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Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan?

OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES, 2001–21

By Steve Brooking



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines why negotiations involving the United States, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and the Taliban between 2001 and 2021 failed to produce a political settlement of the conflict. The report, which was commissioned by the United States Institute of Peace, draws on primary and secondary sources, interviews with participants, and the author's firsthand experience in Afghanistan as a diplomat and adviser.

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Cover photo: The Taliban delegation attends the opening session of peace talks between the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, on September 12, 2020. (Photo by Hussein Sayed/AP)

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Summary



Peace efforts in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 required the willingness of three main parties to negotiate: the Taliban, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (“the Republic”), and the United States. But as political and military advantages shifted, each party’s perceived and relative interests differed over time, preventing the alignment that was necessary for a genuine peace process to take root.

In the early years of the war, with the Taliban on the run, the United States and its Afghan allies chose not to include the Taliban in discussions on the country’s political future or in the new Afghan government. While the United States prioritized military operations against terrorists over statebuilding, abusive warlords and corruption undermined the authority of the fledgling Republic. The US military surge in 2010 arguably led to the kind of mutually hurting stalemate that might have encouraged negotiation, but the US policy machine was slow to acknowledge that a negotiated settlement was likely needed to end the war. By the time the US view had changed, the Taliban could see a path to military victory unobstructed by the need for serious political negotiations with the Republic.

A decisive shift occurred in 2018, when the United States appointed a special envoy to negotiate with the Taliban and enable a withdrawal. But President Donald Trump’s clear intention to leave without any real conditions weakened the United States’ and Republic’s hands in negotiations. Moreover, the Republic leadership distrusted the envoy, was concerned chiefly about its own positions, underestimated US intentions to withdraw, and overestimated the Republic’s own strength—and consequently made no concessions that could advance talks.

The United States negotiated its own deal with the Taliban, excluding the Republic. But the decision to de-link the US-Taliban deal from results in an overall peace process precipitated the speed of the Taliban victory. So, too, did President Joe Biden’s announcement of a complete US military withdrawal by September 2021. By midsummer 2021, Taliban advances across the country demonstrated that victory was within their grasp. The option of a political settlement thus became moot, and in August 2021, as President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, the Taliban took full control.

Ultimately, the three parties, as well as Pakistan, put their own short-term interests above those of the Afghan people, eliminating hopes for a negotiated, inclusive, and durable peace in Afghanistan.



UN special representative for Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi signs a UN-brokered deal establishing a post-Taliban transition government at the Hotel Petersberg near Bonn, Germany, on December 5, 2001, as Afghan leaders and German and UN officials look on. (Photo by Wolfgang Rattay/Reuters)

Introduction

This report assesses the main opportunities to negotiate a peace settlement among the three main parties to the Afghan war from 2001 to 2021—the Taliban, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (“the Republic”), and the United States. All of those opportunities were missed; they either went unrecognized or were deliberately spurned by one or more of the parties. The failure to make peace meant the war continued and deaths and injuries of fighters and civilians mounted, dooming the international intervention to failure and paving the way for the return of an autocratic Taliban regime. As a frequently quoted internet meme says, “It took four US presidents, thousands of lives, trillions of dollars, and twenty years to replace the Taliban with the Taliban.”

Given the enormous cost—financial and human—of the failure to establish a peace process that could lead to a

lasting political settlement of the conflict, the question naturally arises: Why? What explains the inability or unwillingness of the three parties to negotiate a deal?

In the search for an answer, the theory of “ripeness” put forward by scholar I. William Zartman is a useful lens through which to examine the chances of reaching a negotiated settlement. According to that theory, a conflict is “ripe” for a political settlement when both (or all) sides perceive they are in a “mutually hurting stalemate” with outright military victory impossible or highly unlikely and see “the possibility of a negotiated solution (a way out).”¹ Another important—albeit less important—factor is strong, unifying leadership within the conflict parties.² Ripeness, however, is transitory, and all sides need to realize at more or less the same time that the situation exists. Ripeness also presents only an opportunity: the

Applied to Afghanistan, ripeness theory helps to identify three key periods when there seemed to be an opening for the Taliban, the United States, and the US-backed Afghan government to initiate talks or pursue a genuine peace process. . . . In all these cases, the opportunity was missed.

substantive underlying problems of the conflict still have to be addressed in the actual negotiations. Moreover, sometimes parties pursue negotiations in bad faith. For example, they may negotiate and use the pause in fighting as a chance to re-arm and regroup.

Applied to Afghanistan, ripeness theory helps to identify three key periods when there seemed to be an opening for the Taliban, the United States, and the US-backed Afghan government to initiate talks or pursue a genuine peace process. The first was in 2001–2, in the immediate aftermath of the US intervention, when the Taliban were on the run and the world seemed united against them, so they were keen to salvage some power and influence. The second period was in 2010, when US and NATO military pressure, splits in the Taliban's ranks, and a new US president heralded the start of direct talks between the United States and the Taliban. The third was in 2019–20, when the Taliban's desire to make a deal that would secure the final departure of US troops prodded the Taliban into agreeing to sit down at the negotiating table with the Republic, even if that agreement was unenthusiastic and ultimately did not translate into substantive talks.

As this report explains, in all these cases, the opportunity was missed. In the first case, it was missed because neither the United States nor its new Afghan allies saw the need to accommodate in the political arena an enemy defeated on the battlefield; in the second instance, because of a combination of factors, including US and Republic reluctance to acknowledge the real strength of the Taliban; and in the last case, because the Taliban were then likely confident of achieving a military victory, successive US administrations had decided to prioritize the withdrawal of US troops and the United States' own deal with the Taliban and sideline the Republic government in Kabul, and that government was riven with internal disagreements and was misreading its own strength.

This report draws on research conducted in late 2021 and early 2022, using primary and secondary sources, including interviews with Afghan and US government officials and Taliban representatives who participated in peace efforts in Afghanistan.³ More broadly, the accounts and analyses presented here are informed by the author's firsthand experience. Over the course of 20 years, the author served in Afghanistan at various times as a British diplomat, a senior adviser to the Afghan government, and a UN official. In the latter capacity, he held the position of special adviser on peace and reconciliation and led UN efforts in engagements with the Taliban. These roles afforded the author access to key players among the main parties to the conflict, as well as important regional actors; at some junctures, the author was heavily involved in the events described. Although access to and direct participation in peace efforts inevitably shape assessment of them, the author has taken pains to research and represent a range of perspectives and to ensure the report is as evenhanded as possible. Where information or analysis is drawn from the author's notes of conversations with a colleague or interlocutor who wished to remain anonymous, the citation describes the nature of the position he or she held.

Organized chronologically, the report looks in turn at each of three important opportunities for peace negotiations, paying particularly close attention to the intra-Afghan negotiations between March 2020 and August 2021, a negotiating phase about which comparatively few firsthand accounts have been published. The report concludes with an overall assessment of the reasons for the failure to negotiate an inclusive peace deal in Afghanistan and a series of recommendations—based on the lessons of the Afghan experience—for policymakers to consider when opportunities for negotiation present themselves in protracted and complex conflicts.



Afghanistan and surrounding countries

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

The Unseen Opportunity: 2001–2

After the events of September 11, 2001, the prevailing view of President George W. Bush's administration is perhaps best summed up by an episode involving "a senior State Department official who suggested that the United States' first response to 9/11 should be a diplomatic overture to the Taliban. After the official had walked away, Bush turned to the CIA men and said, 'Fuck diplomacy, we are going to war.'"⁴

To the extent that the Americans were willing to talk to the Taliban, it was with the goal of forcing a handover of Osama bin Laden. As the United States prepared to launch military operations in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, the CIA station chief in Islamabad, Robert Grenier, tried to talk to the Taliban. Sometimes alongside Pakistani intelligence officials, Grenier met senior Taliban figures, seeking to persuade them of the need to hand over bin Laden or remove Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar. But the talks came to nothing: the Taliban interlocutors seemed unable to make definitive decisions, and their likely goal was to deflect US military action. Grenier was in any case out of step with the warlike mood in Washington, and talks ended as the United States started its bombing campaign on October 7. After Kabul had fallen and defeat for the Taliban was inevitable, there was a further meeting with a representative of senior leader Abdul Ghani Baradar, but this too failed to achieve any final compromise with the Taliban, who were still resisting in the south.⁵ The Taliban's refusal to turn over bin Laden hardened the US policy of ousting them from power in cooperation with friendly Afghan militias on the ground. President Bush reiterated throughout the fall, "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror."⁶

In December 2001, a conference in Bonn, Germany, brought together international officials and Afghans

to agree upon a timeline for a political process. What became known as the "Bonn process" included the establishment of an interim government, the drafting of a new constitution, and eventually elections in a fully democratic system. The Taliban were conspicuously absent at Bonn. UN special representative for Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi subsequently admitted that not inviting the Taliban to the Bonn Conference was a major error, one that he referred to as "the original sin."⁷ This attitude has recently gained considerable traction among Afghan and international actors, including even some Taliban figures, particularly in the wake of the Taliban's swift takeover of the country in 2021.

Available evidence suggests that at the time, no one even voiced the idea of inviting the Taliban to Bonn. When the conference was being planned, and even concluded, fighting was ongoing in Afghanistan; the Taliban were in disarray, with leaders fleeing to wherever they thought they might find safety. The war seemed to be in an unstoppable phase, and perhaps it would have been difficult to identify whom to bring to Bonn, let alone how, and what ability any Taliban representative would have to make definitive agreements.

Moreover, it was clear that the United States wanted a quick victory and did not foresee that a lasting peace might require including elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan's future governance. The Bonn Agreement was meant not to bring peace among fighting groups but to establish a new order and system, comprised of those whom the United States and the wider international community hoped could bring stability to Afghanistan.⁸ Not even Pakistan—still reeling from the US post-9/11 ultimatum of "you're either with us or against us"—argued for the inclusion of the Taliban at



US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, right, meets with Hamid Karzai, the new interim leader of Afghanistan at Bagram air base in Afghanistan on December 16, 2001. (Photo by Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP)

Bonn. The Taliban had their roots in the Pashtun tribes of southern Afghanistan. International diplomats felt there would be sufficient ethnic Pashtun representation with tribal figure Hamid Karzai as the interim leader, providing balance to Northern Alliance power on the ground, which consisted primarily of Tajik and Uzbek ethnic groups. Southern Pashtun representation at Bonn came mainly from the Rome-based group of supporters of the former king, Mohammad Zahir Shah, who had lived in exile in Rome since 1973. Bonn was eventually seen as cementing the power of the CIA-backed Northern Alliance, which controlled Kabul and was given key ministries such as defense, intelligence, interior, and foreign affairs, all of which were to be headed by Tajiks from the small valley of Panjshir.

