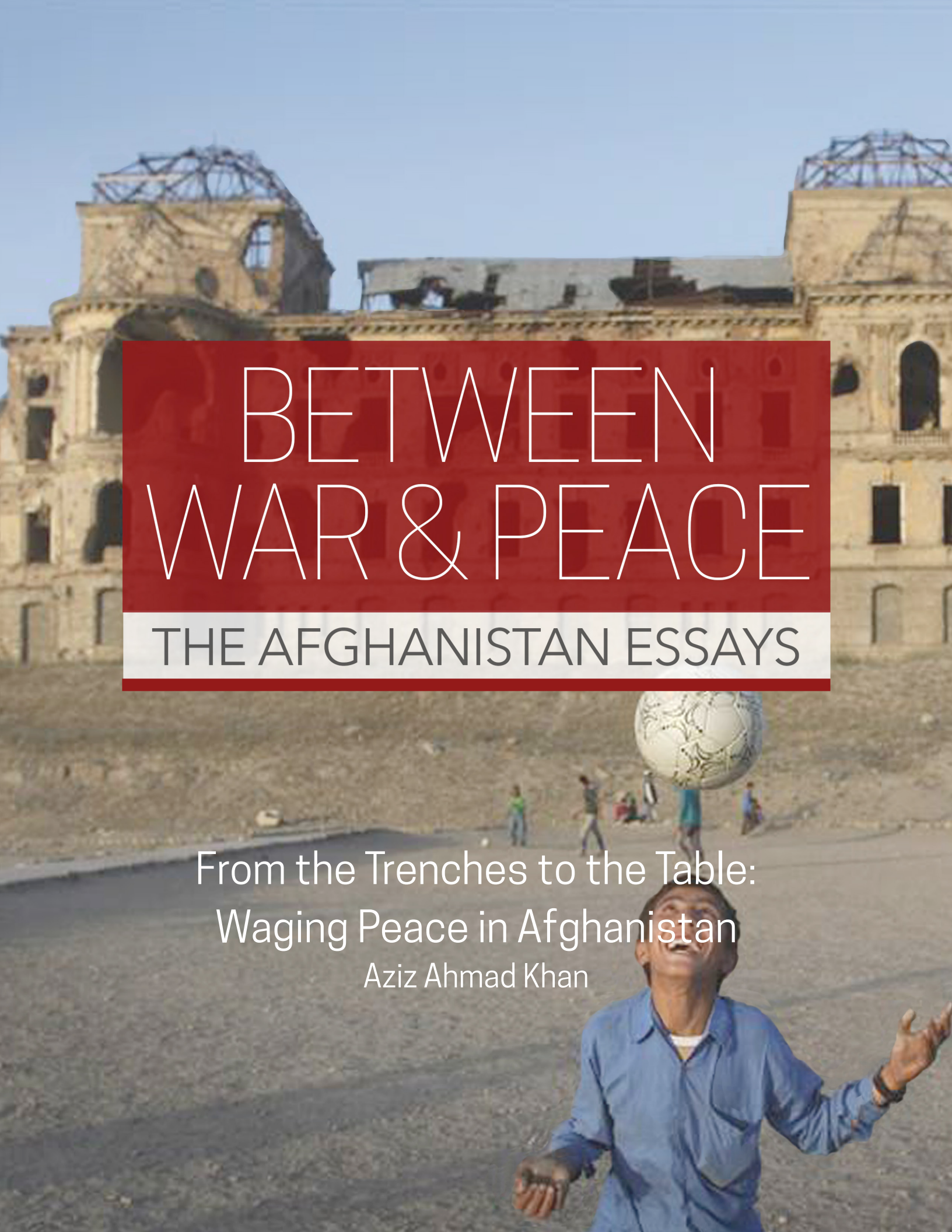




BETWEEN WAR & PEACE

THE AFGHANISTAN ESSAYS

From the Trenches to the Table:
Waging Peace in Afghanistan

Aziz Ahmad Khan

The Afghanistan Essays

This 2018 short-essay series by the Jinnah Institute (JI) reflects a range of Pakistani thought leadership on Afghanistan and its complex history with Islamabad. With the region in the current crosshairs of a seemingly intractable conflict, these essays attempt to spur old and new thinking on the history of Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and existing challenges. The essays cover a range of subject matter on Afghanistan-Pakistan including efforts for peace and reconciliation, threats to security, the broader geopolitical dynamic, and the role of civil society and economy.

