

Taliban's Recapture of Afghanistan: Future Implications for Global, Regional and Domestic Stakeholders

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Abstract:

Afghanistan emerged as a significant concern of foreign policy for the entire region when Taliban regime was overthrown by the U.S and NATO forces in 2001 with subsequent rise of a coalition of different ethnic groups to power. Although ousted from the government, the Taliban fighters kept their struggle alive through insurgency and attacks on the Allied forces and remained a crucial stakeholder in Afghan politics. Taliban regained control after the coalition government collapsed amid U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, leading to peace and security concerns for not only Afghanistan but also the entire region. This paper seeks to address the structural complexities and security challenges involved in the peace process and reconstruction of Afghanistan due to regime change. As per the study, the security challenges require immediate concern as the repercussions may bring large-scale regional collapse. Many efforts were made by the U.S and other regional stakeholders to restore peace in Afghanistan but the internal political dynamics and contrasting interests of stakeholders spoiled the reconciliation process. After the Taliban takeover, the regional stakeholders have been constantly in engagement with the Afghan government for reconciliation in a non-confrontational manner. However, the domestic and external drivers of the conflict have aggravated the dynamics of regional security to prevent peace building in Afghanistan. Thus, an active participation and long term engagement by international and regional community is essential for addressing the security challenges, enduring peace and socio-economic stability.

Keyword:

Peace Process, Regional Security, Taliban government, Security Challenges, US Withdrawal

Introduction

The conflict resolution and peace process in Afghanistan, essentially based upon negotiations among national, regional and global stakeholders, has

been crucial for regional security. The major problem in peace building has been the contrasting interests of regional players involved in the peace process. The conflict in Afghanistan requires durable settlement to reduce financial and humanitarian crisis. Afghanistan has remained significant concern of U.S foreign policy since 2001 when U.S armed forces along with allied forces invaded Afghanistan to neutralize Al-Qaeda operatives and overthrew Taliban government. During the past two decades of intervention, both sides experienced extensive military casualties where U.S has tolerated 22000 casualties.¹ The military campaign in Afghanistan resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, infrastructure collapse and internal and external displacement of people. The U.S congress allocated \$143 billion for reconstruction in Afghanistan during past twenty years but reconstruction and peace building could never be rationalized. Moreover, rehabilitation has turned downward since Taliban's resurgence as the masters of Kabul.²

Over the years, many initiatives were taken by the international community to find long term development policy to reduce conflict and disagreements among local stakeholders. These peace programs did little to stabilize Afghanistan because of lack of sustainability. At regional level, many efforts were also made to provide a durable solution for the conflict in Afghanistan but in vain because of lack of consensus among the global stakeholders. In early years of negotiations, the U.S and its Western allies excluded Taliban, especially, from the Bonn Conference which aimed at determining the political future of Afghanistan through military operation as a course of action to eradicate insurgency.³ It was not until 2010 when the U.S realized that political negotiations, involving all parties, were essential for political solution of the Afghan conflict.⁴ During last decade, many unilateral, bilateral and multilateral conferences were organized by the regional and international community but none bore the desired results. In 2018, the U.S appointed special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzady, to approach Taliban for negotiation and to ease out U.S withdrawal from the country.⁵ In 2020, Taliban became dominant stakeholders in Afghan Politics to such an extent that the U.S had to exclude Afghan government in order to negotiate a deal with Taliban. According to this deal, the U.S was to complete its exit from Afghanistan till September 2021.⁶ This deal helped Taliban to reclaim government in Afghanistan.

The usual notion of a peace process in a civil war within a national framework includes certain steps and procedures which are crucial to follow, with an end to outside interference and support to different fighting groups, cease-fire among fighting groups, and establishment of an interim government to build circumstances for durable governance and reconstruction of the country. Afghanistan needs extensive diplomacy both at national and regional level for establishment of long lasting peace. This study aims to find a desirable policy which should include reconstruction of Afghanistan based on interstate relations and economic fabric of an entire region.

