

# Brokering Peace: Turkey, Iran and Pakistan's Potential Role in Resolving Afghanistan's Issue

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## Introduction

The American interference and intervention has continued in the affairs of other countries and is well known to the world. United States, after emerging from self-imposed isolationist policy in 1940s', has regularly interfered in politically, strategically, geographically and economically relevant regions. The purpose of such interference has been often justified as a means of containing communism through proxies and at other times to defend human rights and spreading democracy in short, the schemes were different but agendas were similar all along

Afghanistan has been subjected to American interventionist policies since the Russian intervention in the country in 1979. The country struggled to return to normalcy and cope with the aftermath of the last proxy war fought in its territory by the two superpowers of cold war era. The second intervention came with the Americans bombing Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 and since then the American presence in Afghanistan has continued to this date and no end to this conflict seems to be in sight. With the history of interventions and prevailing present conditions, some questions need to be addressed. How long could this so called nation and state building mission through American Intervention realistically continue in Afghanistan? How long can U.S stay in Afghanistan and support the state? What happens when the U.S leaves? Is the present approach to establish peace the only way possible to achieve the intended goal or could there be different approaches to establishing peace?

The American mission aimed at assisting in state building in Afghanistan seems to have been successful to some extent in keeping the consecutive governments of Afghanistan up and running yet the state is struggling to maintain stability and sustainability.

As an established wisdom in the discipline of nation and state building, it's considered that nation and state building missions are no short-term missions but the problem with long-term operations is that the people of the host country starts losing hope due to failures and starts perceiving their helpers as occupying forces. With every passing year, the time is running out and so could the patience of Afghans and the people of the region. Maybe it's time that some alternate approach could be employed involving the three most important players of this region namely, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. Yes, you read that right, the two so-called spoilers (Iran and Pakistan) could be put to use but with great diplomatic wisdom, precise maneuvering in bi-lateral, trilateral and multilateral relations amongst the actors involved into the process. The task won't be easy but with correct approach things may turn unexpectedly positive.

### **1.1 Influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan**

Pakistan shares a long border with Afghanistan and has cultural, economic, ethnic and religious ties with groups in Afghanistan and enjoys significant influence on ground in Afghanistan. From Pakistan's point of view, it's about pursuing its national interest and security and gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan that it tries to ensure by whatever means available at its disposal. Sometimes the influence stems not actually from the strengths of some other state but from weakness of the country in question. Afghanistan being a weak country in terms of power status in region and international system doesn't have many realistic options to begin with and on top of that the hostile relations with the neighbors add to the detriment. The roots of hostility between the two neighbors can be traced back to Afghanistan's vehement opposition to Pakistan's admission in the UN and recognition of the newly formed state. Then the irredentist policy of Daud Khan and warm relations between Afghan governments and India rang alarm bells in Pakistan and are major source of anxiety for Pakistan, thus Pakistan seems to have played every card to keep Afghanistan under its thumb.

### **1.2 Influence of Iran in Afghanistan**

Iran also shares a border with Afghanistan and has historical, cultural, economic and religious links in Afghanistan. Iran, like Pakistan also has ties and influence in Afghanistan but the extent, nature and level of influence varies. The close ties of Iran with Shias, Tajiks and some Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan, makes Iran an important player on ground and this claim has been confirmed in a report prepared by RAND.

### 1.3 Influence of Turkey in Afghanistan

Turkey although doesn't share a border with Afghanistan, nonetheless has stable relations with Afghanistan and its influence has been on the rise in last couple of years. The ties that Turkey has with Turkmen and Uzbeks and Ikhwan sympathizers in Afghanistan provide Turkey with certain degree of influence that it can use if there is a comprehensive peace initiative involving the aforementioned countries. The Islamization that AKP party led by Erdogan has been carrying out raises eyebrows in some political circles but at the same time it garners significant appreciation and support in the wider Muslim world, so a large number of those who support the idea of political Islam in Afghanistan and Pakistan and elsewhere look up to Turkey to play a more significant, constructive and assertive role in global issues faced by Muslims. With a void created by the perceived inaction of Arabs in defending the Muslim interests, a significant section of Sunni world looks up to Turkey to lead the way forward while fixing the present. It was the Muslims of British India who launched Khilafat movement to preserve Ottoman empire and the people still look up to Turkey with a sense of nostalgia.

