



# Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track

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**What's new?** The U.S. has stopped talking to the Taliban, following President Donald Trump's tweet revealing that he had scheduled a Camp David summit with the insurgents only to call it off.

**Why does it matter?** A U.S. deal with the Taliban on a narrow set of issues is necessary to pave the way for more important peace negotiations among Afghans. A draft deal that reportedly included a Taliban commitment to intra-Afghan talks had been ready for signature.

**What should be done?** The U.S. should pick up the process where it left off and finalise its agreement with the Taliban. The Afghan parties should prepare for a peace process to immediately follow.

## I. Overview

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President Donald Trump's suspension of U.S. talks with the Taliban has thrown U.S. policy toward Afghanistan into disarray. Beginning in late 2018, and for the first time, the U.S. had put at the forefront of its policy the aim to negotiate a political settlement of the conflict that includes a path for withdrawal of U.S. forces. Nearly a year of intensive diplomacy had brought a draft U.S.-Taliban agreement to the verge of signature. Then, on 7 September, Trump upended plans to seal the deal, tweeting that he had invited Taliban leaders to the Camp David presidential retreat and abruptly called off the event. He followed this news by declaring that talks between the U.S. and the Taliban were "dead", in effect scuttling the more important negotiations among Afghans that were to follow. In reality, however, Washington has no good alternative to reviving talks on the same basis as before the disruption. The U.S. should pick up where it left off, concluding an agreement that sets the stage for an intra-Afghan peace process and thus offers hope of ending Afghanistan's decades-long war.

Trump's scuppering of talks has not improved Washington's limited options in Afghanistan. First, the U.S. could unilaterally withdraw its forces, irrespective of progress toward intra-Afghan negotiations. In this case, the conflict would continue, with violence likely intensifying as the Taliban seek to capitalise on U.S. withdrawal and the anti-Taliban forces engage in an existential fight. Afghan government forces and allied militias could fracture, particularly if U.S. and other funding declines.

Afghanistan's neighbours and other regional powers would likely back proxies in the ensuing multi-sided struggle.

Option two would see the U.S. maintain current or somewhat reduced troop numbers, continue to back up Afghan government counter-insurgency operations in the hope of altering Taliban calculations, and continue to conduct counter-terrorism strikes and raids from inside the country. "Staying the course", as this option is often dubbed, is also a recipe for war with no foreseeable end. Over the past decade, despite the U.S. deploying many times more troops (at the peak) than it would plausibly commit today, the U.S. and government forces have not defeated the Taliban. As U.S. force levels have fallen, battlefield dynamics have steadily shifted in the insurgents' favour. Afghans would pay a high price for either of the first two options. Already, the war in Afghanistan is the world's deadliest.

The third and best option is to pursue a negotiated settlement of the conflict. This policy choice requires reopening talks with the Taliban as a next step. The Camp David debacle set back talks but probably not fatally; insurgent leaders have indicated that they are willing to return to negotiations. Diplomatic spadework would be needed to get the Afghan government to retreat from its critical rhetoric about the draft deal that burst into the open after the debacle, but this may need to wait for the dust to settle from the 28 September presidential election. The U.S. also would need to rebuild regional powers' confidence in its commitment to the negotiations route.

It has been only a year since the U.S. has put pursuit of a deal at the centre of its Afghanistan policy. In that time, U.S. Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad appears to have come close to securing an agreement that won sufficient Taliban concessions to justify the concessions made in return – particularly against the backdrop of a U.S. political tide turning toward a troop pullout. The text is not public, but U.S. officials say the deal sets out a timeline and conditions for the drawdown of U.S. forces in return for Taliban pledges to cut ties with al-Qaeda, stop transnational terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan and, importantly, enter intra-Afghan talks. Because the Taliban has long rejected negotiating with the Afghan government, which it portrays as illegitimate, its pledge to do so surmounts a major obstacle to a peace process. The Taliban would not have made such a commitment had Washington not – after years of resistance – conceded to the group's insistence on up-front direct talks with the U.S., resulting in agreement to withdraw forces.

