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The Fate of Afghanistan's Peace Process

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With the recent developments in Taliban's leadership and the deadly attacks targeting Kabul, the prospect of Afghanistan's peace process is facing an uncertain future. The new leadership of the Taliban has officially denounced the peace overtures shown from the militant group in recent months. In the meantime, the militants have mounted deadly attacks in capital Kabul, leaving hundreds of civilians and military personnel dead and injured. The denouncement of the peace process comes while the Taliban are believed to be fragmented over succession of the group's new leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor. On the other hand, the recent bombings in Kabul and angry reactions of the Afghan government officials have raised questions over the prospect of the two countries' cooperation over the Afghan peace process. With the adverse situation for the peace process, the question now is that what is lying ahead for Afghanistan's peace process and how Afghanistan and Pakistan will be able to overcome the distrusts revive mutual cooperation over the peace efforts and develop relations for the long run?

The recent denouncement of peace efforts by the new Taliban leader was a serious blow to the peace process and the Afghan government and Pakistan's efforts to kick-start talks with the Taliban. The new Taliban leader labeled the process as 'propaganda of the enemy', stressing the group would continue jihad until sharia system is established in Afghanistan. This comes at a time when the two countries had managed to bring the Taliban on table of negotiations for the first time, which was seen as a remarkable achievement for Afghanistan's peace efforts.

However, the events regarding Mullah Omar's death and selection of a new leader for the Taliban came as unexpected developments which were potentially unfavorable and destructive for the peace process.

The Taliban's denouncement of the peace process is quite understandable given the internal politics of the Taliban and the unstable stance of the new leader of the Taliban. The Taliban's hostile move to the peace process and the group's quick move to wage a new round of deadly bombings in Afghanistan are interpreted in many ways. However, there is a consensus that the attacks are aimed at strengthening the shaky stance of the new Taliban leader. The new leader of the Taliban showed a U-turn in its stance on the peace process so to avoid the accusations of the opposition figures of the Taliban that Akhtar Mansoor is supporting peace talks with the enemy.

On the other hand, the Taliban mounted the group's deadly attacks against the government of Afghanistan to prove the group is united and still powerful in the insurgency against the Afghan government. The attacks were seen as an apparent move to strengthen the stance of the new leader of the Taliban and his control on the militants at a time of disputes over the leadership of the group.

The recent attacks in Kabul, which were unprecedented in scale in last two years, shocked Afghans and angered the government of Afghanistan. Afghan leaders' criticisms to the safe havens of the insurgents once again highlighted the difficult partnership between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan over the peace efforts in Afghanistan. However, it seems Pakistan chose not to worsen the relations between the two countries that have seen remarkable improvements by reacting to the recent comments of the Afghan officials. The attacks once again exposed the vulnerabilities of the Afghanistan-Pakistan long-term partnership and cooperation over the peace process. It also made clear that unless the leaders of the two countries manage to develop sustainable relations based on robust cooperation on security and economic matters, the partnership between the two countries could be undermined at any time by unexpected security events.

The question hovering is how the two countries will manage to continue a long-term cooperation over the Afghan peace process and bringing peace in both the countries. The Afghan president Ashraf Ghani has stressed that Afghanistan remains committed to the peace process despite the spike of militant attacks in recent weeks. The Pakistani government has condemned the recent attacks and stressed that the Afghan peace process is not derailed. This shows both sides see themselves in inevitable cooperation for bringing peace in Afghanistan and fight the militancy in both countries. However, the Achilles heel of the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan is that the mutual cooperation could collapse at any time amidst evolving security developments. Despite considerable improvements at times in relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, there has never been a stable trend of development of mutual relations for a longer term. To overcome this, the two countries will need to begin a genuine cooperation over peace in Afghanistan. For this, Pakistani will need to prove its honesty over the Afghan peace efforts and marginalize the elements and circles in the country's powerful military that are accused by the Afghan government of actively supporting the militant groups. Any ambiguous policy from Islamabad towards the war in Afghanistan and the ongoing peace process would doom the mutual cooperation for peace into failure.

The Pakistani government needs to have a clearly defined policy over Afghanistan and back up its declared policy by concrete actions. There is unprecedented consensus in both countries over development of relations and mutual cooperation over the peace process in Afghanistan to end the long-lasting conflict. The two countries need to agree on a plan of action over the peace process. Both the countries cannot afford undermined relations and failed cooperation over the peace process in Afghanistan any more. Whether the Afghan Taliban is going to be a united or fragmented group, the Afghan government will need to embark on peace talks with all or parts of the militant group to break the momentum of the insurgency. Peace talks with the Taliban are going to be an indispensable option. The Afghan government needs to keep up military pressures on the insurgency to force them into a negotiated settlement. Pakistan is going to have a role in ending the Afghan conflict. The two countries should reach a common ground for ending the conflict through a sustainable and long-term partnership.