### 1.4 The possibility of Turkey-Iran-Pakistan Axis

The political developments in last couple of years have been interesting in the tumultuous region of middle-east and Muslims world too. The geo-political turmoil in middle-east has forged new realities for the nations to cope up with and rethink their strategies accordingly. It would be hard to bring any historical reference when the relations between Iran and Turkey were as warm as they are right now. The Turks don't perceive Iran as a competitor or enemy, in fact many Turks are of positive opinion with regards to Iran. It's no hidden thing that the Iran-Turkey ties survived the test of Syrian crisis, rather, despite the differences and the support for opposite sides in Syrian conflict the ties between these two regional heavyweights only grew stronger. Statements coming from Turkey in favor of Iran have been strong enough to create geo-political shockwaves. At many levels Turkey is known to be cooperating with Iran in defiance of its western allies, now this could be interpreted as a temporary phase only but this could also be an indication of something bigger than the region is able to perceive so far. Relation between Pakistan and Turkey are at their peak at present. There is cooperation in fields of diplomacy, military training, weapons supply and overall issues of Muslim world. Erdogan, despite being unpopular with the secularist, Kurds, and Gulenists seems to have enjoyed a significant support from Turkish Islamists and Nationalists. A rising trend is that Turkey led by Erdogan is getting popular amongst Sunnis in South

Asia and Middle east is yet another proof of transnational bond between global Muslim communities and such a transnational bond provides influence and legitimacy to leaders at both global and domestic level. Turkey because of its support for Iran has managed to generate some support base in Shia communities worldwide too but because of the Syrian conflict there is still skepticism but once it's over the reach of Erdogan could be way more than any Sunni leader in the world has ever enjoyed. What it means for Turkey is, influence in world, by being perceived as a strong Muslim country that takes a stand against Israel and by having ties with countries like Pakistan and complimentary influence in Shia political groups through its ties with Iran. Now that's clever politics.

Relations between Iran and Pakistan too have been by and large stable if not too cozy. Pakistan has been balancing its relations with Persian Gulf Monarchies and Iran in a way not to upset its ties with anyone of them, which is some commendable diplomacy from Pakistan. Pakistan's refusal to join the military coalition created by Mohammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia aimed against Yemen (read Iran) has been a strong sign of the extent Pakistan values its western neighbor. It's noteworthy that a poll conducted by PEW research in June, 2015 revealed that amongst Muslim countries, the most favorable view about Iran was of Muslims of Pakistan. Now with the victory of Imran Khan, it wouldn't be surprising if Pakistan gets close to Iran even more as there is a lot for room for cooperation amongst both the nations. Pakistan's significant Shias minority that supported Imran Khan in his election would also play a role in forging relations between the two countries.

Both the countries share the common problem of Afghan refugee that they would like to get rid of sooner or later. The fact that both are getting close to China and Russia is also an indication of converging foreign policy approach, the extended relations create further grounds for cooperation leading to stronger alliances.

It's said that one can choose his friends but not his neighbors so for leadership of Afghanistan the guiding principle for framing policy lies in this wisdom; the sooner Afghan leaders realize that Pakistan and Iran aren't going to go anywhere but are here to stay the better they would be able to shape their policy, it's not that the onus of making all the compromises and concessions rests on Afghans but the mutual distrust is definitely a non-starter, so efforts need to made from all sides to build trust and work to find ways to end the conflict and find a sustainable solution that creates a win-win situation for all. It's easier said than done, so there would be a need to make proportionate compromises but Afghanistan being in a weaker position might have to be open to giving concessions. If Afghanistan, Iran,

Pakistan and Turkey reign in the respective groups they have influence on and push for peace through a political process then the damage that the conflict has been inflicting could be significantly reduced and contained if not fully eradicated.

The idea of reaching a comprehensive political solution to conflict in Afghanistan by keeping U.S completely out of the equation is rather untenable, at the same time Russia and China could also play constructive role in settling the conflict and reaching a long-term solution by facilitating the process, providing political backing and diplomatic cover to the peace process.

Concerted efforts of Turkey, Iran and Pakistan could bring peace to not just Afghanistan but to the whole Middle East and overall Muslim World and considering the turmoil in Muslim world the peace if achieves by the trio would be a very significant step towards achieving the world peace.