



Image Credit: U.S. Department of State

The Afghan Peace Talks, QCG and China-Pakistan Role

The Quadrilateral Coordination Group has failed to fulfill its purpose.

By Halimullah Kousary

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Recently Mullah Haibuttullah, the Taliban's new chief, in his first [Eid message](#) warned of continued conflict until what he called the "occupation of Afghanistan" ends. Weeks earlier, his deputy Serajuddin Haqqani referred to the Afghan government as [a puppet regime](#) and said that holding peace talks with it was futile. The Taliban's defiance over peace talks with the Afghan government comes as a NATO summit in Warsaw is expected to reaffirm the West's commitment to Afghanistan. The evidence strongly suggests that there is scant cause for optimism over the future of the peace talks and that the Afghan government's efforts in the form of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) to get regional countries to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table has to date yielded no results.

The failure of the QCG – which involves China, Pakistan and the U.S. in addition to Afghanistan – is not due only to the apparent recalcitrance of the Taliban; it can also be blamed on the pursuit of individual objectives by certain QCG member states. The failure is also an indication that Afghanistan will not be able to count on these states playing an effective, neutral role, nor on the agreement of the Taliban to peace talks, as long as there is a Western footprint in the country.

Pakistan's role in facilitating peace talks is critical, given its clout within the Taliban. However, Pakistan is not inclined to make efforts commensurate with that clout and push the Taliban towards peace talks. This suggests two hypotheses about Pakistan's role. First, an important issue to consider is the extent to which Pakistan has the will to help facilitate peace talks. It appears that Islamabad is questioning its interest in a reconciliation between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan under the current constitution. Pakistan calculates that a post reconciliation role for the Taliban in the Afghan government would not give Islamabad the influence it wants in Afghanistan. Given this policy paradigm, even if elements within the Taliban show interest in peace talks without the behest of Pakistan, events in the past have shown that Pakistan will target and neutralize these elements if peace talks are truly Afghan-led and Afghan owned.

The second hypothesis is whether Pakistan really does not have the influence, as it claims it does not, with the Taliban to push the group towards negotiation. This hypothesis seems unlikely. Study the statements and actions of Pakistan vis-à-vis peace talks over last couple of years, and a contradiction emerges. On the one hand Pakistan sees the Taliban as a strategic asset and proxy to promote the country's interests and help it counterweigh India's perceived influence in Afghanistan. On the other hand, it talks of having only marginal influence with the group and using it as an excuse not to fulfill the promises it made as a member of QCG.

The main objective of QCG has been to either get all of the Taliban to negotiate or at least the reconcilable elements, and if the latter to then go after the irreconcilable elements and neutralize them. Pakistan not only acted against this objective but even argued that tough measures against the Taliban were not the way forward. The country's Advisor on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz recently stated that "Pakistan cannot fight Afghanistan's war on its own soil" and posited that taking military action against the Taliban would have "blowback" in the form of more attacks by the group. These statements are clearly at odds with Pakistan's touting of its ongoing military operation Zarb-e-Azb as a success and results-yielding offensive against the Pakistani Taliban in North Waziristan. Just last week, Pakistan's army took American senators on a visit to North Waziristan and apprised them of the progress the operations had made against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the outfit's infrastructure there.

Initially, there was a growing sense of optimism among Afghans about China's role in the QCG. But China pursued a paradigm somewhat similar to that of Pakistan and was attentive to what the Taliban expected from it. As a neighbor of Afghanistan and strategic partner of Pakistan, China is recognized as a key stakeholder in Afghanistan's stability. Afghanistan provided an open door for China's participation in setting up peace talks with the Taliban. This was grounded in the belief that China is capable of applying leverage and playing a constructive role in the peace process.

However, it appeared now that while China may be willing to play a role, it is hesitant to play the role expected of it in the peace process. First, China is concerned about stability in Afghanistan, but equally important for China is that it also wants to retain a balance in its policies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. Second, like the Afghan government, the Taliban are open to a China that is increasingly active in Afghanistan, but in terms that counterbalance the U.S. presence. The Taliban sees the U.S. as a negotiator, and wants China to be a mediator in negotiations with the U.S. and the Afghan government. China perceived that given the U.S. presence in the QCG, it could not play such a role. This may be why China lost interest in the QCG, becoming increasingly skeptical about the country's effective role in the peace talks.

QCG has failed to achieve the purpose for which it was created. The major reason for the failure was that states' individual interests did not extend beyond the Taliban. The Taliban is an actor secondary to restoring stability in Afghanistan. It is the countries with stakes in a stable Afghanistan that have to play the primary role – be that through a political settlement or through other necessary measures. With this commitment in place at the state level, the Taliban would feel pressure to negotiate; in the absence of that commitment, the group will remain defiant and will only be persuaded to continue its fight against the Afghan government.

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