of conflicting factions, can have regional or global ramifications (Babbitt 2009, 540). Consequently, the four decades of war in Afghanistan has not only shaped the regional environments, but with the added involvement of diverse international players, its impact is visible in the global arena as well.

It is also proposed by some of the analysts that in its extreme modes, instigating internal conflicts can be regarded as a deliberate phenomenon, which helps vitalize the 'war economies' and shapes the environments for benefiting an array of external as well as internal actors (Jackson, 2001, p. 66). Moreover, the contemporary internal conflicts are viewed as latest dimension of emerging social construction, which is adapted for survival on the margins of the global economy, thus making these wars lucrative and rational option for those seeking advantage and power through violence (Woodhouse, 2000, p. 12). With regards to conflict in Afghanistan, the conflicting militant groups have been alleged for relying on Narcotics money, extortions and kidnapping for affording the war expenditures. On the other hand, some of the Afghan factions and communities have acquired enormous financial rewards by aligning themselves with the influential external players. The four decades of instability and relentless conflict has given rise to the phenomenon of warlord culture in Afghanistan, introducing a socio-political clique which is well beyond any accountability. It may be prudent to assume that although some of the violent clashes like the one in Afghanistan can primarily be caused by internal dissensions, however these conflicts are shaped to have strategic implications, both regionally as well as globally.

Relevance of Conflict Management and Resolution Debate with Afghan Conflict

The argument over the divergences between disputes and conflicts distinctly reflects two different situations, one being negotiable, while the other among those where compromise between the adversaries is complicated (Burton 1991, 63). Thus, the distinctive conceptions with regards to being negotiable or less likely to be compromised, necessitate well diversified approaches for executing the sustainable remedial process. All type of armed conflicts whether internal, international or regional, involve members of various communities as the primary actors and entail a thorough understanding of societal ontology. In addressing the issues where social problems are required to be addressed, it must be recognized that any degree of coercion or repression cannot potentially confine the human developmental aspirations (Burton 1991, 66). In Afghanistan,

despite substantial American efforts at militarily conditioning and luring in the combatants through monetary incentives, the Taliban could not be forced into giving in and instead they amply demonstrated human resilience.

The terms such as 'conflict management' and 'conflict resolution' are often resorted to in the contemporary world for describing the status of an armed clash, whether inter or intra state. Notwithstanding the shared quest of peace, both these terms carry different connotations, strategies, methodologies and influences. The conflict management highlights the efforts of third parties, which is undertaken with the consensus of the belligerents for limiting the proliferation or escalation of a conflict, reducing sufferings, and creating an environment that is conducive for interaction, while not resorting to violence (Butler 2009, 15). Conflict management can thus be defined as an endeavour, which essentially seeks controlling or containing an ongoing armed combat between politically motivated actors, and operates at the state as well as sub-state level, usually with the help of a third party (Butler 2009, 13). In the hindsight, management of a conflict may appear as the preliminary phase, which if successful can lead to the eventual or more comprehensive negotiations for the resolution of the dispute through reaching a broader consensus among the belligerents.

On the contrary, conflict resolution aims at modifying and ultimately putting an end to a contentious struggle besides addressing its sources, however, the process is far more complicated compared to mere settlement of the peripheral issues (Jeong 2009, 10). Conflict resolution thus aims at promoting reconciliation at the elementary level of a conflict by addressing the core grievances instigating a specific dispute, while satisfying the concerns of all the involved parties (Butler 2009, 15). As per another connotation, conflict resolution is projected to be a process of bargaining between former adversaries that is accomplished through mediation largely by a neutral third party, which takes in to cognizance and satisfies the demands of all sides (Lipschutz 1998, 7). For the successful execution of conflict resolution, it is imperative to have the consent as well as contentment of the adversaries to a conflict, since no solution can be imposed from outside other than some kind of facilitation by a third party (Ryan 1990, 58).

