PEACE AND STABILITY IN AFGHANISTAN FOSTERS SECURITY AND AMITY IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Peace, stability, and security in Afghanistan, the 'heart of Asia,' have always remained a matter of deep concern because the peace of Afghanistan preserves the peace in South as well as Central Asia. From early times, Afghanistan was at the junction of various civilizations as crossroads on the Silk Route, connecting the East to the West and Central Asia to the Arabian Sea as well as the Indian Ocean. Considering her the 'heart of Asia', Afghanistan has the potential to significantly influence regional and global politics by leveraging its shared cultures, ethnic traditions, and communal customs with these areas. The uncertainty in Afghanistan has generated ripples of insecurity and instability in the region, fractured the interests of its neighboring countries, and can potentially affect the contours of international politics. However, peace and stability in Afghanistan would be essential for intra-regional trade, economic prosperity and regional security. Moreover, it could play a central role in the socio-economic and political stability, transit, and trade across the continental barriers of the world. Afghanistan has been constantly a topic of discussion due to its volatile geo-political situation, which links South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Afghanistan has remained directly or indirectly associated in global power politics ever since its creation as a sovereign state. But unfortunately, almost throughout its history, the incessant chaos has been undermining its regional peace, prosperity and stability. Afghanistan has suffered many invasions of the external powers at different times during the course of its history. In the Great Game of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Afghanistan acted as a 'buffer zone' for the influential forces, as a middle-of-the-road between the British, American and Russian empires. Even during the Cold War, Afghanistan played a pivotal role in the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Cold War profoundly influenced the strategic thinking, security policies and sensitivities of the major regional states, resulting in conflicting interests and the formation of loosely structured regional alliances around Afghanistan. This study examines the role of South and Central Asia to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan and explores the different facets of various ruling governments in Afghanistan striving for their political struggle against the foreign powers. Unending instability in Afghanistan would disrupt global politics as well as regional politics, especially in Pakistan, China, Iran, and Russia. Resultantly, a peaceful and stable Afghanistan could significantly contribute to regional and global economic cooperation. The political unrest and uncertainty in Afghanistan could spill over into other states in the region. The creation of new ethnic 'Central Asian States' has primarily altered the security environment of the region. Nevertheless, the interconnected elements of regionalism, ethnicity and religion have rendered Afghanistan highly unstable for the entire region. The present research aims to unveil that despite internal clashes, the resistance of the Afghan groups suppressing the external powers is ultimately the dream of a peaceful Afghanistan leading towards a stable Afghanistan.

Keywords: South and Central Asia, Afghanistan, Superpowers, Peace and Stability, Security and Amity, Afghan Peace Process, Internal and External Players.

INTRODUCTION

Peace and stability in Afghanistan have been desired for several decades, but have remained elusive due to multiple factors. In order to understand the challenges faced in achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan, it is important to first examine the country's history, politics, and economy along with the ground realities. Afghanistan has a long and complex history of conflicts, marked by invasions, wars, and internal strife. In fact, Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic state with a central government that has historically struggled to control various regional and tribal factions.[1] The primary reason for the ongoing displacement within and from Afghanistan is the destruction of its political institutions, economy, and the country as a fragile state. As a politically and economically weak and impoverished nation, Afghanistan could barely withstand the influx of modern weaponry indiscriminately supplied to various social groups and ambitious leaders by superpowers during the Cold War and subsequently by regional contenders. Afghanistan is fragmented into a mosaic of regions under the predominantly tribal control of numerous ruling factions, some of which hold sway over the capital while, others control strategic positions throughout the country.[2] Generally, might is right is the rule of the country and has no proper governance model to run the state affairs. There is minimal regard for human rights and notably, there are no institutions working actively to protect these rights within the country. Overall, there is no formal constitution, judiciary, legal system, military or police force to maintain the law and order in the country. As a result, uncertainty prevails, and although various organizations and agencies in different regions apparently perform these functions, none adhere to traditional Afghan mandates or international laws.[3]

According to the United Nations report the Afghan population has been enduring a series of humanitarian crises, resulting in one of the largest humanitarian emergencies globally. This situation has been further aggravated by the country's economic collapse and international isolation.[4] After 1979, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the Afghan paramilitaries gained control of rural areas, while on the other hand, the Soviet troops detained urban areas. This conflict has also caused a huge migration of people, with millions of Afghans leaving the country in search of a peaceful place.[5] This has led to the destabilization of other

neighboring countries too, particularly the whole Southern and Central Asian regions.[6] In 1982, about 2.8 million Afghan refugees had fled to Pakistan due to the war, and approximately 1.5 million had sought refuge in Iran. However, in 1984, the United Nations conducted investigations into reported human rights abuses in Afghanistan. Additionally, from 1995 to 1999, a prolonged drought distressed the condition of farmers creating disappointments, and as a result, many rural areas became uninhabitable. Consequently, over one million Afghan refugees moved to Pakistan, where they endured harsh conditions in overcrowded refugee camps. Moreover, sanctions and the cessation of significant development aid have severely crippled the Afghan economy.[7] The primary causes of the Afghan problem consist of contending plans among the regional powers, the continued Talibanization of different Islamic groups in South and Central Asia, the expansion of a war economy, crises within regional states, and deepening interconnected crises of poverty. Furthermore, these Islamic Jihadis, or holy war fighters, pose a new trial to Pakistan, a significant ally of the United States in the war against terrorism. According to the New York Times, a Western diplomat has predicted: "There will be more and more terrorist attacks. It's open season not only against foreigners and Christians but also against the Musharraf's government in Pakistan".[8]