Yet in early December, even as the US-backed Karzai gained military advantage over Taliban forces in the

south, some Taliban made overtures to Karzai, both through tribal leaders and directly through Tayeb Agha, an aide to Mullah Omar. According to Tayeb Agha, the Taliban offered to hand over the whole of the south as long as their leaders could have vehicles, security, and acceptance of their three nominees as governors for the southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, and Zabul. It is unclear on exactly whose authority this offer was extended. However, the deal that Karzai appeared to have struck with senior Taliban was swiftly rejected when reported up the US military channel: “Karzai negotiated a truce with the Taliban that offered safe passage . . . Mullah Omar would be allowed to live in peace in Kandahar. . . . [US Secretary of Defense] Rumsfeld rejected it out of hand.”⁹ The message from Rumsfeld and White House spokesman Ari Fleischer was that “those who harbor terrorists need to be brought to justice” and that Mullah Omar had harbored terrorists.¹⁰

Even after the inauguration of Karzai as interim leader in late 2001, senior Taliban continued to reach out to him to seek a role in his administration. Former Taliban foreign minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil approached Karzai in February 2002 but was promptly arrested by the Americans and detained at Bagram air base. The brother of mujahideen commander Jalaluddin Haqqani sought to enable a rapprochement between the Taliban-aligned Haqqani Network and the interim government in Kabul; others approached intermediaries in Kandahar.¹¹ All were at best rebuffed; at worst, they were arrested and taken into US custody. Neither the United States nor powerful Northern Alliance elements of the interim Afghan government wanted any role for these “enemies.” Karzai, although concerned that alienation of the Taliban would damage prospects for stability in the south, was prepared to acquiesce to those who had put him in power and could easily remove him.

The Emergency Loya Jirga of June 2002 marked an opportunity to rebalance power and achieve greater political reconciliation. Over 1,500 representatives selected by their communities across the country came together to decide on an interim leader, cabinet, and political roadmap. There was no specific Taliban representation, but a number of community representatives with more conservative views participated. Many Pashtuns were hopeful that the gathering would establish former king Zahir Shah in a role that he could use to unite the tribes and bring them more power. However, an unlikely group led by US representative Zalmay Khalilzad and supported by the Iranians (who were opposed to any return of the king on principle) and their Northern Alliance allies persuaded Zahir Shah to say that he would not be a candidate. The sense of disappointment at the gathering was strong, and some delegates threatened a boycott. In the end, Karzai—the United States’ favored candidate—was again chosen as interim leader.¹²

Karzai did make quiet attempts to win over senior Taliban, and some figures who were not seen as a

security threat were peacefully absorbed back into society, including some who eventually obtained government appointments.¹³ However, US and Northern Alliance opposition to such moves continued.¹⁴ Counterterrorism priorities were still driving US policy, which was focused on hunting down al-Qaeda and the Taliban. A rapprochement with the Taliban was not in the interests of Northern Alliance leaders, who were delighted to return to power and receive cash bonuses for alleged Taliban prisoners they turned over to the Americans. Such prisoners were often merely enemies of existing power brokers, but they were targeted in the United States’ new “Global War on Terror.” Many fled across the border to safety in Pakistan rather than risk detention or death. Intimidation and control by the United States and its warlord allies were set as precedents and continued for the next 20 years, undoubtedly fueling the discontent that led to the successful return of the Taliban.

The Taliban's willingness to make deals in late 2001 and early 2002 is perhaps best seen as an attempt to survive and to hold onto some positions as it became clear who would win. The deal that they negotiated with Karzai in December 2001—to surrender and acknowledge the interim government—likely indicated their relative position of weakness. Karzai's inclination was to reach some form of compromise that would allow a certain dignity to the losers and maybe even grant them some protocol and positions.¹⁵ However, he was overruled by the American military and, in particular, by Secretary Rumsfeld: the US psyche in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 was not prepared for negotiations; complete victory was demanded.

This rigid US position, and the US rejection of subsequent Taliban attempts at outreach in early 2002, meant that an opportunity was missed to co-opt some members of the former regime into the new administration and thus lessen the chances of an armed opposition reemerging. As Thomas Barfield, a scholar of Afghanistan, has written, “The time to win the

As Thomas Barfield, a scholar of Afghanistan, has written, “The time to win the peace is at the end of a war.” In 2001–2, the victors—the United States and the Northern Alliance militias—failed to recognize this fundamental principle.

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Over the next several years, opposition to the fledgling Afghan republic grew. Corrupt and predatory power brokers were appointed to key positions and backed by the Americans for their “anti-Taliban” credentials. The result was poor governance and the marginalization of certain Pashtun tribes. With safe refuge across the border in the Pashtun areas of Pakistan, the Taliban insurgency was able to grow and flourish. The Taliban reestablished links with disaffected Afghan communities alienated by discriminatory policies. At the same time, Pakistan channelled more support to the Taliban, worried about increasing Indian influence

in Afghanistan and realizing that the United States, now distracted by the war in Iraq, had moved on from its stark stance of “with us or against us.” Sporadic attempts at talks were made in this period, notably outreach by some Taliban locally in light of increased international military operations in the south in 2005 and 2006. Reconciliation continued to be blocked by Kabul and Washington, with Taliban detained and EU and UN diplomats expelled by Karzai for attempting to make peace.¹⁷ The Kabul government’s intelligence chief, Amrullah Saleh, summed up the fundamentally unstable situation in the country when, in 2007, he said, “Maybe 15 percent of the people support the government and 5 percent support the Taliban; everyone else is just stuck in the middle, worried that if they pick a side they will be targeted.”¹⁸

The Lost Opportunity: 2010–13



As the insurgency strengthened and US and NATO military pressure on it increased, another opening for peace efforts emerged. Taliban influence had spread significantly since 2005, although they controlled relatively little territory. International air strikes featured strongly, along with a force of around 30,000 US troops plus NATO allies, for a total of roughly 60,000 foreign forces.¹⁹ The Taliban in 2008 “controlled” fewer than 10 of Afghanistan’s 412 districts; but more and more were becoming “contested” (the terminology varied over time and from one organization to another), a trend that continued until the eventual 2021 Taliban takeover.²⁰ Karzai tried to insist that every district needed to be defended, leading to small groups of easily targeted police and soldiers being increasingly exposed to larger and more mobile Taliban forces. Even as late as 2021, the United States was having problems persuading Republic military leaders to consolidate their forces to guard and control key cities and infrastructure rather than spread their forces thinly.

Although the United States had shown an interest in Saudi Arabia’s efforts to mediate secret talks in 2008 between Afghan government representatives and the Taliban, as of 2009, when President Barack Obama came to office, no US official “had ever talked directly to a [senior] Taliban representative.”²¹ President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton seemed inclined to change that approach. A former senior CIA official, Bruce Riedel, was tasked with conducting a review of overall policy on Afghanistan. Obama also appointed veteran diplomat Richard Holbrooke as special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Secretary Clinton wrote, “In my early conversations with Holbrooke about the possibilities of a political solution to the conflict, we debated two ways of approaching

the problem: bottom-up and top-down. . . . The top-down approach was more challenging but potentially more decisive.”²² Arguably for the first time in US policy since 9/11, talk of there being “no military solution” began to produce high-level openness to the political settlement of what had become a grinding insurgency.

Initially, Clinton laid down three core preconditions for talks, which Riedel had identified as necessary conditions for the Taliban to enter the Afghan political process: lay down weapons, reject al-Qaeda, and respect the 2004 constitution.²³ Over time, these preconditions were abandoned, and they instead became the desired outcomes.

A concurrent debate about troop numbers raged through most of 2009, with small increments being added until the administration announced a final surge of over 30,000 troops, bringing total US troop numbers to 100,000, with the provision that the additional troops would be drawn down again by July 2011.²⁴ This policy appears to have been a compromise among various views. General Stanley McChrystal, commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan at the time, had requested a surge not only of military forces but also of diplomats and development experts to win the battle for Afghan “hearts and minds,” whereas US Central Command commander (and later McChrystal’s successor in Afghanistan) General David Petraeus seemed solely focused on applying more military pressure before any negotiations, by which point, he argued, the pummelled Taliban would be more open to compromise. Conversely, some Democratic politicians wanted a full withdrawal. And between these arguments, some hoped the surge would shape dynamics for a peace



US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton (front right) greets Salahuddin Rabbani, Afghan ambassador to Turkey, at a civil society roundtable discussion at the US Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, on October 20, 2011, one month after his father, chair of the Afghan High Peace Council, had been killed. In April 2012, Salahuddin Rabbani would be elected to chair the council. (Photo by Kevin Lamarque/AP)

process. In the end, the amount of civilian assistance and personnel surged along with military forces, although the priority remained supporting the military campaign rather than political negotiations.

Karzai continued to demonstrate openness to negotiating with the Taliban, but with scant concrete results. After he was reelected in 2009 (amid allegations of widespread fraud benefiting the incumbent), he redoubled efforts to reach out to senior Taliban, but suffered a setback when one of his contacts, Taliban deputy leader Abdul Ghani Baradar, was arrested in Pakistan in February 2010—almost certainly because Baradar was involved in talks without Pakistan’s approval.²⁵ The British brokered another approach, this one involving former Taliban aviation minister Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, in early 2010. This channel appeared to

Karzai and others to be real at the outset; but the person who came to Kabul to meet with Karzai was suspected to be an imposter, not Mansour, and the contact faded with publicity and leaks.²⁶

Despite Obama having a sometimes tense and abrasive relationship with Karzai, after a May 2010 meeting with him in Washington, Obama formally lifted the Bush-era ban on talking to the Taliban, as suggested by Karzai. In June 2010, Karzai convened a meeting of over 1,600 delegates to discuss peace. This led to the formation of the High Peace Council, tasked with talking to the Taliban and reaching a political solution. Around the same time, members of a high-level US study group returned from a trip to Pakistan with the news that the Taliban were interested in talks with the United States.²⁷

Over the next decade, the Taliban never significantly deviated from these lines: their message in talks was that the problem lay with the United States. . . . Therefore the Taliban needed to resolve their problems only with the United States, not with what they viewed as the puppet government in Kabul.

The breakthrough in the arrangement for direct US-Taliban talks had been an offer from German intelligence in 2009 to facilitate secret talks between the United States and Tayeb Agha, who was still closely connected to the Taliban leadership. These talks, led on the US side by the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, started in late 2010. The initial focus was on the confidence-building measure of prisoner releases and the idea of a Taliban representative office to be opened in a country that was considered neutral. Doha, Qatar, was the preferred location.²⁸

Diverging interests between the United States and the Afghan government underlay the difficulty of maintaining Karzai's support for negotiations. The United States sought a degree of political stability that would enable the withdrawal of US troops and the protection of US counterterrorism interests. In theory, the path to greater political stability could entail some rearrangement of the existing political order, which would likely undercut Karzai's political power. By contrast, politicians in Kabul wanted to stay in power with US support. Karzai seemed to envisage only a peace deal that left the reins of government in his hands and allowed the Taliban to join under his leadership. His relationship with the United States had deteriorated substantially by 2010: his 2009 reelection had been tainted by allegations of fraud; his government was seen as increasingly inept and corrupt; increased coalition combat operations led to greater civilian casualties, a source of deep anger for Karzai and of domestic political pressure on him to push back; Karzai publicly threatened to join with the Taliban in April 2010; and the Kabul Bank scandal, in which power brokers stole or siphoned off nearly \$1 billion of depositors' money, revealed corruption on a massive scale involving Karzai's brother and senior officials in his government.²⁹

US-Taliban talks continued haltingly from 2010 through 2012. On the Taliban side, according to a senior leader who spoke years later, three main factors prompted Taliban interest in talks with the United States: Supreme Leader Mullah Omar was becoming sicker by the day, and the leadership wanted a deal with his blessing in case the movement fractured on his death; Karzai was clearly having a problematic relationship with the Americans, who might be prepared to abandon or sideline him; and the surge of US troops and increased fighting was hurting the morale of Taliban fighters.³⁰

A 2012 Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) report described interviews with senior Taliban about their perspectives on reconciliation. According to the report, the Taliban would be prepared to discuss counterterrorism issues and US military presence, but not to talk directly with the Afghan government or agree to the 2004 constitution; they saw a ceasefire as an item for discussion as part of an overall deal.³¹ The findings of the RUSI report foreshadowed the Taliban's approach to negotiations in the 2019–21 period. It is remarkable that over the next decade, the Taliban never significantly deviated from these lines: their message in talks was that the problem lay with the United States. The standard Taliban propaganda lines were that the United States had invaded and overthrown the legitimate Islamic Emirate government; the 2004 constitution was created under the shadow of B-52 bombers and so was unacceptable; and therefore the Taliban needed to resolve their problems only with the United States, not with what they viewed as the puppet government in Kabul.