Apparently, the focus on managing the conflict essentially reflects that it has been established as being very complexed, deeply entrenched, and intractable issue for instant resolution, thus prompting efforts at managing the adverse influences instead of resolving its underlying causes (Butler 2009, 15). The Afghan conflict has been a prime illustration of being highly complexed, deeply rooted and visibly an intricate violence, where emphasis has been on management rather than resolution of the longstanding causes of dissonance. It may be appropriate to suggest that greater focus on management of the conflict rather than seeking resolution has eluded the prospects of a sustainable and irreversible peace in Afghanistan. After nearly two decades of presence in the country, the abrupt exit of the US led international forces has resulted in an unprecedentedly swift takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, ostensibly imposing new challenges for an enduring resolution of the conflict. While the triumph of the Taliban may have undermined their opponents even if temporarily, and helped in somewhat managing the Afghan conflict for the time being, the long term peace is still linked with the amicable resolution of the conflict.

International Conflict Settlement Mechanisms and Afghanistan

Conflict settlement in the post-cold war arena seeks employment of both formal as well as informal approaches for opening up of communication channels between the adversaries and shaping of conducive environments for peace initiatives. International conflict resolution envisages to employ all means less violence to settle the inter-state as well as intra-state disputes, and strives to transform the relationships among the disputing parties in a way that the future prospects of fighting are minimized (Babbitt 2009, 540). As part of formal mechanism, governments can back the process by designating special envoys to facilitate negotiations, conciliation and mediation while international organizations may contribute with fact-finding missions or back channels communications (Jeong 2009, 13). In the contemporary global arena, the brewing human and material detriments of the conflict are regarded as a threat to humanity, hence, there are greater aspirations internationally to limit the proliferation of violence. Thus, the international institutions like the United Nations (UN) have a role of intermediaries since conflicting parties need to be facilitated in undertaking meaningful analysis of their mutual relationships face-to-face, despite not having recognized each other or even being in a state of war (Burton 1985, 47).

Consequently, the existence of a functional institutional mechanism with a globally accepted neutrality, reach and potential is inevitable for addressing conflict situations in the world and bringing about sustainable peace. With greater focus shifting towards negotiated settlement of the conflicts, the UN has been perceived to assume a proactive role in mitigating the prospects of violence and ensuring the peaceful co-existence of the world. Presently though, the conflict management is not exclusively linked with the UN alone; the international, transnational and regional organizations, the states - both individually or as part of a coalition, and even individuals have also been playing a significant role in the development of a conflict management regime (Butler 2009, 19). Afghan conflict can be branded among those quagmires in the post-World War II international arena where the UN seems to have a comparatively laid back role in the conflict management. Despite presence in the form of United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the UN neither assumed a proactive role in the country, nor it had much receptivity as a neutral arbitrator among the Taliban leaders.

Applicability of Conflict Settlement Methodologies in Afghan Conflict

Conflict resolution in the post-Cold War global dynamics seeks to back the peace processes with advisory, consultative and facilitative roles arranged through workshops, training and support in various domains, which are proposed by the local groups (Woodhouse 2000, 20). Essentially, the goals of the conflict settlements are achieved by facilitating negotiations for breaking the deadlock, mediating on the persistently contentious issues and eventually leading to a broad based reconciliation of the violence emboldened society. These initiatives can help in addressing trust deficit, however, the execution is principally linked with the development of consensus among the conflicting parties for ending violence. Thus, in the chaotic environments like Afghanistan where one of the violent groups seems to have achieved military ascendancy over its opponents, probability of consensus between the adversaries on conflict resolution appears unlikely. While the initiatives of negotiations, mediations and reconciliation as the methodologies for Afghan conflict resolution are dilated upon in this paper, intervention as an option is discarded due to the highly militarized and volatile dynamics of the country.