Similarly, Afghanistan has experienced multiple invasions and engaged by foreign powers throughout its history, including the British Empire in the 19th century, the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and the NATO-led coalition by the United States in the early 2000s. These invasions have pushed the country into chaos and the following conflicts have caused significant damage to Afghanistan's infrastructure and social fabric.[9] During the course of the Cold War, the superpowers maintained the perseverance of Afghanistan and provided coercive and financial resources, organizational models and its elites with respective ideologies. Consequently, the disruption of decades-long collaboration and cooperation among superpowers in the 1970s precipitated a period of confrontation. Efforts to negotiate an end to the war in the 1980s aimed to revive cooperation amid the competing interests that initially shaped and later destabilized Afghan peace efforts. The collapse of state institutions, particularly the army, following the dissolution of the USSR left Afghanistan

fragmented into a regional mosaic of armed quasi-authorities, lacking political legitimacy or national institutions. The country's political climate remained complex, which led to several factors hindering the peace and stability in Afghanistan. Besides this, the role of superpowers and the frequent invasions in the region played a vital role in sabotaging the country's peace.[10]

Keeping in view the statement of the problem, it is very important to mention here that identifying the research questions regarding the Afghan issue is mandatory. Conversely, in Afghanistan, the collapse of the bipolar system triggered the internal disintegration of the Afghan state, plunging the country into political turmoil and civil war. This situation raises several questions: was the Afghan conflict a cause or a consequence of the end of the geopolitical order, or a result of the power struggle between superpowers? Moreover, the Afghan conflict prompts intriguing conceptual inquiries about the international system—whether it still reflects remnants of bipolarity or if it signifies symptoms of a shifting international order characterized by the rise of multipolarity? Currently, there is no analytical framework available to definitively assert such a pattern affecting the Afghan landscape. However, the absence of a bipolar system has not necessarily fostered regionalism capable of managing regional security issues, such as those posed by the Afghan conflicts. In the light of the above mentioned research gap, this research aims to provide a precise examination of the Afghan issue from national, regional, and global perspectives, particularly within the framework of pre-Soviet and post-Soviet interventions in Afghanistan. This is a concise contextual analysis of the Afghan conflicts impact on the regional peace and security landscape in Southern and Central Asia. It focuses particularly on peace, stability, security, and cooperative relations among the regional stakeholders involved in addressing the issue. Further, the study examines how traditional and customary security methods influence the regional environment and perpetuate ongoing instability, leading to multiple crises. The uncertainty has given rise to various internal and external threats within Afghanistan. Additionally, the lack of a strong central government has empowered peripheral forces, contributing to the resurgence of suppressed ethnic and tribal factions—

an important area of inquiry in this research. It also examines the subsequent effect of the changing regional environment, which can damage the whole South and Central Asian region's peace and security. This research is an effort to answer the above mentioned questions keeping in view the Afghan peace process alongside its historical developments in the light of the statement of the Afghan problem.

Contextual Framework: Afghan Peace Process; Britain, US and USSR

Historically, Afghanistan has been constantly invaded and contested by superpowers and internally it has remained segmented. Situated at the crossroads between Asia and Europe, the region has faced conquests by Darius I of Babylonia around 500 B.C., and later by Alexander the Great in 329 B.C. In the 11th century, Mahmud of Ghazni extended his empire from Iran to India, making a significant period known as the greater Afghanistan of its time. Subsequently, Genghis Khan occupied the land in the 13th century, followed by periods of Arab invasions that persisted until the 1870s.[11] In the 19th century, amidst geo-political tensions between Britain and Russia, Afghanistan became a combat zone in the British attempts to protect their Indian empire, leading to a series of British-Afghan Wars in 1838-42, 1878-80, and 1919-21. The 'Third British-Afghan War' ended with the British defeat in 1919, paving the way for Afghanistan to declare its independence on August 19, 1919, establishing itself as an independent state.[12] In 1919, Amir Amanullah Khan (1892-1960), ascended to power as the Emir of Afghanistan and subsequently declared the country a kingdom rather than an emirate. Concerned about Afghanistan's perceived lagging behind the global community, Amanullah Khan initiated ambitious socio-economic reforms. His modernization efforts included significant reforms aimed at curtailing the authority of the 'Loya Jirga', the National Council. However, Amanullah faced widespread criticism for his policies, leading to armed opposition by 1928. At last, he abdicated the throne and fled the country in 1929.[13]

The diplomatic relationship between the United States and Afghanistan dates back to 1921, when King Amanullah Khan initiated formal ties with President Warren G. Harding (1865-1923), who served as the 29th president of the United States. Though, the US officially recognized Afghanistan in 1934, the first encounter between the two countries

occurred earlier, in 1830s, when an American explorer ventured into Afghanistan.[14] However, succeeding Amanullah, Zahir Shah (1914-2007), assumed the throne as the king of Afghanistan in 1933. He brought an advent of peace and stability to the country and ruled over the country from 1933 to 1973 for the next forty years.

In the meantime, General Sirdar Mohammed Daoud Khan (1909-1978), a pro-Soviet leader and cousin of King Zahir Shah, assumed as the Prime Minister of Afghanistan in 1953. During his premiership, Afghanistan looked to the Soviet Union for military and economic assistance. In 1956, Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), agreed to support Afghanistan, leading to a close alliance between the two nations. Daoud Khan also implemented significant social reforms, including increased public participation of women. As a part of these reforms, women were permitted to attend university and participate in the workforce starting in 1957.[15] In 1965, Afghan politics underwent a significant shift with the establishment of the secret cluster, 'The Afghan Communist Party', led prominently by Nur Mohammad Taraki (1917-1979), and Babrak Karmal (1929-1996). In 1973, Mohammed Daoud Khan orchestrated a military coup that toppled King Mohammed Zahir Shah, marking the end of the monarchy. Daoud Khan then assumed power as president and established the 'People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan' (PDPA). He served as the president from 1973 to 1978 and forged close ties with the Soviet Union, transforming Afghanistan into a largely socialist state. During his tenure, Daoud Khan introduced a new constitution, which granted women rights and aimed to modernize the country.[16]

However, Daoud's rule was marked by the suppression of political opposition, leading to the purge of dissenters from his government. Despite internal conflicts, Afghanistan received approximately $500 million economic aid from the United States between 1945 and 1978 but this aid was suspended due to the 1978 Saur Revolution in Afghanistan. Following Daoud Khan's assassination in a Communist coup in 1978, Nur Mohammad Taraki, a founding member of the 'Afghan Communist Party', assumed the presidency, with Babrak Karmal becoming the deputy prime minister. They initially asserted independence from Soviet influence and declared their policies to be rooted in Afghan nationalism, socio-economic justice, and Islamic principles. Concurrently, Taraki signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union to solidify close relations.[17] Nevertheless, a power struggle emerged between Taraki and Deputy Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin (1929-1979), another influential Communist leader, leading to internal conflict and factional fighting within the government. Unfortunately, Taraki was killed in a fight with Amin's supporters in 1979.[18]

In addition, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 provided financial support to Communist regime for its survival. On December 27th, Hafizullah Amin and many of his supporters were executed. Consequently, Deputy Prime Minister Babrak Karmal assumed the presidency of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1986. Widespread opposition to Karmal and the Soviet presence sparked violent public demonstrations. On the one hand, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan marked a critical juncture in the Cold War, leading the United States to provide financial support to Afghan resistance forces, which was suspended in 1979 following the killing of American Ambassador Adolph Dubs.[19]

Conversely, conservative Islamic and ethnic leaders who opposed social changes introduced in different times began an armed revolt in the countryside. Concurrently, the paramilitary Mujahedeen movement, composed of Muslims fighting for their faith, emerged to combat the Soviet-backed government. By the early 1980s, Mujahedeen rebels had unified against both the Soviet invaders and the USSR-supported Afghan Army.[20] In 1984, Osama bin Laden (1957-2011), a Saudi Islamist, made his first trip to Afghanistan to assist anti-Soviet guerrilla fighters. However, Bin Laden claimed to have arrived in Afghanistan shortly after the Soviet invasion began.[21] Similarly, during Jimmy Carter's Presidency from 1977 to 1981, and later during Ronald Reagan's Presidency from 1981 to 1989, the United States committed $3 billion aid and supported the anti-Soviet Mujahedeen forces through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). During the 1980s, the United States accepted thousands of Afghan refugees for rehabilitation and supplied weapons to the Mujahedeen. Simultaneously, in 1986, the Mujahedeen received arms from Britain, United States, and China through Pakistan. In September 1988, Osama bin Laden and fifteen other Islamists formed the group known as al-Qaida, meaning "the base" to continue their jihad (holy war) against the USSR and those they perceived as opposing their

goal of establishing a pure Islamic nation. They believed that their efforts contributed to the Soviet Union's struggle in Afghanistan and claimed victory in their first major battle. Whereas, they also began to redirect their focus towards the United States, viewing it as the primary obstacle to their vision of an Islamic state.[22]

