



## **Ethno-Nationalistic Dimensions of Afghan Conflict and Prospects of Reconciliation after American Exit**

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### **Abstract:**

Afghanistan came into being after the fragmentation of Persian and Moghul Empires, essentially a process of fission - a proclivity that has since been deeply imbedded in the Afghan socio-political culture. Historically, Afghan national dynamics have been marred with the internal disharmony and external military invasions that not only promoted instability but also seriously impeded evolution of national integrity in the country. After the exit of the coalition forces and return of the Taliban at Kabul, Afghanistan continues to find itself entrapped in ethno-nationalistic conflict, making a broad-based and sustainable reconciliation vital for the survival of the country. However, the challenge of reconciling Afghan society seems even arduous when decades of internal conflict, discord and trust deficit on the basis of ethno-nationalistic divergences is taken into account. This paper aims at dilating upon the historical antecedents of Afghan internal conflict emanating from ethnic dissensions and evaluates the prospects of reconciliation after American exit.

**Key Words:** Afghanistan, ethnicity, polarization, conflict, warlords, periphery, reconciliation

### **INTRODUCTION**

Afghan state had emerged after the demise of great empires in the region, managed to survive without being a coherent as well as historical entity, but continues to face challenges of national identity and political stability (Lee, 2022, p. 697). Ethnicity, a historically existent feature of Afghan society, was politicized by the incessant conflicts well beyond its usual dimensions and enflamed by amplified 'disarticulation' between the national minorities and the state (Sharma, 2016, p. 1). Shahrani (2002) very pertinently opines that "the transformation of tribal structures and ethnic differences into social fragmented groups along ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian cleavages was the direct consequence of the policies of centralizing governments" (p. 720). Since its inception as a nation state, Afghan rulers preferred the approach of encapsulating conventional local institutions instead of seeking governance over countryside and never resorted to some kind of representative rule or mobilization of masses into a national organization (Rubin, 2002, p. 20). It is fair to suggest that no effort was made to develop social, religious as well as governmental structures in the country, essentially persisting with archaic and feudal models that served the interests of a specific clan, ethnicity and religion (Lee, 2022, p. 688).

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Afghan territory has been known as the Highway of Conquest, since numerous invaders from India, Persia, Arabia, the Asian steppes, Mongolia and even China traversed and occupied it, resulting in a diverse cultural as well as ethnic outlook of the country (Lee, 2022, p. 30). Afghan society, especially in the vast rural territory, retains and tends to follow most of the ancient social customs, which may have huge similarities but help distinguishing various ethnicities. The extended family or clan is regarded pivotal to Afghan society, creating a shared identity that strengthens the ethnic, political, economic as well as social affiliations and leads to commonality of interests. Since childhood, the ethno-nationalistic identity is instilled through appraisals about its histories, genealogies, its eminence in social hierarchies and the ethno-cultural bonds with the tribal territory or a particular region (Lee, 2022, p. 42). The clan or family ties become vital with security concerns, thus making quest of survival precede all other aspects. The ethno-nationalistic bindings within the family or clan are at times extended for enhancing influence through inter-marriages but otherwise, these are mostly hard to be breached or intruded by the outsiders.

Afghan political dynamics are described by Dorronsoro (2005) as a 'recurrent process of fission and fusion', where state's inclination towards integration has more than often been defied by the centrifugal propensity of the tribes (p. 7). The ethnic diversity of Afghanistan and the composition of country's ethnolinguistic groups is mostly reckoned to be a vital source of contention as well as political manipulation (Lee, 2022, p. 13). During dominant part of Afghan history as a nation state, powerbrokers in the center as well as periphery have exploited ethno-nationalistic links for attaining political ascendancy. The central authority preferred to align the tribal and religious cliques with political and financial incentives, a strategy that fueled policies of self-interest, nepotism and helped in sustaining the patronage (Lee, 2022, p. 690). The political interdependence between the Afghan state and the semi-independent powerbrokers in the periphery continues to be an inevitable connivance, which has however been at the cost of ethno-nationalistic cohesion. Thus, relationship existing between Afghan state and the divisive informal power holders can very conveniently be termed as a function of the relative capacity of each to not only capture but consolidate coercion, capital, and connection (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 13).

The cause of ethno-nationalistic harmony in Afghanistan could not be helped in the absence of a national identity, an aspect which might have rallied all Afghans on one platform irrespective of their cast, creed and geographical region. Since the creation of Afghan state, there has been a crisis of national identity and despite many deliberations as well as initiatives, the leadership in Afghanistan could not develop a broad consensus among various ethno-nationalistic communities. The ruling Pashtun elites aspired an identity of Afghan nation by seeking inspiration from Pashtun history as well as ethno-cultural core, an endeavor which failed to draw support from other ethnic groups (Ibrahimi & Maley, 2019, p. 69). The challenge of evolving a broad-based consensus on national identity was neither taken seriously by the Afghan rulers nor was the quest towards achieving it helped by highly fragmented social as well as political environments of the country. As per the standard norm, any regime or a political uprising in Afghanistan, irrespective of its declared objectives or ideological orientation, embarked upon recruiting as well as mobilizing supporters on the basis of ethnic, tribal or clan solidarity (Saikal et al., 2012, p. 9).

According to the contention of this paper, despite several internal drivers of Afghan conflict, influence of ethno-nationalistic dimension has been massive as the infighting among various

communities provoked a security dilemma, with everyone getting suspicious of the other. There is no denying that numerous and indeed very high quality scholarly works on the causes of Afghan domestic factionalism and social polarization are available, however, this research aims at exclusively dilating upon the impact of ethno-nationalistic dimensions on Afghan internal conflict. Thus, an endeavor is made to evaluate major causes of ethno-nationalistic divergences in Afghanistan during various phases of its history and the prospects of a sustainable reconciliation. The aspects highlighted are: What have been critical occurrences that not only caused but exacerbated ethno-nationalistic fragmentation in Afghanistan? Would it be possible for the contesting Afghan ethno-nationalities to get rid of deeply engraved historical distrust without developing consensus on a new social construct? Would the triumphant Taliban be willing to accommodate other ethno-nationalistic groups in the government, despite a long and violent history of infighting? Given several initiatives aimed at peaceful resolution of conflict in Afghanistan failing in the past, the prospects of a sustainable and all-encompassing reconciliation after the US withdrawal from the country without addressing deep-rooted ethno-nationalistic polarization seems a distant proposition.

### **HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF ETHNO-NATIONALISTIC POLARIZATION IN AFGHANISTAN**

According to Lee (2022), present day Afghanistan can be regarded as the product of numerous fortuitous circumstances precipitated originally with the disintegration of the Safavid, Mughal as well as Uzbek empires, invasions of Nadir Quli Khan, and later continued by the rising imperialist sway of Britain and Russia in the region (p. 684). It is also suggested by some analysts that the establishment of Afghanistan as an autonomous nation state was never a deliberately conceived occurrence, rather it has been the outcome of several unintended events. Prior to developing into a dynastic state, Afghanistan was created in the form of a tribal fiefdom by a military leader Ahmad Shah, who belonged to the Sadozay clan (Roy, 1990, p. 13). Consequently, the Afghan tribes, essentially the social entities formed on the basis of common ethnicity, always aspired a dominant role in the functioning of the state. The Pashtun tribes regarded central authority as their representative, and expected it to be confined only in administering the conquered territories for mutual rewards. It implied that the state was seen as existing on the periphery alone, and its role within tribe's own territory seemed redundant to some extent and regarded absolutely unnecessary (Roy, 1990, p. 14).

Afghans were compelled by the Imperialist powers of England and Russia to accept the territorial boundaries, which were dictated purely by strategic needs, without taking into consideration any ethnic or historical dimensions (Roy, 1990, p. 17). Consequently, the nation to state ratio in Afghanistan was undermined from the very beginning, plunging the country in serious ethnic polarization and eroding national cohesion. Ethno-nationalistic challenges were somehow imbedded in Afghan state from the outset as the empire established by Durrani Pashtuns not only lacked political coherence but was also confronted with internal feuds (Lee, 2022, p. 686). Afghan history, at times, appears to be suggestive of a perception that probably a chaotic, instable, violent and anarchic territory suited the ruling clique internally, while it equally served the interests of the external players. An English analyst noted: "It would have been impossible to demarcate on the north-west of our Indian Empire a frontier which would satisfy ethnological, political and military

requirements.....a scientific frontier was the best strategical boundary which could be used as a line of defense against invasion from the direction of Central Asia” (Davies, 2013, p. 16).

Afghanistan has been identified as a “neo-patrimonial state,” which can be distinguished “by the appropriation of the partially institutionalized political center by a group essentially oriented towards the maintenance of its own power” (Dorronsoro, 2005, p. 25). In this case, the indication is towards Pashtun tribes, which were in dominance as compared to other ethnic groups forming part of modern Afghan state since its inception. It is often claimed that since the establishment of the Durrani Empire, a large number of Pashtuns got settled in the regions inhabited by other Afghan ethnicities due to voluntary as well as involuntary migrations, nomad relocations and above all, the state-sponsored colonization (Lee, 2022, p. 14). Centre’s policy of accommodating Pashtuns resulted in serious resentment and Afghan territories located on the peripheries were therefore, least receptive to Ahmad Shah Durrani’s rule even during his life time, while opposing and rejecting his authority (Johnson, 2011, p. 39). The seeds of dissensions among smaller ethnicities were thus sowed from very early days of the creation of Afghanistan as an independent state with subsequent events further polarizing the society on numerous pretexts.

After the death of Ahmad Shah, the outbreak of fratricidal conflict between his heirs further eroded the legitimacy as well as authority of the Durrani Pashtun dynasty, hence intensifying the rivalry between ethnicities and regions (Johnson, 2011, p. 39). The dominant Pashtun ruling elite did not fancy sharing power with other Afghan ethnicities, even long after the beginning of dynastic rule, and focused on strengthening the control over the state with all conceivable means. During most part of the recorded Afghan history, the ruling elite has not been much inclined towards pursuing an inclusive policy, which could enhance incentives for other ethnicities at Kabul. The Pashtun rulers of Afghanistan persisted with an exclusionist narrative, and intensely retained dynastic influence over the state, where nationalistic discrimination of other ethnic groups continued (Saikal et al., 2012, p. 32). Thus, it is also claimed that some of the territories of the country were deliberately turned in to Pashtun-majority regions with the state patronized forceful relocations of native ethnicities belonging to the Hazaras, Aimaqs as well as other Persian-speaking communities (Lee, 2022, p. 14).

The ethnic polarization in Afghanistan was not a natural phenomenon alone where diverse communities sought influence, security or even survival against locally hostile rivals, it was rather a ruling strategy that encouraged infighting as a policy. Among Afghan rulers, Abdul Rahman Khan combined ferociously pursued repression with a strategy of employing one segment of the society against other; Pashtuns against the non-Pashtuns ethnic communities and even rival Pashtun tribes against his own dynastic rivals (Ibrahimi & Maley, 2019, p. 16). Another somewhat perplexing tendency in Afghanistan has been the reluctance of the masses over developing a shared narrative on nationalistic issues, whether these were the oppressive policies of the center or the denial of the legitimate rights of a particular ethnic group. The response against state’s discriminatory policies has generally been piecemeal, limited to specific geographical regions and often led by tribal strongmen for protecting their own privileges. Consequently, during the era of reforms led by Amir Abdur Rahman, majority of the ethnic-tribal influential resisted state’s intrusion into their customary realm of power as well as efforts to decrease their traditional prerogatives, including the hereditary titles (Saikal et al., 2012, p. 81).

According to Barnett Rubin (1988), a renowned and well respected scholar on Afghanistan, the Musahiban (successors of Amanullah) agenda has been at tangent with the conventional philosophies of state consolidation, allowing Kabul to exercise its “relative independence . . . from the traditional society.” (p. 1205). Likewise, owing to a persistently dominant role in the recruitment process, the influence of traditional power centers in Afghanistan over the state institutions, especially the military, has been a constant phenomenon. Traditionally, until the 1940s the recruitment for the Afghan military was based on the manpower provided by the village or in some cases the clan, instead of being picked by the state (Dorrnsoro, 2005, p. 29). National Army had thus been infested with ethno-national polarization by default, containing and persistently simmering tendencies of yielding to the aspirations of regional strongmen of their native territories. In pre-Saur revolution era, Sardar Daud (1953–63) desired using national army to Pashtunize the state, preferring to recruit Ghilzai as well as eastern Pashtuns in the military colleges, which resulted in the domination of one ethnicity (Dorrnsoro, 2005, p. 40).

Lee (2022) is of the view that the people making part of modern Afghanistan had no other choice but to be the inhabitants of a state with whom many did not have any historical or ethnic connection (p. 688). Thus, affiliation between a sizeable populace in Afghanistan with the dynastic rulers, who reflected the influence of a particular community, was similar to a relationship that exists between the conquerors and conquered. Moreover, the perpetual violence and instability in Afghanistan has always been a major challenge for various communities, convincing the threatened groups to develop alignments for mutual security and communally pursue shared political, economic and social interests. Whereas, most conventional community alliances at regional level have often been on the basis of shared ethnicity, however in some peculiar cases, potential challenges prompted emergence of alliances even beyond common racial identity. One such community, which reflects the narrative of alignments without essentially a common ethnic kinship is identified as Tajiks, a politically vibrant and influential grouping. Saikal (2006) has labelled this policy of Afghan rulers “a concept of sober nationalism ... a gradual process of change and development, based on peaceful coexistence with conservative forces.” (p. 97).

Interestingly, the territorial integrity of Afghanistan stayed intact despite polarization as the ethnic communities never had homogeneous territories with the dispersal of the Pashtun tribes all over the country and the displacement of the Tajiks, the two of the largest groups (Dorrnsoro, 2005, p. 181). The influence of Pashtuns is best explained by Sharma (2016) by quoting a prominent Hazara: “From the time of Ahmad Shah Abdali up till now, Pashtuns dominate the uppermost ranks of the government. Only their representatives become Presidents. Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks want a government that represents all groups, not just the Pashtuns.” (p. 75). Despite sway of larger Pashtun ethnicity, there has been internal Durrani factionalism besides their conflict with Ghilzais, as well as violent Shia–Sunni violence in Kabul, while warlords or strongmen controlled the lands of northern periphery, which further debilitated the nascent Afghan polity (Johnson, 2011, p. 39). Moreover, in addition to the conventional role of the state, warlords led armed militias also acquired significant dominance and started influencing the political landscape. Hence, successive Afghan central governments have been seeking support from community militias and regional strongmen, thus essentially utilizing, empowering as well as legitimizing these armed groups (Bhatia & Sedra, 2008, p. 27).



### **Decades of Violence and Exacerbation of Ethnic Polarization**

Afghanistan has never been a socially homogenous society, but the period after the Soviet invasion particularly exacerbated the ever-existent fault lines in the country. Hence, the era after Saur revolution is often described as most violent and politically explosive period that aggravated deep-rooted internal fault lines. The pro-communist regime at Kabul pursued an agenda of reforms, which was neither in line with the Afghan tribal traditions and culture nor sustainable in the face of stiff resistance. According to Barfield (1984), while confronting general opposition all over the country, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) resorted to military suppression, but since the conscriptions of the forces were largely drawn from countryside, their loyalties were naturally influenced by the ethno-nationalistic affinities (p. 182). During the Jihad era in Afghanistan, there was increased militarization of the society with Marxist Kabul regime seeking greater sway in the countryside through military means while an armed resistance shaping up against the oppressive center. It was essentially an era where three different types of infighting commenced with one community pitched against the other, intra-party scrimmage eroding cohesiveness of the government and party versus community/ tribe adding up to ethno-national polarization (Bhatia & Sedra, 2008, p. 34).

The pro-Marxist Kabul regime flattered to deceive regarding its potential of addressing ceaseless ethno-nationalistic divide through rallying the masses on communist ideology. Although, the ruling elite did profess the rhetoric of shared ideology, but endemic factionalism mostly influenced with ethnic overtones continued dominating Afghan political landscape (Saikal et al., 2012, p. 14). Marxist regime in Afghanistan professed to extend autonomy to all the ethnic entities as well as tribes and sought to finely balance incentives for the Pashtun populace and the non-Pashtun ethnicities (Sharma, 2016, p. 77). Notwithstanding the intended goals of pro-Communist ruling elite, the policy of deep involvement in ethno-nationalistic domains of Afghan society did more harm and instead of unifying the nation, induced further polarization. In one such initiative, Afghan Marxist government recognized six major ethnic communities: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Hazaras and Baluchis, while the Pashais and the Nuristanis as two minor groups, a policy which in reality reinforced the ethnic segmentation for enhancing state control (Dorransoro, 2005, p. 80). Whereas the Marxist ideology could not prevail upon the religious, social as well as tribal norms in a conservative Afghan society, Kabul regime's policies did fuel the ethno-nationalistic fault-lines in the country.