Theoretical framework:

Traditional theory of international relations is of view that global system is consisted of small units, holding power which can affect the dynamics of a system. It also opines that relations among these small units are defined by the anarchy. This theory further states that 'for pursuit of power, war is an unavoidable reality'. However, the emergence of multilateral institutions in post-WW-II scenario replaced politics with the notion of war. The security interdependence has been more intense with states aiming to project their power on regional level. Likewise, the global scenario has been of strategic concern in the post-cold war era, the hunger for power and dominance has now spread beyond region.⁷

Similarly, the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is also applicable in view of the Afghan conflict and efforts for peace process, Regional importance as communities has made its reflection in international relations during the past 50 years. Barry Buzan first presented the Regional Security Complex Theory in his book "**People, States and Fear**" (1983) and applied it to South Asian and the Middle Eastern security issues. Later on, the same theory was also applied to the Southeast Asian context. In 2003, Barry Buzan and Weaver presented a modified version of the theory in "Regions and Powers" (2003). The theory addresses the different levels of analysis that are present between individual units and the international system and views the existence and presence of sub-regional system as an object of security analysis. Furthermore, it provides an analytical framework to deal with regional security. Like most other theories, RSCT has been focused on the state as primary unit and on the political and military sectors of state as the major instruments for security relations. The theory also highlights the importance of security relations at regional level, and provides a guide with respect to the state and system levels.⁸ It also analyzes security

strands at the regional level and the interplay with global level and does not only analyses regional or global level.⁹

Historical analysis of peace process:

Over the years many initiatives were taken by international community to discourage and demobilize the speed of Taliban's insurgency but their growing strength has always remained challenge for allied forces. The initial programs regarding reconstruction did little to fix Afghanistan because not a single program was pursued for sustainable peace process. In 2009, most of the countryside of Afghanistan was under Taliban's control when President Obama announced the approach for settlement.¹⁰ Considering these circumstances, peace talks with insurgents were necessary to ensure durable peace. In an attempt to ease NATO withdrawal from the Afghanistan, Lisbon Summit in 2010 committed to entrust security duties to Afghan National Army and ISAF to take over secondary and supportive role in security operations.¹¹ The same year, the London conference showed willingness of the West to involve insurgent group in negotiations.¹² In the backdrop of the *Quetta Shura*, the Taliban and NATO allies started secret negotiations in early November 2010 in Germany followed by another two rounds of meetings in Doha in 2011 which paved the way for establishment of Taliban office in Doha in 2012.¹³

The region-led dialogue began at the Heart of Asia by 14 regional states in order to provide a platform for peace negotiations on 2 Nov, 2011 in Turkey¹⁴ followed by the Trilateral Summit in February 2012 involving the presidents of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran in Islamabad to discuss the core issues of economic integration, containment of terrorism and Afghanistan war with Pakistan, willing to play effective role in reducing conflict from neighboring state.¹⁵ Another effort was the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), established in 2016 involving USA, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan aimed at reviving talks between Afghan government and Taliban. The QCG first met in Islamabad in January 11, 2016.¹⁶ Although the Doha talks were halted over Afghan government's concerns, the Trump administration restarted negotiations, strictly between US and Taliban.¹⁷

The Afghan government started unofficial negotiations with the Taliban on October 16, 2016 followed by the high council showing willingness to allow Taliban to open their office in Kabul on December 6, 2017. Furthermore, the Afghan government officials and Taliban met in Turkey on January 14, 2018. The international community put more efforts at the Moscow Talks on August 22, 2018 and November 9, 2018 second Moscow talks.¹⁸ The United States appointed Zalmay Khalilzad for direct

talks with Taliban on September 2018 that led to signing of an agreement between them on February 29, 2020 that committed the withdrawal of the U.S and allied forces from Afghanistan by May 2021, later extended by President Biden to September 2021, exchange of prisoners between U.S and Taliban, lifting up the U.S sanctions from Taliban, assurance by the Taliban to not allow the use of Afghan soil by militant groups to threaten U.S and its allies.¹⁹