During the final phase of the Cold War, a projecting viewpoint in the United States suggested that if the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan had not occurred, it might have been necessary to invade it. Conversely, Mikhail Gorbachev (1931-2022), who led the Soviet Union from 1985 until its disintegration in 1991, believed that resolving the Afghan conflict would have significant international implication, potentially fostering peace in the Gulf region, the Middle East, Southern Africa, Central America, and Cambodia.[23] Gorbachev's perspective proved prescient as the withdrawal of East-West forces from Afghanistan contributed to broader peace initiatives in the post-Cold War era, facilitated either through successful United Nations mediation efforts or unilateral interventions by the dominant global power, United States.[24]

In 1989, the USSR, United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan signed the Geneva Accords. The aim was to secure Afghan independence and facilitate the withdrawal of 100,000 Soviet troops. The final withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 marked the end of their direct intervention in Afghanistan.[25] However, the internal political conflicts that began with the Communist coup in 1978 persisted. It was largely fueled by aid and support from external powers on opposing sides. While, the Geneva Accords of 1988 and 1989 aimed to halt aid to both sides and foster international cooperation for peace, they were undermined by the rapid involvement of various players, including sectarian groups in Afghanistan. Despite Gorbachev's intentions to withdraw from Afghanistan, the United States and its proxy alliances did not stop their support for various armed factions in different capacities.[26] As the Kabul government weakened, external powers were ready to align with internal Afghan factions. However, frequent shifts in power dynamics within and outside Afghanistan, along with competing regional and ethnic power struggles to control Kabul since 1992, thwarted efforts to establish a unified governing institution. The emergence of the Taliban represented a new force in Afghanistan, but it has not been able to address the country's structural collapse

effectively. Afghanistan today, as described by Barnett R. Rubin, remains "a legally undivided territory of fragmented power".[27]

Following the Soviet withdrawal, the Mujahedeen continued their resistance against the Soviet-backed regime led by Communist President Dr. Mohammad Najibullah (1947-1996). He had assumed the Presidency of Afghanistan in 1986, the Soviet-backed state. Najibullah, aligned with the Soviets, served as Afghanistan's President until 1992 when he was ousted from power. In 1992, Mujahedeen forces and other rebel groups, supported by allied troops captured the capital, Kabul. Ahmad Shah Masood (1953-2001), who was a prominent guerrilla leader, led the assault and ousted Najibullah from his position of authority.[28] However, the United Nations offered Najibullah for his protection. During this period, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi (1926-2019), another Afghan guerrilla leader, assumed power in April 1992 as the acting president following the collapse of Najibullah's government. The Mujahedeen factions, already splintering as warlords vied for control, attempted to establish an Islamic state under the leadership of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani (1940-2011). From 1992 to 1996, Rabbani served as the President of Afghanistan, but again for a short time from November to December 2001 (exiled from 1996 to 2001). Despite initial hopes for peace symbolized by the Geneva Accords, they instead became a source of further discord. The United Nations was tasked with implementing a peace plan for a "period of transition", which proved ineffective. Meanwhile, the international community was preoccupied with addressing other serious global issues closer to the interests of the Western world.[29]

After the USSR, a US-led invasion entered Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, marking the first phase of what would turn into the twenty yearlong war. In fact, the US invaded Afghanistan as a consequence of 9/11 attacks in 2001to capture Osama bin Laden and topple the Taliban regime. However, Bin Laden was apprehended in Pakistan, and the invasion led to Afghanistan's reconstruction and re-establishment of global diplomatic relations.[30]

In 2012, President Barack Obama, who served as the 44th President of the United States from 2009 to 2017, designated Afghanistan as a major non-NATO ally. However, this status was later revoked by President Joe Biden, the 46th and current president of United States. The US involvement in the Afghanistan War is the longest war in American

history, concluded with the withdrawal of US troops starting on August 30th, 2021. The Taliban launched a successful offensive move, overthrowing the US-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and prompting the evacuation of US diplomatic personnel.[31]

On April 13, 2021, President Joe Biden announced the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. This withdrawal commenced on May 1, coinciding with a widespread Taliban offensive across the country. Kabul fell to the Taliban on August 15, 2021, resulting in the collapse of the Islamic Republic. President Biden acknowledged that his administration was taken surprisingly by the Taliban. The United States completed its troop's withdrawal on August 30, with the Taliban declaring victory. The US Embassy in Kabul ended its operations on August 31 and relocated to Doha, Qatar. On November 12, 2021, the United States announced the establishment of an interests section at the Embassy of Qatar in Kabul, serving as the protecting power for US interests in Afghanistan.[32] The diplomatic missions of the Islamic Republic in the United States operated independently for several months before closing down on March 16, 2022, and transferring their assets to the US State Department. Currently, there is no protecting power or recognition for Afghanistan in the US. Attempts by the United States to uphold a structured peace process between the Taliban and the former Afghan government faltered when the Taliban advanced on Kabul, resulting in the collapse of the Islamic Republic and the reinstatement of the Islamic Emirate.