This essay titled 'From the Trenches to the Table: Waging Peace in Afghanistan' outlines a chronology of recent attempts to reach a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan. Sixteen years since a fateful US invasion, the country remains in turmoil and violence is on the ascendance. This essay charts the progress made, and challenges that befell multi-party talks at Murree, the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), and more recent experiments in dialogue in the guise of Moscow and Kabul-led negotiations.

About the Author

Aziz Ahmad Khan is a former High Commissioner to India and Malaysia, and Ambassador to Afghanistan.

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FROM THE TRENCHES TO THE TABLE: WAGING PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Aziz Ahmad Khan



Digging Through the Debris of War

Seventeen years since the US invasion of Afghanistan, the country remains a victim of violence even as the new administration in Washington continues to ignore hard realities on the ground, maintaining that a military solution is the surest path to settling the conflict. While Afghanistan has enjoyed political, economic and security gains since 2001, today there are serious questions about the solvency of the Afghan National Unity Government, and the ability of the Afghan National Army to wrest back territory from Taliban control.

Despite America's strategic unpredictability over the course of this long conflict, the international community by-and-large recognises that a peaceful Afghanistan is necessary for stability in the region. It is a fact, however, that military and financial assistance has failed to subdue the insurgency within the country. Worryingly for Pakistan, instability has increased, hostilities have intensified, and Taliban and other insurgent groups have grown stronger, expanding their territories. In 2017, the United Nations reported that civilian deaths were at a record high. Notably, US and Afghan airstrikes contributed to the surge in civilian casualties, which increased by 43 per cent according to UN figures .

As the stalemate in Afghanistan continues, peace on the ground remains elusive despite several multi-party attempts to try and push through a negotiated settlement. Pakistan has been a critical partner in this regard, advocating for an Afghan-led and owned political settlement as necessary for a viable peace supported by the international community. In pursuit of these goals, in October 2017, the four-nation Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) that was instituted two years earlier resumed discussions in Muscat after a year-long hiatus, in a bid to revive talks with the Taliban and seek a negotiated end to the war. However, the Muscat meeting met with a familiar obstacle: a surge in violence that keeps exposing the complexity of the conflict in Afghanistan.

New, looser rules of engagement for US commanders in Afghanistan have resulted in a wave of aerial bombing and drone strikes, threatening to upend a fragile Pak-US conversation on counterterrorism, in addition to increasing political pressure on Islamabad to do more to compensate for America's own failure. In the region, Pakistan continues to absorb the most shocks from the conflict on its western border. The spillover manifests itself in the form of an influx of refugees, drug trafficking, safe havens for anti-Pakistan terrorists across an unstable and porous border, and impediments for bilateral trade, connectivity, and regional commerce.

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/17/civilian-deaths-in-afghanistan-war-at-record-high-says-un>

A Rendezvous in Murree

The path to talking peace has been paved with good intentions, if nothing else. In February 2015, China invited Pakistan and the Taliban for talks in Urumqi. These early meetings concluded with the Taliban as well as the Haqqani network agreeing to further talks with representatives from the Afghan government. Pakistan hosted the first round of these in Murree on July 7, 2015. The Afghan government delegation sent political leaders from various ethnic backgrounds to reflect the importance of inclusion in any possible peace deal. Representatives from the United States and China also participated.

The next round of Murree talks was scheduled for July 31. Before they could take place however, the Afghan Presidential Palace broke the news of the death of Taliban leader Mullah Omar, plunging the whole process into a new downward spiral and prompting the Taliban to call for a postponement. The Afghan government immediately adopted an aggressive posture towards Pakistan, accusing Islamabad of keeping the news of Mullah Omar's death under wraps and of supporting terrorist organisations. The talks, as well as the peace process, came to an abrupt halt.

Enter the Quadrilateral Coordination Group

A few months later, the Paris Climate Change Conference in November 2015 provided space for a bilateral meeting between Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Using the opportunity, the two leaders discussed the possibility of resuming efforts geared towards peace and reconciliation. Prime Minister Sharif offered Pakistan's good offices for an Afghan-owned and led peace process, and reiterated the commitment to work with all those who were willing to invest in the process as legitimate political actors.

President Ghani later visited Pakistan to attend the fifth ministerial meeting of the Heart of Asia Istanbul Process. The two leaders jointly inaugurated the meeting on December 9. Key bilateral and trilateral meetings were also held on the sidelines of the conference. Of great significance were the Pakistan-China-Afghanistan and Pakistan-US-China trilateral meetings designed to start an Afghan peace process, promote confidence building measures that could reduce violence and allow the full participation of all those seeking a peaceful resolution to the war.

