

Kamran Bokhari: Hi, my name is Kamran Bokhari and welcome to another episode of the Center for Global Policy's podcast series called The Lodestar. This particular episode is being organized in conjunction with -- in collaboration with -- the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. And our guest today is Professor Hassan Abbas, who is a distinguished professor at NESAs and he's also one of our senior fellows at CGP. Welcome, Hassan.

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much.

KB: Thank you for taking the time out. And basically we're ... I'd like to tell my listeners that this particular podcast will revolve around your latest piece for the center for Global Policy's Navigator. It was on the recent deal between the United States and the Afghan Taliban, and you make a very strong argument that the next phase of this deal, which is supposed to be the intra-Afghan dialogue between the Taliban and their opponents both in government and outside of government, cannot take place unless regional players -- the states that have stake in Afghanistan in the region -- are involved and they should have a confab and they should come to an understanding. So I'd like to give it over to you and you know, let our readers know, what is it that you were basically arguing?

HA: Thank you very much Kamran for this opportunity. Indeed, the main idea in this piece that I wrote, in my ... my argument is that we ... we have seen many efforts in the last few years between United States and Kabul also done from ... from the NATO side from the regional, other places as well. But those were all either bilateral in focus or trying to keep some stakeholders out of the main arrangement. And that's why what was lacking was that all the regional players, and we know who those are -- Pakistan, India, Iran, China, Russia -- and they all had their interests, but they felt that they have been kept outside the conversation and the negotiation table.

So they -- and they had over the years developed their own links, not only as in terms of proxy, but in terms of their alliances, their investments. And they all felt that at one time or the other that they were kept out of the loop. And that allowed them, or that kind of created an opportunity for them, to try to poke their nose in this, try to at times push back, focus more on pushing their own not only agendas but their own allies within the broader one system, and even within the Taliban. There is no more one Taliban now, as you know. So my argument is, in brief, that unless everyone is on the table, chances of a comprehensive and sustainable peace deal is very difficult to achieve.

Kabul will try to tell us they are elected government, they are a representative government, and they should be the ones who should call the shots. They are right, but this this would have been the case if this was a coherent government with its own revenue, with its own complete sovereignty, and its own control and command system across Afghanistan. That, unfortunately, is not the case. Taliban, whether we like them or not, are a force to be reckoned with. They have established their control whether through violence or direct control or in some areas their

own small courts, they ... they were able to push back against the NATO forces the U.S. forces. They ... this constant flux that we have seen in Afghanistan convinces me that that unless everyone relevant, everyone with a stake is on board, we will continue to see this instability, chaos, violence and disconnect.

KB: So Hassan, thank you for that introduction and sort of summary of what your piece. Now, I was listening to you and what came to my mind is that there is already this perception in the region, particularly within Iran, within India, and perhaps even with Russia that Pakistan is already heavily involved in this process because the United States leaned heavily on Islamabad to get these negotiations going. And you know, I won't go into the details of what happened ever since Special Representatives Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed and took over this task to conclude this deal with the Taliban. But there is that sense, and it's ... and it's fair, if you think about it, because Pakistan is already playing in this -- if you will -- arena and has a head start. So how can we have the other actors come to the table when ... when, you know, Pakistan already has a lead, if you will?

HA: So -- excellent point, and I would briefly mention three or four major points providing the context and then, then kind of a hint at a new reality, which is there. First and foremost, there is I think no doubt about it in anyone's mind that Pakistan was at not only a patron of Afghan Taliban, but they had provided them a sanctuary in the Pakistan Afghanistan tribal belt. We know about the Quetta Shura, where some of the top leaders had stayed there. Pakistan was one of the only countries -- one of two countries -- who had supported nor Taliban through diplomatic channels as well and recognition as well. So there is there's no true views about that part of history. But that is up til 2001. Many people forget that in 2001, the Taliban leadership was very annoyed at Pakistan to to have sided with the U.S. Even though they never went in their own planes, or they have never moved their own armored vehicles inside of Afghanistan, but the Taliban leadership had lost so many people -- many of them were killed. And everyone knew like the way Pakistan had handed over Mullah Zaif to the U.S. forces.

So in 2001, there was a shock for this new this old relationship. The Taliban were never happy with what Pakistan had done to them. That it ... after that, the relationship started changing. Pakistan I think continued supporting Taliban. Some of them gave rest houses ... to their families, scholarship stipends, support in Peshawar or in Quetta. The relationship continued, but it was not the same as it was before 2001. Then the relationship continued to develop in different directions. For instance, there was this -- we know that the narcotics money started. It became a big issue, the reason being that a lot of money that Afghan Taliban were generating were through this the drug smuggling and drug dealing. And there's a whole economy of this drug dealing that that exists in Afghanistan that nobody from outside can manage and maneuver and manipulate. That is a -- if you have a direct funding source that enables you, you will start becoming more independent. Then the organized crime in Afghanistan has its own foundation, and its own dynamic, which neither Pakistan or India -- nobody else can impact that. That organized crime also was hand in gloves with Taliban.