The U.S had started withdrawing its troops even before the signing of the actual February agreement. However, many observers claimed that at least 4500 troops were required for counterterrorism and training. The New York Times, in March 2021, claimed that the total 3500 troops in Afghanistan were stationed along with special operation forces.²⁰ With the Secretary of Defense, Christopher Miller and Pentagon maintaining their claim of only 2500 U.S troops, the lowest military presence since 2001.²¹ The year 2020 witnessed a landmark breakthrough as after a lot uncertainty and distrust, the Intra-Afghan dialogue took place in Doha, Qatar to envision a complete political arrangement after U.S withdrawal. Ashraf Ghani, the President of Afghanistan appointed Abdullah Abdullah as head of High Council of National Reconciliation (HCNR) for negotiating with Taliban to find political solution and settlement. The Afghan government and Taliban could not close any deal about future structure of the government due to contrasting visions with the former one focused on liberal democracy and later determined to run the state in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence.²² In view of the U.S seeking an agreement with the Taliban, the Afghan government officials reiterated that any attempt to reach agreement without its consent will bring catastrophic consequences for all parties involved.²³ The growing distrust between Afghan government and Taliban was mainly due to the violent past rivalry between both. However, the Taliban announced a drafted a proposal for reduction in violence in March 2021.²⁴

Taliban government and its approach to peace process:

The Taliban recaptured Kabul, the Capital of Afghanistan in August 2021, after twenty years of their elimination from the power, just before the complete U.S withdrawal in September 2021.²⁵ They enjoyed popular support only from the Pashtun and rural Afghans but the rampant corruption and neglect of former government towards the people paved the way for their victory. Taliban took over the Kabul without any resistance from the government forces.

The Taliban as a movement or group have always enjoyed strong administrative internal structure for decades whose key decision-making is carried out by a Rehberi Shura. Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, the

current supreme commander of the Taliban is considered more of an Islamic scholar rather than a military leader but Taliban achieved noticeable military success under his leadership and gained the ability to conduct heavy attacks with tactical capabilities. According the SIGAR report of Oct 2019, Taliban attacks have been more effective since 2019 as compared to earlier year in 2018.²⁶ The Taliban regime in Kabul is administered by thirty three ministers, all of them the members of Taliban's Shura and the most of them declared as terrorists by the U.S state department during operation.²⁷ The UN mission in Afghanistan reported many human rights violations where Taliban shut down leading information organizations, arrested journalists, brutally used force against protesters, carried human rights violations, restricted women from work and denied their right to education.²⁸

Taliban, after gaining control in Kabul, however, have struggled with power as they have been unable to provide security and political stability to the country. The economic situation has worsened since their takeover in August 2021. Public have been suffering food insecurity. Previous international grants in the face of Taliban take over have been shut down that aided more than 75% of expenditures.²⁹ Though, the international donors provided over \$2 billion in July 2022 to meet country's humanitarian needs, the uncertainty and instability prevails with the Taliban suffering political isolation globally.

Internal security has been another challenge for Taliban government in the wake of Islamic State of Khorasan and the National Resistance Front (NRF), the militant groups carrying destructive attacks against them. The Islamic State of Khorasan also claimed rocket attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to undermine the Taliban assertion of peace and security in the country.³⁰ Taliban conducted counter-insurgency operations against these militant groups to successfully dismantle the position of insurgents. Reduction of weapon possession by launching house to house search and relocating prominent people who they suspect benefactors of IS-KP were other measures to honors their commitment of security.³¹ National Resistance Front, active in North-Eastern province of Panjshir, the group mainly composed of former Afghan government stakeholders led by Ahmad Massoud whose father was assassinated by Al-Qaeeda in 2001 have engaged Taliban in small skirmishes, after it strongly resisted the Panjshir take over in 2021.³²

The internal conflict between the political and military wings of Taliban over taking credit for victory emerged as another challenge.³³ Mullah Baradar, the political wing head expressed displeasure with the structure of caretaker government and wanted more focus on peace building

negotiations because, in his opinion, these negotiations resulted in the victory. Mullah Abdul Qayum Zakir, the military-wing leader took things otherwise, claiming that victory was achieved because they defeated the international forces and wowed the revival of the Emirate of Afghanistan on the pattern of 1996. Furthermore, internal ethnic disintegration within Taliban pose huge threat to stability of the group.