Despite these internal and external political developments, ongoing peace building efforts remain crucial in Afghanistan. However, the importance of peace and stability in Afghanistan cannot be overstated. The conflict has persisted for so long that it has been infused into every aspect of life in the country, deeply shaking the nation's political, economic, social, and cultural order. Continuous wars have disrupted the functioning of institutions, shattered the infrastructure, and crippled the economy of Afghanistan. Conversely, the ground realities, internal and external challenges are the major hurdles that are preventing permanent peace in the region.[33]

Challenges and Realities

In Afghanistan, many of the challenges appear directly or indirectly interlinked with several aspects, such as the decline of the agricultural sector and irrigation system, along with the collapse of traditional, tribal, and social norms. Addressing these neglected areas is crucial for achieving tangible peace, stability, security, and harmony in the country. These include political instability and effective governance, the human rights and justice system, handling security challenges, managing the influence of the Taliban, and navigating regional and international engagements.[34] However, achieving sustainable peace requires addressing major issues that have been intensely debated over the decades of conflict. Resolving these core issues is essential for fostering a sustainable environment and long-lasting peace in Afghanistan. In 1995, the Taliban, an emerging Islamic militant group, seized power in Afghanistan with promises of restoring peace to the war-torn country. Their rise created a power vacuum among the various groups, including the Taliban themselves. This militant Islamist group governed Afghanistan from September 1996 to 2001. Many Afghans, weary from years of hardship including scarcity, famine, and continuous conflict, initially supported the Taliban for their stance on upholding traditional Islamic values.[35]

The Taliban pledged to crackdown on crime, ban the cultivation of poppies for opium production, and restrict women's employment and education. However, under their rule, women were mandatory to be in veil and were forbidden from going outdoors alone. Islamic law was imposed through public punishments such as amputations and executions. Despite these policies, the US denied to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Even today, the international community widely opposes the Taliban government and shows reluctance to recognize its rule. Most of the countries have not endorsed the recognition of the Taliban's initial period of ascendency except Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Taliban regime consistently disregarded the international laws of the Charter of the United Nations. On the other hand, the return of the Taliban after twenty years in the present scenario from August 2021 till date is alarming for Afghan peace and stability.[36] However, the majority of the Afghan people favor the world's stance of non-interference in their country. The country's economy is also troubled by numerous internal and external challenges.

Afghanistan, where a significant portion of its population lives in poverty, ranks among the poorest countries in the world.[37] The country is also mainly penetrated with corruption which has further hindered economic development and international investment.

Despite these challenges, there have been several efforts to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan. In this regard, one significant effort was the Bonn Agreement, which was signed in December 2001 following the US-led invasion of the country. This agreement established the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, with a mandate to formulate a constitution and hold democratic elections.[38] Since then, Afghanistan has held several rounds of elections, and progress has been made in various sectors such as education, health, and human rights. However, the country remains mostly troubled owing to internal and external conflicts.[39] Nevertheless, peace and stability are critical elements for any nation to grow and flourish, and Afghanistan is no exception. For decades, the nation has been plagued with violence, conflicts, and political instability, which had severe repercussions on the lives of millions of people. Afghanistan today is undergoing wide-ranging chaos, threatening its people and alarming its neighbors with numerous fears and insecurities. Despite this critical situation, the international community remains largely silent and there are no clear indications of peace settlement of the Afghanistan issue in the near future.[40]

The Human Development Index (HDI) of Afghanistan suggests that the country has been experiencing instability, weak education system, lack of infrastructure and gender disparity. The Afghanistan's stakeholders and global powers need to work on mutual agreement and work on human development in the country. By following the United Nations human development indicators such as education, health and living standards, the socio-economic status of the people will be uplifted along with better infrastructure and a good governance model leading a devastated nation towards peace and progress. To achieve lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan, several key factors must be addressed.

Security: The Security of any state is its basic requirement, which may contribute to the prosperity of the country. Ensuring the security of the Afghan people is essential for achieving peace and stability. It comprehends the end of the ongoing conflict with the Taliban and mitigating the influence of other extremist groups. Additionally, creating a strong and capable 'Afghan National Security Force' is crucial for maintaining peace and addressing internal and external threats to the country.[41]

Governance: Governance is another important factor to maintain peace within the state and to run the state machinery smoothly. Improving the governance model and introducing reforms in it is essential for building a strong and effective government, capable of addressing the needs of Afghan citizens. It will put an end to the menace of corruption, promote transparency, and ensure the inclusion and representation of all ethnic and religious groups. A good governance system can lead Afghanistan to develop its infrastructure and workforce.[42]

Economic Development: Economic development is considered the backbone and essential for the progress of any country. Improving the economic situation in Afghanistan is crucial for ensuring peace and stability. It implies bringing international investments, promoting local entrepreneurship and creating jobs that provide a decent standard of living for Afghan people. If Afghanistan can stabilize, its economy and many of the issues being faced by the state can be eradicated.[43]