The third important factor in that regard is local Insurgent groups, which were also active. This was a new generation of Taliban, which was not the one which had fought in the Afghan Jihad or which they had never seen ... themselves. They were not Kandahar-based. These were local insurgents which had their own local grievances, the push and pull of their own tribal context that also something which passed on or nobody else could control. And last but not the least is that this the fourth big group that emerge is the one which came back from Guantanamo Bay, which was also in Doha, Qatar.

Qatar, many people think that Qatar or Doha was just a platform. No. The Qatari government and there is actually this is a point which they ... more research is needed, but what I am heard from folks on the ground, I went to Qatar and I'd heard at one time that the government of Qatar had made a policy decision to invest in Taliban and they had at one time started recruiting top scholars from Western countries. They build their own university campuses and they built their own strategic thinking groups. And they thought that how would they compete with Saudi Arabia, UAE, other countries, in extending their influence? We know of how Qatar had started ... Qatar had old links with Muslim Brotherhood how Qatar head started investing or supporting some of the groups in the Israel-Palestine context, even with Hamas. So we know of the world view of Qatar. Qatar has invested in ... in Taliban by providing them a space not on behalf of Pakistan or even for U.S. They were friendly with everyone but they were making their own investment in Taliban. So this ... many of the Taliban leaders who are based in Doha like Mullah Zaif will never put his ... would step his foot in Pakistan again for a long time because he was very, very angry.

So these are the different components of Afgan Taliban. Pakistan, if Pakistan has been giving the impression that they control all these ... this different segments and these ... these arms of Taliban, that was a ... that was an exaggeration. Not to say that Pakistan has not been supporting Taliban, but the old guard, maybe those -- the Mullah Baradar, some of the other, the Haqqani Group. Pakistan's real investment in the main Taliban leadership was on the Haqqani Group. That's why we have seen when the Haqqanis and as his brother and others went back into the game, that's when Pakistan's influence increased and that those are the elements which Pakistan brought on the table trying to help United States to ... to cut a deal with Taliban. So that's why this is a more nuanced thing -- a general sweeping statement that Pakistan controls Taliban I think is inaccurate. That's why United States wanted them to help specifically on Haqqani, and you'll see we have not seen a lot of more critique about about Haqqani Group for some time because now they are part of the game. They have been involved. Why U.S. had to do that, because nobody else could have done that.

The Haqqani Group's special, but the other elements of the Taliban they are hoping that the Doha group or the new Taliban that ... that Doha Shura as I say this in the piece, and I must give the credit also to you -- you would as an excellent editor had given that excellent suggestion. So this Doha Shura has its also trying to control, they are trying to manage control of the field commanders. And I was recently interviewing a senior Afghan political leader who had played a

very important role historically. I can't name him at this time. But his ... when I asked him this issue that what I'm hearing from people in the field is that they ... is this effort by the Doha group to keep their control on the military commanders in the field some ... some local commanders, others, and this is a constant tussle. Is that true? He said to me not only that this is true, but this is also old phenomena and the Peshawar Seven or the nine larger groups during the Afghan Jihad era -- he said this tension which all the leaders who used to be in Pakistan who controlled by the Pakistani intelligence, it was a battle since then that those who were fighting on the ground in the field that they would get more funds. They at times would get direct from some intelligence agencies, from other countries. So this tension of sorts is an old thing and no one at any time, even in case of Afghan Jihad, no one had a complete control. That's why we have seen as soon as Soviet Union had left Massoud and Hekmatyar had bombed Kabul. Soviets had kept Kabul quite relatively safe, but the ... the internal battles and infighting among these Jihadi militant groups has been an old phenomenon.

So this this is the layout. In this layout, to try to find a common theme, a common ground for all the Taliban factions is a very tough task. And that what Kabul we'll figure out now -- that they will not be talking to one Taliban and the Doha Shura, which will negotiate on behalf of the Taliban, probably ... probably will be telling Ghani and Abdullah and others that look we have a constituency as well we have to satisfy. We in a diplomatic way can give up a few things but we have to satisfy our commanders on the ground as well. That's why the more stakeholders who are sitting there, the better it will be for a final peace settlement.