The ethno-nationalistic fragmentation of Afghanistan intensified with the creation of several factions during armed resistance against the Soviets, which were primarily organized on the basis of local alignments. Essentially, the pre-existing internal conflicts among tribes, individuals or localities influenced the affiliation of various communities with regards to associating with any particular resistance group or the government (Bhatia & Sedra, 2008, p. 35). Moreover, the resistance against the Soviet occupation not only altered the ethnic balance, but also compelled the communities to align themselves with macro-ethnic groups, so as to assert politically at the national level (Roy, 1990, p. 224). Consequently, the armed resistance could never reflect impression of a homogeneously structured struggle despite shared ideological, political and even economic objectives. With each resistance faction pursuing its own agenda in a particular geographic region or ethno-national community, there were frequent incidents where conflict of interests preceded

potential of cooperation for common goals among Afghan armed groups. Each group aspired dominance over all other similar ideologically oriented factions, seeking to expand their public support base or secure control over logistic routes, thus looking at eliminating the power competitors (Bhatia & Sedra, 2008, p. 35).

The post-Soviet invasion conflict in Afghanistan fractured the Afghan society on the political, ideological, ethnic as well as generational lines, resulting in a social polarization, which has been far more deep-rooted compared to any unity that religion might have fostered (Johnson, 2011, p. 301). The resistance forces relied heavily on their respective support base against the military might of the Red Army and launched successful mobilization, which was predominantly organized on geographical as well as ethnic basis. Religion also helped rallying the fighters, but sectarian disharmony was visible among the Shia Hazara groups and Sunni Pashtun militias. Nevertheless, the rising clout of Islamic forces also could not address the ethno-nationalistic polarization that has been imbedded in the Afghan society since the early days. Consequently, after a unified struggle, the Islamists failed to develop consensus on the composition of an Islamic state and instead got embroiled in an armed power contest. The intra-Jihadist violence was followed with the emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s, which was confronted by Mujahidin groups established on the premise of the political philosophies of Islamic scholars like Sayed Qutab and Abdul Wahhab (Lee, 2022, p. 695).

The mobilization of communities against the Marxist regime on ethno-nationalistic and regional identities significantly empowered the armed militias, thus instituting a culture where numerous incentives were on offer through developing an allegiance with a strong group. The success of resistance against the Soviet occupation amid West patronized triumph of the religiously motivated resistance forces, substantially altered historically established socio-political order in Afghanistan. The rising sway of 'political Islam' somewhat rendered 'ethnic identities, tribal segmentation and power relationships' as unethical, 'ignorance or sin' at least during the Jihad era (Roy, 1995, p. 13). However, after the exit of the Soviet forces, the majority of mujahidin commanders emerged as the new stakeholders in the Afghan social construction alongside the traditionally functional tribal chiefs and influential. The rise of these mujahidin commanders was not only facilitated through armed militias, established or organized by them during resistance against the Red Army, but also with their sway over a particular ethnicity controlling a specific region. These resistance commanders either employed traditional patterns of power to become the new tribal leaders, or tried to adapt the modern political structures (Roy, 1990, p. 215).

While ethno-nationalistic polarization in Afghanistan has been an irrefutable fact, the mujahedeen era (1992–1996) dynamics can be regarded instrumental towards inflecting the violence along an ethno-political alignment (Sharma, 2016, p. 3). Incidentally, the internal Afghan conflict along the ethno-nationalistic axis ensued in an era where influx of Jihadist narrative and projection of the ideological tenets of Islamic unity was at its peak. With the ouster of Najibullah regime, Afghanistan faced highest possible fragmentation as there has been emergence of nearly eight zones that included Kabul and environs, where each area reflected sway of a particular ethnic composition and leadership (Rubin, 2013, p. 119). Thus, with the Soviet exit, the post-war dynamics led to an alignment of the distribution of ethnicities and political affinities, however, the proliferation of ethnicisation factor in the parties was essentially a consequence of the war (Dorrnsoro, 2005, p.

16). With the fall of the Soviet empire, pro-Moscow Kabul regime also crumbled, resulting in the emergence of several feuding warlords as well as ethnic militias, which were joined by the mujahidin and the remnants of the national army (Rubin, 2013, p. 25).

The perpetual violence in Afghanistan led to a social transition, resulting in a new structure where previously deprived ethnic groups, especially the Uzbeks and Hazaras made an entry into the political as well as military spheres; however, denial of compatible access in the political system further intensified the divergences (Sharma, 2016, p. 58). Rival Afghan factions involved in the internal combat relied heavily on their respective ethnic communities and social homogeneity to sustain the fighting. While employment of ethnic as well as sub-ethnic solidarity greatly helped in coordinating military and political action, the phenomenon substantially aggravated the ethnic fragmentation of Afghan society (Rubin, 2013, p. 60). Resultantly, during the unfortunate episode of civil war after the Soviet exit, internal divergences particularly the ethnic, sectarian as well as clan fissures prevalent in the Afghan society, were further embittered (Johnson, 2011, p. 304). While the Afghan violence during civil war did not proliferate in the neighborhood, it nevertheless embroiled the regional countries in some capacity. The ethno-nationalistic flavor of the conflict offered external players an opportunity to exploit ethnic cleavages inside Afghan society and employ the existent cross-ethnic or sectarian connections to their advantage (Sharma, 2016, p. 52).

