

# Facilitating Stability in Afghanistan

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## **Key Points**

- The Afghanistan war has entered a phase where the peace dividend outweighs the potential benefits of continued conflict.
- Coalition efforts have nearly eliminated the threat emanating from Afghanistan, the country is no longer a primary US security interest.
- All parties involved in the conflict have a stake in its resolution and must share the responsibility as well.
- The International community must remain cognizant of conflicting interests of some in the Afghan Government, violent extremist organizations, certain regional countries, and parties who thrive on the war and drug economy.
- A chaotic US withdrawal or a collapse of the current peace process would generate space for violent extremist organizations and transnational criminal organizations to operate in Afghanistan.
- The true frame of reference identifies the conflict's two major parties as the Taliban and the US, with Afghan forces of subsidiary importance.
- The Doha Peace Process is the logical way forward, so it demands perseverance, commitment, and willingness by all to concede, cooperate, and agree for an inclusive outcome.
- Due to Afghanistan's tribal socio-cultural traditions and financial/institutional instability, the international community must have realistic expectations from the Peace Process.

## **Introduction**

Almost 20 years in, the Afghanistan war has entered a phase where the peace dividend outweighs the potential benefits of continued conflict. Major warring parties have reached a stalemate as NATO cannot eliminate the insurgents and the Taliban cannot oust the foreign forces. While both sides may have the capacity and/or the will to continue fighting, neither is likely to achieve tangible gains in the foreseeable future. The conflict, however, suits some who thrive on the instability and anarchy. Those spoilers serve their own narrow self-interests by countering efforts to bring peace to this war-torn country. To logically conclude the Afghan War, NATO forces must: pursue an orderly and well calibrated withdrawal; leave a relatively stable Afghanistan which is at peace within; and address regional and broader security concerns emanating from Afghanistan.

## **Frame of Reference for Conflict Resolution**

NATO forces entered Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and ousted the rogue Taliban regime from power. The lightning-fast victory was overshadowed by the lingering twenty-year insurgency wherein the once scattered Taliban has regrouped and now controls vast swathes of the country. While conducting counter-

terrorism and counter-insurgency operations, US led forces introduced democracy to Afghanistan, helped create an elected government, and spent billions of dollars to build and sustain the administrative and security infrastructure to run the country. As the Afghan government struggles to effectively govern its country, the Taliban has gradually shifted to targeting mostly Afghan Security forces. Many observers argue that the current focus of Taliban attacks (against other Afghans) is an indicator that the primary conflict is between the Taliban and the Afghan Government, and that foreign military forces are of secondary concern. It is the position of this author that the reality is the reverse: the true frame of reference identifies the conflict's two major parties as the Taliban and the US, with Afghan forces of subsidiary importance. Thus, US commitment to the Doha Peace Process is vital for its success.

### **Impact of Incorrect Frame of Reference**

An incorrect frame of reference encourages the parties to ignore ground realities and pursue their narrow self-interests, thereby endangering the overall peace process. If the US and Western forces consider this to be an Intra-Afghan issue and abruptly remove their military presence, the US will lose the leverage to encourage Intra-Afghan dialogue and threaten its own security interests. Similarly, if the Taliban ignores the legitimacy of the Afghan Government, the Afghan constitution, and socio-cultural progress, they will fail to make necessary concessions and are unlikely to renounce violence. The Afghan Government should also make concessions. They must begin by accepting the Taliban as a legitimate negotiating party and seek to build an inclusive dialogue.

### **Dynamics of Conflict in Afghanistan**

Conflict in Afghanistan is a decades old problem. The stances of opposing groups have hardened and at times, personal and organizational interests supersede national ones. While the conflict is detrimental to Afghanistan's future, prolonged instability substantially benefits major spoilers such as: some in the Afghan Government; violent extremist organizations; certain regional countries; and war/drug lords who thrive on the war economy. The peace process is vulnerable to self-serving spoilers exploiting ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, and tribal fault lines, and rigid government leaders' stances.