Negotiations

- The origination of negotiation is regarded as an arduous process, which is aimed at ascertaining the principal demands of the belligerents to explore the potential of any concessions or identify the areas where consensus is possible (Whittaker 2002, 4). The conflict resolution by pursuing negotiated solutions seem to rely on the presumption that the fighting groups, while participating in the political process, have consented on a common value framework, wherein divergences can be ultimately negotiable (Clapham 1998, 206). However, this assumption may not be very much in line with the historical perspective on conflicts even within the Western culture itself, where the preceding template has seen 'winner take all'. Apparently, post-US exit Afghanistan finds one of the conflicting parties gaining military ascendancy, and the triumphant group may not feel much obliged to develop consensus with its adversaries. Hence, a consensual way forward to cease the hostilities can only be possible, when each participant of the conflict is conscious of the potential fallout and prospects of mutual hurt.
- Negotiations between the conflicting parties may commence directly or can involve facilitators when the disagreements are deep-rooted and seemingly insurmountable due to lack of trust. The involvement of facilitators implies role of third parties, which can traditionally have more space for manoeuvre with minimum to 'lose' if proposals made by them are not agreed to or radically modified (Whittaker 2002, 5). Peace negotiations are fragile when one of the groups is pressed to concede, since the concerns of the party compelled to accept the imposed provisions continue to be unresolved. On the other hand, peace negotiations can help avoiding armed confrontations if the adversaries are persuaded to seek mutual solutions that promise to meet the objectives of both sides (Jeong 2009, 13). Paradoxically, the prospects of finding mutually acceptable solutions in Afghanistan have been somewhat marred when the mighty US led Coalition and its Afghan allies opted to militarily condition the Taliban for ending the violence.
- One of the key ingredients of a negotiated settlement is deliberations among the rivals over post-conflict power sharing mechanism; the agreement can either be reached at with direct talks or alternatively, may need facilitation by third parties (Caroline & Matthew 2007, 6). Negotiating power sharing arrangements to end protracted conflicts have always been the most sensitive phase, where divergences among the belligerents could potentially derail the entire process. In prevailing environments, talks over post-conflict power sharing mechanism in Afghanistan between the combatants directly, and without the facilitation from third party, may seem odd but cannot be ruled out as a viable option. However, it is generally perceived that mediated peace process can be more balanced, realistic and to an extent durable as it is likely to contain incentives for all parties. Here again, the responsibility of amicably reaching at a workable power sharing agreement in Afghanistan is left at the discretion of belligerents, since the process could not be initiated during international presence in the country.
- Peace talks are least likely to yield desired outcome if the belligerents are unable to reach at the mutually consensual way forward or unwilling to concede their maximalist demands. Thus, if the stakes are largely indivisible and neither side achieves most of what it aims at without denying other of what it expected, negotiations are unlikely to be successful (Pillar 2014, 24). Over the years, the prospects of mutual agreement on the settlement of the conflict through negotiations have been non-existent during the peace endeavours in Afghanistan. The Afghan warring factions have, thus, historically made use of the peace talks as the bargaining chip to gain strategic ascendancy against the opponents, which otherwise could not be attained through kinetic option.

- The peace parleys are not helped when the belligerents accord an equally significant value on military gains hence, preferring to bargain over-aggressively for comparatively bigger rewards (Walter 1999, 131). The inflexible approach for comparatively superior goals may at times be rewarding for a side which is more resolute, however, it can stagnate the entire peace process if each party adopts a non-yielding posture. It can be presumed that in the hindsight, the resilience displayed by the Taliban militia against its far superior military opponents, has rewarded them immensely, even if it may be reversible or momentary. Ostensibly though, the Taliban have achieved a decisive ascendancy over their local adversaries in the post-US exit environments, however, impact of this military victory over long term future of the country and sustainable peace cannot be estimated at this stage.