U.S Policy towards Taliban government:

The U.S policy towards Afghanistan took a major shift after it signed an agreement with Taliban on February 29, 2020, committing to withdraw the U.S and allied forces from Afghanistan and in return seeking assurance from the later to prevent any attack on U.S from Afghan soil and commitment of establishing inclusive Afghan government.³⁴ When President Biden entered office in 2021, he continued the policy of previous government by announcing complete withdrawal of Allied forces by September 2021.³⁵ Secretary Blinken wrote a letter, on March 7, 2021, to Afghan President, requesting him to form a united front including all Afghan leaders in the face of potential withdrawal of U.S forces from Afghanistan in May 2021³⁶ but was turned down. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad also provided a draft for interim government involving all stakeholders including Taliban on February 28, 2021 that would be rationalized after the approval of the international community.

The IS-KP was a major U.S counterterrorism concern and both U.S and Taliban mutually cooperated against the containment of this group³⁷ that is held responsible for Kabul airport attack in August 2022, killing hundreds of civilian including thirty U.S service men.³⁸ In order to tackle the security concerns, U.S followed “Over the Horizon” policy to air strike against potential threats without any military presence on ground.³⁹ United States has also been concerned about the state of human rights, especially women and minorities, under the Taliban regime. During last two decades, women were empowered to participate in national growth and development by pursuing education and doing jobs without any restriction. However, Taliban closed leading information organizations, arrested journalists, brutally used force against protesters, carried human rights violations, restricted women to work, denied their right to education, banned them from appearing on screen, travelling without male guardian.⁴⁰ Although, Taliban showed some acceptance for Hazara, the largest Shia minority in Afghanistan, they didn't give them any part in the government and protection from IS-KP attacks on the community.⁴¹

Though, they engaged Taliban during withdrawal of their forces, U.S and its European allies did not recognize Taliban regime and in doing so U.S

froze \$9.4 billion worth of Afghan assets with European Union suspending \$1.4 Billion for development assistance. Similarly, IMF and World Bank also denied Taliban access to Afghan financial reserves, leading to ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.⁴² Thus, it is important for U.S to address these policy concerns by politically and diplomatically engaging the Taliban-led Afghan government. It is responsibility of United State to find plausible and long term solution to end chaos and uncertainty in Afghanistan and also provide the people with humanitarian aid.

China:

China has always been interested in peaceful resolution of Afghan conflict and participated actively in number of negotiations with Afghan government and Taliban. China has also invested in infrastructure development in Afghanistan. Its active participation in Afghanistan has primarily been driven by the American military presence in China's backyard. China has been desirous of outside influence and interference in Afghanistan, terming it as a threat to regional stability. It has also plans for Chinese economic expansion into Central Asian States and its BRI project, involving Afghanistan in the infrastructure. From political point of view, China has been the main beneficiary of U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan, a boost to Chinese anti-liberal world order narrative but also a potential recipient of repercussions of Afghanistan's instability at the regional level. Afghanistan's proximity to Xingjiang province of China could increase the danger of drugs and radical Islamic extremism in China.⁴³ Therefore, restoration of peace in Afghanistan has been crucial for China's national interests. China has contributed a lot towards peace process, carrying out multilateral negotiation with Taliban since 2016, the Quadrilateral Cooperation Group one of such efforts. After Taliban take over the representatives of both states visited each other and China's diplomatic exchange with Taliban regime has been based on the premise of border security stabilization and keeping IS-KP at bay. The Chinese foreign Minister visited Kabul in May 2022 and vowed that China will honor the independent choices of people of Afghanistan.⁴⁴ China can contribute a lot in Afghan peace process by providing economic and financial support to Afghanistan in general and Taliban in particular. In return, China can get access to its mineral exploitation. China has already acknowledged the importance of Afghanistan for its BRI project by committing US \$250 million for reconstruction for Afghanistan⁴⁵ but its investment in infrastructure and resource extraction is linked to Taliban's credibility to prevent internal security risks such as IS-KP.