The impact of the 2009–11 troop surge on prospects for genuine negotiations is hard to assess. There were certainly strong impacts on the battlefield, but the secondary effects are more difficult to judge. Major combat operations and higher casualties were increasing the

costs of the war on all sides. Some argued that the surge was contributing to a military stalemate situation, while others argued that the killing of potentially more accommodating Taliban leaders was counterproductive and resulting in more ideological, hardened figures taking their place.³²

One side effect of more fighting was more civilian casualties, which Taliban propaganda blamed on the “foreign invaders.” Senior Pakistani generals who worked on Afghanistan viewed this period, when the US military presence was at its height, as the key opportunity for peace negotiations that was lost, seeing the military pressure making the Taliban more likely to compromise.³³ Conversely, former UK special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan Sherard Cowper-Coles complained about the “incurably optimistic” military views that were distorting US and UK policy in 2010; rosy assessments of the coalition’s military advantage led the US and NATO to overestimate their own leverage and thus dampened military support for negotiations and willingness to compromise.³⁴ This overoptimism was revealed in excruciating detail in 2019 in a multipart *Washington Post* story, “The Afghanistan Papers,” based on 2,000 previously unpublished pages of interview notes by an independent US government watchdog agency, whose analysts had interviewed hundreds of people involved in the war. As one retired Army colonel told the agency, “The strategy became self-validating. Every data point was altered to present the best picture possible. Surveys, for instance, were totally unreliable but reinforced that everything we were doing was right and we became a self-licking ice cream cone.”³⁵

Despite the military pressure exerted by the United States during the surge, which not only pushed US troop numbers up to 100,000 but also increased air strikes in Pakistan, most US military leaders opposed top-level reconciliation at this time, arguing with the White House and State Department as to whether the aim of the surge was to destroy or to degrade the Taliban—in other words, whether to go for outright

military victory or to weaken the Taliban until they were amenable to negotiations.³⁶ The vice president at the time, Joe Biden, reportedly saw the aim as to “degrade the Taliban, with eventual reconciliation in mind.”³⁷ General Petraeus, however, as noted above, seemed more focused on winning a military victory than on pressing the Taliban to negotiate. Even as Karzai was setting up the High Peace Council in September 2010, Petraeus deviated from McChrystal’s emphasis on protecting the population as a means of winning hearts and minds and launched major attacks around Kandahar.³⁸ To many observers, US policy was unclear, and it seemed that the State Department, Defense Department, and White House were not jointly working toward any agreed end state in Afghanistan.

Although formal talks were slow to start, track 2 peace initiatives were launched. At conferences in Kyoto, Japan, and Chantilly, France, in 2012, both Taliban and Afghan government representatives were present. However, Karzai argued that allowing the Taliban to take part in such meetings meant they could continue to avoid direct talks with his own government. He asked the United Nations to cancel a planned track 2 meeting in Turkmenistan in early 2013. Karzai’s successor, Ashraf Ghani, held the same attitude after his 2014 election, rendering such initiatives difficult to organize.

Meanwhile, tensions between the United States and Karzai continued to hamper US engagement with the Taliban. Obama still regarded Karzai as a key ally, and in US talks with the Taliban, US officials insisted that the Taliban engage in direct dialogue with the Republic government to reach a joint Afghan-owned solution to the country’s future. The Taliban’s response was to announce the suspension of talks with the United States in early 2012, claiming that the United States kept trying to impose fresh conditions.³⁹ Despite US attempts to maintain Karzai’s support for the talks and keep him informed, his staff leaked details and claimed that US-Taliban talks were being held without Karzai’s consent and were granting political legitimacy to the Taliban.

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Successive US special representatives continued to engage and restarted talks, and in June 2013, the Taliban Political Office formally opened in Doha. However, on the day of the opening, the Taliban displayed a nameplate for the “Islamic Emirate” and their flag outside the office, both of which were explicitly prohibited in the agreement with the United States and Qatar to set up the office. In response to Karzai’s objections, the office was promptly shut. Nonetheless, despite not having a formal office, there was at least an acknowledged presence of the Taliban Political Commission in Doha and a clear channel of communication perceived to be reporting to their leadership.

The 2010–13 period was therefore a second major opening for a process to reach a negotiated deal. In this case, elements within the US government and the Taliban appeared willing to talk peace. But the US insistence on including the Afghan government in formal talks, combined with Taliban refusal to agree to this, and Karzai’s obstructionist efforts because his government remained excluded from talks, created an impasse. Further, US engagement was likely complicated by the

Pentagon’s relatively weak support for negotiations. Key military leaders thought that greater investment in the war effort could either defeat the Taliban on the battlefield or weaken the Taliban and thus eventually strengthen the US hand at the negotiating table. In hindsight, this appears to have been a misreading of the situation. The battlefield advantage that coalition forces enjoyed during the surge marked perhaps the height of US military leverage over the Taliban, and the Taliban evaded US military might by escaping to their sanctuaries in Pakistan (whose role is covered in more detail later).

It would be wrong to blame the military entirely: they were serving their political masters and commander-in-chief. However, there was rarely a political strategy with which to guide the military strategy; the two appeared to continue to be headed in different directions. As the Riedel review said in 2009, “Eight years into the war [US policymakers] were still struggling to refine what the core objectives were.”⁴⁰ It took a very determined US president in 2018 to push US-Taliban negotiations onto a new track and an equally determined one to carry that through to its logical conclusion in 2021.

Limited Engagement: 2013–18



In the five years leading up to the 2018 initiation of public, direct US-Taliban talks, numerous peace efforts were initiated, but none produced significant results. A close examination of these efforts is outside the scope of this report, but a brief recounting sets the context for the talks that were held from 2018 to 2021.

US-Taliban contacts continued even after the abortive opening of the Taliban political office in Doha. The United States and Taliban negotiated a prisoner exchange deal in 2014, in which US soldier Bowe Bergdahl, who had been held captive by the Taliban since 2009, was returned to the United States in exchange for five major Taliban figures who had been held at Guantánamo Bay. At the same time, international and Afghan attention was focused on the 2014 Afghan presidential elections—which again produced a disputed result—effectively putting peace efforts on hold. The election dispute led to the formation of a National Unity Government headed by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. Early in Ghani’s new term, he tried to improve relations with Pakistan as a means of working toward a peace process, but leaks from his own team set back these efforts, and the Taliban did not engage.

Similarly, attempts in 2015 by the United Nations and China, and then by Pakistan and China, to convene

Taliban and Afghan government representatives faltered, in part due to the news that Mullah Omar had been dead for more than two years. Akhtar Mohammad Mansour was elected the new Taliban leader. Some analysts have argued that his pragmatism (illustrated by his profitable ties to drug traffickers) would have made him a viable negotiating partner. This could not be tested, however, because a US drone strike inside Pakistan killed Mansour in May 2016, with the United States explicitly claiming that his opposition to peace had been a factor in the decision to target him.⁴¹ Meetings of a Quadrilateral Coordination Group of the United States, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan also failed to make progress.

During these years, the evanescent impact of the surge also became clear. It had achieved its objective in pushing the Taliban away from the provincial capitals and limiting their control of districts. But as the troop levels drew down again and prime responsibility for fighting the war was transferred to the Republic’s forces in 2014, the Taliban surged back in and increasingly took control of districts; the Taliban even temporarily seized the provincial capital of Kunduz in both 2015 and 2016. The war was now widely being seen in Washington as unwinnable. By May 2018, the Taliban controlled 42 districts and contested 203 (over half the country), with international troop numbers down to about 30,000, of whom 14,000 were American.⁴²

Formal Negotiations: 2018–February 2020



President Ghani had launched an initiative in 2017 seeking peace with the Taliban; and in early 2018, amid increasing violence, he proposed unconditional peace talks. The Taliban responded with silence. However, June of that year brought a watershed moment for the country, when Afghan security forces and the Taliban observed an unconditional three-day ceasefire during the Eid religious holiday. The Afghan people enthusiastically welcomed relief from the war. Social media was flooded with images of Afghan soldiers and Taliban fighters embracing, praying together in mosques, and celebrating Eid. The ceasefire demonstrated that the Taliban had the unity of command to stop violence, if they wished, although they later issued instructions against such “fraternization,” clearly fearing their fighters would see the enemy as fellow Islamic Afghans rather than American puppets.⁴³ The larger political effect was also profound: Afghans experienced three days of peace, inspiring new hope that an end to the war was possible and perhaps strengthening public support for a peace process.

In Washington, newly elected President Donald Trump was keen to fulfill his campaign promise of ending the “forever war” in Afghanistan. In September 2018, Trump appointed former US ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad to a new role as US special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation.⁴⁴ Trump wanted a deal with the Taliban and appeared prepared to move ahead without the direct involvement of the Republic government. This approach marked a significant break from the United States’ long-standing policy of refusing to open formal talks with the Taliban unless the Afghan

government was present. The Taliban had been consistent in their demand that they would speak to the “Kabul authorities” only after reaching a deal with the United States; thus, US formal talks with the Taliban represented a concession to them. From the beginning of Khalilzad’s efforts, however, he sought to link the US-Taliban dialogue to the overall ideal of an intra-Afghan settlement.

The other major break from previous US policy was that Khalilzad was willing to talk with the Taliban about the full withdrawal of US troops. The Trump administration never publicly clarified exactly when, during the course of negotiations with the Taliban, that offer was put on the table. The Taliban had always demanded full US withdrawal. The original idea on the part of the United States, however, was that the United States would be allowed to maintain, as in Iraq, some troop presence—perhaps attached to the embassy—to deal with counterterrorism and other issues. (The eventual US-Taliban deal would provide for a full but conditional withdrawal of US and international troops.)

Khalilzad faced an uphill battle in establishing trust with several of the key stakeholders in a negotiating process. On his first visit to the region, he encountered little goodwill. Khalilzad had been critical of Pakistani support for the Taliban, so he was not warmly welcomed in Islamabad. And in Kabul, the atmosphere was prickly thanks to a decades-long rivalry between him and President Ghani, as well as hostility from many Tajiks who were highly suspicious of the US envoy’s motives.⁴⁵ Ghani feared that Khalilzad, with whom he had been a US scholarship student from Afghanistan in

Khalilzad had sought to reassure Afghan officials of America's commitment. . . . He tweeted in January 2019 what would become a mantra: "Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, and 'everything' must include an intra-Afghan dialogue and comprehensive ceasefire."