Mediation

- Attainment of breakthrough among the conflicting parties during negotiation process leads to a phase, where mediation by a third party may be required to help address some of the contentious issues for reaching at an agreement. Mediation is thus essentially a mode of negotiations, wherein a third party seeks to facilitate the conflicting parties in finding a solution that otherwise may seem unattainable by them at their own (Zartman 2007, 155). Historically, the negotiated settlement is identified as the most sustainable means of ending a conflict as it offers certain incentives for all the belligerents and can, therefore, lead to a consensual way forward. The politically deliberated accords mostly address the power-sharing issues mediated through the third-party guarantees, which can strengthen the sustainability of peace agreements (Sriram 2008, 4). Notwithstanding several peace initiatives in Afghanistan over the years, the conflict could not be resolved through a well-structured, thoroughly deliberated and consensually pursued negotiation and mediation process. Thus, despite little semblance of peace after the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, Afghan conflict is far from being resolved with simmering political dissensions persistent among several ethno-social communities.
- During a conflict, the process of mediation highlights third-party intervention, which neither envisages the direct employment of force, nor it is meant to offer any of the participant undue favour in getting ascendancy against the opponents (Zartman 2007, 155). However, the third-party guarantees can only ensure sustenance of peace process when the guarantors are powerful as well as influential enough to ward off the prospects of tricking by any of the parties, and mitigate deliberate violations. Mediation is expected to yield desired outcome, when all the parties to a conflict or one of the parties come to fear the potential fallout of the continued fighting and is prepared to concede from a maximalist stance (Shearer 1997, 847). Paradoxically, the Taliban sway in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of international combat troops may persuade the opposing groups to accept some kind of mediation process for the settlement of the issue. However, finding an influential mediator acceptable to all parties of the conflict, especially in case of Afghan violence, appears to be a challenging proposition.
- Third-party guarantees are vital to ensure that all the provisions of the peace agreement, agreed between the conflicting parties during the mediation are respected and accordingly implemented. However, the process of mediation can be a complicated phenomenon and may carry widely different connotations for various players. Thus, the mediation process or those mediating may not solely be aiming at addressing a conflict situation and can instead be looking at preserving their national interests. The states generally prefer to use mediation as one of the foreign policy instruments and their craving for peace is often intertwined with other motives as well, primarily in the context of international power politics (Zartman 2007, 156). It would be prudent to infer that the actors volunteering to be the mediators may have certain stakes in the conflict and its potential outcome or else, they might prefer to stay away.

Consequently, prospects of a mediatory resolution of Afghan conflict have often been envisioned minimal as the geopolitical aspirations of various regional and international stakeholders in Afghanistan are regarded diversified and contradicting.

- In case of protracted conflicts like the violence in Afghanistan, where dissonance between warring factions is deep rooted, the trust deficit is mostly irrepressible and hard to remove. Notwithstanding consensus for peace, the problems which can potentially hinder meaningful progress include: divergence among the combatants on sharing of the stakes; each group seeks maximalist gains, leaving least prospects of compromise; none is prepared to divulge actual information about respective military potential or staying power; or unyielding stance over demands that cannot be backed down (Walter 1999, 131). All these factors which reduce the prospects of a sustainable peace agreement, can be relevant with regards to the conflict in Afghanistan, especially when the US led military Coalition has pulled out of the country after two decades of war. Whereas a momentary relief in the fighting among conventional Afghan opponents can be viewed in the country after the return of the Taliban, violence is persistent in the form of the suicidal attacks and bomb blasts at public places. Hence, without comprehensive peace mediations, the security environments in Afghanistan can potentially deteriorate further, if anti-Taliban non-Pashtun communities initiate armed struggle against the current regime at Kabul.

Reconciliation

- The successful negotiations lead to mediated peace agreements among the warring factions, which can be implemented in true letter and spirit only, if the environments are conducive and each side is prepared to trust other. Negotiated peace agreements often fail to yield desired outcome, when conflicting parties cannot prevail over the bitterness as well as grievances of a protracted violence, and are unable to revisit their hostile perceptions and mutual fears (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004, 4). Hence, the sustainable implementation of peace agreements necessitates an institutionalized process for removing longstanding trust deficit among the belligerents, and convincing them to accept the agreed provisions as mutually rewarding. Conflict management and resolution studies reflect numerous instances, where initial accomplishments in the peace processes were rendered fragile and reversible in the long-term, owing to the persistent animosity among the warring factions. Ideally speaking, a genuine, sustainable and realistic reconciliation process, where all Afghan warring factions could agree for peaceful settlement of their differences, has never been initiated in the country. Essentially, reconciliation in Afghanistan has often been viewed and even pursued as a policy instrument for attaining strategic ascendancy against the opponents.
- In the hindsight, the negotiated and mediated agreement can help achieving truce in the short term but for a sustainable peace in the long term, reconciliation of the war torn society is inevitable. Reconciliation is thus a process that seeks to restore the environments of peaceful coexistence, a state where different entities are not disposed to harm each other, and where revenge is not an option (Webel & Galtung 2007, 174). The term reconciliation seems a complex phenomenon, since it is both a goal - which is something to achieve - and a process - basically an instrument to achieve that goal (Bloomfield, Barnes & Huyse 2003, 12). The expression reconcile means the proposal to come back collectively into a council, implying that let's set-aside differences and work harmoniously together (Webel & Galtung 2007, 174). On the contrary, the post-US/ NATO exit Afghanistan reflects a society where prospects of a mutually pursued and consensually shared way forward seems a distant proposition.
- In simple understanding, reconciliation aims at alleviating the hostilities, removing trust deficit and promoting harmony among the rival factions after resolving the conflict or transforming