The Afghan conflict is complex and has deep roots, so the solution is likely to take considerable time. In Afghanistan, traditions are vital to conflict resolution. Afghan tradition and culture generally holds that reaching a solution may take significant time and cost,<sup>1</sup> but is never impossible. Further, it is unrealistic to expect or require the Taliban's complete dissociation with Al Qaida. Notwithstanding different ideologies,<sup>2</sup> the Taliban's connection to Al-Qaida must be viewed in the backdrop of decades long Taliban-Al Qaida family relations, living together in inhospitable terrain, a limited Afghanistan security apparatus, and the inability to physically differentiate between both groups. Likewise, violence has remained persistent across the globe even in the most stable countries. Instability in Afghanistan merely highlights that the peace process cannot make ceasing violence an absolute term. Afghanistan has a national culture and traditions which the population follows irrespective of administration and rule in Kabul. Although the social environment in Kabul today projects a picture of an open and modern society, the ground realities regarding the rest of the country remain different.<sup>3</sup>

The media also has an especially important role to play in the peace process. When the media reports on an overwhelming increase of violence in Afghanistan, it creates a perception of a failing peace process. In contrast,

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<sup>1</sup> Mujeeb Mashal, This Afghan General Fought the Taliban for Years. Now He Has Joined Them, May 11, 2020, [This Afghan General Fought the Taliban for Years. Now He Has Joined Them. - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) (accessed on Jan 6, 2021)

<sup>2</sup> Al-Qaeda vs. Taliban, [Al-Qaeda vs Taliban - Difference and Comparison | Diffen](#) (accessed on Jan 12, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Burqa Workout: Afghan Women Exercise Their Rights, Radio Free Europe, March 11, 2019, [\(290\) Burqa Workout: Afghan Women Exercise Their Rights - YouTube](#) (accessed on Jan 30, 2021)

the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission reported a 21% decrease in civilian casualties in 2020 as compared to 2019.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it must be understood that gauging developments in Afghanistan in absolute terms will lead to faulty conclusions and wrong decisions.

### **The Way Forward: Perseverance, Conciliation, and Flexibility**

The US-Taliban peace agreement is a framework with three broad categories: 1) the US commits to withdrawal of foreign forces; 2) the Taliban guarantees to prevent the use of Afghan soil to attack US and allied forces; and 3) the Taliban engages in Intra-Afghan negotiations to decide the political future of the country and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. Since gauging progress in Afghanistan in absolute terms will be detrimental, all parties must focus on broad adherence to the peace deal rather than tactical compliance. Rather than demanding peace process pre-conditions, the parties should guide the process with flexibility and gradually pursue long-term, sustained stability.

The Taliban is averse to any prolonged stay of foreign forces in Afghanistan. However, the US must not see the May 1, 2021 deadline in absolute terms and should seek an extension from the Taliban. Also, expecting the Taliban to immediately and completely dissociate from Al-Qaida will be extremely unrealistic. Reasonable expectations of the Taliban include an immediate end to the following types of Al-Qaida associations: communications between top level leaders; the Taliban providing financial assistance; and, guidance to Al-Qaida operations outside Afghanistan. While the US expects the Taliban to reduce the violence and pursue a ceasefire during the negotiations, a full ceasefire should not be a pre-condition. Likewise, expecting Intra-Afghan negotiations to proceed on a set timetable is not a realistic notion.

The US is the only party in the conflict which has the capacity to guide the process to its logical conclusion. Therefore, a continued process with US involvement and regional countries' support will be essential for long-term stability in the region. The wheel must keep rolling as, with every passing day, interference by spoilers will complicate peace efforts.

### **Accepting Full Responsibility for Past, Present, and Future Actions**

The primary objectives of the conflict's major parties are: the US wants to exit the conflict with some semblance of victory; the Afghan Government wants to stay in power; and the Taliban wants to expel foreign forces from Afghanistan. The US-Taliban peace deal is a key step towards the two parties settling the conflict; however, the Afghan Government and Taliban are negotiating for Afghanistan's political future. Therefore, if the US passes ownership of leading the process to the Afghan Government, achieving stability in the short-term will be extremely difficult. The US must take responsibility and lead the process through guidance, exercising its leverage on other parties, and influencing the potential spoilers to remain at bay. The Afghan Government must pursue the middle ground and make some early concessions to demonstrate its commitment. Such action provides the government in Kabul with moral ascendancy and puts the Taliban in reactive mode. The Taliban are responsible for adhering to the peace deal and they must take responsibility to ensure and safeguard western security interests. Therefore, the US, Afghan Government, and the Taliban must each accept the others as necessary parties to peace negotiations in order to fulfill their respective responsibilities.