Beirut many years previously, retained his own personal interests in Afghan politics and business and would seek to sideline the Afghan government. Ghani thus made a strong pitch that Afghan officials should be present in all talks with the Taliban.⁴⁶ This Afghan mistrust of Khalilzad, not limited to officials in Kabul, would dog reconciliation attempts.

A direct result of Khalilzad's first trip was that Pakistan released Mullah Baradar, the former deputy leader of the Taliban, from house arrest in order to help get the negotiations moving.⁴⁷ Baradar was reinstated as a deputy leader and appointed to head the Political Commission. Khalilzad began discussions with the Taliban about a ceasefire and, most importantly for them, a timeline for the withdrawal of US and international troops. He failed, however, to persuade the Taliban to agree to meet the Afghan government for direct talks.⁴⁸ At one point, Khalilzad promised Ghani that the Taliban would meet with Republic representatives in Abu Dhabi and persuaded him to send a delegation there to be ready for talks. Instead, they spent a humiliating few days waiting in a hotel for a meeting that never happened.

In late 2018, still early in Khalilzad's efforts, his greatest source of leverage at the negotiating table—the US military presence in Afghanistan that stood between the Taliban and their return to power—was significantly undercut. Trump announced that he would bring home roughly half of the 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan, reportedly without any policy process having supported the decision.⁴⁹ This sudden announcement both diminished US leverage and telegraphed Trump's impatience. Khalilzad had foreseen this risk when he told his team that they might only have a short window before the president made irrevocable decisions.⁵⁰ Undoubtedly, the Taliban noted the US urgency to

leave Afghanistan and the gap this created between the United States and its allies in Kabul.

Khalilzad had sought to reassure Afghan officials of America's commitment, stating that his goal was to bring the Afghan parties together for talks. He tweeted in January 2019 what would become a mantra: "Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, and 'everything' must include an intra-Afghan dialogue and comprehensive ceasefire."⁵¹

Also, in January 2019, the US team and the Taliban met in Doha. Over six days, they produced a draft framework for an agreement, which officials would continue to work on in detail and which would form the basis for the eventual agreement. It sought to link a US withdrawal to Taliban guarantees that they would join a peace process, reach a ceasefire, and ensure that Afghanistan would not again become a base for cross-border terrorism that threatened the United States or its allies.

One difficulty that emerged was that the Taliban lacked technical expertise and understanding of key issues surrounding the US troop withdrawal and counterterrorism questions, such as how retrograde operations worked or the internationally agreed best practices on combating international terrorism. At the United States' request, Norway and the United Nations agreed to send experts to assist the Taliban in the margins during negotiations. However, the Qataris blocked this move, as they wanted their own think tank experts to be involved in discussions. Unfortunately, it became clear to the US side that the Qatari think tank lacked any real expertise in the issues under discussion, and its experts eventually had to be excluded. Qatari interventions on the agenda were also seen as unhelpful. Yet US attempts to get the United Nations and Norway into the room were also blocked by the Taliban members

who had come from Pakistan, fueling suspicion that the Pakistanis were also opposed to the presence of independent observers. Some US team members speculated that the Taliban might be not only uninterested in details but also unprepared to make any concessions.⁵²

Khalilzad sometimes tried to draw aside a couple of the key Taliban leaders for more informal conversations. The problem with these side discussions was that they caused mistrust not only among some members of the Taliban, who wondered what was being discussed outside the plenary, but also with Khalilzad's own side, as he tended to hold the conversations in Pashto, which few of his own team spoke. On more than one occasion, he tried to avoid taking State Department officials on trips. Republic officials suspected Khalilzad was making up US policy as he went along.⁵³

Khalilzad publicly expressed optimism that a deal could be reached before the Afghan presidential elections scheduled for July 2019. But talks broke down at the end of February with the Taliban's rejection of a Qatari draft text, which contained, in their view, too long a timeline for withdrawal and overly strong conditions on counterterrorism. The Taliban continued to insist on a full international troop withdrawal and an Islamic government—by their definition of “Islamic”—before they would agree to intra-Afghan talks and a ceasefire.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, by the time a fifth round of negotiations ended on March 12, the two sides had reached a draft agreement on withdrawal and counterterrorism guarantees.⁵⁵

Not everyone in Washington was happy with the deal that Khalilzad appeared to be putting together. The emphasis on *complete* withdrawal, rather than leaving some form of counterterrorism presence in case the Taliban failed to live up to their commitments, provoked concern in some quarters of the US government.⁵⁶ The Defense Department argued strongly for retaining a counterterrorism force, but the White House position was unclear. One idea was to address these issues in secret annexes that would allow the United States to

keep counterterrorism forces in the country and provide a mechanism to monitor Taliban compliance.⁵⁷ These annexes, often cited, have yet to be made public.⁵⁸

The Qataris were keen to keep the talks in Doha. In April 2019, in response to suggestions from the United States, which wanted some form of intra-Afghan meeting to show progress before US officials returned to Doha for their own negotiations, the Qataris tried to arrange for a delegation of 250 civil society members and politicians to come from Kabul to meet the Taliban for informal talks. However, this proposal had not been properly discussed with the Afghan government in Kabul, which objected to some individuals on the list of delegates prepared by Qatar. Moreover, Qatar had agreed that the Taliban could veto people they did not like, which further annoyed Ghani. Thus, plans for these informal talks fell apart. This episode reinforced Ghani's view that Qatar was too pro-Taliban to be a venue for neutral talks.

It was unclear when a decision was made that the United States would sign an agreement that only addressed its own concerns and left the questions around an ultimate political settlement of the conflict to be dealt with separately by the Taliban and the Afghan Republic. But in mid-April, Khalilzad told European allies that he was “keen to press ahead with the US-Taliban talks to the point of agreement, as this is what the Taliban and his own political leaders wanted.” The Europeans expressed concern that a US-Taliban final agreement would destroy any incentive for the Taliban to talk directly to the Republic government and suggested that the United States stop just short of a final agreement to preserve an incentive for intra-Afghan talks.⁵⁹ US allies within NATO were growing increasingly concerned that they were not being adequately consulted and informed by Khalilzad and that he would press ahead with a deal without any reference to them. Within NATO, as within the Republic government, Khalilzad was inspiring a degree of mistrust.

Meanwhile, at the end of April, Ghani, who was increasingly concerned by rumors coming from Doha that



Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the leader of the Taliban delegation, shake hands after signing the US-Taliban “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020. (Photo by Hussein Sayed/AP)

the United States would like to see a delayed Afghan presidential election and the installation of an interim government led by Khalilzad’s old friend Hamid Karzai, called a consultative peace assembly of more than 1,500 people to discuss and advise on terms for peace. The result was fixed in advance: the assembly would emphasize the need for a ceasefire and to preserve the Republic. Yet the attendees also agreed that the constitution could be amended, some prisoners released, and all reasonable Taliban demands met.⁶⁰ Some major political figures boycotted the event, seeing it as Ghani electioneering for the upcoming presidential contest rather than really being about peace. This split in public positions by Republic politicians was helpful to Taliban propaganda.

The United States continued publicly to link any possible agreement with the Taliban to a ceasefire and

an intra-Afghan peace deal, but it was clear that the two sides were very close to an agreement and just needed to finalize details with their respective leaderships.⁶¹ The US government asked Norway to convene a meeting of Afghan experts in August 2019 to lay the groundwork for intra-Afghan negotiations, with a view to starting them in Oslo in September.

It is unclear at what point the idea of any strong linkage between the US deal and an intra-Afghan deal was dropped or how any conditionality may have worked. Major interagency disagreements persisted into August 2019. At two National Security Council meetings, President Trump did not come down firmly in any particular direction, leaving Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Khalilzad to pursue the policy they wanted, despite the Defense Department wanting any final US withdrawal “conditions-based.”⁶²

In late August, Khalilzad and Baradar initialed a deal in Doha and discussed the next steps. Trump had made it clear to US officials, the Taliban, and Ghani that he wanted to invite both Afghan sides to the United States for the final signing and meeting as soon as September 8. All that changed, however, after a suicide attacker in Kabul killed a US soldier on September 5; on September 7, the mercurial Trump tweeted about a canceled meeting planned for Camp David, stating that if the Taliban “could not have a ceasefire during such talks then they probably could not reach a meaningful agreement anyway.”⁶³ It is unclear whether the Taliban had already signaled that they had a problem with attending a signing in the United States at which Ghani would be present, and thus whether Trump was using the killing as an excuse, or whether in fact he suddenly had cold feet about the whole deal.

According to a senior Taliban figure who later spoke to the United Nations, the Taliban had not been keen to attend a meeting in the United States. The delegation did not want to engage with Ghani, who had also been invited to Camp David. Further, Taliban leaders did not want delegates to attend a signing while US troops remained in Afghanistan and were concerned that the United States might try to bring about last-minute changes to the written agreement.

Even after this breakdown, the Taliban pressed for the initialed agreement to be honored and said that any attempts to renegotiate would cause further delay and thus more Afghan deaths. They were willing to have a ceasefire with the United States as part of the deal but insisted that discussions of a ceasefire with the Republic would come only later, as part of the intra-Afghan talks.⁶⁴

Afghan presidential elections in September 2019 were marred by low voter turnout—less than 15 percent of the electorate voted—and widespread fraud allegations. It appeared that Ghani was going to be announced as the winner (which he was in February

2020, although it took until May 2020 to resolve the political impasse with Ghani’s rival, Abdullah, who had also declared himself the winner). The United States and Taliban meanwhile negotiated a prisoner exchange in which two professors from the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, kidnapped by the Haqqani Network in 2016, were released in exchange for three important Haqqani figures, including Anas Haqqani, the son of the movement’s founder, and two commanders. The Haqqani release was agreed to by Ghani partly under US pressure but also as a goodwill gesture and because he wanted continued US support for the Afghan security forces and in his dispute with Abdullah, as well as US help in the upcoming intra-Afghan negotiations.⁶⁵

As US-Taliban talks resumed in December 2019, the United States pressed for greater reductions in violence against Afghan security forces or a complete ceasefire. The Taliban offered only limited, and not easily quantifiable, reductions in violence.⁶⁶ They were willing, however, to execute a weeklong complete ceasefire in order to show that they had control of their fighters across the country.

As the United States came close to an agreement with the Taliban, Khalilzad and US chargé d’affaires Ross Wilson also discussed with Ghani and his team a parallel “arrangement” to be announced the same day in Kabul as any signing ceremony with the Taliban. This arrangement would provide reassurances to the Republic that the United States would continue to stand by it.

On February 29, 2020, the US-Taliban “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” was signed in Doha by Khalilzad and Baradar. The deal stated that US and coalition troops, plus all their support elements, would be significantly reduced by mid-July 2020 and would leave Afghanistan completely by May 1, 2021, in exchange for Taliban guarantees that they would not threaten the safety of the United States and its allies or allow others based in Afghanistan to do so. It said that intra-Afghan negotiations would start in 10 days

Many Afghan officials saw the deal as dooming the Republic to accepting peace on Taliban terms. As a report by the International Crisis Group noted, Taliban statements indicated that they thought that the “Doha agreement was, in effect, a framework for bringing the movement back to power.”

and that the Republic government would release “up to” 5,000 prisoners by that date and the rest within three months, while the Taliban would release 1,000. The United States pledged to work toward removing international sanctions on the Taliban.

