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Preface

Taliban's political office is the only address through which this group is in contact with various parties. Although the office is recognized neither by Karzai's government nor by the National Unity Government (NUG), it is active since several years, and the Taliban say that it is their only address for political relations.

Several months ago, President Ghani had threatened to close this office, but now this issues is raised once again because, based on some reports, President Ghani and President Trump have discussed its closure in their recent meeting.

The closure of the Taliban's Qatar Office will be to pressurize the Taliban to bring them to the negotiation table, which the Afghan government and the Americans would presume as another phase of pressures. Although the activities of this office have not yet resulted in direct peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, one reason for which according to the Taliban is unrecognition of this office by the Afghan government, will the complete closure of this office resume peace talks or help in the peace process? The various aspects of the issue are analyzed in the first part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies.

In the second part of the analysis, you would read about the recent developments in the Afghan-Pak relations. The Pakistani Military Chief traveled to Kabul last week, and after the increasing pressures on Pakistan and particularly after the pressures, due to the new US strategy towards South Asia and Afghanistan, on Pakistan, this trip is considered important. It is said that now Pakistan is under more pressure than ever; therefore, it will probably change its stance towards Afghanistan.

The plan to close the Taliban's Office in Qatar and its impacts on the peace process



Last week, contradictory reports about the scheme to close Taliban's Qatar Office was released by the media. After the meeting between President Ghani and President Trump in New York, *the Guardian* reported that in this meeting, Trump had emphasized on the closure of Taliban's Qatar Office. However, during a joint press conference with the US Secretary of Defense and General Secretary of NATO, President Ghani termed these reports as "rumors" and said that no such thing was raised in his meeting with the US President. Nevertheless, terming this report as rumor by President Ghani does not mean that he is against it because seven months earlier during his meeting with the Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs at the sidelines of Munich Security Conference, President Ghani had said that if the Taliban did not join the peace process, their Qatar office must be closed.

Although no practical step is taken in this regard until now, there are oppositions with the idea as well. The Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) says the doors for peace talks must not be shut down. Head of Hezb-e-Islami Engineer Gulbuddin

Hekmatyar has also opposed the idea of closing the Qatar Office, and besides reiterating on the negotiations with the Taliban, he has said that closing Qatar Office would be a futile move. On the other hand, releasing a statement, the Qatar Office has accused the Americans and the Afghan Government of preventing the peace process and has warned that if this group's office in Qatar was shut down, the responsibility for its consequences would be on the shoulders of the Afghan government and international troops. The Taliban have always stressed upon their Qatar Office as their only address for peace talks, an address that the Afghan government does not recognize.

Here we have looked at the background of the Taliban's Office in Qatar, this Office's role in the peace talks, and the consequences of the closure of this office on the peace and war processes in Afghanistan.

The Background of Qatar Office

On 30 June 2009, the Taliban captured a US soldier Bowe Bergdahl in Paktika province and, on the other hand, this year and the years after that were the bloodiest years for the American troops in Afghanistan. Hence, the US realized the need for talks with the Taliban and included reconciliation to its war strategy in Afghanistan.

In an article in 1392 [solar year], the spokesperson of the former Afghan President Aimal Faizi had said that in 1390 [solar year] the US and the Taliban had reached an agreement to open the Qatar Office; but the US informed the Afghan government about it only a few days after the Second Bonn Conference. According to a source among the Taliban, head of the Taliban's Qatar Office Tayyeb Agha was present in Germany to participate in Bonn Conference but, due to Karzai's opposition, he could not participate in this conference.

On 3 January 2012, the Taliban released a statement about their negotiations with the US. In this statement, the Taliban had stated that they had reached an initial agreement with Qatar and other involved parties regarding their political office, but they did not announce when they were going to open it. After that, the

Afghan government opposed the Taliban's office in Qatar; hence, opening the group's office in Qatar was delayed.

On the one hand, relations between the Afghan government and the US were tenuous and, on the other hand, the Taliban's rejection of the peace talks with the Afghan government had added to the suspicions of the Afghan government. That is why in Jadi 1391 [solar month and year] in his speech in the Afghan Parliament, the then-Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs Zalmay Rasoul said, "As long as the Taliban do not announce their willingness to reconciliation with the Afghan government, the Afghan government will not agree with the opening of the Taliban's Office in Qatar."