### **Respecting the Red Lines**

Each party has its own red lines and respecting those is important to keep the peace process on track. The Taliban's 20-year-old red line is "withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan." NATO forces have remained in Afghanistan to defeat Al-Qaida and prevent ISIS emergence. The idea of permanently stationing smaller forces in Afghanistan

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<sup>4</sup> Report Summary: Civilian Casualties in 2020, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, January 28, 2021, [Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission \(aihrc.org.af\)](https://www.aihrc.org.af/) (accessed on Jan 28, 2021)

is not likely to eliminate the violent extremist organizations, so the risk of disrupting peace negotiations outweighs the benefits. The maintaining of forces in Afghanistan for an indefinite period would void the US-Taliban peace deal and derail the Intra-Afghan negotiations.

The US red line is that no attacks are able to be launched from Afghanistan against US territories and allies. The parties provided positive signals when the former US Secretary of State hailed the Taliban sticking to the deal<sup>5</sup> and the Taliban did not condemn the US targeting Al-Qaida's leaders. Despite the Taliban's position against foreign troops, the Taliban and NATO both share interests against ISIS. While a coordinated US/NATO/Taliban effort against ISIS might achieve mutual interests, it remains unlikely that the Taliban will enter into some overt agreement for combined operations. Therefore, the US and NATO must retain assets in the region to counter any emerging threats. To support the peace agreement and address security concerns, the US should focus on intelligence-based operations, develop a regional security cooperation mechanism, and remain prepared to respond to more critical regional threats with airpower.

The Afghan Government's red line appears to be a stop to Taliban violence. However, since the US and Taliban signed the peace deal, the Afghan Government maintains that violence has surged. Since the October 2020 Helmand offensive, Taliban activities have shifted from large-scale attacks on cities and ANDSF installations, to targeted killings. In an initial response<sup>6</sup> (and in subsequent attempts to regain the initiative) the Afghan Government increased its use of force.<sup>7,8</sup> Actions by both sides<sup>9</sup> have caused civilian deaths<sup>10</sup> which, irrespective of origin, alienate the Afghan people and are counter-productive to achieving lasting peace. The Taliban has agreed to keep a comprehensive ceasefire on the negotiation agenda, but is not likely to implement one as continued violence serves as the Taliban's greatest leverage.

### **Creating Leverage within the Process**

For the foreseeable future, irrespective of who governs Afghanistan, the country is likely to remain dependent on the international community for financial, political, educational, technological, and infrastructure support. The economic support pledges of the Geneva Conference and the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan are the US's most exploitable levers. The current environment indicates the Taliban are gaining power and a return to government in Kabul is just a matter of time. Therefore, it is imperative that the US exploit existing, and create new levers by supporting and guiding the peace process and, more appropriately, become part of the negotiations. The US can use these leverages initially to extend the forces withdrawal timeline, and to strengthen relations with the incoming Afghan Government.

The Taliban are under critical pressure for, if they fail to uphold the peace deal, they are not likely to achieve any more concessions. This pressure provides the US additional leverage. As the US requested, Pakistan released

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<sup>5</sup> Pompeo hails US-Taliban deal and peace talks as 'incredible progress', January 3, 2021, [Pompeo hails US-Taliban deal and peace talks as 'incredible progress' | Ariana News](#) (accessed on Jan 18, 2021)

<sup>6</sup> 44 Taliban militants killed in military raids, November 11, 2020, [44 Taliban militants killed in military raids – Afghanistan Times](#) (accessed on January 21, 2021)

<sup>7</sup> 60 Taliban militants killed in Kandahar operation: MoD, January 29, 2021, [60 Taliban militants killed in Kandahar operation: MoD | Ariana News](#) (accessed on January 30, 2021)