On the same day, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg were in Kabul in a show of support for the Afghan government. Nevertheless, Ghani clearly felt betrayed; the United States had not even shared with him in advance the full text of the deal.⁶⁷ The verbal assurance that “your most important security guarantee is that we will be on your side in the negotiations with the Taliban” rang hollow.⁶⁸ The Afghan government saw the deal as a contradiction of Khalilzad’s earlier repeated promise that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed,” because the deal entered into areas that the Republic side felt should have been left for them to negotiate with the Taliban. The United States had made commitments to the Taliban on which it could not unilaterally deliver, namely, the release of prisoners, the removal of sanctions, and the start of intra-Afghan negotiations. The deal contained no agreement on a ceasefire or any reduction in violence, which had been a key US demand at the beginning of talks. It also prevented the United States from assisting the Republic with offensive operations. Meanwhile, the Taliban continued to ramp up targeted killings across the country, and the United States used an increase in air strikes to try to restrict Taliban gains.⁶⁹ These were not peace negotiations, but rather negotiations over the safe withdrawal of all US forces from Afghanistan.

Many Afghan officials saw the deal as dooming the Republic to accepting peace on Taliban terms. As a report by the International Crisis Group noted, Taliban statements indicated that they thought that the “Doha agreement was, in effect, a framework for bringing the movement back to power,” and that the “Taliban clearly view themselves as the country’s . . . only legitimate authority, with little acknowledgment of the need for compromise.”⁷⁰ The same reluctance to compromise could also be seen in Ghani and among his key supporters.

The United States had compromised its initial positions when it delinked its own deal from any results in the intra-Afghan negotiations and softened the language about Taliban ties with international terrorist groups; instead of requiring the Taliban to break their ties with such groups, the final language merely required that such groups not be allowed to threaten the United States or its allies. Subsequently, despite strong evidence of the ongoing collaboration between al-Qaeda and the Taliban (for instance, senior al-Qaeda leader Abu Muhsin al-Masri was killed in an operation by Afghan security forces in a Taliban-controlled area of Ghazni province in October 2020), the United States continued its withdrawal plans without obvious conditionality.⁷¹ The United States also appeared not to regard Afghan civilians and the Republic’s officials and security forces as allies as far as counterterrorism “conditions” were concerned, because they were clearly “being threatened by the Taliban.” Khalilzad consistently downplayed the increasing levels of Taliban violence throughout the next 18 months, such as the use of targeted assassinations, as he sought to defend the US-Taliban deal.

The Failed Opportunity: March 2020–August 2021



The signing of the US-Taliban deal in theory paved the way for direct talks between the Afghan Republic government and the Taliban. However, each side interpreted the terms, particularly on prisoner release, differently. This divergence and both sides' internal disputes on the composition of their teams meant that the Doha agreement timeline was not realistic.

MULTIPLE DELAYS: MARCH–SEPTEMBER 2020

Talks between the Afghan Republic and Taliban did not start 10 days after the signing of the US-Taliban deal, as envisioned. The issue of prisoner releases proved a major obstacle. The Taliban insisted on a named list of 5,000 prisoners to be released, thereby adding to the terms of the deal (which did not name individual prisoners to be released). The Afghan government wanted to stagger the releases in line with progress in the talks and release of their own prisoners. As a goodwill gesture, Ghani released an initial batch of 1,500 prisoners but also asked for a written promise from each prisoner that he would not return to the battlefield. He promised to release 500 prisoners every two weeks as talks continued, but the Taliban did not accept this.⁷² The Taliban, perhaps deliberately playing into the unresolved electoral dispute between Ghani and Abdullah, also announced that they were not prepared to talk to the Republic's 21-person negotiating team, claiming it was not sufficiently representative of all Afghans. US and UN officials had to explain that a basic rule of negotiations was that one party cannot choose the other side's team.

By early June, the Afghan government had released 2,700 prisoners and the Taliban around 460.⁷³ But

President Trump, who had his own election to consider, was getting impatient.⁷⁴ Khalilzad put significant pressure on Ghani to finish the releases and start talks. Finally, in early August, Ghani again called a consultative assembly to decide on the fate of 400 prisoners whom the government regarded as particularly dangerous. The assembly agreed to the release of those prisoners and thus gave Ghani the political cover he needed.⁷⁵ The parties prepared to convene in Doha. There were last-minute delays as some NATO partners, particularly Australia and France, objected to releases of prisoners who had killed their soldiers, but these issues were resolved. As Ghani and the Taliban both prevaricated over protocol matters, intense US pressure was needed to ensure that the talks could begin in September. The start date slipped to September 12.

The Taliban made some notable last-minute changes to their team. The figures, led by Mullah Baradar, who had negotiated the US-Taliban deal, were now joined by more religious scholars and individuals linked to Pakistan. This move seemed to strengthen the hand of Islamic hard-liners and sideline Baradar. Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai was named head of the Taliban negotiating team. He was quick to point out in a press conference that this was at the personal order of the Taliban's amir, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada. His appointment lasted less than a week as Baradar and others complained and threatened to resign. A subsequent announcement explained that Sheikh Abdul Hakim, former head of the Clerical Council, would nominally head the delegation. His appointment seemed to reflect a compromise among the Taliban:

no one could complain as he was one of the most respected Taliban clerics and was above the political infighting.

INSUBSTANTIAL INTRA-AFGHAN NEGOTIATIONS: SEPTEMBER 2020–APRIL 2021

On September 12, a formal opening session was held, and both sides gave speeches. In line with best negotiating practice, the Republic side wanted to negotiate a code of conduct and an agenda. This effort immediately ran into problems. First, the Taliban seemed to view the negotiations with the Republic as subordinate to their agreement with the United States: they wanted the February 29 agreement as the sole basis for the talks, whereas the Republic wanted other factors taken into consideration. Second, the Taliban wanted the Hanafi (Sunni) school of Islamic law to be the sole jurisprudence in the Afghan state, whereas the 2004 and earlier constitutions allowed Shia disputes to be judged under Jafari (Shia) jurisprudence. Third, there was an argument over whether to describe the fighting as a “jihad” or a “war.” These were important principles for the Republic, but arguments about them delayed discussion about power sharing and the future of the Afghan state.

Why did the two parties fail to make progress? The simple answer seems to be that neither side had a strong interest in advancing negotiations. The Taliban were in no hurry to reach a deal now that they had a firm commitment on the date of departure of US troops. Ghani was watching the US presidential elections. Although he wanted a ceasefire, he probably judged that a Biden administration would provide him more support and lead to Khalilzad’s departure. Thus, for the first few months, neither side seemed inclined to engage on substantive issues or make any compromises. The Taliban even threatened to halt negotiations should the Republic not accept the US-Taliban agreement as the basis for the talks.⁷⁶ Yet Ghani was adamant that the talks should not be subordinated to an agreement that his government had played no role in negotiating.

Parallel discussions between the United States and the Taliban were underway on a reduction of violence and counterterrorism issues. Since the signing of the February 29 agreement, the Taliban had stepped up attacks around the country and were carrying out a relentless campaign of targeted assassinations in major cities. As the Taliban increased their control in the countryside, US military capability to help the Republic forces was stretched thin by the withdrawal and the need for force protection. Khalilzad complained about UN briefings that cited high levels of Taliban violence, and he criticized, without justification, the United Nations’ methodology. He appeared determined to question whether the Taliban were responsible for most of the attacks and show that the deal he had negotiated was working. The US military proposed a nationwide reduction in violence, with special measures in Helmand, where the Taliban had launched major attacks in October. The Taliban rejected this as “too much like a nationwide ceasefire” and refused to give up gains they had made in Helmand. Both the United States and the Taliban admitted negotiations on a reduction in violence were going nowhere and that Qatari attempts at facilitation on this issue were pointless.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, Khalilzad started talking again about the need for Ghani to step down and a more inclusive interim government to be formed. This further damaged the relationship between the United States and Kabul. Gaps were also widening between, on the one side, Khalilzad and his team and, on the other side, the US embassy in Kabul.

Joe Biden won the US presidential election in November. According to members of the Republic delegation, Ghani was buoyed by news of Biden’s victory and hoped for a change of US policy that would significantly reinforce the Republic’s bargaining position; Ghani, therefore, wanted to slow negotiations until Biden took office.⁷⁸ The two negotiating teams agreed on a code of conduct, which was initialed by both delegations and included a clause listing four “bases for the negotiations,” not only the US-Taliban agreement. It was agreed to keep the details secret for a few days. Ghani then claimed not to have agreed to the text.



Abdul Salam Hanafi, a member of the Taliban delegation, speaks with reporters at the peace talks with the Afghan Republic in Doha, Qatar, on September 12, 2020. (Photo by Mujib Mashal/New York Times)

The Republic chief negotiator, Masoom Stanekzai, was summoned back to Kabul amid public comments from the presidential palace accusing the negotiating team of having “sold out.”

After a week of discussions in Kabul, during which he was expecting to be fired, Stanekzai returned to Doha having convinced Ghani to accept the code of conduct. The incident underscored the need to constitute as soon as possible the High Council for National Reconciliation, which was supposed to oversee the negotiations under the chairmanship of Chief Executive Abdullah, to prevent such future misunderstandings and to lessen Ghani’s role by widening the decision-making on peace.

The two sides swapped provisional ideas on agendas. Despite different wordings, many of the proposed items

covered the same sorts of issues, such as the role of Islam, the need to revisit the constitution, reform of the security forces, and how to ensure border security. They agreed to take a break to consult with their leaders and constituents and to resume negotiations in January 2021.

Khalilzad, who was trying to manage the process from behind the scenes and was often using Qatari foreign ministry officials as front men because they met regularly with both sides, used the break to rally support to remove Ghani.⁷⁹ An anonymous paper was circulated at this time that suggested replacing Ghani with an interim government. Many saw it as a last throw of the dice by Khalilzad before the US administration changed. After Biden’s inauguration and Antony Blinken’s appointment as secretary of state, a revised version of the paper was leaked to the press at the end of February and further soured the mood between Ghani and Khalilzad.

Most people saw a change of government and some form of power sharing as an inevitable outcome of the negotiations, but that it would be highly damaging to the Republic to engineer such a change in the middle of negotiations.⁸⁰ Ghani, mistakenly and disastrously, had also been emboldened by the lack of a final decision by NATO to withdraw non-US NATO troops (NATO members had made no decision at their high-level meeting on February 18) and apparently believed Pakistani intelligence assurances that Pakistani officials were “working hard on the Taliban, who would be content with only a few positions and to join the current government.”⁸¹ Ghani should have recognized the non-removal of Khalilzad as envoy as an indication that Biden was not going to make an abrupt change in policy.

In January, representatives agreed that they would group the agenda items under six broad headings (security, political, human rights, refugees, humanitarian, and implementation), but each side had different priorities. For instance, the Republic wanted “ceasefire” as the first item on the agenda, while the Taliban wanted “Islamic government.” When the main Taliban team returned from Pakistan, the negotiations went backward. The Taliban returned to the issues of prisoners and sanctions, which were in the US-Taliban agreement, and declined to discuss other agenda items “until these problems with the US were resolved.” It seemed clear to the Republic team that the Taliban had received fresh instructions to delay negotiations until the position of incoming President Biden was clearer.⁸²

INVOLVING THE WORLD AND FAILING

After its own deal with the Taliban was signed, the United States had tried to strengthen international support for intra-Afghan talks. The United States asked the United Nations to reconvene the “6+2” format that had been used in the 1990s to try to reach a political settlement of the conflict: the six neighbors (China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) plus Russia and the United States. In light of COVID-19 restrictions, a virtual meeting was held in March 2020 in New York. It was not a success, not least because the United Nations, always

susceptible to pressure from its member states, agreed that the Republic could also be present, and its delegates heavily criticized Pakistan. Complaints were also voiced by countries such as India and Turkey that felt excluded.