Negotiations do not guarantee but at least offer some hope of ending the war. Washington would have to accept uncertainty over the timing of its military withdrawal. Troops and aid are the main sources of U.S. leverage, and some U.S. military presence, even if reduced, would give intra-Afghan negotiations the best prospects for success, though the U.S. can continually assess its presence as intra-Afghan talks proceed. Whether the Taliban, Afghan government and other anti-Taliban power-brokers can agree on what the Afghan state and security arrangements will look like is uncertain. Both sides may face resistance in their own ranks. But a U.S.-Taliban agreement that paves the way for an Afghan peace process is the path more likely than any other to end the war and permit Washington to withdraw without prompting further chaos. The U.S. has fought for almost two decades in Afghanistan yet prioritised peace talks for less than a year. Forsaking diplomacy now makes little sense. The sooner U.S. political leaders allow their diplomats to get back to the table, the better.

## II. U.S. Options after the Suspension of Talks

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On 7 September, President Trump tweeted that he was cancelling purported parallel meetings with Taliban leaders and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at Camp David, the presidential retreat outside Washington that has hosted prior peace summits.<sup>1</sup> Though the White House has not revealed the U.S. motivation for trying to organise the event, it appears likely that Trump saw it as an opportunity to preside over signing the U.S.-Taliban deal that Khalilzad had negotiated over the preceding eight months with the group's representatives. Whether Trump also wanted to try to better the deal's terms through his direct involvement in negotiations is unclear, as is the reasoning behind inviting Ghani, whose government would not have been a signatory to the agreement. For their part, the Taliban declined to go to the U.S. without the deal having already been signed.<sup>2</sup>

According to U.S. officials, the draft agreement entailed the U.S. setting a timeline and conditions for the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan, thus meeting one of the Taliban's main demands, in return for pledges from the movement to sever its ties to al-Qaeda, prevent transnational terrorist groups from using Afghanistan to plot attacks, and engage in peace talks with the Afghan government and other Afghan power-brokers.<sup>3</sup> President Trump subsequently declared the U.S.-Taliban talks "dead".<sup>4</sup> In the past, however, he has reversed similar rhetoric on major policy questions, leaving uncertain whether the talks are cancelled or only paused. To date, Washington has sent no public signals of its intended policy direction beyond the rupture.

In reality, U.S. policy options are limited. One option is to set and execute a unilateral plan for near-term withdrawal of all U.S. forces, irrespective of any progress toward a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Other NATO forces would certainly withdraw within the same timeframe. A withdrawal-centred policy would not require the U.S. to negotiate an agreement with the Taliban, though the U.S. might want one largely for the purpose of securing safe passage for departing U.S. troops. Implementation of this policy could include the U.S. renegotiating its security partnership with the government in Kabul, narrowing the relationship to funding and other material support that could be provided to an extent and in ways not requiring a military presence in the country. The U.S. would need to conduct any operations against transnational jihadists from locations outside Afghanistan or through proxy forces in the country.

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<sup>1</sup> This briefing is adapted from and expands upon testimony given by Crisis Group Asia Program Director Laurel Miller before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives on 19 September 2019. For Trump's announcement, see the tweet by Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, U.S. president, 6:51pm, 7 September 2019.

<sup>2</sup> For more on disruption of the U.S.-Taliban talks, see Laurel Miller and Graeme Smith, "Behind Trump's Taliban Debauchery", Crisis Group Commentary, 10 September 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Secretary of State Mike Pompeo interviewed on the CBS program "Face the Nation", 8 September 2019; Peter Baker, Mujib Mashal and Michael Crowley, "How Trump's plan to secretly meet with the Taliban came together, and fell apart", *The New York Times*, 8 September 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Lara Jakes, "Trump declares Afghan peace talks with Taliban 'dead'", *The New York Times*, 9 September 2019.