Infrastructure: Infrastructure is the reflection of the prosperity of any country. The better infrastructure in Afghanistan will play a vital role in fostering peace and prosperity in the country, which includes the development of social and economic elements in the country. A better infrastructure is essential for ensuring that economic development can take root and that Afghan citizens have access to basic necessities such as clean water, electricity, and roads. It also includes investing in infrastructure projects such as dams, power plants, and transportation networks.[44]

Regional Connectivity: Regional connectivity is one of the most important factors not only for the Afghans but also for the whole region. Achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan hinges not only on the actions of the Afghan government and its people but also on the support and engagement of regional powers like Pakistan and Iran. Their involvement is crucial for reducing insecurity and fostering peace

and stability in the region. These efforts are as important as those taken by the Afghan government and its people themselves. A country like Afghanistan, already facing security challenges and other issues, can only be stabilized by having ideal connection with other regional states.[45]

Women Education: The period from 1996 to 2001 in Afghanistan was the initial era of Taliban rule, when women were suppressed under firm justification of Islamic laws, severely restricting women's rights. They were prohibited to attend school, work outside their homes or even leaving their residences without male escorts. The Taliban's policies imposed significant limitations on women's social lives, confining them primarily to their homes under stringent rules. The issue of women's education needs to be addressed and their socio-economic need must be understood and acknowledged. This will help to bring prosperity and bring the country on the tracks of socio-economic progress.[46]

Findings and Suggestions
Peace in Afghanistan is not only crucial for the country itself and its people but also for the entire Central and South Asian regions. It is clear that achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan will be a complex and challenging task, but it is not impossible. The key to attain this goal is a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses the underlying causes of instability and violence. By working towards greater security, improving governance, promoting economic development, investing in infrastructure, and engaging with regional partners, the Afghan government and the international players can collaborate to achieve a more peaceful and stable Afghanistan.[47] In this context, peace and stability in Afghanistan can bring an enormous transformation to the nation and the entire South and Central Asian regions. When Afghanistan enjoys peace and stability, there will be a remarkable progress in the establishment of a legitimate government and the rule of law as well as an expansion of basic social services in every sector. Ultimately, it will reduce the number of people who flee the country seeking safety and security. By bringing political and economic stability in the country the Afghan government can attract greater investment into the country and can

create economic opportunities at national and international level.[48]

Moreover, peace and stability in Afghanistan would have a significant role in minimizing regional security issues. When armed conflicts subsides the chances of insurgent groups exploiting a lack of trust among nations decreases. It is seen that people with extremist ideologies find shelter in conflict and then spill over the conflict to other countries, fueling different conflicts in South and Central Asia.[49] Addressing the regional security matters; brings the leaders of South and Central Asia together towards peace and progress, therefore providing a stable platform for future investments in multiple sectors such as energy, transport, and tourism.[50] There are also many unexplored natural resources in the Central Asian region. The destabilization of Afghanistan prevented Central Asian States from exploring those reserves. Turkmenistan has some of the world's largest natural gas reserves. Western companies have made every effort to gain access to these reserves but their main obstacle is geo-political conflicts in the region. To some extent, the geo-political condition of Afghanistan is the biggest obstacle in the way of exploring the Central Asian region. Although, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI), is only in black and white but it will not be physically implemented until there would be peace in Afghanistan. This is considered the final step towards regional economic success towards peace in Afghanistan. The political turmoil and frequently wars in Afghanistan ultimately provides safe heavens to terrorist groups. Destabilization in Afghanistan has a significant impact on neighboring states, particularly those in Central Asia where governments are simultaneously battling Islamic terrorism, human trafficking, and the drug trade.[51]

Countries such as Pakistan and India have a deep interest in the revival of peace and stability in Afghanistan. Both the countries remained partial participants in resolving the conflict and mediating a deal to establish harmony. Pakistan shares a long border with Afghanistan and is greatly affected by the situation in Afghanistan. The consequences of the decision of a rambling and bleeding Afghanistan is highly risky for Pakistan. There were severe humanitarian and economic effects on the millions of Afghan refugees who fled across the border to seek refuge during the past few decades. Likewise, it has been difficult to work through their bilateral relations

with issues concerning extremism and terrorism rooted in Afghanistan.[52] Therefore, peace and stability in Afghanistan will have multiple positive outcomes for the country itself and its neighboring countries. It would bring enormous transformation in socio-economic and political aspects, providing the opportunities to grow and develop according to the requirements of the people. Further, it will relieve security and related concerns for regional powers. These factors will be mutual, benevolent, and inclusive of diverse cultures in South and Central Asian countries and abroad. Consequently, there is a dire need to seek negotiations actively and establish sustainable networks to framework for peace in Afghanistan.[53] A successful peace deal requires the inclusion of all major stakeholders because true success can only come from a process that is both led and owned by the Afghans themselves. Even the major development in Afghanistan is the withdrawal of US-led NATO coalition troops from Afghanistan in August 2021.