Russia:

Russian policy in Afghanistan has been driven by many developments in the region. Moscow believes that Taliban triumph in Afghanistan can be seen as an indicator of vulnerability of the Western foreign policy and decline of U.S hegemony. Moscow has sought a stabilized Afghanistan, believing that destabilized Afghanistan may lead the whole Central Asia to face extremism and refugee migration. Russian security concerns also include diversification of defense sale, countering of IS-KP, narcotics and drug trafficking. Russia has been desirous of increasing the scope of central Asian military bloc through Collective Security Treaty Organization.⁴⁶

Russia has suffered extremist retaliation in recent years, stemming out of the Syrian war. Therefore, it cannot allow trans-continental terrorist organizations like IS-KP and Al-Qaeeda to take roots in Afghanistan and export terrorism into Central Asia. In 2001, Russia welcomed NATO forces in Afghanistan to eradicate the menace of opium and extremism.⁴⁷ Now Russia believes that these security concerns could be addressed under the leadership of Afghan government. Russia also launched joint military exercises with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the face of Afghan civil war.⁴⁸ Hence, it would be correct to say that Russia is somewhat exaggerating the threats in order to feature the importance of regional security guarantor and also to secure its influence in Central Asia.

Russia banned Taliban as terrorist group in 2003 but later on when Taliban regained noticeable influence, it engaged itself with them diplomatically at different multilateral forums for to ensure peace in Afghanistan. After Taliban takeover in 2021, Russia remained positive about Taliban and did not comment over domestic disputes and human right violations in the country.⁴⁹ Russia has little to offer to Afghanistan in view of infrastructural development but seems partner with Taliban regime in Kabul to counter extremism and IS-KP threat.

Iran:

The NATO invasion of Afghanistan removed seemingly an anti-Iran regime that was replaced by a government of allied groups who enjoyed good ties with Iran. Iran enjoyed the great deal of influence in Afghanistan benefiting itself in both political and economic perspectives. Iran encouraged negotiations with Taliban as it always viewed them as political reality of Afghanistan. Iran also advocated power sharing policy in Afghanistan and opposed all the platforms where Taliban were given dominant role. After the U.S withdrawal, Iran vouched for post-Bonn political arrangement in Afghanistan where Taliban should take part as one

of the stakeholders along with other ethnic groups. The return of organized and better equipped Taliban and disintegration of Bonn Political Arrangement caused distress for Iranian policy in Afghanistan.

Iran and Afghanistan have been bound closely by cultural, historical, lingual and religious similarities. The close proximity with Afghanistan has posed the danger of spill over for Iran. From past four decades, the Iranian security concerns include refugee influx, drugs trafficking and religious extremism.⁵⁰ Iran has been hesitant to the monopoly of Taliban in Afghan politics because it fears that their political presence will strengthen the ISIL and other Sunni extremist groups around Iranian borders. Preventing the activities of the extremist groups like ISIL and IS-KP has been a top security concern for Iran for which it desires to work with Taliban.

The financial and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan after U.S withdrawal is another security concern for Iran because it can affect Iranian economic interests. During the last two decades, Iran expanded its economic activities by exporting petroleum and non-petroleum goods to Afghanistan. Therefore, stable Afghanistan is essential for Iranian economic and trade ambitions in the Central Asia.

So far, Iran has followed pragmatic and flexible policy towards Taliban. The officials in Tehran intend to adopt non-confrontational and limited-cooperation relations with Taliban. to Iran, Taliban are reality of Afghanistan that can't be ignored. But, Iranian perception towards Kabul has been based on inclusive government where all the ethnicities share power with Taliban. Furthermore, Taliban's approach towards Saudi Arabia, the regional rival of Iran can affect bilateral relations as was the case in the past when Taliban served the interests Saudi Arabia, UAE and U.S, more than of Iran. Therefore, Iran may not welcome any partnership in its neighborhood that serves the interests of its rival parties.⁵¹ The supreme leader of Iran and Commander of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) both reiterated to seek stability in Afghanistan with ethnically inclusive government.⁵² In order to address refugee influx and water disputes, Iran can expand its political and economic relations with Kabul and help the incumbent government in bring regional stability.