For the U.S., this first option offers the advantage of bringing its troops home from a war that is stalemated and costs U.S. taxpayers tens of billions of dollars each year. It would, however, pose serious risks for Washington. Any assurances from the Taliban that they will break with or counter transnational terrorist groups – such as those reportedly included in the tentative deal – would likely be unreliable in circumstances in which U.S. policy is one of disengagement from Afghanistan, though the Taliban has its own reasons to counter at least the Islamic State branch (ISIS-Khorasan) in the country.<sup>5</sup> Were the U.S. to continue supporting the Afghan government while withdrawing, it would remain in an adversarial stance vis-à-vis the Taliban, which might then be unwilling to allow departing U.S. forces safe passage. Those forces might end up fighting their way out. Finally, without the U.S. military presence, the sustainability of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul would be questionable: this facility relies on the military for evacuation, which can only be done by air.

Afghans could pay a heavy price. The war would rage on without direct U.S. involvement. Indeed, it would likely intensify and become more chaotic. Though the Taliban use the U.S. military presence to motivate their fighters and mobilise recruits and funds, their narrative also paints the Afghan government and its security forces as illegitimate creations of the foreigners and therefore justifiable targets. The movement will not lay down its guns if the U.S. withdraws. More likely, it will seek to exploit the government forces' loss of U.S. operational backing, in particular air support. There is a strong possibility that anti-Taliban security forces and political institutions would fracture; how fast that may happen would depend on how quickly the foreign funding on which the Afghan government and its security forces heavily depend dwindles.<sup>6</sup> The conflict could begin to resemble the multi-sided civil war of the early to mid-1990s. Afghanistan's neighbours and other regional powers may well step up support to favoured factions, hoping to secure their interests but in fact fuelling the war.

Washington's second option would be to continue fighting the Taliban alongside the Afghan government and conducting operations against ISIS-Khorasan and, occasionally, other jihadist groups with its current or a somewhat reduced force level. U.S. officials have stated that the draft U.S.-Taliban agreement provides for a first-phase drawdown from about 14,000 U.S. troops to about 8,600 (that is, to the force level at the start of the Trump administration) over a 135-day period.<sup>7</sup> They have stated nothing publicly about the negotiated conditions or timeline for further reduction, suggesting that at least some within the administration see about 8,600 troops as adequate for the existing mission.

“Staying the course”, as this approach is often characterised, would mean the conflict remains a bloody stalemate, albeit one that has been gradually tilting in the

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<sup>5</sup> ISIS refers to its holdings in Afghanistan and Pakistan as Khorasan, a historical name for points east of Iran.

<sup>6</sup> According to the World Bank, “Public expenditure in Afghanistan is at high and unsustainable levels. Grants finance more than 75 percent of total expenditures. Total expenditures are equal to around \$11 billion, while government own-revenues are around \$2.5 billion”. Roughly half of all on- and off-budget spending is devoted to security. World Bank, “Afghanistan: Public Expenditure Update”, 29 July 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Mujib Mashal, “To start Afghan withdrawal, U.S. would pull 5,400 troops in 135 days”, *New York Times*, 2 September 2019.

Taliban's favour over the past several years. U.S. officials, including senior military officers, have long acknowledged that military victory by either side is implausible.<sup>8</sup> The political feasibility of this option over an extended period of time is uncertain. Some in Washington advocate maintaining the U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan indefinitely.<sup>9</sup> But President Trump has made his impatience with the war clear.<sup>10</sup> Most of his potential Democratic opponents in the 2020 election likewise want U.S. forces out.<sup>11</sup>

Assuming it were politically feasible, this option, too, would exact a heavy toll. In 2018, Afghanistan was the world's deadliest conflict, measured by those killed directly in fighting, with large numbers of civilians killed, injured and displaced.<sup>12</sup> Even these effects do not fully encompass the human and other costs.<sup>13</sup> Afghanistan, so long as the conflict rages, will be unable to achieve self-sustaining economic growth and will under-spend on development in favour of enormous security costs. Even with continued U.S. support, Afghan security forces will be hard pressed to sustain their capabilities over the long haul due to their heavy losses and high turnover.<sup>14</sup> Over time, momentum could shift further toward the insurgents. Staying the course, in other words, means perpetuating the war with no foreseeable end.