Khalilzad had also half-promised Germany, Indonesia, Norway, and Uzbekistan that they could host the intra-Afghan talks. He thus felt he needed to involve them from the start in Doha, and did so by forming a “Host Country Support Group,” which met in the run-up to the official start and afterward. However, China, India, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey complained about this group’s existence and its privileged access to the negotiations because they regarded themselves as far more relevant to any discussion of Afghanistan than the members of the group. At the same time, the Qataris accused the Germans and Uzbeks of seeking to undermine the process in Doha and take it away to their respective countries; both denied this.⁸³ The Host Country Support Group therefore fell into abeyance, and the United States became the Qataris’ main partner in trying to keep the process on track.

Khalilzad continued to look for ways to involve the international community and build consensus around a peace deal. The United Nations had tried this a few years previously but had been blocked by the Russians, who had seen it as trying to cut across their own “Moscow Process.” In the meantime, the Russians had also started a troika process involving China, Russia, and the United States, with invitations also extended to Pakistan and Iran (the latter declining to attend unless the United Nations was present). Many of the powerful regional countries appeared to believe that the United States regarded Afghanistan as being of such strategic importance that it would never leave. The region saw the continued US presence as a potential threat yet paradoxically also saw the United States as an enabler of a level of stability in Afghanistan that was beneficial. One senior Russian diplomat speculated that the regional powers only really understood the seriousness of US intent to leave when American troops suddenly abandoned Bagram air base in July 2021.⁸⁴

One problem in trying to build an international structure to support the peace process was that the pride of countries was at stake, with many countries feeling important and deserving of an invitation to be part of the process. The Russian logic remained the most compelling: Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and the United States were the five key countries that could influence both Afghan parties, and once one started to expand beyond those five, there were no clear-cut criteria with which to identify or limit the number of participants. That problem continued to dog any attempts to form a group of friends.⁸⁵

DESPERATION

In his search for a way out of the impasse and to shore up his own and US influence over the final outcome, Khalilzad made various proposals. By the end of February 2021, with no real progress being made in Afghan talks, no international consensus on what an acceptable deal might look like, and in the face of Russian and Iranian opposition, Khalilzad had abandoned the idea of a large international grouping to guide the process. He unsuccessfully tried to leverage the “Troika Plus” (China, Russia, and the United States plus Pakistan) to force both Afghan parties to speed up talks. As his conviction that Ghani was an obstacle to the negotiations had deepened, Khalilzad worked on ways to remove him from power, even though at this stage it was the Taliban who were evasive.

Although a move proposed by Khalilzad to replace Ghani with an interim government had failed, Khalilzad still hoped to curtail Ghani’s obstinacy by calling together, in Turkey, key leaders from both sides at a level higher than the negotiating teams (e.g., former President Karzai, High Council for National Reconciliation Chairman Abdullah, and Deputy Amir Mullah Yaqoob) to work out a deal quickly on parameters for a political agreement and an expedited timeline for detailed negotiations by the teams. He aimed to leverage the May deadline of US troop withdrawal, though the incoming Biden administration’s Afghanistan policy review threw the May deadline into uncertainty. Further, the report of a congressional study

group on Afghanistan that had been published at the start of February had recommended an extension of the deadline.⁸⁶ US allies, however, worried that Khalilzad’s fast-track idea would marginalize the negotiating teams and return decision-making power to the same people who had ruined the country over the preceding 20 years.⁸⁷

Khalilzad nonetheless put this proposal to the two teams. He said that the meetings would be under the auspices of the United Nations (although this had not yet been agreed). The United States, unhappy that the UN special representative in Kabul, Deborah Lyons, was not amenable to all US suggestions for UN actions, was pressuring the UN secretary-general to appoint a new envoy for Afghanistan. Khalilzad wanted the replacement to be Jean Arnault, who had been UN representative in Kabul when Khalilzad had been ambassador there and whom he thought quite malleable. On March 17, the UN secretary-general did appoint Arnault as his “Personal Envoy” on Afghanistan to assess the chances for regional consensus and a peace deal, but it was some months before Arnault could start work.

Khalilzad also circulated to the negotiating teams a draft agreement on a “Transitional Peace Government.”⁸⁸ Khalilzad’s staff described this idea as “a catalyst and [designed] to shake up both Afghan parties,” who were asked for comments.⁸⁹ He then pressed ahead with preparations for the meeting in Turkey. The US goal was for the two parties to agree in Istanbul to elements of a ceasefire and its implementation; elements of an end state, including a “new Islamic government” and some reform of the current system; a sustained reduction in violence; and a calendar for further negotiations. Neither Afghan party, however, wanted an interim government, and both disliked the United States imposing an agenda.

The Republic produced a response to the US paper.⁹⁰ This response was never going to be acceptable as a final agreement, but it provided a basis for initial discussions. The Taliban produced no response. As the

The announcement [of US troop withdrawal] had an immediate impact on the negotiations as well as affecting events in Afghanistan: it emboldened the Taliban; seriously damaged the morale of the Republic's security forces; and persuaded many Afghans to think about switching sides to the Taliban, who were now perceived as likely winners.

date for the meeting slipped from March to April, the Taliban tweeted that they would probably not attend any meeting in Istanbul.

END GAME: APRIL–AUGUST 2021

President Biden announced on April 14, 2021, that all remaining US troops would depart Afghanistan by September 11, thus adhering to the withdrawal component of the US-Taliban deal, but pushing back the deadline by four months.⁹¹ The announcement had an immediate impact on the negotiations as well as affecting events in Afghanistan: it emboldened the Taliban; seriously damaged the morale of the Republic's security forces; and persuaded many Afghans to think about switching sides to the Taliban, who were now perceived as likely winners. Moreover, the actual withdrawal of contractor and US military support had practical impacts on Republic military capabilities in terms of Afghan aircraft (needed to evacuate wounded troops and to support beleaguered ground troops) and accurate close air support from the United States.⁹² During the month of June alone, the Taliban captured 84 districts, in many cases without firing a shot, increasing the number of districts under their control to 139 out of 398.⁹³

The Taliban's reluctance to agree to meet in Istanbul likely stemmed from their perception that the war was now winnable and that an interim government was not in their best interests. The Istanbul conference was called off. Diplomats involved felt the Taliban had been frightened by the idea that they might have to become involved in concrete discussions and to stop prevaricating.⁹⁴

Despite the withdrawal announcement, efforts to preserve the peace process continued, and the focus switched back to Doha. According to a senior member

of the Republic team, there was "no plan [for] how to move anything forward. Khalilzad [did not] have one and anyway neither the Republic nor the Taliban are likely to listen to him as they used to."⁹⁵ The two sides held informal discussions on the idea of another Eid ceasefire (duly announced on May 9 by the Taliban) and also some low-level issues such as security of civilians on highways and treatment of prisoners, but refused to countenance discussion of more political issues or power arrangements. The Taliban continued to insist on the release of their remaining prisoners and relief from sanctions, even as they claimed the United States had abrogated the February 29, 2020, agreement by keeping troops in Afghanistan past May 1. Ghani seemed to think that his security forces could hold out or that the United States would back him and refused point-blank to release any more prisoners; he also pointed to studies showing how many of the initial released prisoners had returned to the battlefield.⁹⁶

At the end of May, against a backdrop of increasing violence and Taliban gains, Masoom Stanekzai returned to Doha because the Taliban said they had some new ideas that they would share only with the full Republic team present.⁹⁷ The Qataris now wanted the lead role in facilitation and suggested to both the United Nations and the United States that their presence was not helping the parties reach an agreement; the Qataris said they would move the process forward by asking both sides for political roadmaps and would act as facilitator.⁹⁸ The idea again took shape of a smaller meeting of more senior leaders in Doha in the middle of June; however, Karzai and others dug in their heels on petty protocol matters (e.g., wanting their "staff" to accompany them), and so the Republic delegation swelled to a size that became unacceptable to the Qataris.⁹⁹ These incidents were typical of the process as a whole: the Taliban were not making



President Joe Biden meets with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, center, and Abdullah Abdullah, chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, in the Oval Office at the White House on June 25, 2021. (Photo by Pete Marovich/New York Times)

genuine offers; the Republic leaders were more concerned about their own positions than substance; and the Qataris were trying to secure control of the process.

In late June, Ghani and Abdullah traveled to Washington to meet with Biden. Biden assured them that the United States remained a friend of Afghanistan but gave vague answers to specific questions on military support.¹⁰⁰

By now, UN envoy Jean Arnault was traveling around the region. As a highly experienced UN peacemaker, Arnault realized that there was no consensus around a peace process or any format for international engagement, and that Taliban reluctance on mediation would make the task of any mediator extremely difficult if not impossible. He was sympathetic to the Qataris' concern that others were trying to take the process away from them, Arnault himself having experienced similar issues when trying to

mediate conflicts in the past. In Arnault's view, the real issue was not the location of the talks or lack of proper mediation, but the Taliban's unwillingness to engage in any meaningful way. He was not in a hurry to recommend that the United Nations receive the poisoned chalice that the United States had been trying to pass off to the United Nations for the past year.¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, the Afghan foreign minister wrote to the Qataris on June 30 to request joint Qatari and UN mediation in the peace process for an intensive 60-day period (July 10–September 10), in response to a Qatari suggestion that Qatar alone should mediate intensive discussions.

The Taliban met the Republic side in Doha in early July, and their only message was to insist on a new Islamic constitution; they did not put forward any details and were not willing to say which parts of the 2004 constitution they considered “un-Islamic.” The Republic team

felt that the Taliban were talking only because they were under international pressure to do so and had no intention to do anything except take the country militarily.¹⁰² This suspicion seemed to be justified when the Taliban advanced into Kandahar City on July 9, despite claiming to the United Nations a few days earlier that their fighters were merely accepting the surrender of districts and had been told not to attack cities. With the United States having abandoned its main air base at Bagram at the start of July and transferring only some of the air assets to Kabul, the Taliban claimed to control 220 districts.¹⁰³

The military situation steadily worsened for the Republic during July and August, with major Taliban attacks on provincial capitals. Because of diminishing US resources and the degradation of the Afghan Air Force's ability through the overuse of its aircraft and lack of maintenance, the Afghan security forces' main tactical advantage over the Taliban—air power—was quickly eroding. In the absence of air support, Afghan forces retreated from rural areas, leaving them to the Taliban. The Taliban were also able to seize control of key border crossings and thereby gain control of customs revenue that the Republic had previously enjoyed.

A further meeting with the Taliban negotiators, attended by Abdullah, took place in Doha in mid-July, and a statement was issued saying that both sides remained committed to a peaceful solution and an inclusive government. However, the Taliban continued to insist on prisoner releases before they would discuss the constitution or any roadmap to a political settlement. Taliban military advances continued.

At a virtual meeting with US, Qatari, and European special envoys on July 22, the Qataris scolded the Taliban for their unwillingness to put forward proposals to end the conflict. The Taliban blamed the violence on the Afghan government and the US rejection of their proposals in December 2020. Further attempts by the Qataris in early August to suggest mediation were met with delaying tactics by the Taliban.

By the time the Qataris brought the next meeting together in Doha on August 10, the Republic's situation had deteriorated further: the Taliban had mounted serious attacks on major cities at the end of July, had taken control of some, and were now directly threatening Herat, Lashkar Gah, and Mazar-e-Sharif. Afghan forces were crumbling, and some provincial leaders, having seen the destruction caused by fighting in Lashkar Gah, seemed reluctant to have the same happen to their cities. At a working dinner on August 11, the Troika Plus asked the parties to provide a delegation list for future meetings, present their respective political roadmaps within 10 days, and enter into simultaneous negotiations on key topics, perhaps with the Troika Plus mediating. Abdullah agreed immediately, but the Taliban requested more time for consultation.

The collapse and surrender to the Taliban of most major cities on August 13 rendered nearly all the negotiations pointless: the "peace process" had clearly failed. The questions now became how long could Kabul be defended, and how could the final capitulation of the Republic government be negotiated? Sami Sadat, the general appointed on August 14 to defend Kabul, said later that "there was no 'Plan B,' not even really a 'Plan A,' just some vague ideas; nothing was written down. No one knew what was going on."¹⁰⁴ Even as negotiators in Kabul talked to Karzai, Abdullah, and the Taliban about sending a senior delegation to negotiate in Doha, President Ghani decided to flee the country. The United States was desperately trying to get assurances from the Taliban that they would not enter Kabul and were threatening air strikes if the Taliban did so, but it was all too late.¹⁰⁵ The Taliban had already infiltrated Kabul with forces who had lists of targets and places to secure. The Americans, moreover, were talking only to the Political Commission and not to the military commanders, and even they probably could not have controlled the rush to Kabul if they had wanted to.¹⁰⁶ Like most of the other cities, Kabul fell virtually without a shot being fired.

Conclusion and Recommendations



Were peace negotiations on Afghanistan always doomed to fail, or could different policies have led to a different outcome? These questions are relevant for the lessons those negotiations hold for future conflicts elsewhere or even for resolving ongoing instability in Afghanistan.

PERIODS OF RIPENESS

After the United States rejected the Taliban's early peace overtures in 2001, there were perhaps only two times in the conflict when all sides might have privately acknowledged that a mutually hurting stalemate existed and that their conflict might thus be ripe for negotiation. One of those times—and the one that came closest to a true mutually hurting stalemate—occurred in 2010, when there was the surge of US troops and when the Taliban did indeed make some approaches for peace. It is true that the surge had a timeline of 18 months attached to it from the start, thus leading some on the Taliban side to see that a reduction of pressure was in sight. And yet, the continued US military presence prevented the Taliban from taking major cities, although they continued to make gains, so that was a form of stalemate.

The second time was in 2018–20 when the Taliban remained unsure whether the United States would continue to keep troops in the country. Even in 2019, as the US talks with the Taliban were underway and President Trump spoke of major troop reductions, the US commander in Afghanistan was confident that with only about 3,000 soldiers, plus the necessary airpower, he could prevent the Taliban from winning.¹⁰⁷ The US commander's confidence may have been misplaced: shortly after the Taliban takeover, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin testified to Congress that thousands more US troops would have been needed for force protection.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, perhaps a stalemate could have

been sustained with a relatively modest US force for at least another few years.

Although negotiations did not produce a political settlement of the Afghan conflict, the US-Taliban talks in Doha from 2018 to 2020 did result in an agreement that resolved (assuming both sides continued to uphold their commitments) the main dispute between these two parties: the Taliban agreed to prevent the use of Afghan soil as a base for attacks against the United States or its allies, and in return, the United States agreed to withdraw its troops (as well as coalition forces) from the country. The Taliban commitment addressed the main reason US forces had intervened in Afghanistan in 2001, while the US promise to withdraw its troops addressed the core objective for which the Taliban had been fighting for nearly two decades.

The Doha agreement ushered into existence a process of direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Republic, but the chances of that process leading anywhere that satisfied both sides and their support bases, and that each side could portray as a “victory” of sorts, were always slim. The Republic side was fighting for the survival of the Republic; its 2004 constitution; and post-2001 political, economic, and social gains. President Ghani, and Hamid Karzai before him, was fighting for his own job. The Taliban were seeking to oust foreign forces, restore the Islamic Emirate, and return to power. It was always difficult to see how compromises could be made that would be satisfactory to the powerful hard-liners on both sides, but that is usually the view at the outset of talks. As genuine negotiations between the Afghan parties never truly started, no chance to explore possible compromises materialized.

Moreover, according to the Republic's negotiating team, the Taliban never indicated a serious interest in compromise. On August 10, 2021, Abdullah Abdullah, the head of the Republic delegation in Doha, spoke to assembled foreign diplomats. He recalled that a few years earlier, he had told the then-lead negotiator for the United States that he feared the Taliban were using confidence-building measures, such as prisoner releases, to win international legitimacy from the United States and buy time to increase their fighting capacity while the United States tired of the war, and that the Taliban would then try to take over the country militarily. Abdullah thought it was apparent that the Taliban had never wanted an inclusive government; from the negotiations in the 1990s onward, they sought power only for themselves. Abdullah's chief negotiator, Masoom Stanekzai, added that the Taliban's consistent approach to negotiations had been "dominate, delay, and derail."

DISUNITED PARTIES

In addition to requiring—according to ripeness theory—a mutually hurting stalemate, peace negotiations also benefit from strong, united leadership of the parties.¹⁰⁹ Each party has to believe that the other party (or parties) will stay united and comply with any agreement made, and that the other's leadership has its supporters under control, particularly the armed elements. This was problematic for all sides. The Taliban, who had demonstrated at least short-term control of their forces through some temporary ceasefires, could stay united as long as they took a hard line on most issues, but compromises were going to cause them problems between their military, religious, and political commissions as well as between their different factions. The Republic side was disunited: Ghani never commanded significant popular support and was better at making enemies than friends; he and his cronies were seen as more interested in staying in power than reaching any accommodation with political opponents, whether the Taliban or others. Ghani was not going to be able to reach a deal that he could impose on others; it was more likely that others would depose Ghani in order to

reach a deal. A senior Taliban negotiator said the same fear haunted Sheikh Haibatullah.¹¹⁰ Both sides spent time trying to fragment or split their opponents, and the United States joined in undermining Ghani once the United States suspected he was an obstacle to a deal. On the US side, the interagency process did not always seem to be functioning properly: at the start, there was no clear political strategy to guide the military action; at the end, domestic political considerations and strong personal views held by successive presidents dictated a rush for the exit.

Had the United States kept to the dictum "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed," not signed up to what was a virtually unconditional deal, and kept its military pressure on the Taliban to prevent them from winning, then the Taliban might have been forced to adopt a more positive frame of mind for genuine intra-Afghan negotiations. However, producing and sustaining this more positive approach would have required a US military presence in the country for as long as it took for intra-Afghan negotiations to succeed—if, indeed, they ever did, which was by no means guaranteed. That military presence would have had consequences in terms of the financial, human, and political costs for any US administration that decided to maintain it.

In the end, two consecutive US presidents decided that the direct interests of the United States (chiefly, a cessation of the expenditure of US "blood and treasure") were more important than all the other issues related to Afghanistan (notably, the United States' moral responsibility to an ally and the Afghan population, the potential terror and narcotics threats that could worsen when the United States exited the country, and the complications a US exit would impose on its regional diplomacy). There was the reality of either having to leave or having perhaps to stay indefinitely, given that the situation seemed intractable. Having made its own negotiated deal, the United States opted to desert its ally. This was a perfectly logical *realpolitik* way to address the issue, although the full repercussions are yet to be known.

THE PROBLEM OF PAKISTAN

To judge from their propaganda, the Taliban may have assessed several years before the Doha Process began in 2018 that they were likely to win after a US withdrawal; their control of territory and population was already increasing each year. Although they had gradually received increasing support from states (such as Iran, China, and Russia) that were US rivals in various ways, the support of Pakistan, which was at least nominally a US ally, was key to the Taliban's ability to survive and eventually thrive. The importance of the sanctuaries in Pakistan cannot be overestimated: a RAND study in 2010 pointed out that "most modern [counterinsurgency] theorists concur that insurgent sanctuary correlates with insurgent victory." The study showed that insurgents who had enjoyed sanctuary had won almost half of their conflicts with governments, whereas a total absence of sanctuary gave them a less than one in seven chance of victory. Interestingly, the same study showed that sanctuary per se was not necessarily sufficient in itself to ensure victory but it was usually indicative of "neighboring state support," which was also an important enabling factor.¹¹¹

Pakistan played a major role in the conflict through its consistent support for the Taliban, despite its public protestations to the contrary.¹¹² In the face of the US insistence after 9/11 that countries were "either with us or against us"—and mindful of alleged threats to bomb Pakistan if it did not cooperate—Pakistan publicly pledged cooperation in the fight against the Taliban, and it did manage to obtain US relief on sanctions and a massive US aid package.¹¹³ As the focus of US attention shifted to Iraq, so Pakistan took the opportunity to renew its support for the Taliban. When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton invited President Karzai to tea in Washington in 2010 and asked if Pakistan's intelligence services could really pick up Mullah Omar easily if they so wanted, he "reached over and plucked a chocolate chip cookie from his plate. 'They could deliver Mullah Omar like I can pick up this cookie,' he said."¹¹⁴ It was around the same time that US national security leaders were grappling

with how to obtain Pakistani cooperation in going after the Taliban. According to journalist Bob Woodward, CIA chief Leon Panetta, frustrated by intelligence reports that "showed trucks crossing the border that were full of Taliban combatants with all kinds of weapons packed in the back," complained, "How can you fight a war and have safe havens across the border?"¹¹⁵ Later on, as the Taliban started taking cities in July and August 2021, Pakistan was also seen as providing the money to "buy off" local Republic commanders and politicians.

Although the problem of Pakistan had been known for years, no one seemed to know how to handle it.¹¹⁶ Up to the last minute in 2021, the United Kingdom in particular, which felt it had a special relationship with Pakistan, continued to work with the Pakistani military and to believe that they wanted a peaceful solution in Afghanistan, despite all the evidence and intelligence to the contrary. No one was prepared to take coercive measures. "It was less of a 'carrot and stick' approach than a 'big carrot or slightly smaller carrot' approach," explained one senior US diplomat.¹¹⁷ Pakistan's strategy quietly remained largely unchanged below the surface rhetoric, and the United States and its allies tended to assume, incorrectly, that Pakistan was a real ally with shared goals rather than a state pursuing its own narrow interests.¹¹⁸

Pakistan had assessed that the balance of its interests continued to lie in supporting the Taliban and that it could resist US pressure. "Pakistan's military viewed Afghanistan as an extension of Pakistani interests and a zone of competition with India and other Asian countries," according to one author who has chronicled the global war on terror. "Pakistan could not be secure without a government in Kabul that refused Indian influence and accommodated Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban were a tool to prevent Pakistan from being surrounded by hostile neighbors."¹¹⁹ For their part, Afghan politicians made it easy for Pakistan to stick with Taliban. Karzai oscillated on almost a weekly basis from calling the Pakistanis his "brothers" to accusing them of fomenting the war in Afghanistan. Once Ghani's outreach to



An Afghan woman waits to receive food distributed by a South Korean humanitarian aid group in Kabul, Afghanistan, on May 10, 2022. (Photo by Ebrahim Noroozi/AP)

Pakistan in 2015 had been rejected, he went to India and gave a vehemently anti-Pakistan speech; and in January 2018, after a suicide bomb attack had killed over a hundred civilians in Kabul, he used a dinner with resident ambassadors at his palace to threaten to attack Pakistan, describing the suicide attack as “Afghanistan’s 9/11.”