Important moves followed. Pakistan and Afghanistan declared that all forms of terrorism presented a grave threat to both countries and the region, and that neither country would allow its soil to be used by any violent extremist group. The political leadership also agreed that those who refused to join the peace process must be opposed by any means available. The US committed to support these efforts.

A conference comprising Pakistan, China, the US and Afghanistan was also held on this occasion where the four countries agreed to set up a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) to work together and create a conducive atmosphere that would engage the Taliban in meaningful negotiations. As a result, the QCG held five meetings that alternated between Islamabad and Kabul. The first meeting on January 11, 2016 led to the adoption of terms of reference that should have guided the QCG. Pakistan and China were keen to invite all Taliban groups and subgroups to the negotiating table. The US and Afghanistan on the other hand were tilted towards only dealing with the reconcilable elements of the insurgency. The latter approach was, for the most part, in contravention of the very spirit of the QCG, a process that had been created to promote intra-Afghan dialogue to end violence, and has continued to remain one of the main stumbling blocks in moving the QCG process forward.

The QCG's second meeting was held on January 18 in Kabul. The meeting discussed a roadmap aimed at presenting specific measures that could help create an environment conducive for the commencement of Afghan-led and owned peace talks between government representatives and the Taliban. The QCG called on all Taliban groups to enter early talks with the Afghan government to resolve their differences. The meeting, once again, emphasized the need to end violence against the Afghan people. Other member states reiterated their commitment to eliminate all forms of terrorist groups regardless of their origin, operating in their respective territories.

The focus of the third QCG conference, held in February, was to finalize the framework for peace talks, and to explore avenues for direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives. Plans were laid out for three phases, pre-negotiation, actual negotiations, and finally implementation. The QCG stressed that the outcome of the reconciliation process be a political settlement that could ensure sustained peace. The group agreed to work jointly towards a date for direct talks by the end of February.

The fourth meeting of the QCG was held soon after in Kabul on February 23. As agreed in the roadmap, the Group made an appeal to all Taliban groups to join the peace talks. Just prior to the group meeting, President Ashraf Ghani also issued a statement underlining his government's strong commitment to peace and reconciliation with the Taliban and the Hizb-e-Islami Hikmatyar faction. Ghani also called on the Taliban and other groups to join early talks with government representatives. Around this time, the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan also decided to constitute a joint working group to work with religious scholars for their support in the peace process.

Unfortunately, the Taliban responded to such appeals by laying out pre-conditions to hold formal talks with government representatives. These included the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and the removal of UN sanctions against their leaders among others. With the deadlock persisting and the Taliban facing little resistance from the Afghan National Army, the annual spring offensive was launched on April 11. A week later, they attacked the headquarters of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) in Kabul. Enraged and frustrated with their failures, both Kabul and Washington blamed Pakistan for supporting the Taliban and the Haqqani Network.

The QCG met a fifth time on the 18th of May. While members reaffirmed to do everything, they could to help Kabul reach a political settlement, the meeting was marred by differences between Pakistan on the one hand and Afghanistan and the US on the other. Nevertheless, they reiterated the resolve of the QCG to try and bring the Taliban to the negotiation table. But on May 21, just three days after the fifth meeting, Mullah Omer's successor Mullah Akhtar Mansour was killed in a US drone strike in Baluchistan while coming back from Iran. Pakistan condemned the drone attack not only as a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty, but also as a setback to the peace process. The drone strike effectively scuttled the entire QCG effort for reconciliation until October 2017, when representatives of the four countries met in Muscat after a long hiatus to break the ice on the stalled talks. However, no official statement was released after the meeting, and the absence of the Taliban echoed its symbolic rather than strategic value.

Experimenting With Formats: Moscow, Kabul, Beijing Tracks

While the scuttling of the QCG process in 2016 created an undesirable vacuum in the peace project, it also offered an opening for regional powers to step in to try and bolster the push for a regional consensus on the need for stability. This push first manifested itself in an attempt by Russia to

host a trilateral consultative process between Pakistan, China and Russia. After two rounds of talks, Afghanistan voiced its objection to not being a party to the meetings. Consequently, the third round of talks included officials from Afghanistan as well. The meeting expressed concern over the increased violence in Afghanistan as well as Daesh's growing presence. The next meeting held on February 15 was expanded to a six-party consultation exercise comprising Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Iran and India. The meeting emphasised the need for a regional approach to strengthen security in Afghanistan and promote an intra-Afghan peace process. It was also agreed to include the Central Asian Republics as well.