The third option is for the U.S. to seek an end to both the war and the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan through a negotiated settlement. This course will require

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<sup>8</sup> At his confirmation hearing to become head of U.S. Central Command, Marine Lieutenant General Kenneth McKenzie told the Senate Armed Services Committee the following regarding Afghanistan: "I believe that the operational military situation is largely stalemated". Ellen Mitchell, "Afghanistan war at a stalemate, top general tells lawmakers", *The Hill*, 4 December 2018. General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that there is no "military solution" to the war in Afghanistan. Jamie Crawford, "Top U.S. military officer says Taliban are 'not losing'", CNN, 17 November 2018. See also Borhan Osman, "The U.S. Needs to Talk to the Taliban in Afghanistan", *The New York Times*, 19 March 2018; Crisis Group Asia Report N°298, *Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire*, 19 July 2018; Borhan Osman and Graeme Smith, "Kandahar Assassinations Show Rising Taliban Strength in Afghanistan", Crisis Group Commentary, 19 October 2018; and Laurel Miller, Borhan Osman and Graeme Smith, "Interpreting the U.S. Talks with the Taliban", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 January 2019.

<sup>9</sup> A particularly vocal exponent of this view is Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina. See, for example, Camilo Montoya-Gomez, "Lindsey Graham warns Trump against 'really risky' Afghanistan drawdown", CBS, 25 August 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Courtney Kube and Carol E. Lee, "Trump wants to pull all U.S. troops out of Afghanistan by 2020 election, officials say", NBC, 2 August 2019.

<sup>11</sup> David E. Sanger and Maggie Astor, "Democrats' Afghan strategy sounds familiar: it's a lot like Trump's", *The New York Times*, 16 September 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, "ACLED 2018: The Year in Review". Afghanistan is also on track to be the country with the greatest number of conflict-related fatalities in 2019. Uppsala Conflict Data Program, "Afghanistan in the First Half of 2019", 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Gallup polling found that "[f]or the second consecutive year in 2018, no Afghans rated their current and future lives positively enough to be considered 'thriving'. At the same time, the percentage who rated their lives so poorly that they are considered 'suffering' shot to a record-high 85 per cent. This is a new record not only for Afghanistan, but also for the world". Steve Crabtree, "Inside Afghanistan: nearly nine in 10 Afghans are suffering", Gallup, 16 September 2019.

<sup>14</sup> In January 2019, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said that 45,000 security force personnel had been killed since he took office in late 2014. BBC, 25 January 2019. U.S. military officials have called these losses unsustainable. See Idrees Ali, "Afghan security forces' deaths unsustainable: U.S. military official", Reuters, 4 December 2018.

picking up where the process left off in early September and concluding a U.S.-Taliban deal that serves as a launching pad for crucial intra-Afghan talks. The Taliban have publicly indicated their openness to doing so, though they have also signalled that they consider the U.S.-Taliban deal fully negotiated and may not be willing to make further concessions.<sup>15</sup>

The pursuit of a negotiated settlement has only been at the core of U.S. policy since late 2018. The U.S. unveiled what appeared to be an unambiguous policy of pursuing peace talks as far back as 2011. Hillary Clinton, then secretary of state, announced that the U.S. was “launching a diplomatic surge to move this conflict toward a political outcome”.<sup>16</sup> Years of diplomatic efforts to launch a peace process followed, but these were inconsistently pursued and often subordinated to military priorities. The U.S. did not truly prioritise talks until late 2018, after an uptick in its military effort starting in the preceding year failed to alter the trajectory of the conflict in the U.S.’s and Afghan government’s favour and against the backdrop of President Trump’s evident interest in withdrawing U.S. troops. Put simply, U.S. forces have been in Afghanistan for approaching two decades and fighting a Taliban insurgency for some fifteen years, yet Washington has only prioritised reaching a negotiated settlement for a matter of months.