The ethnic fault lines were predominantly exacerbated during the civil war era as the political disposition in the country mainly conformed to that of the larger ethnic groups; Hezb-i-Wahdat was entirely Hazara, Jombesh was predominantly Uzbek, Jamiat-i-Islami was for the most part Tajik, while the Taliban drew manpower essentially from the Pashtuns (Dorransoro, 2005, p. 257). Although, larger armed factions drew support from the respective ethnicities during the conflict of 1990s, however, neither the Taliban nor the non-Pashtun factions projected themselves as the exponents of the cause of any particular community. Hence, each of the bigger ethnic alignments during the civil war era, whether the Pashtuns or the Tajiks, mostly claimed to seek national reunification. On the other hand, Afghan political party structures have generally tended to encourage as well as exacerbate the intra-political, intra-ethnic, and even to the extent of intra-tribal segmentation in the country (Roy, 1990, p. 216). Thus, the civil war period did offer ethnic affiliation a semblance of political significance, however, the factor of ethno-nationalism could not prevail over the party ideologies with local solidarities assuming a more defining role (Dorransoro, 2005, p. 258).

The global dynamics underwent unprecedented transformation in the wake of September, 11 terrorist attacks in the US, and brought civil war ravaged Taliban led Afghanistan under renewed international focus. With the ouster of the Taliban regime amid American led invasion of the UN mandated Coalition forces, which sought action against the nominated perpetrators of terrorist attacks, there begun new decades of violence and instability in Afghanistan. Even after the formulation of internationally supported government with adequate multi-ethnic representation, although without accommodating all ideological and political groups including the Taliban, Afghanistan could not get rid of internal polarization. Dobbins (2007) acknowledged simmering divergences among various religious, ethnic and linguistic entities in Afghanistan, but claimed that the tensions after American led occupation were primarily the reverberations of civil war of the 1990s (p. 4). With a deep engagement of international community in the governance structure after



2001, proposed design of state envisaged an overly centralized, technically proficient as well as accountable collection of institutions; but in reality it has been another era of brokerage, deal making, and patronage, thus continuation of informal power in almost every sphere of politics (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 13).

Post-2001 international efforts aimed at devising and implanting presumably a more representative as well as immensely assertive center were confronted with nearly total absence of previously existing corresponding structure at Kabul. Consequently, the new structure emerging from the ashes of Taliban rule was a political center, well reminiscent of preceding models that mainly reflected the neopatrimonialism; thus essentially forging links outside the capital through maintaining partnerships with power holders (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 4). Moreover, quite in line with historical precedence, American led international community was looking at the possibility of appointing a suitable ethnic Pashtun at the helm of affairs at Kabul (Crews, 2015, p. 304). As the Afghan state has traditionally been a weak center, which was never assertive in the peripheries hence, post-US invasion Kabul regime, despite its rhetorically pronounced democratic credentials, also resorted to conventional strategy of appeasing warlords. Consequently, the ethno-nationalistic polarization kept brewing since the post-Taliban government opted to initiate bargains with the warlords responsible for fragmenting the society as a political strategy, thus resonating the ancient imperfect, iterative, and informal tradition (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 9).

While polarization in Afghanistan on ethnic lines always warranted initiation of a strictly pursued coercive policy against the perpetrators but peculiar geographic, political, economic and social dynamics of the country rendered such a strategy a non-starter. Essentially, in a neo-patrimonial political economy, the regional powerbrokers continued to function as the interface between a weak center and wild periphery, maintaining the capacity of threatening, defying, or contributing towards capital's claims over far-flung territories (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 12). Moreover, these regional powerbrokers and armed groups have been key beneficiaries of violence, which stalled the progression towards state building but helped warlords in controlling markets as well as creating a discernable monopoly of predation (Cramer & Goodhand, 2002, p. 896). Notwithstanding the compulsion of ensuring ethno-nationalistic cohesion for national integrity, successive regimes at Kabul had to compromise with the divisive elements for achieving as well as maintaining reach to the countryside during all phases of country's troubled history. In Afghanistan, these armed groups have sought authority in social realm by employing combination of actions and well deliberated rhetoric, intending to build narratives that helped justifying their political ambitions (Schlichte, 2009, p. 87).

In the contemporary realm of socio-political dynamics, the sway of tribal strongmen or warlords and their emergence as dominant stakeholders cannot be regarded as an exceptional development, exclusively linked with any particular nation or a specific region. In Afghanistan, these warlords had perpetrated a deep rooted factionalism in the society with largely ethnic-based alignments active in the entire country, seeking greater share in the power as well as resources (Rich, 2016, p. 8). Besides accentuating the already fragile internal security environments of the country, these unintended recipients of the externally supplied armaments strengthened their respective communities/ ethnic groups while immensely eroding the writ of the state. As mentioned above, the emergence of de-facto states all over Afghanistan was manifested with the control of North-east

by ethnic Tajik Jamiat-i-Islami forces; power contest in the North between the armed ethnic groups Junbish-i-Milli (Uzbek), Hezb-i-Wahadat (Hazara) and Jamiat-i-Islami (Tajik); sway of Tajik commander Ismail Khan in Herat as well as West; dominance of Hazara Hezb-i-Wahadat factions over the central region; and control of mostly ethnic Pashtun commanders in the Eastern and Southern parts of the country (International Crisis Group, 2002).

The essence of curtailing warlord power for the post-Taliban stability of the country might have factored heavily while planning an internationally endorsed and highly centralized interim governance structure and the new constitution of Afghanistan. According to Wilder & Lister (2007), there has been mushrooming of several de facto states, which were essentially controlled by the regional strongmen, whose power [was] based on financial and military strength, as well as personal, factional, and historical loyalties supported by the current political economy of Afghanistan” (p. 87). The factionalized security sector at center reflected the extremely factionalized periphery, where intense rivalry induced a damaging contest among warlords for asserting control over respective domains of concern (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 30). The growing influence of regional militia commanders at their traditional strongholds and over central government at Kabul, did little to convince the large portion of the Afghan population about the much propagated rhetoric of democratic values, human rights and political stability. Consequently, the Afghan people have been perplexed over the future course of action and left with no option but to stay loyal with the locally organized armed militias for security and even survival in the periphery.