Pakistan:

The peace and stabilization in Afghanistan has been dependent to a greater extent upon the political stability and economic development of entire region, especially Pakistan. Both states have seen problems of governance, low level of human security, militancy, insurgency and poor economic conditions. While there are some obvious differences between Pakistan

and Afghanistan, the two countries have been interlinked by the common challenges that they have faced over the many years in the past. Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan has been driven by few challenges like its quest for security against India, CPEC, economic interests in central Asia, and revival of Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Pakistan actively supported Taliban Government in 1996. Many analysts and experts viewed August 2021 recapture of Kabul as victory for Pakistan's regional policy.⁵³ In the past, Pakistan has played an active role in peace process by bringing Taliban on negotiation table. In 2015, the initiatives and efforts of Pakistan led to the "Murree Peace Process" marking the first official talks between the then government in Kabul and Taliban.⁵⁴ The revival of TTP has been a major security concern for Pakistan as the terrorist group operating from Afghan soil have increased their attacks on Pakistani security forces after the Taliban takeover. Pakistani government has approached Afghan Taliban on multiple occasions for ceasefire mediation which met with commitments and refusal alike at many occasions.⁵⁵ The political and military dynamics of Pak-Afghan border clashes have been another hindrance in achieving regional peace. The poor border management and cooperation has been central issue in Pak- Afghan relations since 1948. Pakistan always vouched for Taliban government in Kabul with international recognition and international financial support but Taliban, on the other hand, angered international partners by taking government by force and sending their political opponents into exile. Due to these violent measures, Taliban lack diplomatic and economic support from the Western world. The ongoing humanitarian crisis has increased the refugee burden on Pakistan.

Now, after Taliban's takeover, Pakistan has been attempting to achieve desirable results out of this conflict for its internal security against the extremist. Pakistan can use its long term close ties with Taliban to bring them towards the commitment of the Doha agreement to respect human rights and countering terrorist outfits in using Afghanistan soil for terrorism. Pakistan has also raised its voice on several forums against economic sanctions and freezing of assets, urging the Western powers to engage with Taliban in order to prevent economic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.⁵⁶

Conclusion and Recommendations

The recapture of Kabul by Taliban can be viewed as failure of the Western powers to incorporate effective government in Afghanistan. The previous government installed in Afghanistan by the Allied forces after 2001 invasion proved to be incapable and corrupt that could not gain public

trust. Chaos among masses increased as the government failed to take independent and effective security measures against insurgent groups. The main reason behind this fiasco was West's inability to understand the Afghan political dynamics. The West focused on centralized government rather than patrimonial regime. Afghan government and its Western allies underestimated Taliban resilience that turned their twenty years of partnership into historical defeat. In order to prevent further crisis, it is imperative that all regional and global parties involve themselves in Afghanistan to provide a lasting framework for reconstruction and rehabilitation.

International and regional pressure is essential to force Taliban to adhere to their Doha commitments. UN should keep its eye on Taliban. Similarly, the regional organizations such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) should map out a coordinated approach towards the future of Afghanistan. The EU and the other Western allies should find ways to cooperate with regional partners in an attempt to find durable solution for Afghan humanitarian crisis. Engagement with Taliban is essential but diplomatic recognition of Taliban regime should be based on the conditions of freedom of speech, freedom of movement, basic human rights, especially girls' access to education, and prevention of killing of former government officials. For this purpose, it is important to establish a third party unit to monitor the activities of Taliban government.

Similarly, Taliban should also establish proper engagement mechanism with international and regional stakeholders for communication and distribution of humanitarian assistance to the most needed places. They should establish greater legitimacy for their government by internal reforms such as neutralizing other terrorist groups and non-state actors. Furthermore, by establishing Loya Girga mechanism can be of help for approval of their interim government at the national level. Efforts should be made for holding elections involving all ethnic and sectarian stakeholders, restore democracy protected by a viable constitution to represent Afghanistan as a country, not as a political entity held by a single group, and an organized army.

The international community should not abandon Afghanistan at this crucial moment as they did in 1990s because it will bring disastrous implications for entire region and generate a vacuum that could be filled by other extremist groups. There is a dire need to cut off foreign financial support of other operating groups in Afghanistan including Al-Qaeda and IS-KP. The people of Afghanistan have suffered psychological trauma amid decades of war and insurgency. Therefore, long term commitment to socio-political reconstruction and rehabilitation can eradicate menace of

violence and extremism from the society. The reconstruction requires engagement of all the political stakeholders at national, regional and international level.

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