However, their exit from Afghanistan opened a new debate for the future survival as well as peace, stability, security and amity in Afghanistan after the return of Taliban government in present scenario.[54] Gestures to bring peace in the region such as releasing the prisoners of war, lifting bans on leaders, and ceasefire can help to build self-reliance and confidence among all the stakeholders. These steps have been encouraged by insurgent groups, regional and international community, demonstrating their commitment to Afghan peace, stability, security, and regional prosperity.[55] On the other hand, undoubtedly, several critical issues require careful attention, including the state constitution, the governance system, and a practical power-sharing plan that all stakeholders can agree upon it. Addressing these governance and constitutional challenges demands close collaboration with internal stakeholders. However, the future of Afghanistan must be determined by the Afghan people themselves. A successful peace deal requires a strong commitment from all stakeholders involved in the peace process. The regional players continue to ask the United Nations and other international forms for peaceful solution of the Afghan conflict.[56] Generally, whenever there is progress in the Afghan peace process, uncertainty arises regarding which parties should be included or excluded. The critical question arises that; who are the main groups involved in the peace process of Afghanistan? Their existence create

a significant trust deficit among all the internal and external stakeholders for the peace settlement—whether the Taliban, the Kabul government or the other key elites. Thus, there is an urgent need to bridge and channel the trust deficit among all the stakeholders which are the part of this peace process. The involvement of external stakeholders is also crucial for establishing peace in Afghanistan.[57]

After enduring decades of relentless violence, Afghans are overwhelmingly eager to live in peace. Although, the insurgency's end brought some respite, Afghanistan still faces severe security threats, including the presence of terrorist groups like Islamic State- Khorasan Province, internal Taliban divisions, potential armed resistance to the Taliban government, powerful criminal networks, and the daunting task of reintegrating thousands of former soldiers, militiamen and Taliban fighters into civilian life. Moreover, Taliban elements and other actors have perpetrated extrajudicial killings, targeting former government officials and human rights advocates further complicating the path to last peace and stability. With the passage of time, various structures operating in Afghanistan—such as legal frameworks of governance, community institutions, provincial, national and international institutions, along with the ambiguous dynamics of the war economy and related networks—have attempted to shape society according to their interests, often excluding certain segments. These actions have contributed to increased societal violence. The war economy, in particular, is seen as a major source of insecurity, perpetuating social inequities that provoke reactions and exacerbate insecurity due to flagrant injustices.[58]

The international allies in the peace dialogue must include US, Russia, Pakistan and China. While, India and Iran have also significant interests in Afghanistan, India has declared its decision to remain outside the dialogue, and Iran has been excluded due to ongoing resentment with US. Regional players, including Iran, play a crucial role in the peace dialogue, and their active involvement is essential for meaningful progress towards peace. Iran's participation and cooperation is pivotal, as its influence and interests in Afghanistan can significantly impact the outcomes of peace negotiations and stability in the region. Encouraging and supporting Iran's constructive steps towards peace can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the peace process in Afghanistan.[59]

Similarly, Pakistan's role as a facilitator and mediator in peace process is crucial for fostering peace and stability in the region. Its efforts to ensure that the process remains Afghan-owned and Afghan-led are commendable, reflecting a commitment to supporting Afghanistan's stability.

The success of the peace process depends significantly on logical and pragmatic decision-making by all stakeholders. Although, Pakistan is playing a pivotal role in facilitating negotiations and maintaining regional peace. However, acceptance of Pakistan's role by both internal and external powers is essential for advancing the Afghan peace agenda effectively.[60] Coordinating Pakistan's facilitation role with China and Russia in Afghan peace process can indeed leverage broader regional support and enhance the prospects for lasting peace in Afghanistan. Collaborative efforts among these key regional powers can contribute significantly to peace-building initiatives. Engaging at the foreign ministers' level underscores the seriousness and commitment of these countries towards stabilizing Afghanistan and addressing regional security concerns. This coordinated approach can help align interests, pool resources, and promote a unified strategy that supports the Afghan-led peace process effectively.[61]

Building trust and demonstrating sincerity are crucial for a successful peace process in Afghanistan. The US must show its commitment through transparent efforts and respect for Afghan sovereignty. Regional powers; like Pakistan, China, and Russia can play a vibrant role in bridging trust gaps and enabling meaningful dialogue. Their influence can encourage insurgents and Afghan authorities to engage constructively. International actors should align actions with commitments to sustainable governance and economic development. By fostering trust and inclusivity, sponsors of peace can pave the way for a comprehensive agreement that meets Afghan aspirations and enhances regional stability. The US plays a pivotal role in establishing peace in Afghanistan and must navigate carefully, ensuring all key stakeholders are included to achieve their peace goals effectively.[62] Central Asian states can significantly support peace in Afghanistan by hosting diplomatic talks and offering political and economic cooperation with Kabul. Numerous other groups have taken similar actions to promote peace, thus cooperation between them is necessary to find a workable solution. Many groups have initiated peace efforts, and their role is crucial, these efforts coordinate for a viable solution. Supporting the slogan "Afghan peace must be Afghan-owned" is essential for sustainable peace.[63]