KB: So on this stakeholder note, so there, I already see two fault lines. So you are calling for an international sit-down with the regional stakeholders, and, and I agree, you know, that is, that is significant. But I want to problematize that, because I see two immediate fault lines -- and there are many, but I see two immediate ones: the one between Iran and the United States and the other between India and Pakistan. So given these two major fault lines, how can we expect all these international actors, these regional players, alongside the United States sit down and actually come to, you know, start talking much less come to an agreement?

HA: I think you're absolutely right. And that's why I think and I projected in the piece that it can take any time between three to five years, what had happened in other cases. And that's also the best case scenario because there are other challenges as well, and I'll say just in one sentence: Rise of Taliban in in Kabul or even a great influence of Taliban in Kabul, which will be very, very problematic for Pakistan, because there is no shortage of extremist groups in Pakistan who had looking at this opportunity because they'll say, look what had Afghan Taliban done. We need a stake in power as well. Militant groups on one side, religious political parties, like Jamaat-e-Islami, Jamiat Ulema al-Islam, especially Fazlur ... Fazlur Rahman. They ... their power will increase, and that that's in the dynamic but coming to your mind on Iran -- Iran is currently out of the game. Iran used to be a big supporter of Abdullah Abdullah the if I'm correct they have not yet fully properly congratulated Ghani government.

Also they have been more closer to the Northern Alliance, although we had heard that they had tried to penetrate the Taliban as well. And we know that Mullah Mansour, when he was killed in a drone strike close to Quetta, the former head of the Afghan Taliban when he was killed he was actually returning from Tehran because he was there to keep his family in Iran. This was head of the Afghan Taliban who was killed in a drone strike. One of the reasons people think that Pakistani intelligence probably gave the tape or the Pakistanis never reacted negatively to the killing of Mullah Mansour the way it was expected, the reason was that they themselves were very critical of him that why he was going to Iran quite often. So Iran has invested on both sides -- in Northern Alliance as well as in Taliban.

India is very, very concerned, and one understands Indian concerns because the last time Taliban were in power some of the militant groups focused on Kashmir from the Pakistan side were running training camps in Afghanistan and there is this ... this concern what if again situation will lead to that in the in the south so that's why the India-Pakistan rivalry is very, very central. It's an old issue. I'm reminded of an old piece by Barnett Rubin and Ahmet Rashid in Foreign Affairs I think in close to 2002 or 3 or around that time, or right before that, if I'm correct, and they were saying, using the word "grand bargain." I think they were absolutely right.

And we again now, after going through the whole cycle, we need some kind of grand bargain that the regional players and then can be one common agenda. Afghanistan will not be used against anybody else by Iran against Pakistan, or by Pakistan against India, or by India against Pakistan. These three countries will have to be on one, on the same page, and they are not close to being on the same page. So that will require a international effort. Otherwise, Afghanistan will ... will continue to be the center of chaos and hub. I'm reminded of a great poet from South Asia Iqbal, who rightly said that Afghanistan is the heart of Asia. If the, this heart of Asia is unwell or not functioning then you will see problems in the region -- in India, Iran, Pakistan, to continue to simmer.

KB: So coming back to the U.S. and Iran given the you know, this the heightened tensions, especially after the killing of the Quds Force commander, General Qassem Soleimani, and you know with the tensions rising and U.S. policy of maximum pressure. How do you see that interfering with this regional compact or understanding that you're calling for in order for, you know, the U.S. Taliban deal to move forward?

HA: I think for that, probably India will have to play a bigger role because of the port in Iran also where India has invested, and we had seen that when us sanctions against Iran had gone active still there was initially a waiver that was given on that count. So United States-India relationship here is one of the strongest relationships in this region. And we need to benefit from that relationship, in a sense that it will have to be India, which we'll have to talk to because India and Iran together were kind of more supportive of the Northern Alliance, if I recall. Abdullah Abdullah and some of the non-Pashtun groups are elements. So India will have to talk to them.

Pakistan-Iran relations have not been very good in recent years. There's was this constant struggle -- the geopolitics, as you understand very well as an expert in that region, the whole oil pipeline issue between Iran, Pakistan, and India went nowhere. But Pakistan's trying to be, if not neutral, it tried to be a balancing factor between Saudi Arabia and Iran also created roles. So India is ... historically Pakistan-Iran relations were excellent. Today, India is in a better position, and we know that in recent months those relationships got a little ... went through a trial when Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of ... Iran gave a very critical statement about Indian policy towards Kashmir, and Pakistan is jubilant at it, and Indians are very unhappy, like they are unhappy with Malaysia for taking the position, which is closer to Pakistan's position. So I don't know how far, how much damaging that is for India and Iran relations, but at the same time their financial investments, their bilateral trade, em ... their collaboration in in the major port, they're working together that ... that stays. That is intact, but India will have to play a bigger role in that regard -- bringing Iran on the table or at least in ensuring that Iran will not be a spoiler in this whole context.