The next meeting took place in Moscow on April 14, and was attended by senior officials from eleven countries – Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. An invitation was also extended to the United States but they decided not to participate. The emphasis of this meeting was to share concerns over growing terrorist activity in Afghanistan and the need to actively promote the peace process. An appeal was issued to the Taliban to abandon the use of force and to hold direct talks with the Afghan government.

In 2016, the Afghan government separately announced the launching of yet another peace process that included 24 countries. Kabul explained that while multiple forums had been at work to help peace and security in Afghanistan in the past few years, there was a need for an overarching process that could serve as an umbrella that various other initiatives could feed into, because the peace process was losing momentum. The purpose of the Kabul process was also to position the Afghan government as the key driving force. The idea was that other initiatives would continue to support this larger endeavor, with the Kabul process incorporating and consolidating the gains achieved through other processes. It is also quite likely that the Kabul process may have been initiated at the behest of the United States to counter the Moscow talks.

In late December 2017, Beijing made an ambitious attempt to nudge the peace process out of limbo by hosting a trilateral meeting of foreign ministers from Pakistan, Afghanistan and China, in a bid to push Islamabad and Kabul toward closer political and economic cooperation. This Chinese initiative dovetailed with previous Chinese efforts to broker a solution, given its regional interests, ties to both Islamabad and Kabul, as well as a political history of backchannel contact with the Taliban. Of particular significance was the decision to try and extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan. With regard to the conflict, the joint statement at the end of the meeting noted, "A broad-based and inclusive peace and reconciliation process, which is 'Afghan-led, Afghan-owned', and fully supported regionally and internationally, is the most viable solution to end the violence in Afghanistan". But while the three sides agreed to work together on reconciliation, development cooperation, connectivity, security cooperation, and counter-terrorism, the trust deficit between Islamabad and Kabul, reinforced in part by increasing American hostility towards Pakistan, prevented meaningful substantive takeaways other than the three countries agreeing to hold a second meeting in Kabul in 2018.

Conclusion: Overcoming the Disconnect

While reconciliation efforts with the Taliban have not made much progress, in large part due to unwanted strategic adhoc-ism by the United States, the Afghan government and the Hizb-e-Islami Hikmatyar faction agreed to sign a peace deal in 2017 putting an end to hostilities with the political mainstreaming of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar in Kabul. There is little doubt that Hikmatyar had, over

the last few years, lost most of the power he once wielded and some would argue that peace deals with someone in his position does not mean that the Taliban too would be open to talks. However, Hikmatyar's willingness to make peace highlights the fact that the conflict is not based purely on ideological differences, which gives hope that the Taliban would be prepared to enter meaningful negotiations if given the right incentives. Apart from official talks, attempts have also been made at the Track II level to promote reconciliation with the Taliban. Pugwash Conferences have been engaged in convincing the Taliban and Afghan representatives to start a process, and a significant meeting was held in Doha where the Taliban demonstrated some flexibility on women rights and freedom of speech within Islamic principles. This was also the first time where the Taliban agreed to consider talks with the Afghan government, their previous position had been that only the US or NATO were in a position to hold talks as the Afghan government was considered illegitimate. Similarly, Taliban and Afghan representatives are known to have privately met in Paris to explore other opportunities.

Today, as the US continues to look for a military solution that may or may not materialise, abdicating responsibility for its own failings over the course of the conflict, the security situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate. The Taliban have not only managed to stage a comeback but have made significant territorial gains. The group is reported to control more than half of Afghanistan. Instead of dispassionately examining the real causes for these setbacks, the Afghan government and the United States are now adopting a shared policy of accusing Pakistan of providing safe havens to the Taliban and the Haqqani network. Pakistan has categorically rejected these claims, pointing instead to its extensive military operations in the northwest of the country, along the Afghan border, that have been successful in clearing large parts of the area of Taliban influence. Without much fanfare, US military and political leaders have been taken to those areas on official trips, and have also expressed their appreciation of Pakistan's anti-terror efforts, so the change is palpable. However, Taliban gains in areas like Faryab, Kunduz and Badakhshan that are far away from the Pak-Afghan border cannot be attributed to safe havens in Pakistan. There is plenty of ungoverned space in Afghanistan that is not in the reach of the Afghan government. The Taliban do not need to cross the border into Pakistan to establish safe havens when more than half of their country is lawless.

Instead of indulging in the blame game, it would be more useful if Afghanistan, the United States and Pakistan could engage in extensive bilateral and trilateral consultations at the political, military and intelligence levels to remove misunderstandings and coordinate efforts between them. Afghanistan's National Unity Government should take steps to remove public perceptions of disunity. Kabul could pay more attention to improving governance particularly in the rural areas. Reports of police high-handedness in several parts of the country are alarming, and explain why Taliban have some salience in lawless areas, particularly given their reputation for strict law enforcement and delivery of rough justice. It is also obvious from the forced alliances with former warlords and local strongmen that the Afghan National Army does not have the professionalism to face an enemy that is highly motivated and is grounded in some form of native legitimacy.

Today, Afghan security forces need more training, better equipment, larger numbers and most importantly, a personnel overhaul to ensure complete de-politicisation of the security forces. The independence of the security forces carries serious question marks. This is particularly true for rural Afghanistan where the bulk of the population lives. Reports of graft, corruption and police high-handedness are rampant and require serious investigation. There are also reports that government departments headed by different ethnic factions are unable to cooperate with each other. The international community, the UN, EU and reputed NGOs should help the Afghan

government improve its overall performance. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), meanwhile, need to improve its performance as well. The army's rapid deployment and aerial support capabilities also need to be enhanced. Only then can the Afghan government put up effective resistance against the Taliban.

It is now widely accepted within the broader strategic community that there can be no military solution to the situation in Afghanistan, and that peace can only be established through an Afghan-owned and led peace process. However, prospects for this happening anytime soon do not appear to be encouraging. A key reason is Taliban inflexibility, with the organisation having shown scant interest in peace. Their assessment that the Afghan government is weak and divided, that the Afghan National Army is not capable of putting up a good fight, and that the international community and particularly the United States is keen to get out of Afghanistan partly explains their disdain for reconciliation. Analysts in Afghanistan, however, believe that if Taliban unity is broken and they split into different factions it may be easier to bring the insurgency to heel. This is a fallacy, since small insurgent groups can continue to challenge the security situation and it would still take a strong concerted effort by a well-trained and motivated army to eliminate them, as evidenced by Pakistan's experience in FATA. On the other hand, a united Taliban could be easier to negotiate with.

The Afghan government must evaluate why in many Afghan eyes it seems to have failed. The state does not have a monopoly on the use of force, it is perceived to be taking orders from a foreign invader and it has not been able to offer a significant enough degree of economic or political development to compensate for its ideological shortcomings. Once the Taliban realize they cannot hold territory, and will face stiff resistance from the local population, it is likely that the group's leaders may become more receptive to peace negotiations. The example of Hizb-e-Islami Hikmatyar is a case in point where the group became so weak that the choice facing them was to either be destroyed completely, or gain a lifeline by laying down their arms and joining the political fold.

Pakistan has repeatedly assured the Afghan government and the United States, that there are no safe havens for either the Taliban or the Haqqani network on Pakistani soil. However, in the fog of an ongoing war, dangerous misperceptions continue to prevail. Given escalating tensions between Pakistan and America, urgent mechanisms need to be established to promote a better understanding of each other's concerns. Better control and management of the Pak-Afghan border is a key part of such structural changes. There has to be more than a stated commitment to the idea that peace talks are the only way to solving the conflict in Afghanistan. Negotiations must be inclusive at all levels with representation from regional as well as domestic stakeholders, including, crucially, women. The QCG format is still the best option for proceeding with the reconciliation process, although the Kabul process can play a supportive role through the engagement of a larger group of countries. The Muscat meeting in late 2017, while encouraging, must be followed by a comprehensive roadmap and clear benchmarks to ensure all sides are on the same page. Until the peace process starts in earnest, a US presence in Afghanistan for training as well as combat support is likely to remain essential. There are no easy solutions here, and only coordinated tactical and strategic end-goals along with a degree of trust among key parties can lead to lasting peace in Afghanistan. At the moment unfortunately, this sounds like a utopian goalpost.

Over and above all these efforts, it is the Afghans themselves who must come forward to build serious and sustained momentum for the promotion of peace. The Taliban are a part of the Afghan milieu, and need to be incentivised to renounce violence and join the mainstream. All other strategies seem to have failed.