<sup>8</sup> 38 Taliban killed in Afghanistan, January 24, 2021, [38 Taliban killed in Afghanistan \(radio.gov.pk\)](#) (accessed on Jan 30, 2021)

<sup>9</sup> Masood Ansar, 261 Civilians Killed in Taliban Attacks in 50 Days: Mol, October 31, 2020, [261 Civilians Killed in Taliban Attacks in 50 Days: Mol | TOLONews](#) (accessed on Jan 18, 2021)

<sup>10</sup> Civilians killed in Afghan gov't air raid, say local officials, January 10, 2021, [Civilians killed in Afghan gov't air raid, say local officials | Asia News | Al Jazeera](#) (accessed on Jan 22, 2021)

Mullah Baradar in 2018 in order to push the peace process forward.<sup>11</sup> The move created goodwill between the US and the Taliban and Pakistan was able to maintain its limited leverage on the insurgent group<sup>12</sup>. The international community widely lauded Pakistan's efforts to facilitate what it calls an "Afghan led, Afghan owned" peace process.<sup>13,14,15</sup> Thus, the effort to bring stability in the region also provides an opportunity for the US to maintain or even strengthen its relations with Pakistan.

## **Conclusion**

All parties involved have expended enormous energy, money, and blood to only reach a stalemate in Afghanistan. The best solution appears to be the current peace negotiations. Expecting a dramatic change in the Afghan political, security, and economic landscape is unrealistic. Therefore, the international community must take a flexible approach with Afghanistan for the sake of long-term stability. The US, the Taliban, and the Afghan Government must understand the different perspectives of each party, abide by the terms of the peace deal, demonstrate patience, render guidance, maintain continuity, protect against spoilers' actions, and take measures to enable security. For the US, it is extremely important to keep the deal intact. Rather than bring outright changes, the US should use the peace process to secure further concessions. The US is already attempting to regain lost trust in the region, therefore backing out of the peace deal would worsen US standing.

## **Recommendations for US/USCENTCOM**

- Continue to support the progress towards peace through a gradual and responsible troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.
- Make a reduction in violence a pre-requisite condition for continued US support for the peace process.
- Actively engage in negotiations to exploit existing leverages, create new leverages, and establish terms with the Taliban for keeping the process on track and addressing long-term security concerns.
- Identify the spoilers inside and outside Afghanistan, and engage them to eliminate/reduce interference with the peace process.
- Engage with the Taliban leadership, directly and/or through partners in the region to negotiate a responsible withdrawal, but avoid any indication of intent to remain longer than necessary.
- Develop regional security cooperation mechanisms to assist future Afghan Government's efforts to build Afghan Military capacity.
- Increase focus on intelligence-based operations in Afghanistan.
- Be prepared to allocate regional airpower assets to conduct anti-terrorist operations.

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<sup>11</sup> Pamela Constable, Peace talks are faltering, violence has surged, and U.S. troops are pulling out. Can the Afghan government withstand the pressure?, Jan 13, 2021, [Faltering peace talks with Taliban prompt calls for interim government in Afghanistan - The Washington Post](#) (accessed on Jan 19, 2021)

<sup>12</sup> Abdul Basit, Is Pakistan losing its influence over the Taliban?, September 23, 2020 [Is Pakistan losing its influence over the Taliban? \(trtworld.com\)](#) (accessed on January 19, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> Pompeo meets Pakistan Foreign Minister Qureshi, lauds Pak's efforts for Afghan peace, January 17, 2020, [Pompeo meets Pakistan Foreign Minister Qureshi, lauds Pak's efforts for Afghan peace - INDIA New England News](#) (accessed on January 19, 2021)

<sup>14</sup> Munir Ahmed, US envoy lauds Pakistan's role in Afghan peace talks process, September 14, 2020, [US envoy lauds Pakistan's role in Afghan peace talks process - ABC News \(go.com\)](#) (accessed on Jan 19, 2020)

<sup>15</sup> Ustad Karim Khalili lauds Pakistan role in Afghanistan peace process, January 13, 2021, [Ustad Karim Khalili lauds Pakistan role in Afghanistan peace process \(gtvnetwork.tv\)](#) (accessed on January 19, 2021)