KB: So if the U.S. leans on India to manage the Iranian component of this regional understanding, then that obviously upsets, you know, the Pakistani calculus. And so we're going to go back and forth on that, but I want to move to the other two players that you mentioned in the piece: Russia, which has huge interest and a long history of involvement in Afghanistan, and of course continued involvement because the three Central Asian states that border of Afghanistan are of strategic importance to the Kremlin, and then of course in recent years, we know ... it's now clear that Moscow also developed very close relations, if we can call them that, with the Taliban. And then of course the Chinese relationship which has a Pakistani angle, which has a direct angle. And of course the Chinese have their own relationship with the Taliban. So how do you see that side of this equation?

HA: Another very important thing from a U.S. security perspective -- how Russia and China will react is ... is an extremely important factor. Russia, I think, as they had shown if you remember before the peace settlement led by Zalmay Khalilzad that was finalized Russia had organized an event. In fact, that had put a lot of pressure on Zalmay Khalilzad and that is because Iranian representatives were there as well, and there was a broader representation of Afghan leadership in that meeting in Moscow than happening in Doha. But that had a positive impact, in the sense that that allowed Zalmay Khalilzad to make this point both to Doha and to Kabul that look, Russia is not the one which is stabilizing Afghanistan, how much investment they're making -- it is the US money which is helping Kabul to run Afghanistan today without U.S. financial and security support would not be able to function for a single day. I mean that's a fact.

So as much as Russia has interest, and the way that they are talking to everyone -- especially to maybe those some and some of the others -- Turkey's of course talking to Dostum as well. Whenever there was a problem Dostum would still run to ... to stay in Turkey. So Turkey I'd meant -- forgot to mention is also a player in that sense. But Russia, Russia's limitation is Russia

is strategically smart. They were talking to everyone, but in terms of financial investment they lag behind everyone else. So Russia will have to be involved in the sense that Kabul will have to probably talk to them, or the Northern Alliance, which has slightly better relationship for working relationship with them. Again, keeping Russia out will ... will be nobody's interest.

On China, China we had seen had invested in as we know in the mineral development and they want ... they they had won a big contract in Afghanistan, but when it became a challenging situation in terms of security crisis, they basically ran away. Also, they started investing a little bit in training of police in Afghanistan, but that was was a pilot project. So the Chinese investment -- China has been more on the sidelines watching. And I remember a talk given by a Chinese diplomat some time ago who would ... who was emphasizing that China will really join in any larger conversation only if that is done under the umbrella of United Nations. And that is something which ... which I think will not be acceptable to the United States. United States being a biggest financial supporter of Kabul, will have to take lead in this.

Yes, United Nations is important because of their work with the refugees, so many other major projects that they are running in Afghanistan, but frankly United Nations is not proved it to be a good leader in in these kind of arrangements. I say it with some reluctance, but ... but U.N. still is not seen as an organization which can lead this kind of bridge building. Although they, by definition they should be, but in this case with U.S. forces on the ground and with U.S. security interests, U.N. should be involved, but U.S. will have to lead. And China and Russia, as much as they are challenged by the geopolitics, they would not like to be cut off from any comprehensive arrangement in that area. In fact, they will be beneficiary if U.S. is able to cut a deal and if Kabul and U.S. can push Kabul, I mean U.S. will not only have to work with India to at least show that ... Iranian influence is not negative but also to convince like what we had seen recently due to work with the power players in Kabul as well Abdullah Abdullah and President Ashraf Ghani. They know well their how much dependent they are on U.S. support, so it will have to be I think the U.S. leadership will be very important in this whole game.

KB: Wow, that's quite a complicated picture that you have basically painted and you know, unfortunately, we've come to the end of our time for this segment. You know you and I can continue forever on this, and they'll be more opportunities in the future, because this thing is going to pick up. You've basically given us a lot to watch for because the next phase of this dynamic, as you rightly pointed out, is going to be the behavior -- watching the behavior of all these stakeholders in Afghanistan -- how they're going to deal with one another will you know, how can they collaborate while they're still competing? So you've given us a lot of food for thought and I really thank you for that.

Ladies and gentlemen that was Hassan Abbas from the Near East and South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. You have been listening to another episode of the Center for Global Policy's podcast series called The Lodestar, which was recorded and produced in collaboration with NESAs at the National Defense University. This is Kamran Bokhari signing off for now. Take care in this age of corona.

*Although transcription is largely accurate, there could be some inaccuracies due to inaudible passages or transcription errors.*