Such a settlement, if it involves the U.S. tying the pace of its troop withdrawal to the Taliban’s good-faith participation in intra-Afghan talks, is the option that stands the best chance of reducing bloodshed in Afghanistan and enabling U.S. forces to depart without leaving an intensified civil war in their wake. A negotiation-centred policy is the only option that aims directly at violence reduction. For the U.S. and other international actors, the Taliban’s counter-terrorism assurances could become far more meaningful insofar as a political settlement would see the Taliban enter the country’s legitimate governing structures and have a stake in keeping the state attractive to donors and investors. Taliban figures themselves have acknowledged that Afghanistan cannot afford to become a pariah state again and to remain impoverished.<sup>17</sup>

Pursuing the third option by no means guarantees an end to the Afghanistan war. As explained below, it is uncertain whether the Taliban, the Afghan government and other Afghan power-brokers can reach agreement on what the country’s political order should look like. Although none of Afghanistan’s neighbours or other regional powers appear to want the war to escalate, it is unclear what type of settlement they can all support or at least live with.

Too, under this scenario the U.S. would have to accept some uncertainty about the timeline of its military withdrawal. Its engagement in Afghanistan – both military and financial support – is a main source of U.S. leverage. Some U.S. military

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<sup>15</sup> In an interview with a Russian media outlet during a visit to Moscow, senior Taliban negotiator Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai was quoted as stating: “Our stance is that there is no solution to the conflict except negotiations and except peace on the table. ... We hope that Mr. Trump rethinks his announcement and comes back to where we were”. “We can fight Americans for 100 years”, Taliban tells RT after scrapped peace talks”, *Russia Today*, 13 September 2019. A senior official from a Middle Eastern country with longstanding relations with the Taliban said the movement is categorical: “They said: ‘we reached an agreement; we need to return to it’”. Crisis Group interview, New York, 26 September 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speech before the Asia Society, 18 February 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban negotiators, 2019.

presence, even if reduced, would give intra-Afghan negotiations the best prospects for success. That said, domestic political factors in the U.S. appear to militate against an open-ended presence, and the U.S. could always reassess that presence in light of how the talks proceed.

### **III. Sequencing Negotiations**

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Even among those who accept in principle the desirability of a negotiated settlement, many criticise the Trump administration for negotiating exclusively with the Taliban, cutting out (so the argument goes) the Afghan government, and failing to secure an early ceasefire. This approach is seen as dismissive of longstanding U.S. rhetoric that a peace process should be “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned”. Understandably, it is frustrating and worrying to many Afghans opposed to the Taliban who feel that Washington and the Taliban are determining their fate without their involvement.<sup>18</sup>

The administration’s decision to negotiate bilaterally with the Taliban about the terms for a U.S. military withdrawal and a narrow set of other issues prior to peace negotiations among Afghans was indeed a concession to the Taliban. The group has long insisted that it would engage in a peace process only by talking first with the U.S. regarding the Taliban’s highest-priority demand – a U.S. withdrawal – and later with other Afghans on other issues, including the shape of a future Afghan governance structure. It is no mystery why the Taliban have stuck to this position. In this way, any peace process would commence with the Taliban winning a major negotiating victory up front and then entering talks with the government and other Afghans with its leverage enhanced and its rank and file assured that it is making gains. The Taliban has also long rejected an early ceasefire because its leaders see the movement’s military capability and actions on the battlefield as its principal source of leverage and a means of maintaining its internal cohesion.

These benefits for the Taliban have equal and opposite costs for Kabul. Having already struck a deal on the U.S. withdrawal, the movement might have less incentive to compromise in intra-Afghan talks. By cutting a separate deal with the insurgents, the U.S. will erode the appearance of legitimacy for the Afghan government it helped compose and then backed for nearly two decades.

