

Preventing Fresh Hostilities as Afghanistan Peace Negotiations Progress

Afghan Peace Process Issues Paper

January 2021

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Summary: Many peace processes experience at least short-term reversions to violence. Even a successful Afghan peace process will be at risk of the same, especially in the likely event that the United States and its allies continue to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Ideally, such troop reductions would move in parallel with de-escalatory measures by the Taliban and other armed actors on the ground. A healthy dose of realism is in order, however. Though the Taliban and others in Afghanistan are unlikely to ever fully disarm or demobilize, persistent resources and attention from the United States and its allies can help prevent any regression to full-scale violence during the years of any peace agreement's implementation.

As the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations (APN) progress, there is considerable focus on the details of the U.S. troop drawdown, but less attention is given to parallel moves the Taliban may make as the U.S. military capacity to challenge it diminishes. To ensure a lasting peace, the United States (and its partners) should strive to minimize the possibility that, once international forces withdraw from Afghanistan, the Taliban remobilize and seek a battlefield victory.

A Note on Terms. It is too early to map out how Afghanistan's peace process will unfold in the coming years, but it is helpful here to anticipate a few "phases" that a successful process would likely include in some form. We see at least four:

1. The current period of "Afghanistan Peace Negotiations (APN);"
2. An "initial agreement," i.e., some understanding among Afghan parties on how a political transition will proceed;

3. A “temporary period” during which the initial agreement is implemented and the Taliban in some way join the Afghan polity; and
4. A more “enduring arrangement” marking the end of the temporary period and the launch of a more permanent governing structure.

Milestones for the Taliban

We identify at least five key steps one would want to see the Taliban take if they do not intend to revert to large-scale military conflict, and we posit when in the peace process it would be reasonable to expect the Taliban to take these steps.

1. **Announce a cease-fire.** The Taliban are unlikely to agree to a nationwide cessation of hostilities before APN make significant progress, or perhaps until an initial agreement is reached. A cease-fire at this time would presumably be mutual, with the Taliban, Afghan government and foreign forces all ceasing hostilities against the others while retaining a capability for counterterrorism and self-defense.
2. **Declare end of war.** Around the time of the initial agreement or during a temporary period, Taliban leaders and/or religious scholars might join with other Afghans and international partners to declare a more permanent end to the war, at least pending implementation of other key elements of the peace process.
3. **Relinquish weapons.** Disarmament would likely be a key line of effort during a temporary period. Few expect the large-scale collection of personal weapons from Taliban fighters or other Afghans, but a program aimed at decommissioning heavy weapons and dismantling improvised explosive device (IED) factories might be viable. Some Taliban express openness to such a program because of the group’s support for a strong, singular government and disdain for irregular or parallel military structures.
4. **Units demobilize.** Demobilization would also likely be a priority during a temporary period. Distinct from the demobilization of individual fighters, this could take the form of the leadership ordering units to disband (akin to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC) or to retool for peacetime objectives (akin to Iraq’s Jaysh al-Mahdi). Some researchers note that allowing insurgent groups to remain intact can actually strengthen peace processes because the

group structure gives insurgent leaders and fighters a sense of physical and/or economic security while potentially tumultuous political events play out.¹

5. **Fighters join the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).** Few disagree that individual Taliban should eventually have the right to join the army or police, if qualified. The Taliban may insist on more, i.e., allowing intact units to join; if so, key questions would include how to ensure the professionalism of these units and what role within ANDSF they would fill. Such integration could begin during a temporary period, and ideally would conclude with an apolitical standing force under an enduring governance arrangement.

Ideal Scenario

In an ideal scenario, any removal of remaining U.S. forces—and related changes in the posture of international and Afghan forces—would happen in tandem with the Taliban verifiably reducing their military capacities and dismantling their military structure. Key milestones in the U.S. process, loosely akin to the Taliban list above, could include the United States joining a cease-fire declaration, pulling back more completely to bases, incrementally withdrawing remaining troops, closing remaining bases and/or completing a full troop withdrawal. One “ideal” example of such a sequence might include:

1. A cease-fire announcement, concurrent with announcements by the Taliban and other Afghans, including the government, at the time of the “initial agreement.”
2. An indefinite pullback of U.S. and international forces to bases when the Taliban declare an end to the war, provided the cease-fire is enforced and violence remains contained.
3. A partial troop withdrawal (with accompanying base closures) concurrent with the Taliban’s large-scale entry into an agreed process to integrate with Afghan forces and/or enter into an agreed disarmament and demobilization process. Partial troop withdrawal could correspond with entry into the process, or with subsequent progress.