the relationship from animosity to amity. A successful reconciliation process averts the renewal of conflict on the pretext of violent past and helps in consolidating peace, breaking the cycle of violence, while strengthening the post-conflict democratic institutions (Bloomfield, Barnes & Huyse 2003, 19). Thus the process is envisaged to go beyond the simple agenda of conflict settlement to transforming the inspirations, objectives, beliefs, attitudes, and sentiments of the majority populace about the violence, mutual relations among the factions, and the association within a group pursuing mutual interests (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004, 12). For achieving durable peace, it is imperative that the warring factions not only abide by the provisions of agreement but proactively seek broad based and all-inclusive reconciliation. However, at this stage of Afghan conflict, none of the warring factions, whether the triumphant Taliban or most of the groups which formed part of the ousted Kabul regime, appear keen at initiating a deliberately sought, viable and all-inclusive reconciliatory process in the country.

- Reconciliation being the eventual goal of a peace initiative, is hence expected to be an evolutionary process, which would take a gradual course and require a passionate involvement of the influential leaders of all the conflicting parties. In Afghanistan where unabated violence has continued since last four decades now, prospects of a broader reconciliation among the warring factions for a sustainable and irreversible peace should be envisaged as a long drawn process. With the Taliban gaining control over most part of the country being one of the warring factions, the probabilities of reconciling the Afghan nation appear challenging. Apparently, convincing a hardliner militant group that perceives militarily victory after a long struggle, for accommodating and reconciling with their opponents seems an enormous mission. Thus, without an honest and persistent display of magnanimity by the triumphant Taliban with the opposing factions, the pursuance of sustainable peace seems difficult in a deeply fragmented country. It can, therefore, be rationally presumed that the semblance of peace in the country would continue to be fragile, reversible and momentary without a broad conflict resolution process, which entails reconciling all the Afghan communities.

Sustainable Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan: The Inevitable

The dynamics of the conflict in Afghanistan may have been decisively transformed with the military takeover of the country by the Taliban, ouster of the internationally recognized Kabul regime and exit of the US led coalition forces. Notwithstanding the triumph of one of the belligerents, hostilities and discord among Afghan groups continue to persist and the conflict is far from being resolved. Emerging situation in Afghanistan warrants fresh approaches for conflict resolution in the country, which can be little different from the contemporary methodologies and may introduce innovative and more visionary options. Some of the suggested measures that are proposed by the conventional conflict settlement methodologies and would require an honest involvement of all international as well as regional stakeholders for sustainable peace in Afghanistan, are as under:

- The consensual settlement of protracted conflicts necessitates removing misperceptions among the adversaries, which is vital for not only resolving the differences but also institutionalizing the new relationship (Jeong 2009, 4). It is imperative that the Taliban are convinced and facilitated by the international community in addressing the deep rooted mistrust among Afghan communities as well as removing misperceptions about their future policies.
- International community needs to continue the process of facilitating and encouraging negotiations between various conflicting groups in Afghanistan, even after the collapse of the Kabul regime and takeover of the country by the Taliban. An internationally backed process of negotiations among various Afghan groups, none of whom may accept defeat, is inevitable for

bringing together the combatants and thus peacefully resolving the armed conflict (Caroline & Matthew 2007, 6).

