



# The Turkish narrative in Afghan peace process

**SPECIAL REPORT**



Turkey's announcement to host the Afghan peace conference in April 2021 is a strategic move, encompassing President Erdoğan's ambitions to wield smart power in the post-war state, consolidate the gains of neo-Ottoman expansionism, and re-position itself as a crucial power broker amid the strained bilateral relationship with the Biden administration.

## **Deconstructing the Facts**

The decision to spearhead the peace initiative is not part of unilateral Turkish propaganda. Made abundantly clear by the U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, it initially emanated from the detailed "decree" delivered to the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgents. However, it legitimised a platform for the Turkish government to realise its foreign policy objectives in a fragile country where it is perceived as an "objective" stakeholder in the ongoing peace process.

Amid these geostrategic calculations, including the ramifications of the American troops' possible withdrawal after 1 May 2021, Istanbul will play host to the domestic stakeholders mentioned above, should they accept the invitation. The Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, explained that his government would soon appoint a Special Envoy to Afghanistan while also emphasising that this aspect of the peace process will complement and not disrupt the Doha negotiations.

Essentially, the aim of hosting this conference is to rejuvenate the stalled negotiations and arrive at a definitive peace agreement.

As it stands, Ankara refers to them as “goal-oriented,” however, there is much ambiguity surrounding ensuing discussions. There is also a lack of confirmation about whether Afghan government and the Taliban representatives will make their presence known. Nonetheless, the Turkish-endorsed process has significant legitimacy due to the long-standing bilateral cooperation between Kabul and Ankara. Centuries of historical, religious, and humanitarian ties have cemented the cohesive engagement and cooperation between them.

Having recently celebrated a centenary of diplomatic ties, the two actors have consistently underscored the significance of their relationship, particularly concerning the peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes, and with Ankara having a pivotal role in the country enveloped by protracted violence. It has consistently engaged in the Asia Istanbul Process, bringing together actors across the board to support the peace process and maintained boots on the ground, extending its presence by 18 months in December 2020. Over the years, Turkey has also proactively trained police and military officials and made overtures in the educational sector by constructing schools and educational centres, benefitting over 7,000 children.

## **Consolidating Peace and Realpolitik Strategies Under the Same Gambit**

The Turkish foreign policy requires contextualisation and segregation between the pre-and the Erdoğan era. Ankara has unabashedly made realpolitik-based decisions under the incumbent administration, without remorse or restraint, more so than before.

Ankara has made bold and aggressive overtures in existing conflicts(armed and otherwise) with a hyper-nationalist leader at the helm. There is nothing to suggest why Afghanistan should remain an exception.

This is not to suggest that peace is not a priority for the Turkish administration. At the least, negative peace is crucial to ensure the realisation of its fundamental objectives in the foreseeable future. Stability, progress, and the definitive absence of armed conflict are pertinent for President Erdoğan to wield substantive influence in moulding post-war Afghanistan. The ability to dictate the terms of post-war reconstruction is essential to consolidate the gains of neo-Ottoman expansionist agenda, already emerging in countries or areas like Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. What is particular to Afghanistan is that Turkish intervention encompasses smart power, i.e., the culmination of hard and soft power. The presence of boots on the ground and education as weaponised tools cumulatively are part of its strategic interventionism.

If it hopes to exercise “legitimate” and unyielding power in the country, it is obligated to remove any probability of a full-blown conflict in the post-war state. That is contingent on the cessation of violence, a perpetual ceasefire, reconciliation, a consensus on a comprehensive peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and relative economic and infrastructural development. Undoubtedly, this is a mammoth list of goals that may prove non-feasible for the Turks, regardless of their intention to do otherwise.

On the other hand, it is critical to highlight how Turkey’s acceptance of spearheading the regional and international efforts to resolve the conflict is another power-play, positioning itself as the core power broker amid the transformative U.S.-Turkey relationship. Its actions in the East Mediterranean and North-Western Syria have altered the relatively smooth bilateral ties. Receiving the “cold shoulder” from President Biden has spurred it to leverage geostrategic manoeuvres in Afghanistan. Its centuries-long relationship with the Afghans and the substantive degree of faith in its presence and actions place it in a pivotal position, significant enough to outweigh the American influence in the post-war state and negotiations beyond the Afghan question.

By adopting the mediator’s role, Turkey might have set its sights on recalibrating the worsening bilateral relationship. Much to its detriment, it may not act as a precursor for the complete reversal of deteriorating ties between Washington and Ankara.

Nonetheless, it carries the potential to relatively modify the relationship, allowing for it to operate as an alliance of convenience in Afghanistan. Both these actors could find themselves in an amicable and cooperative relationship in the Afghan state since the American priority is to maintain peace and stability after the withdrawal of armed forces, and Turkey can act as a guarantor of that. Beyond that, they will continue clashing over humanitarian and legal issues, compartmentalising their bilateral relationship.

However, the most pivotal aspect of Turkey's announcement is that the Taliban officials have not accepted or denied the invite to the conference. There appears to be a lack of incentive for the insurgents to attend this conference as they continue to engage in violent acts with great impunity. The absence of either actor will negate the significance of this initiative. On the other hand, if Turkey can secure a victory in the aftermath of this peace process, it will have presented a fait accompli to the world instead of waiting further to consolidate its foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan.