

# Bringing Multilateralism Back in: Ending the War in Afghanistan is Not a One-Nation Job

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## *Afghan Peace Process Issues Paper*

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*By: Neamat Nojumi and Thomas J. Barfield*

**Summary:** The United States' unilateral deal with the Taliban in February 2020 needs to be expanded if it is to achieve success. Because the war in Afghanistan was never purely a domestic one, only a multilateral international agreement can end it and simultaneously empower Afghan stakeholders to determine their country's future governance. A dual-track United Nations-led mediation platform, bolstered by a collaboration between Washington and Brussels, offers the best means to achieve this end. At the international and regional level, its goal would be conflict management: to end outside support for any faction unwilling to take part in the domestic peace process and to pledge support for any final negotiated peace agreement acceptable to a majority of the Afghan people. Since neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban can win a war or dictate the structure of a future constitutional order without such outside support, this would lay the groundwork for lasting conflict resolution within Afghanistan itself.

The need for a multilateral forum is urgent because the current agreement focuses on the terms of departure of U.S. forces and fails to address the most significant local and regional priorities needed to bring about a lasting peace. Without the resolution of these issues, Afghanistan could fall into a new civil war like that of the 1990s once international troops withdraw. Former U.S. President Donald J. Trump's administration did not condition the departure of U.S. troops on the existence of a peace agreement between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, acquiescing, instead, to a longstanding Taliban demand that all foreign forces withdraw as a condition for ending their insurgency. While the Trump administration contended that the structure of a future Afghan government would be determined by

negotiations between the government in Kabul and the Taliban, it failed to secure a cease-fire that the government of Afghanistan insisted was a necessary precondition for good-faith talks even after Kabul released 5,000 [Taliban prisoners](#) in September 2020. Many Western officials with extensive experience on Afghanistan issues, including [nine former U.S. ambassadors](#), expressed concern that, in exchange for little but empty rhetoric, the agreement risked the already tenuous legitimacy of the internationally recognized government of Afghanistan that the United States has supported for close to two decades.

The possibility that a unilateral U.S. troop withdrawal might trigger an even worse civil war in Afghanistan is a concern shared by the governments of all of Afghanistan's neighbors. For this reason, Afghanistan is one of the few policy areas where ongoing disputes between the United States and countries such as Russia, Iran or China do not preclude their cooperation: ending the conflict in Afghanistan is in all of their interests. The United States can also take advantage of its close alliance with the European Union (EU); its assistance could prove invaluable in building a consensus for the reinstatement of a U.N.-led regional platform on Afghanistan that could receive early support from both Moscow and Beijing. The EU has a long tradition of pursuing the kinds of multilateral diplomatic initiatives that went neglected during the Trump administration and, so, would have a head start in this process. Moreover, many EU members are also NATO members that have contributed troops to the Alliance's mission in Afghanistan, a point acknowledged by [U.S. President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. in his remarks](#) to the Munich Security Conference on February 19, 2021. There, Biden committed the United States to "consulting closely with our NATO Allies and partners on the way forward in Afghanistan." A joint EU-U.S. return to multilateralism would provide much-needed oxygen to the March 10, 2020 [U.N. Security Council Resolution](#) (UNSCR) that described the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan as offering "significant steps towards ending the war" and committed the UN's "sustained support" to achieve peace in Afghanistan. The resolution "affirms that any political settlement must protect the rights of all Afghans, including women, youth and minorities" as the ultimate outcome of the peace process.

## Reframing the War in Afghanistan

A multilateral approach to ending the war in Afghanistan that extends beyond a troop withdrawal requires a reframing of the problem and the way forward. The absence of such an approach for the U.S. and NATO mission in Afghanistan harks back to the beginning of the war that originated as a unique military response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. For Afghans and many countries in the region at large, the war began long before then. They saw its root causes not in groups espousing terrorism but as byproducts of the Cold War when Moscow and Washington's regime-change policies resulted in the collapse of the Afghan state, the rise of the Taliban, and — only thereafter — the appearance of foreign al-Qaida terrorists in their country. While the United States remained fixated on fighting and defeating

terrorism in Afghanistan, studies commissioned by the U.S. and European governments found that the local population was more [interested](#) in better governance and economic development.

Following its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, believing that Afghanistan represented a counterterrorism problem, the United States soon found itself engaged in counterproductive policies. It demanded a selective rather than holistic approach to the nation-building project, excluding the defeated Taliban from the Bonn process when the new government was created and aligning itself ever more closely with Pakistan despite its long-standing support for extremism. Pakistan now gave the Taliban refuge and enough military support to renew its insurgency three years later in 2004, making the conflict in Afghanistan as much a proxy war as a domestic insurgency. In 2012, a senior U.S. intelligence analyst described the U.S. mission in Afghanistan to the authors as fatally flawed on account of ongoing U.S. financial assistance to the Pakistani government, which, in turn, was being channeled to the Taliban and the Haqqani Network who attacked and killed U.S. soldiers. Over the past 19 years, this [Pakistan-backed insurgency](#) in Afghanistan has cost the United States and NATO hundreds of billions of dollars and resulted in the death of more than [3,500](#) coalition soldiers and more than 10 times that number of Afghan civilians.

That the war in Afghanistan was never purely domestic but had strong regional linkages has been documented by numerous studies, including the recent [Afghanistan Study Group](#) report. Competing regional interests have blocked past peace efforts, emboldened Islamic militancy and terrorism and encouraged the reemergence of insurgencies against the Afghan government. Despite billions of dollars spent on counter-narcotics programs, Afghanistan remains the hub of the region's illicit [opium](#) production that supplied 80 percent of the global market in 2019 and continues to be a major funding source for the Taliban insurgency. Although it portrays itself as an exclusively Afghan insurgency, the Taliban continue to rely on [safe havens](#) inside Pakistan and receives assistance from [Iran](#) and [Russia](#). A recent memorandum from the U.S. Department of the Treasury noted that, in 2021, the Taliban still upholds links with and [protects al-Qaida](#).

Because the insurgency is so heavily embedded in regional politics and beholden to Pakistan, the Taliban is better seen as a [proxy movement](#) rather than an independent actor. This has profound consequences for any U.S. diplomatic effort. First, one cannot assume that Taliban negotiators have the ability to move outside a framework that prioritizes Pakistan's national interests even if all Afghan parties prove agreeable. Second, one cannot treat the Taliban negotiators as if they represent an independent sovereign state under international law without undermining the authority of the Afghan government. The parts of the U.S. peace deal with the Taliban that alluded to "the completion and agreement over the [future political roadmap](#) of Afghanistan" were not viewed in Kabul as an invitation to reconciliation but, instead, as a nullification of the existing government and the national constitution that created it. Many elements in the U.S. agreement with the Taliban contradict those contained in a [joint declaration](#)

the U.S. and Afghan governments signed on the same day. According to numerous Afghan government officials and teachers, the Taliban now insists that it has already won a de facto surrender from the United States; it has gone as far as to coerce Afghan government civil servants into taking an “Oath of Loyalty” (*bay’ah*) to its putative Islamic Emirate. Far from seeking reconciliation, the Taliban has mounted a series of deadly targeted attacks against prominent [journalists](#), [female judges](#) and [civil society leaders](#) whose views conflict with its own. These actions and Taliban rhetoric suggest the movement does not believe its popular support is strong enough to prevail in political negotiations or elections and so plans to achieve [victory through violence](#).

No revision of a unilateral U.S.-Taliban agreement will fix these problems, but a U.N.-led regional mediation platform could by internationalizing the conflict resolution effort. From the outside in, regional cooperation could actually embolden and incentivize pragmatic negotiations between the Afghan parties. The legal basis for doing so lies in the March 10, 2020 [UNSCR 2513](#) that calls upon a) the Afghan government and the Taliban to create “the conditions for a swift start to intra-Afghan negotiations leading to a durable peace” and b) “all member states to provide their full support to promoting the successful negotiation of a comprehensive and sustainable peace agreement that ends the war for the benefit of all people in Afghanistan and contributes to regional stability and global security.” The resolution conceptualizes an end to the war in Afghanistan that goes beyond troop withdrawals and includes a peace process that aims to “protect the rights of all Afghans, including women, young people and minorities” and that would sustain and build “upon the economic, social, political, and development gains achieved since 2001.” This is no mere throwaway line — the Afghanistan of 2021 bears little resemblance to the Afghanistan the Taliban ruled in 2001.

## Reframing the Taliban and National Reconciliation Process

The Taliban negotiating team in Doha, with Pakistan’s blessing, came to the table prepared to be pragmatic, but many of the premises on which it operated revealed a lack of appreciation for how much has changed in Afghanistan since 2001. For one, the country’s population is now so young that a majority of Afghans know about the Taliban’s previous rule only through the stories their parents and grandparents tell. The ruined city of Kabul the Taliban left behind is now a booming metropolis with a population of more than four million, and Afghanistan now boasts one of the highest rates of urbanization in the world. This development has been accompanied by a communications revolution that includes a nationwide cellphone network, better transportation (including domestic air travel) and electrification approaching 90 percent in urban areas up from only 5 percent in 2001. Primary and secondary education (including for girls) now reaches nine million in a population of 35 million. From a single university in 2001, Afghanistan now has hundreds (most privately funded) that enroll 300,000 students, of which [100,000](#) are women (up from zero in 2001). There are few Afghan families that have

not been impacted by the expansion of education. Afghanistan's mass media is now ubiquitous with over 200 TV stations (up from zero in 2001), a larger number of radio stations and internet-based social media outlets that amplify urban-based progressive [values](#) and perspectives to the most remote corners of the country.

These demographic changes and a growth in the economy from \$2.5 billion in 2001 to \$19 billion in 2020 have reduced the Taliban's appeal. Rather than expanding its popular base in Afghanistan and carving out a sphere of autonomy, the Taliban have found themselves even more reliant on the support they [obtain from Pakistan](#), operational and technical assistance from ["foreign militants"](#) from Central Asia and on donations from the [wealthy conservatives](#) residing in the [Middle East](#). Their need to cultivate outside support may better explain the Taliban's [reluctance to break](#) with al-Qaida than the ideological sympathies of its hardliners. Moreover, because Afghanistan's cultural history has been [dominated by the Sufi](#) teachings of Islam that permeated its arts, poetry, music and folklore for centuries, the Taliban's Salafist political Islam is viewed as a suspect foreign import. This has led some analysts to argue that it is not possible to [reconcile](#) the Taliban's values with those now taken for granted in today's Afghanistan. Despite its many weaknesses, the current national government is more representative of values held by the Afghan population than the Taliban.

Like other Islamic militant groups that arose during the 1980s, the Taliban's ideology is backward rather than forward-looking. The gulf between the massive changes in Afghanistan over the past two decades and the ideological militancy adhered to by most Taliban leaders residing in Pakistan remains unreconciled. While Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada and the circle of hard-liners around him may believe they can and should reverse these social and economic gains, other members of the movement fear their own people are losing out — with potentially dire consequences for their families and communities. During one interaction, a disenfranchised senior Taliban commander complained to us about how the lack of access to international assistance in Taliban-controlled communities had "left our women with diseases and our children to grow illiterate and unskilled." Two other senior Taliban leaders fighting in Afghanistan complained that their families living in Pakistan were being treated as virtual hostages by Pakistani authorities who would not allow them to leave the country. They explained that their families would suffer if they did not continue fighting in Afghanistan and they themselves would "face assassination by the hard-liners or be put in jail in Pakistan."

Given these realities, negotiations that include only top-ranking exiled Taliban hard-liners and ignore more pragmatic commanders within Afghanistan reflect a lack of strategic imagination. Taliban leaders in Doha, Quetta and Karachi may have no interest in compromise, but at least some Afghanistan-based Taliban commanders are keen to see their own communities' benefit from economic and infrastructure developments delivered via the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and

Development. These incentives would offer rank-and-file Taliban a strong reason to choose a path of negotiation that would facilitate the safe return of their families from Pakistan to Afghanistan via United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and EU-designated programs for refugee repatriation. With such issues at the center of negotiations, the narrative would shift from how to end the war to how to build a durable peace in its aftermath. This would empower more pragmatic Taliban leaders, with the support of their respected community elders, to check the ambitions of hard-liners within their group. Traditionally, respected local leaders prioritize the well-being of their own people over policies that come from the outside, whether the source of these is the Kabul government or zealous ideological Islamists. The shift of narrative would avoid the disastrous mistake of 1992 after the Najibullah government fell when power was transferred to exiled mujahedeen leaders who had been living in Pakistan for decades rather than to more moderate leaders who had never left Afghanistan.

## **Why Rejuvenate a U.N. Role?**

If peace could be achieved by a unilateral withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan, the task at hand would be one of logistics rather than diplomacy. But ending the wars that have destabilized Afghanistan for more than four decades requires a set of multilateral agreements that reinforce one another. These include agreements that secure the withdrawal of international troops, the end of ongoing interference by Afghanistan's neighbors and a negotiated peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government. If any one of these is missing there will be continued fighting that, in the worst-case scenario, will set the stage for a new period of anarchy to the detriment of the Afghan people and their neighbors and will invite the return of violent extremist groups.

Because the international troops on the ground are under NATO and U.S. command, Washington and Brussels must take the lead under UNSCR 2513. This resolution, endorsed by all 15 members of the Security Council, can serve as the basis for a U.N.-led regional mediation role. This role would be structured through a 7+1 platform comprised of the United States, China, Russia, the EU, Pakistan, India and Iran plus Afghanistan. It would commence its work by fostering confidence-building measures at the regional level that are essential for building a durable peace. This new body could capitalize on the experiences of U.N. envoys like Diego Cordovez, who brokered the Geneva Accords in 1988, and Lakhdar Brahimi, who ushered in the Bonn Agreement in 2001; both obtained the kinds of regional cooperation that will be necessary to support the Afghan government's negotiations with the Taliban to bring an end to war in Afghanistan. A U.N.-led regional platform would create an independent international body that is able to mobilize a diverse regional coalition committed to supporting the Afghan government in its negotiations and sanction the outcomes as legitimate and binding agreements toward ending the war. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), currently led by Deborah Lyons, should offer decades of rich experiences in this direction.

A U.N.-led regional mediation has historical resonance in Afghanistan. The 1988 Geneva Accords that secured the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan offer useful lessons for today. While the situation in Afghanistan in 2021 is far different than when the Soviet Union was seeking a settlement, the conflicts in each decade share a common presumption that peace cannot be imposed by military force. Toward the end of the 1980s, the major international powers and Afghanistan's neighbors all played a role within a U.N.-led diplomatic framework to successfully manage a Soviet withdrawal. However, that process failed to bring peace once the Red Army withdrew because both sides continued to support their proxies in the aftermath, heedless of the destructive effect on the Afghan state.

Today, there is a common understanding on the part of the United States, the EU and Russia that continued insecurity in Afghanistan benefits none and endangers all. Stability provides more immediate benefits for bordering countries like Pakistan, Iran, China and the Central Asian states. Past Afghan instability resulted in the Talibanization of Pakistan and enabled cross-border narcotics trafficking that supplied millions of Iranians addicted to heroin. Both Pakistan and Iran also faced large-scale refugee crises from the wars in Afghanistan over the course of two decades. China has security concerns about the spillover of Islamic militancy into its Muslim majority Xinjiang region, and ongoing insecurity in Afghanistan's borderlands threatens China's planned investments of billions of dollars in Southwest and Central Asia. Unlike 1988, all these major powers are keen to end the war in Afghanistan and not just continue it by other means. On February 18, 2020, [China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) expressed strong support for the U.S.-Taliban deal and said the Chinese government was ready to "step up cooperation with all parties and the international community for peace, stability, and development in Afghanistan."

## Alliance Rebuilding for Peace

The Trump administration's go-it-alone policy not only failed to achieve good results, it also failed to recognize how much the U.S. victory over al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 depended on the mobilization of a multinational coalition. Incorporating the U.S. deal with the Taliban into a deliberative peace process to enable a responsible troop withdrawal demands its own kind of coalition-building approach. On February 18, during the Alliance's [ministerial summit](#), NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg rejected a rushed troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. This position harmonized the EU, once again, with the United States under the Biden administration. Stoltenberg's announcement was cheered in Kabul; during a meeting with members of the national Parliament, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said the NATO decision sent "[a big message.](#)" He added that the NATO decision offers a path "for more serious peace talks with the Taliban." U.S. and EU sponsorship of a U.N.-led regional mediation initiative under [UNSCR 2513](#) offers a legitimate platform to support the way forward.

As the military mission in Afghanistan is a NATO operation, the Biden administration has an opportunity to demonstrate that it is once again U.S. policy to work closely with allies to achieve more than it could

hope to accomplish on its own. Washington and Brussels can redirect the U.S.-NATO mission in a way that ends their military presence in Afghanistan without jeopardizing the democratic gains achieved over the last two decades. Currently, NATO's 11,000 troops (outnumbering 2,500 U.S. troops) in Afghanistan elevates the Washington-Brussels role in the partnership for peace in Afghanistan. However, the Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban put the burden of concluding a negotiated settlement on the shoulders of an under-resourced Afghan government without giving it the tools needed to achieve one.

There is another diplomatic advantage for the Biden administration beyond drawing on the depth of European contacts in the region: the EU currently has a better [relationship](#) with Russia and China than does the United States. The EU is also in the nuclear agreement with Iran, while mediating for the Biden administration with Tehran. "At the end of the day, the operation in Afghanistan has been a NATO-led mission. Why should it be negotiated on Washington's terms alone?" a senior EU diplomat recently asked the authors. Folding the U.S. peace deal with the Taliban into this mediation process should sustain the militant group's engagement on the terms of the agreement but would make its interlocutors the whole international community and not the United States alone.

## The Way Forward

Ending the war in Afghanistan requires two tracks that arrive at a common destination. Domestically, the Taliban must be persuaded that an agreement in which politics replace violence is both achievable and viable. Despite its current reputation as ungovernable, before 1978, Afghanistan experienced a half-century of unbroken peace and remains the second oldest continuously independent state in the region after Iran. Internationally, all of Afghanistan's neighbors must commit themselves to noninterference via a U.N.-led multilateral forum. For two centuries, Afghanistan has been the victim of geopolitics in which Afghans have died in conflicts that came uninvited into their lands. The last two of these foreign interventions ignited vicious civil wars that have led to Afghans killing Afghans for almost four decades. War in Afghanistan cannot end without effective regional and international support that prevents spoilers from sabotaging peace and ensures Afghanistan is not viewed as a threat by its neighbors. Successful work within such a contested and hostile political environment will require addressing the following two key challenges.

### Overcoming Deep Regional Mistrust

An effective and impartial mediating body is required to overcome the lack of trust between regional stakeholders and point them, instead, toward their shared interests. Just as it did in Bonn, the United Nations is uniquely positioned to fulfill a trust-building role and, dating from its experience then, has a ready-made structure that can involve both Afghan and international parties. And because factions within Afghanistan are most intransigent when they rely on international support to maintain



uncompromising positions, their state sponsors need to be part of a comprehensive settlement to end the war. The mechanism for obtaining such an outcome is greatly vested in the duality of conflict resolution via an Afghan-led negotiations process and conflict management mediated by the United Nations among key regional actors. The presumed national security interests of Pakistan, for instance, would be addressed within the U.N.-led regional platform endorsed by all regional and international participants. Such an endorsement would also secure the outcome of negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban, transforming the conflict toward sustainable peace and stability. While resolving the conflicts in Afghanistan through nonmilitary means is an accepted proposition at both local and international levels, piecemeal unilateral negotiations without a regional supporting mechanism will only expedite the withdrawal of U.S. troops without ending the war — a worst-case scenario for key regional actors, particularly China and Russia.

The fear that a unilateral U.S. withdrawal will make the regional situation worse for Afghanistan's neighbors is already prompting policy changes. Russia recently took control of the [Kant Air Base](#) in Kyrgyzstan and reinforced its long-deployed 201st Division in Tajikistan on the border with Afghanistan in response to U.S. and NATO downsizing. Although it only has a tiny border with Afghanistan in the high Pamir mountain range, China, too, has become alarmed at reports of its ethnic Uyghurs in the ranks of the Islamic State group in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The Xinjiang region, with its Muslim Uyghur inhabitants, has recently emerged as a strategic corridor for energy and commerce in China. The harsh Chinese treatment of the Uyghurs, including mass incarceration beyond mere counterterrorism measures, has furthered the fear of armed rebellions. The eruption of a new civil war and state collapse in Afghanistan would provide a safe haven for Uyghur Islamic militants over which China would have no effective control. China has already conducted [joint military](#) drills with Tajikistan along the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan even as that strip of land remains one of the few the war has not touched.

The chances of Afghanistan becoming the operational headquarters for militant groups would be significantly diminished if not for the support from Pakistan that serves as their [safe haven](#). For Pakistan, a government in Kabul that might potentially side with India is considered such a national security threat that it has justified supporting decades of insurgency in Afghanistan. Thus, the difficult task in the peace process is not just getting an agreement with the Taliban but also getting the Pakistani government to honor it. This is most likely to occur as part of a U.N.-led regional process, with India as a participant, wherein the Afghan government could attempt to address Pakistan's security concerns.

### **Achieving Regional Integration**

Integrating Afghanistan into the region economically and politically would turn domestic security into an interdependent good that can be sustained via commerce, logistics and interpersonal relationships. Afghanistan is already a member of several regional organizations as well as a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) via both bilateral and multilateral treaties. In the last two decades,

Afghanistan has become connected to regional railroad systems, electrical grids, pipelines and trans-regional logistics. Domestic stability in Afghanistan can significantly improve regional security and economic development by connecting the significant rich energy resources from Central Asia to the high-demand market in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan. In addition, the end of the war in Afghanistan should improve security on the Pakistani side of the border, which could allow Islamabad to achieve the infrastructural objectives of the 15-year, \$62 billion commitment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

On issues of regional economic integration, the United States and the EU have particular expertise by way of post-conflict efforts in the Balkans, Northern Ireland and the two World Wars. Although the dynamics, contexts and regional orientation of those conflicts in Europe were exceptionally different from those of Afghanistan, the conceptual regional post-conflict framework remains highly relevant. The United States and the EU should task their special envoys to work closely with their Russian and Chinese counterparts and the U.N.-led 7+1 regional mediation platform to push for inclusive partnerships relevant to the peace process in Afghanistan.

A peace deal that lays the groundwork for closer regional economic integration has the best prospect of success because it maximizes the self-interest of the parties involved to maintain it. This could gradually tip the balance of short-term gain from proxy-supporting behavior toward long-term economic cooperation. Connecting Pakistan via electrical grids, pipelines and logistics to Central Asia via Afghanistan would tie domestic security in both countries against the presence of Islamic militancy and cross-border terrorism. A regionally integrated Afghanistan should convince neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, to change their policy toward Afghanistan and would offer Washington and Brussels a strategic advantage in their dealings with China and Russia across Southwest and Central Asia by making the region more autonomous and open to democracy and commerce.

This approach avoids the pitfalls of a dangerously narrow foreign policy that focuses on counterterrorism and exit strategies. It was such a lack of concern about future consequences that led the United States to abandon its promise to aid Afghanistan's reconstruction after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops in 1988. By recognizing the current peace process as a viable strategic opportunity for achieving long-term stability in Afghanistan, the United States and the EU can have a transformational impact on a new generation of Afghans who are integrated into their region with a global perspective. This emerging generation is already eagerly engaging with the world and will soon be replacing the country's existing (and aging) leaders whose lives have been scarred by violence, exile and treachery that makes extending a hand of reconciliation difficult. A U.N.-led 7+1 forum is a mechanism that includes neighboring states and regional actors that can establish conflict management via collective commitment. That commitment would offer the region a mandate for stability via noninterference and the furtherance of cross-border cooperation.

An end of war in Afghanistan would have many collateral benefits for the international community: from better managing narcoterrorism originating from Afghanistan, to keeping Islamic militancy at bay, to reducing the number of asylum seekers heading to Europe, to encouraging millions of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan to return to Afghanistan and rebuild their country as well as their own lives. By encouraging active [cooperation](#) with Russia and China, Afghanistan could finally escape the buffer state cage imposed upon it by the British in the 19th century and return to its historic position as a geo-economic hub linking Central Asia and South Asia, a state that serves as a geopolitical center for regional security. In this way, a Biden administration initiative for multilateral diplomatic peacebuilding in Afghanistan could become a blueprint for 21st-century conflict reduction [elsewhere](#).

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**About the Authors:** Dr. Neamat Nojumi is the author of several books on Afghanistan, including “The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region” and “American State-Building in Afghanistan and Its Regional Consequences: Achieving Democratic Stability and Balancing China’s Influence.” As a research professor at George Mason University, he facilitated several international dialogues on peacebuilding. He also served as a senior adviser to the U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations.

Dr. Thomas J. Barfield is a professor of anthropology at Boston University and the author of numerous books on Afghanistan, including “The Central Asian Arabs of Afghanistan,” “Afghanistan: An Atlas of Indigenous Domestic Architecture” and “Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History.”

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