1. See, for example, Derksen, Deedee. 2019. *Options for Reintegrating Taliban Fighters in an Afghan Peace Process*. Special Report No. 444 (March). Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/sr_447-options_for_reintegrating_taliban_fighters_in_an_afghan_peace_process.pdf. It is worth noting, at the same time, that organizational coherence can also enhance an insurgent group’s capacity to fight, absorb resources effectively and the like as detailed in Staniland, Paul. 2012. “Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia.” *International Security* 37 (1) (Summer): 142-177.

4. A full withdrawal only at the end of the peace process, when an “enduring arrangement” begins—and even then, only if both the United States and the legitimate Afghan government at that time want U.S. troops to leave.

Reality Check

While a sequence like the above might offer maximum comfort that the Taliban will not return to violence, reality will likely be messier. A realistic list of steps the Taliban could take in the overall context of the peace process, therefore, should:

1. Rest on modest expectations of disarmament, given the prevalence of personal weapons within the Afghan population, the battlefield strength of the Taliban and the difficulty and expense of implementing nationwide post-conflict programs;
2. Be selective in linking Taliban actions to U.S. withdrawal. Given the strong likelihood that the disarmament and demobilization of the Taliban will be incomplete, for example, the United States should be wary of making its actions overly dependent on the full disarmament of Afghan society or dismantlement of the Taliban as a group;
3. Recognize that past efforts at disarmament have produced the best results when implemented with the active involvement of battlefield commanders (i.e., from the top down);
4. Consider that the Taliban may become more invested in the process, not less, if they retain some degree of command structure and capabilities during the potentially uncertain early phases of the peace process; and
5. Anticipate Taliban hedging. The Taliban will likely sustain capacity inside Pakistan to resume hostilities, likely with Pakistani support.

Deterring Any Taliban Return to Insurgency

The above considerations can help policymakers plan for a Taliban movement that does not demobilize quickly. However, keeping the Taliban from reconstituting and resuming hostilities will depend on several additional factors:

1. Deterrence/enforcement/punitive action. There must be some clear and compelling consequence for any Afghan armed groups that rearm or remobilize in violation of the political agreement. Such consequences could involve military and/or political action—such as expulsion from the government or loss of key sources of patronage obtained under the agreement. Such consequences would likely have greatest impact if the United States remains committed and

active in the implementation of an agreement, potentially by exerting military and financial leverage if circumstances warrant it.

2. A visible U.S. willingness to alter plans for its troop withdrawal if one side egregiously violates a deal.
3. Some form of neutral post-conflict force in Afghanistan. A peacekeeping operation or its functional equivalent could provide at least a partial battlefield deterrent. If backed by the United Nations Security Council, it would carry the implicit blessing of Russia and China, which might be useful if the Taliban are considering a return to war.
4. Steps to prevent or erode safe havens in Pakistan. Though a Pakistani military crackdown on the Taliban is implausible, it is possible that, in the context of a peace process in which Taliban leaders return to Afghanistan, Islamabad would deem it advantageous to limit any spoiler activity that could jeopardize an agreement.
5. Providing international support to post-agreement Afghan institutions, including those controlled by Taliban leaders as part of the settlement, and preserving the ability to halt such assistance to deter any renewed militancy.

Ultimately, the best bulwark against a Taliban return to the battlefield will be a negotiated process that successfully incorporates the group into a mutually acceptable political arrangement for Afghanistan so that its leadership and those who look to it believe that they are reaping adequate benefits from the political process that a return to arms would risk. Even in an optimistic scenario, this will likely be a difficult and yearslong process.

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