- During long-drawn-out conflicts like the violence in Afghanistan, the combatants of opposing sides are well acquainted with the conflict realities and maintain the previous as well as emerging enmities and prejudices towards adversaries (Jeong 2009, 7). The future administration at Kabul, whether proportionately represented by all politico-ethnic entities or dominated by the triumphant Taliban, may be convinced and facilitated by every stakeholder for alleviating prevalent discord among all the factions.
- A broad based reconciliation is crucial for a sustainable peace after inter-ethnic, inter-racial, or inter-religious violence that inclines to be prolonged, involves extensive bloodshed, results in many casualties, and exacerbates enmity in the society (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004, 4). Many of the anti-Taliban Afghans may find it hard to reconcile in the immediate future, however, it would be crucial that all domestic stakeholders in Afghanistan are persuaded for peaceful coexistence.
- The Taliban are required to be convinced that the obsession to impose conflict resolution terms through coercive bargaining can help in short-term settlement but at some stage, the protagonists forced to concede, may revisit the agreement under favourable circumstances (Jeong 2009, 9). Taliban leaders can be reminded that the US pursued Afghan peace by coercing the opponents, which primarily envisaged at imposing a solution, had failed in the not too distant past.
- Reconciling for the peaceful resolution of conflict is reckoned to be a mutual and consensual process and anticipated to offer shared rewards, thus the probability of it being imposed unilaterally by one side or through a mediator may be somewhat remote (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004, 5). Presumably, the conflicting parties in Afghanistan can agree for reconciliation, if each side is made to comprehend the potential incentives with the peace and prospects of mutual spoils from continued violence.
- Mutually agreeable settlement of Afghan conflict, even after the military victory of the Taliban, can be facilitated by helping the warring factions in developing shared interest and willingness towards a collectively sought way forward. Otherwise, if Taliban's opponents are compelled to offer concessions over the contentious issues under duress and without reaching a broader consensus, the existing impression of peace would continue to be reversible.
- In sum, all Afghan warring factions shall be persuaded to accept that the strategy of coercive tactics designed to hurt the rivals, has proved to be inapt and abandoning it is vital for settling a conflict, besides agreeing to initiate an extended process of relationship transformation (Jeong 2009, 10). However, the quest for Afghan peace can only succeed when the external stakeholders are ready to play positive as well as a sincerely enabling role in the country, regardless of their respective geopolitical interests.

CONCLUSION

The conflict in Afghanistan is one of the longest, bloodiest and most complexed phenomenon, which continues to be unresolved even after almost four decades, notwithstanding numerous peace initiatives. Analysts suggest that neither a military triumph nor a negotiated settlement essentially means resolution of a conflict; moreover, tangible conflict resolution is rather doubtful soon after a prolonged cycle of violence. Apparently, various conflict management and resolution initiatives have not yielded desired results in Afghanistan and the incessant violence can potentially proliferate in the entire region. Thus, for understanding a conflict and seeking its resolution, it

becomes essential to evaluate the prevalent roots of discontent and enmity, ascertain the stages of evolving relationships among the adversaries, and illustrate escalation in their struggles.

According to one perception, the pursuit of mediated settlements may unintendedly prolong the conflict, resulting in the continued suffering of civilians, whereas the resolution sought with kinetic option can be foreshortening the violence by persuading the losing party for a settlement. It is thus suggested that there are inadequacies in the approaches, which are designed to rely solely on negotiations for reaching at a consensus among the parties, as the dynamics of the internal conflicts appear least likely to respond to this strategy. In some cases, it might be an effective strategy where one of the belligerents, or the side opposing the regime has gone weaker, endured unacceptable reverses in the battlefield or is prepared to abandon militancy. Moreover, in Afghan context, prospects of result oriented mediation through contemporary settlement mechanisms, whether state sponsored or initiated by informal means, appear remote as these are generally patronized by the US led West, perceived to be the part of the conflict.

Notwithstanding the popular narrative of preferring the option of peaceful resolution, the wars ending with military victories have been least likely to recommence, compared to those culminating through negotiated settlements. In Afghanistan, the exit of the US led coalition forces and ouster of the Kabul regime has apparently led to the military victory of the Taliban, thus resolution of the conflict now solely depends upon the strategy of triumphant forces. The prevailing situation leads to a natural query that, can Taliban's military takeover of the country after the exit of the Coalition Forces, bring any semblance of peace or conflict resolution? It may be too embryonic to suggest the prospects of peace or persistent violence in some tangible form at this stage, however, the display of a magnanimous posture by the triumphant Taliban can heal the bleeding wounds. In addition, response and policies of the international community, especially the financial support institutions over developments in Afghanistan will have predominant influence as effort to penalize the Taliban can result in damaging fallout.

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