Summarizing it, a secure and peaceful Afghanistan, with fully functional institutions, would strengthen Asia as a whole, particularly South and Central Asia. Afghanistan's stability is crucial for improving security in the Central Asian region. Achieving peace in Afghanistan would promote peace, safety, and stability across the Asian continent. Whereas, continued instability in Afghanistan could perpetuate turmoil and pose an alarming threat to the whole region. Moreover, connectivity between Central and South Asia presents a critical opportunity for the Taliban to enhance Afghanistan's commercial milieu. Establishing Afghanistan's business arrangements can attract investment and foreign trade, crucial for economic development and stability in the whole region.[64] The Afghan issue is linked to the broader global power dynamics, most specifically the rise of multipolarity and the decline of the bipolar system in the world. The post-cold war era is witness to the decline of bipolar order paving the way to the rise of multiple global and regional actors on the world map. The emergence of China, and regional powers like Pakistan and India in the world sphere proves the rise of multipolarity. This further questions the existence of bipolar world complicating consensus-building over the global issues, which will ultimately change the course of South and Central Asian politics.

These factors represent pivotal elements influencing outcomes in post-conflict and fragile states, and while comparative insights can be derived, each factor exhibits distinct characteristics within Afghan context. Researchers and scholars can rigorously examine these domains, incorporating insights from leading experts and engaging in consultations with a diverse spectrum of Afghan and international stakeholders. The resources available aim to assist Afghans and other powers interested in Afghanistan, fostering constructive political and civic dialogue towards achieving a peaceful future. The current state of affairs, Afghanistan has encountered a wide-range of challenges, particularly in security and economic spheres, following the withdrawal of US forces. These problems arose as a result of various circumstances, including US substantial budgetary contribution to Afghanistan and the states' extremely low revenue and resource levels. The freezing of Afghanistan's assets in US banks also added fuel to

the fire. The present Afghanistan is like "a wet blanket" critical to the stability of the entire region since it includes a lack of life-saving medication in hospitals, unpaid medical and civil servants, people who have sold assets to survive, and many other issues that could cause the state to descend into economic collapse or civil war. Collectively, United States, Russia, Iran, India, China, and Pakistan should step forward to assist the Taliban government to save the lives of people in present scenario.[65]

The enduring realities of present-day Afghanistan remain unchanged, regardless of who holds power for any period—be it a year, a month, or even a day. No single political entity or leader maintains dominance, nor ensures a sustainable, autonomous flow of resources necessary for stable governance and influence.[66] Respectively, every key player strives to prolong their position and weaken rivals through continued reliance on foreign aid. Power dynamics are influenced by temporary international support, complex webs of informal alliances that sometimes involve betrayals and continuous renegotiation of agreements among all the major powers. Unlike historical interventions by powers such as Britain, US, and the USSR, no superpower is currently imposing order or financing Afghan authorities to enforce stability. Afghanistan will persist as a legally undivided territory marked by fragmented centers of power unless neighboring countries achieve a peaceful settlement.[67] If the Afghan conflict persists, Pakistan, situated in closer proximity, stands to suffer more than any other country except Afghanistan itself. Pakistan brought world's attention towards the Afghanistan's issue in Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meetings and other regional and international forums to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan which fosters security and amity among the whole of Southern and Central Asian regions. Although, achieving long-lasting peace in Afghanistan is complicated and requires a pragmatic approach from all fronts including a number of internal and external players' whereas, multiple sincere efforts can produce positive results.

Recommendations

Peace in Afghanistan can be achieved through a comprehensive dialogue among all the parties involved, addressing their grievances and demands with viable solutions. The internal conflicts must be resolved through ceasefire agreements to build trust among the involved groups. This will provide conducive environment for Afghan people protecting their rights including women rights and the most important issue of women education and their social mobility. The rule of law must prevail to secure people and their rights and for the instant dispensation of justice. An ideal governance model needs to be established to improve socio-economic conditions of the country, rebuilding its infrastructure, including transport, roads, telecommunication, and investing in modern technology. This will also create opportunities for the locals to halt the migration. A government representing all political forces, including ethnic and religious groups needs to be formed with constitutional reforms which will guarantee the protection of human rights in the country. International monetary bodies need to save the sinking economy of the country to eradicate poverty, unemployment and chaos within the country. Along with that, new economic initiatives must be taken within the region to aid the economic prosperity of Afghanistan. The UN watch-dog, global and regional stakeholders must facilitate the peace process and ensure the compliance with signed peace agreements. A strategy must be shaped through regional cooperation to combat terrorism in the region leading towards a peaceful Afghanistan. The civil society must come forward and play its due role in peace building efforts to sustain peace, law and order, and justice in the society. Last but not the least, cultural and educational programs must be initiated to develop harmony, and foster tolerance among diverse ethnic groups of the country for a way forward. Following and turning the above mentioned recommendations in reality would result in a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan with the collaboration of Afghan militant groups, regional and global stakeholders.

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