#### **AFGHAN ETHNO-NATIONALISTIC DILEMMA: THE INFERENCES**

Afghan state never relied on developing the conventional relationship between the center and periphery, which is a standard norm among most of the modern nation states, and in a way isolated itself from the masses. The rulers at Kabul had often been exploiting domestic inter/intra-factional conflicts for achieving greater influence in the countryside and instead of helping resolve these disputes by playing the role of neutral arbiter, the state exacerbated local cleavages (Bhatia & Sedra, 2008, p. 28). Afghan instability has been in the form of a vicious circle and the byproduct of state’s policies wherein the armed militias created to defend a threatened community emerged as a security hazard to some other group. Thus, as per the opinion of Barfield (1984), “no reforms, modernizations or political actions were to be undertaken if they would destabilize the government” in Afghanistan (p. 176).

The idea of an Afghan nation and its current status somewhat validates the enduring sway of social heterogeneity in the country and reflects heightened ethnic consciousness, which resisted the notion of being a distinctive nation (Sharma, 2016, p. 32). It would be incorrect to suggest that the Afghan rulers have been oblivious of the essence of developing a nationalistic ideology for inculcating cohesiveness among ethnically heterogeneous communities. However, with the governments traditionally being dominated by the Pashtuns, the majority ethnicity that exploited control over the state as the instrument of ‘internal imperialism,’ the perceived identity of the country also reflected the same inclinations (Dorronsoro, 2005, p. 37). Consequently, the early Afghan rulers were once heavily influenced by the nationalistic conception promoted by Nazi Aryanism and sought Pashtun supremacy, an ethnocentric model, which was taken as the justification of Durrani rule, a narrative always resisted by non-Pashtuns (Lee, 2022, p. 693).

It has also been argued that “the incessantly centralizing state policies and practices of internal colonialism, generally aided and abetted by old colonialist powers.....produced a cumulatively negative impact on state-building efforts in Afghanistan.” (Shahrani, 2002, p. 717). Whatever efforts were undertaken by the Afghan rulers towards state-building as well as establishment of institutions, the premise has mostly been influenced by the ethno-nationalistic interests. Consequently, as suggested by Wilder & Lister (2007), “centralized state institutions in Afghanistan historically coexisted uneasily with a fragmented, decentralized and traditional society” (p. 87). The state under successive rulers, especially the ethnic Pashtuns, failed in doing much towards promoting national cohesion and harmony among various communities as presumably, internal conflict strengthened their hold over the country. Historically, the Pashtun led State’s policies cultivated feelings of discrimination and deprivation among others, promoting a deep resentment among the national minorities (Sharma, 2016, p. 7).

Traditionally, in Afghanistan since its inception, the populace mostly did not question the authority or the legitimacy of its rulers, unless if the interventions from Kabul aimed at influencing the ideological, territorial or ethno-tribal dynamics of the periphery. According to Migdal (2020), these are the “struggles over the state’s desire for predominance, the accommodations between states and others, and the maneuvers to gain the best deal possible,” reflecting essentially the real politics prevailing among many of the Third World countries (p. 32). However, the success of Jihadist forces decisively altered this perception as the resistance movement empowered the masses with a political power, which was never perceived in the past. This social reconstruct emerging out of a prolonged violence led towards a complex interplay of certain influences that have been seminal in promoting ethnicity as one of the crucial determinants of legitimacy in Afghanistan (Sharma, 2016, p. 59).

The deep-rooted and ever persistent state of internal conflict and anarchic undercurrents have seriously eroded the prospects of a well-integrated, politically stable and financially viable Afghanistan since the early days. Afghanistan thus continues to be often governed by the clique of tribal influential, warlords and clergy, which strives for the exclusion of other stakeholders from acquiring their due share of power in the state affairs (Lee, 2022, p. 689). While, it is at times suggested that the center had little option but to align itself for dealing with the intricacies at periphery, however, whenever it was deemed essential, state managed to have its way. According to Rubin (2002), center always had the capacity of maintaining the status quo without confronting any serious challenge as Kabul managed to emplace a coercive apparatus, which helped in providing sufficient autonomy to the state despite the constraints of a heterogeneous society (p. 19).

It would not be imprudent to suggest that domestically, the self-centered policies of successive Afghan rulers throughout recorded history of the country, have aggravated ethno-nationalistic dissonance in the society. Regimes at Kabul mostly opted for consolidating territorial control oppressively and, if military option was not feasible or preferable, the Afghan center decided to accommodate influential power brokers for avoiding a conflagration (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 22). Consequently, it has been a common feature of Afghan dynamics where warlords managed to protect their respective communities, and in the process developed capacity of playing a role at national level, but at the same time threatened interests of other groups (Bhatia & Sedra, 2008, p.

30). A major cause of perpetual violence as well as political instability in Afghanistan, therefore, has been the sway of regional strongmen, tribal chieftains and militia commanders, commonly referred as the warlords.

In violence ridden states like Afghanistan, a thin line separates protection from pillage, often making it a matter of varying perspectives, as the savior of one can actually be persecutor for other. Hence, during conflicts, a local security dilemma generally transpires, where each community can feel threatened by others, without realizing that similar concerns may emanate from their own activities (Bhatia & Sedra, 2008, p. 34). Relevance of warlords and tribal chiefs in the periphery is predominantly linked with their sway over respective strongholds and influence over particular ethnic groups. Conventionally, Afghans inhabiting the country side do not appreciate any incursion in their traditional sphere of influence and are prepared to resist such initiatives. Hence, the regional powerbrokers are least receptive to peace, which may disrupt the process of production and exchange that is put in place to unduly reward armed militias at the cost of masses (Cramer & Goodhand, 2002, p. 896).

After the ouster of the Taliban Regime by the US led Coalition, there was a widespread concern that conflict ridden Afghanistan might disintegrate into autonomous fiefdoms, created under the influence of competing warlords (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 108). However, contrary to a logical sequence of action in transforming the war ravaged, ethno-nationalistically fragmented and politically instable Afghanistan into a viable state, the Coalition forces pursued the same old script of developing allegiances with regional power-brokers. For those defending the Coalition's policy, empowering the armed groups was logical consequence of the American strategy aimed at hunting down the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, implying alliance with militias led by the local or regional strongmen (Suhrke, 2011, p. 15). The Coalition policy thus completely ignored the fact that violence allows some segments of Afghan society to reap undue rewards, both in terms of economic incentives as well as political influence, which essentially protects them from state's accountability.

Despite formulization of a new road map for a democratic Afghanistan with several interactions among the stakeholders, arranged to seek consensual way forward after the ouster of the Taliban regime, numerous uncertainties continued to persist among the masses. Hence, persistent violence kept aggravating ethnic tensions, compelling many Afghans towards seeking refuge from continuing patronage relationships instead of trusting new institutions (Rubin, 2013, p. 178). Barfield (2010) has summarized the American policy in the wake of new Afghan governments' incapacity on ethno-nationalistic landscape as under:

The former regional military leaders .....retained their political importance..... In the Pashtun east, US forces coped with their limited troop strength (and lack of familiarity with complex tribal divisions) by recruiting local militia.... This was an easy short-term solution but highly divisive politically. (In a land where factionalism was rife, an alliance with one group guaranteed making an enemy of another, regardless of ideology (p. 314).

The creation as well as survival of Afghanistan in the face of chaotic political, economic and strategic environments, besides several internal conflicts and ethno-nationalistic polarization, can be termed incredible. Over the years, many policies of the state, especially forced displacements of ethnic communities, failure in addressing factionalism, and oppression of smaller groups, have

seriously eroded ethno-nationalistic homogeneity in Afghanistan. The evolutionary process of state's institutions in Afghanistan could neither help in developing a fully coherent structure, nor in abandoning the patrimonial tendencies, with power mainly being considered personal prerogative of the ruling elite (Dorransoro, 2005, p. 30). However, notwithstanding numerous existential challenges, the Afghans are generally reactive as well as adaptive besides being usually influenced by cultural perspective, while non-Pashtun Afghans also maintain a sense of pragmatism, adaptability as well as opportunism (Johnson, 2011, p. 305). Therefore, despite several conflicting tendencies domestically, Afghanistan has displayed the potential to survive as a nation state during various phases of its turbulent history.

### **Prospects of Reconciliation after The American Exit**

With deep-rooted ethno-nationalistic polarization, essentially fueled by state of perpetual conflict, Afghanistan has been one of the worst hit victims of internal conflict and seems far away from getting rid of this menace. Notwithstanding continued presence of the Coalition forces in Afghanistan for nearly two decades and introduction of democratic order in the country during this period, triumphant return of the Taliban militia can initiate another era of civil war. Besides the simmering resentment of various ethno-nationalist communities, especially those in power during American presence, Taliban regime's centralized governance structure may seriously erode traditional sway of regional strongmen. It is often argued that the 'warlord insurgencies' are in particular more likely to be resistant to the conflict resolution, achieved with a consent and the negotiation process (Woodhouse, 2000, p. 9). In the hindsight, the warlord dominated conflicts are traditionally a recurring phenomenon in countries like Afghanistan, where influential power brokers continue to dominate the societies.

The endeavor to alleviate the devastations of internal wars leads to reconciliation, the ultimate objective of any peace effort that is reached between the conflicting parties after a long process involving several initiatives. Essentially, reconciliation is a comprehensive and well-deliberated process, which seeks a sustainable, broad-based and all-inclusive peace in a war ravaged country like Afghanistan. The initiative becomes inevitable when the ethno-nationalistic fragmentation is as deep-rooted and unbridgeable as the Afghan social polarity, which may even endanger country's existence. There have been several peace endeavors in Afghanistan with mixed results, however, all such initiatives were way short of a result oriented and sustainable process for reconciling the fragmented society. Reconciliation is thus considered a vital component for stabilizing peace by seeking to transform the prevalent hostilities among the warring factions and addresses the cognitive as well as emotional hurdles to normalization of peace relations (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004, p. 4).

Ethno-nationalistic fragmentation of Afghanistan, especially in the aftermath of four decades long violence, has reached its pinnacle and it is at such a threshold that a broad based reconciliation is inevitable for very survival of the state. A devastating era of protracted conflict and innumerable sufferings of the Afghan population, regardless of their ethnicities, language or religion, has created an environment where continuation of infighting is no more an option. Reconciliation is therefore regarded to be the politico-military situation where the continuing stalemate convinces both the parties that lowered expectations and demands will cost less compared to the price of a prolonged conflict (Whittaker, 2002, p. 8). Thus at bare minimum, reconciled society seeks co-existence of



once enemies without necessarily asking to either love each other, or forgive the opponents, or forget the past in any way but to cooperate for better lives together (Bloomfield et al., 2003, p. 12).

After two decades of international presence without a sustainable resolution of Afghan conflict, a successful and broad-based reconciliation among all ethnicities, factions and groups in the country is mandatory for peaceful co-existence. With the return of Taliban and the exit of the American led Coalition forces from Afghanistan, another transition is in place, which may lead either towards peaceful resolution of the conflict with reconciliation or result in another phase of violent civil war. Reconciliation nevertheless is a complicated process, which entails various initiatives that are required to be undertaken by the warring factions, with sincerity and transparency, during as well as after the implementation phase of peace agreement. The successful reconciliation would thus include increasing cooperation among the conflicting parties on the issues of security, economy, and politics, besides addressing the cognitive as well as emotional aspects of the process (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2004, p. 5).