Pakistan’s enduring support was certainly one of the reasons why, when the Doha agreement was signed in February 2020, and then when Biden made his withdrawal announcement in April 2021, the Taliban felt confident that they had no need to engage in good faith negotiations and could instead slow the pace of talks until they achieved a total victory by military means. With victory on the horizon, the possibility of a negotiated settlement became uninteresting, just as the United States had regarded negotiations as unnecessary in 2001.

NARROW POLITICS VS. PUBLIC INTERESTS

While the Taliban were thus not likely serious—not after February 2020, anyway—about negotiating a peace deal with the Republic, what about the Republic’s attitude? The supposed unwillingness of Ghani to make a deal, which would mean him relinquishing power, was never actually put to the test because negotiations never progressed that far. In private conversations, he had indicated that he was prepared to step aside as part of an overall deal, but not to do so as a “precondition” that would only further weaken the Republic.¹²⁰ He was at least willing to put forward proposals. Usually, negotiations in a conflict between a government and insurgents start to move forward when the insurgents either respond to a suggested solution from the government or put forward their own conditions for ending the war.¹²¹ The Taliban never put forward anything except vague points for discussion, and then never moved into detailed

discussions on what it would take to end the fighting. But the Republic leadership was hardly blameless for the minimal progress achieved at the negotiating table; they seemed to want to cling to power and all the benefits that accrued from US support for as long as possible.

The United States carries as much responsibility for the failure to pursue good faith negotiations toward a political settlement of the conflict as any other party to the conflict. In the first years of its intervention, the United States spurned several offers of surrender and outreach by Taliban leaders in the wake of their defeat. In doing so, US leaders failed to understand that the only sustainable peace in Afghanistan would likely be an inclusive one. A decade later, at the peak of US military leverage in the country, the United States continued to pursue military victory against the Taliban insurgency. There was no strong interagency consensus within Washington that its military leverage should be applied toward achieving a political settlement to end the war; thus, the United States disregarded another potential opportunity for peace talks. When, in 2018, the United States finally prioritized negotiations toward a political settlement, that effort was eclipsed by the more urgent goal of bringing US troops home from Afghanistan.

Could mediation have made a difference to all three sides' calculations? Some observers have argued that a mediator was needed. But introducing a mediator into the talks would have required the sides to agree on an acceptable candidate. The United States did not see a need for a mediator in its own discussions with the Taliban and moved to exclude the Qataris from claiming that role. In a similar way, the Taliban did not appear to think that a mediator would help them achieve their aims with the Republic. Ghani, too, initially opposed the idea of a mediator. He later supported the idea, but by then it was too late to implement it. Both the Taliban and the Republic appeared to fear that a mediator would force compromises on them. Even so, as the Republic's negotiators presumably already knew and as could have been explained to the Taliban, a genuine mediator

works with consent and not through power. The United States and a group of united, supportive countries might have provided power to the right mediator, but there was never sufficient consensus on the need for a mediator and on whom to collectively support as the mediator. What was clear was that neither side trusted Khalilzad or the main Qatari envoy.¹²² Moreover, if one side was not really interested in a negotiated deal, any mediator stood little chance of success.

The United Nations was resistant to US attempts to force it to mediate and take the blame for the failed US intervention. It understood the tensions in the US position: Somehow, the United States needed to persuade the Taliban that the United States was willing to leave if peace was achieved but might stay forever if not. It needed to convince the Republic leadership that the United States would continue to support the Republic, even though concessions by the Republic were needed for peace. And it needed to signal to the region that the United States was committed to leave once Afghanistan reached some degree of stability. In the end, Biden's public decision broke these tensions and made it clear that the United States would leave—but even then, many US officials, regional actors, and Afghans, including the Taliban, were initially in disbelief.

Afghan negotiations in 2020–21 did not so much fail as never really start. There was little international pressure on the Taliban and Republic to reach a deal because key powers thought the United States would never really leave or wanted any peace process to fail, and the overall tone and content of US foreign policy under Trump made consensus-building between the United States and other countries difficult.¹²³ Once it was clear that Biden would continue the withdrawal, there was no incentive for the Taliban to reach a negotiated settlement and the balance of power on the battlefield had already shifted. On the other side, Ghani and his team made a hubristic misjudgment about the likely direction of US policy and the impact it would have on the viability of his regime.



The Taliban flag is seen painted on a wall outside the US embassy compound in Kabul on September 11, 2021. (Photo by Bernat Armangue/AP)

SIX LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The failure to seize, or at least fully explore, the ripe moments for negotiations on an inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan offers many lessons for the parties involved and for historians of the period between the Taliban's ouster in 2001 and their return to power in 2021. The lessons for policymakers—especially, but not only, US policymakers—as they confront protracted conflicts in the future include six prominent takeaways.

Focus on consolidating peace when the opportunity exists and be inclusive of former enemies because their exclusion may later fuel renewed conflict. The Bonn Conference was clearly a missed opportunity. If the Taliban had been included in Bonn, there may well have been no eventual insurgency, and certainly not one on the scale that finally ensued, because presumably some Taliban leaders would have been part of the

political accommodation that emerged from the Bonn process. The Taliban may well find that the same soon applies to their failure after returning to power to reach out to elements of the Republic regime to form an inclusive government.

A long-term political strategy needs to drive any military strategy. The civilian policymakers in Washington did not clearly define the United States' desired end state in Afghanistan and appeared to take a back seat in determining a US strategy to achieve it. If the aim had been solely to degrade al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, then that was achieved in 2001–2, but the policy and the mission seemed to keep changing thereafter and to have no long-term aim or carefully delineated end state. A clearer conception of what the United States was trying to accomplish in Afghanistan might have made US policymakers readier to respond to the

Taliban's peace overtures at the start of the intervention and to explore the opportunities to launch negotiations created by the surge in 2010–11. When two US presidents finally did decide on a clear goal and pursue it, it was the goal of cutting US losses and withdrawing, even though that meant sacrificing the hard-won democratic gains of the preceding two decades.

To build genuine cooperation and trust with its allies engaged in a peace process, the United States should be explicit about its interests and incentives, where they diverge from those of US allies, and how far US support for those allies extends.

The Ghani regime's misreading of US intentions made its leaders overconfident and thus more resistant to the idea of negotiations with the Taliban initially and then less willing to make concessions when negotiations did begin. The Republic leaders listened more to the voices that they wanted to hear in the US administration and policymaking circles, particularly US military figures who did not want to abandon them. Some of the confusion on the part of the Republic probably stemmed from the fact that US messaging in 2019–21 was at odds with US intentions: the United States was trying to convince the Taliban that US forces would stay until peace was made, and yet the United States was in fact committed to leaving.

Recognize that regional powers can be invaluable partners in building and sustaining momentum for peace, but political capital must be invested in keeping fractious countries onside. Although ultimately assessed as a failure, the Bonn process showed what could be done when key countries in the region all acted together. But the initial consensus on Afghanistan quickly broke down as the US war on terror expanded to Iraq and US aims in Afghanistan became less clear to the region. The United States tried to isolate cooperation on Afghanistan from other issues with potentially hostile key players such as China, Iran, and Russia, but ultimately the obstacles were too great and the trust between the United States and key players

disintegrated in the face of competition on other global or regional issues (such as Iran's nuclear ambitions). The United States does appear to have made genuine attempts to convince these nations that the United States would be withdrawing and that the region would have to deal with the problems posed to regional stability by Afghanistan. However, the erosion of trust over the years seems to have clouded the judgment of the regional powers as to the United States' true intentions, and therefore they appeared unwilling to cooperate with the United States in finding a joint solution while there was still time. In addition, each regional power was pursuing its own interests, which in the case of Pakistan meant giving the Taliban enough sanctuary and support that it was able to spurn negotiations and pursue its military campaign. In the absence of punitive measures by the United States, Pakistan was free to play the role of spoiler.

A strong mediator can help to clarify issues for negotiation more quickly but can only do so with the trust of all parties. There was no one who was trusted by all three parties who could help bring a negotiated end to the war. Khalilzad was seen by the Republic, the Taliban, and regional powers as having his own personal interests in the outcome of negotiations as well as being concerned with those of the United States. In addition, in the eyes of the Republic leaders, his interventions were seen as unhelpful and designed to protect "his" deal between the United States and the Taliban. The Qataris were seen by Afghans as more interested in their own positioning vis-à-vis the region and the United States, and they were regarded by the Republic as too pro-Taliban. Khalilzad eventually wanted the United Nations to take on the role of mediator, but possibly only so that blame for failure would not fall on the United States. Even then, the Qataris opposed anyone taking what they viewed as "their" role, despite the fact that the Qataris were unsuited to that role. Ghani accepted the idea of UN mediation only as a last resort when he saw that the United States was abandoning him, but

by then the Taliban knew they were going to win and saw no need for negotiations, let alone for a mediator. Had an experienced mediator been agreed upon and appointed earlier, it is possible—albeit unlikely—that he or she could have helped move the parties away from their narrow interests and find a zone of possible agreement to explore.

Look for signs of ripeness and seize the ripe moment for negotiations, if and when one occurs. But also recognize when ripeness is absent and it is not yet the time for formal negotiations, and carefully calibrate a political-military strategy to make conditions ripe in the future. The Afghanistan conflict probably never reached a stage that was ripe for peaceful settlement in the eyes of all the protagonists at the same

time; if it did reach such a point, it did so only fleetingly, giving the parties insufficient time to overcome their resistance to negotiations. The evanescence of a mutually hurting stalemate also meant that even if negotiations had begun, they would have been unlikely to be sustained long enough for a deal to have been struck and implemented. By contrast, when the United States tried to push the Taliban and Republic into intra-Afghan negotiations, the Taliban were well aware that they now held the upper hand militarily and that they could prevaricate until they fought their way to outright victory. A neutral mediator or envoy with a long-term, but even part-time, assignment could keep an eye open for such moments of ripeness—which the parties themselves may initially fail to recognize—and be prepared to seize the moment to push them toward talks.

Notes

For this report I draw on a variety of sources. I was privileged to have been a witness to many of the events and processes described in this report. I would like to thank all those with whom I have worked over many years in Afghanistan, a number of whom kindly shared their insights for this report. I would also like to thank colleagues at the United States Institute of Peace for all their assistance and helpful comments. All mistakes are mine.

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This report examines three key periods when there seemed to be an opening for the Taliban, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and the United States to initiate talks or pursue a genuine peace process. The first period was in 2001–2, in the immediate aftermath of the US intervention; the second was in 2010, following the US military surge; and the third was in 2019–20, when the Taliban desired a deal that would secure the final departure of US troops. Based on the author's diplomatic experience in Afghanistan, research, and interviews with Afghan and US government officials and Taliban representatives who participated in peace efforts, the report seeks to explain why these opportunities either went unrecognized or were deliberately spurned by one or more of the parties.

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