In the same month the Karzai traveled to the US and, according to his spokesperson, he "included the issue of Taliban's Office in Qatar in the agenda of his meeting with the American officials." Later, the Afghan government announced its conditional agreement with opening the Qatar Office, and on 18 June 2013, Taliban's Qatar Office was Officially inaugurated.

Although dialogue about the Qatar Office had started in 1389 [solar year], this office was officially opened in 1392 [solar year]. Nonetheless, due to the flag and plaque of the Taliban reading "Islamic Emirate", this office encountered the fierce opposition of the Afghan government, and it was closed on 9 July 2013. However, this office is unofficially open until now and not only it continues its activities, but also the Taliban emphasizes on this office as their only address for negotiations.

The role of Qatar Office in the peace talks

The peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government has had no desiring outcomes until today, something that has also impacted the role and existence of the Qatar Office as well.

Although the Taliban have repeatedly announced that the Qatar Office had all the authority to conduct peace talks on behalf of this group, the Afghan government do not recognize it as the Taliban's address and has undertaken no effort for direct talks with the Taliban through this office.

Through this office, the Taliban succeeded in establishing relations with various countries, has participated in international conferences, and has declared their stance regarding the Afghan peace process. Moreover, through this office, the Taliban met many Afghan elites and politicians and exchanged opinions regarding the Afghan issue with them.

The Office added in value when it facilitated the exchange of an American prisoner against five key Taliban prisoners. Furthermore, the Tajik and Russian soldiers were also released from the Taliban's prisons with the mediation of this Office.

Overall, although the activities of this office in the past several years did not start the peace talks between the group and the Afghan government, the existence of this office provided the way for unofficial and behind-the-curtain talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Trump's opposition with the Taliban's Qatar Office

Although President Trump has not officially opposed the Taliban's Qatar Office, *the Guardian's* report suggests that he is opposed to this office.

The Guardian writes that in a meeting with the Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, President Trump has discussed the issue of closing Taliban's Qatar Office. Recently, the US Secretary of Defense has said that the US will soon decide about it.

The followings could be the reasons for why Trump opposes Taliban's Qatar Office:

- Based on the new US strategy towards Afghanistan and South Asia, suppressing fight is the priority. That is why a halt or at least a delay in peace talks with the Taliban is forecasted. The US and the Afghan government are seeking to put further military and political pressures on the Taliban and opposition with their office in Qatar is one of their political pressures.

- Imposing restrictions on Qatar which is demanded by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates- the two regional partners of the US- to marginalize Qatar. Saudi Arabia sees the existence of this office in Qatar as a sign of Qatar's diplomatic prestige. The Saudi Ambassador in Kabul had previously declared Saudi's opposition with this office and had termed the Taliban as a "terrorist" group for the first time. Therefore, another reason behind the opposition to the Taliban's Qatar Office is to meet the demands of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Qatar's approach to Iran may have also increased Trump's inclination in this regard.
- Trump wants to show that the initiative to open the Qatar Office was a failed move by the former President Barack Obama and that this office has done nothing regarding the Afghan peace process.

The consequences of closing the Taliban's Qatar Office

The Afghan government has not yet officially demanded the closure of the Taliban's Office in Qatar and some American diplomats have also opposed its closure; however, the final decision about closing this office will be at the hands of Qatar. Nevertheless, the Qatari government has announced that if the Afghan government and the US government demand the closure of the Taliban's Qatar Office, they are ready to do so. The question is if this office is closed, what will be its implications for the Afghan peace process? The followings need to be considered in this regard:

First, the closure of the only political office of this group in Doha can trigger the fierce reaction of this group and would mean the failure of the former and current Afghan governments' efforts for peace talks. On the other hand, now the Taliban has established relations with the countries in the region and the world, which is also confirmed by the Afghan government; therefore, if the Qatar Office were closed, the Taliban would use their alternative options. The closure of this office due to the military option of the Afghan and American governments would also urge the Taliban to fight.

Second, this office was primarily aimed at bringing the Taliban out of the control of Pakistan that is why Pakistan opposed to opening this office since ever the beginning. If the Taliban's Office in Qatar is closed, this group will lose its relative independence. It is at a time that the Afghan and the US government want to prevent Pakistan's interventions in the peace process.