The peace in Afghanistan has mostly fallen prey to the obstinate posture of the warring factions who sought maximalist gains during negotiation process. While a lengthier shadow of the future can result in sustainable cooperation, it may alternatively offer the warring factions an incentive to bargain harder, with everyone aspiring a better deal (Fearon, 1998, p. 270). The collapse of reconciliation process can thus be the outcome of inflexible posture adopted by any of the conflicting parties with regards to proposed concessions or expected compromises. Commenting on the prospects of ending long civil wars like Afghan conflict, Licklider (2005) suggests that: "We have some evidence that long civil wars are disproportionately likely to be ended with negotiated settlements rather than military victory. This is plausible since a long civil war means that neither side has been able to achieve a military victory" (p. 39).

Reconciliation achieved through peace agreements is regarded as the pinnacle of conflict dealing situations, achieved by facilitating negotiations between the warring factions and managed through developing consensus among all stakeholders. Reconciliation would, therefore, require to lead towards some kind of a power-sharing arrangement among the Afghan factions, by offering all contending ethno-nationalistic groups adequate incentives in the system. The power sharing incentives are regarded to be the initiatives, which helps the international community as well as the third-party mediators in facilitating the process of negotiations (Sriram, 2008, p. 13). Success in managing Afghan conflict through power sharing among the warring factions can potentially offer a viable way forward for amicable resolution of the longstanding divergences. It would entail accommodations, compromises and whole hearted cooperation among all groups, though, onus of responsibility may be greater on the triumphant Taliban for dispelling fears of other domestic stakeholders in Afghanistan.

It is an accepted reality that implementing the provisions of reconciliation process in the form of peace agreements gets complicated as the negotiating parties retain apprehensions regarding their own security, and seek reassurances (Sriram, 2008, p. 13). For reaching an agreement through negotiations during reconciliation, each party shall be prepared for making compromises since it is a process that helps resolve the differences in goals, arising from divergent interests and perspectives (Jeong, 2009, pp. 141-151). At present, the traditional anti-Taliban factions are nearly dormant and evaluating the developments, especially the policies of post-American exit transitional

government. The triumphant Taliban can realize the dream of reconciling the society by ensuring proportionate representation of all ethno-nationalistic groups in the government with open arms. While international community would be supportive of a reconciliation process, however, the successful execution of such an arrangement might not transpire without magnanimity from all factions, especially those in power.

## **CONCLUSION**

A persistently constant notion that Afghanistan was facing existential threat, owing to historically deep-rooted ethnic polarization in the Afghan society, has been one of the most pronounced apprehensions about the future of the country. It has been argued that Afghanistan was not a nation state but in reality a patchwork of ethnicities, virtually cobbled together by ingenious monarchy through devising a system of deals, that had been interrupted by unending conflicts (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 108). However, as a matter of fact, the tendency of categorizing Afghan conflict as an exclusively 'ethnic warfare' can be regarded far from being unbiased; essentially, it has not been 'ethnicities' waging wars, but the political organizations pursuing ideological objectives besides specific institutional practices (Dorransoro, 2005, p. 15). There is no denying that internal fragmentation in Afghanistan did occur along the ethno-political lines nonetheless, while articulating social as well as political demands on the premise of ethnic affiliations, these groups have done that as citizens of Afghanistan (Sharma, 2016, p. 32). It would be interesting to note that Afghan ethnicities has never displayed any separatist tendencies, even when confronted with serious security concerns or while facing atrocities of dominant communities.

After the ouster of the Taliban Regime in 2001, the United States led international community undertook a reconstruction drive in Afghanistan that was launched on the premise of transforming the role of state according to the dictates of modern world. Two decades later, Afghan state has ironically been taken over by the same militant group, once declared as non-representative, ethno-nationalistically biased and antagonistic to the prevailing global order. It can be inferred that the American led international community might not have delivered what locals aspired but actually reflected an ever-evolving international model of state-building, envisaged in the post-Cold War exuberance of democratization, liberalization and peace-building (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 23). While reforming Afghan governance system, international community took little stock of ground realities in the country and got trapped by the conventional stakeholders represented by warlords, regional power brokers and tribal chieftains. Moreover, despite lofty expectations from much hyped Afghan reconstruction drive, the tangible priorities of Washington were reflected by the Undersecretary of Defense Douglas J. Feith who conveyed very explicit opinion of the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld outlined in a memorandum that "Nation-building is not our key strategic goal" (Jones, 2010, p. 112).

Afghan conflict has been and continue to be very intricate as the historically engraved trust deficit among the ethnically organized warring factions is hard to remove. However, it can be assumed that instinct of survival against numerous challenges, has made the Afghan communities pragmatic, and their response is often well measured and based on rational assessment. Afghan factions, though more than often organized on ethnicity basis, have displayed the tendency of developing interest based relations with other groups. Therefore, during the violence, formulation of alignments or alliances have been fluid in nature, fostered according to the dictates of prevailing

environs and even at times, negated the ethno-nationalistic concerns. It may be suggestive of the fact that despite ethno-nationalistic proclamations, rivalling Afghan factions are amenable towards cooperation, if incentives on offer are worthwhile. The nearly unopposed return of the Taliban after American exit and an apparent narrative of peaceful existence among all ethnic groups may be indicative of prevailing sagacity and pragmatism in the Afghan society. Consequently, at this critical stage of Afghan history, all ethno-nationalistic entities would be required to abandon individualistic goals for achieving sustainable and irreversible peace through reconciliation.

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Date of Publication	Jan 25, 2022
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