Third, the Afghan government, somehow, sees this office as a means to recognize the Taliban; nevertheless, the fact is seeking ways to solve the current situation in Afghanistan is far more important than these concerns. Taliban have 40% of the Afghan territory under their control, and now they are an indisputable reality in the Afghan issue. This step will kill the last hopes to a peaceful resolution of the Afghan issue, and after that, there would be no way except for military struggles against the group.

Fourth, the Afghan people and the parties engaged in the Afghan war have realized the necessity of the reconciliations with the armed opposition of the government, and the past one decade has proved that there is no military solution to the Afghan issue. Taliban's Qatar Office, to some extents, indicated the group's interest in political negotiations. Therefore, if peace is the priority, the doors of negotiations should not be closed, but rather efficient strategies must be undertaken to drive it towards success.

Pakistan's Military Chief visits Kabul; will the bilateral relations be repaired?



The Pakistani Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Bajwa at the head of a senior Pakistani officials visited Kabul last week and met the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and other senior Afghan officials.

Bajwa travels to Kabul at a time that, on the one hand, a little more than one month ago, Donald Trump announced the US strategy towards South Asia and Afghanistan and, on the other hand, since a while Kabul-Islamabad ties are marred by mistrust and suspicion.

What is the purpose of Pakistani Military Chief's visit to Kabul? Will such travels improve the relations between the two countries? These are the questions that are analyzed here.

Kabul-Islamabad ties; filled with suspicions

The beginning of the Kabul-Islamabad ties was not constructive that is why since the past seven decades, relations between the two countries were a scene of distrust and suspicion. Although in the beginning, Afghanistan did not recognize the Pakistani government in the UN due to its border issues, and the Afghan government still does not recognize Durand Line, Afghanistan called on the people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to make the final decision. Nevertheless, during the two Indo-Pak wars, Afghanistan remained impartial.

Pakistan's Afghan policy in the past seven decades is rooted in the fear that a strong emerging Afghanistan is a threat to Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan seeks strategic depth in Afghanistan in order to neutralize both this concern and the formation of a coalition between India and Afghanistan. Hence, the main reason behind the mistrusts between the two countries is Pakistan's early concern and fear.

Pakistani Military Chief's trip to Kabul

Before this, during the presidency of Barack Obama in the US, the Islamabad-Washington relations were deteriorated in two occasions; first, when the US conducted operations in Pakistan against Osama bin Laden, Second, when the US forces attacked the Selala base and killed some Pakistan soldiers. In response, Pakistan blocked the supply routes of NATO for several months. Nonetheless, with Trump coming to power in the US, pressures on Pakistan have increased. Therefore, now Pakistan does not see itself as a US partner in the region and, in order to fill the void, it is more and more approaching to China and Russia.

On the other hand, although Pakistan rejects the existence of such armed groups in its soil that are active in other countries, in an unprecedented move, the BRICS organization, in which the strategic partner of Pakistan China is also a member, condemned the activities of the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network as well as Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Tayiba in Pakistan. Therefore, international pressures on Pakistan is gradually increasing.

Given the points mentioned above, Pakistani Military Chief's visit to Kabul can have the following purposes:

First, one of the reasons behind this trip is to decrease the increasing international pressures on Pakistan.

Second, based on the new US strategy in Afghanistan, the US is seeking to increase India's role in Afghanistan; therefore, another motive behind the trip could be to share Pakistan's concern in this regard with the Afghan government.

Third, this trip may also pave the way for the exchange of prisoners between the two countries and in a second move to the resumption of peace talks with the Taliban.

Kabul's expectations from Islamabad

The Afghan government in its statement and the Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan on his Twitter account has welcomed Pakistani Military Chief's trip to Kabul. The Afghan government has termed this visit and meetings during this trip as "constructive". Overall, this travel had the following three achievements:

First, it was an ice-breaker in Kabul-Islamabad's frozen relations.

Second, it will help decrease international pressures on Pakistan.

Third, it facilitated a systematic order in increasing the cooperation between the two countries in various areas.

Despite all these, the Afghan government's expectations will, to a greater extent, be practical steps by Pakistan because in the past three years Pakistan has made big promises but have most of the time failed to fulfill them which has led to the deterioration of relations between the two countries.

The End

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Note: Please let us know your feedback and suggestions for the improvement of Weekly analysis.