For years, the U.S. resisted talks in the Taliban’s preferred format and sequence. It pressed the Taliban to accept an approach that involved including the Afghan government at the table from the start; putting the U.S. troop presence on the table but not front-loading it in negotiations; and securing a ceasefire early on. From the perspective of the U.S. and its Afghan allies, this approach would unquestionably be better. Indeed, the U.S. pursued such a process in discreet talks with insurgents on and off for years.

Those efforts failed: the Taliban showed no sign of relenting and their refusal proved non-negotiable. Even had the troop presence been negotiable at some point in the

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<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Afghan government official, August 2019. The U.S., along with Russia, China and Pakistan, reaffirmed that the process should be “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” at a July 2019 meeting in Beijing. See “Four-Party Joint Statement on Afghan Peace Process”, 12 July 2019. The U.S. has used this phrase countless times in statements.

past decade when the U.S. and NATO had up to 140,000 military personnel (at the peak) in Afghanistan – which is not clear – President Trump’s oft-expressed desire to withdraw U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan likely reinforced the Taliban’s determination to hold out.

Nor does any evidence suggest that the Afghan government on its own could launch its preferred form of peace process. The U.S. has not stood in the way over the past decade. Indeed, in recent years the U.S. has urged Kabul to take the step necessary for any peace process of building a cohesive, consensus-based negotiating team and platform supported by the main anti-Taliban political forces. That predicated step appears still to be a work in progress. Informal dialogue between the Taliban and anti-Taliban political figures, including government officials, has taken place over many years, but these contacts have not translated into substantive negotiations.<sup>19</sup> Advocating for the U.S. to adopt an approach that involves the Afghan government’s participation and a ceasefire up front thus overstates Washington’s leverage and ignores the history of its failed efforts to achieve these steps.

The U.S. does hold cards, in that it can deliver results Taliban leaders want. These consist primarily of U.S. forces’ withdrawal; the prospect of continued financial aid for Afghanistan (from the U.S. and other donors who follow the U.S.’s lead); and the normalisation of relations with a future government that includes the Taliban. Taliban negotiators have stated that, though they demand that foreign forces leave Afghanistan, they want foreign development assistance to continue, diplomatic missions to remain and friendly relations with Afghanistan to persist – with both the U.S. and other countries.<sup>20</sup> The Taliban have made clear that, rather than leading an assistance-starved pariah state, as they did in the late 1990s, they prefer to be part of an internationally legitimised government that continues to receive external resources – Afghanistan being a poor, landlocked country that throughout its history has required such resources. The U.S. has retained much of this leverage despite conceding to the Taliban’s insistence on bifurcating and sequencing negotiations into a U.S.-Taliban track followed by an intra-Afghan track.

How much the Taliban will compromise in exchange for U.S. withdrawal and a share of power in an internationally recognised and funded government is not clear and will not become so until negotiations among Afghans are under way. What is evident, however, is that the Taliban have been loath to enter negotiations that bring the Afghan government to the table from the outset and include an early-stage ceasefire. Because it was the only realistic path to a peace process, the Trump administration’s apparent readiness – until the president halted the talks – to reach an agreement on troop withdrawal that then sets the stage for intra-Afghan negotiations was sensible. It opened the first real opportunity to move toward a negotiated settlement, and it could do so a second time.

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<sup>19</sup> The earliest publicly known meeting was in Chantilly, France, in December 2012. See Scott Sayare and Matthew Rosenberg, “New scenery for breaking the ice with the Taliban”, *The New York Times*, 20 December 2012. The Pugwash organisation hosted other such meetings in 2015 and 2016. See the reports “First Doha Meeting on Security in Afghanistan” and “Second Doha Meeting on Peace and Security in Afghanistan”, both on the Pugwash website.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban negotiators, 2019.



#### IV. Challenges for Intra-Afghan Talks

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Any evaluation of the draft agreement that U.S. Envoy Khalilzad has negotiated with the Taliban must be caveated by acknowledging that the text is not public and administration officials have said little about its content. The few details that have emerged include that it provides for an initial U.S. military drawdown of approximately 5,500 troops over 135 days. The trigger for starting that drawdown and what happens afterward have not been revealed. Further details include that the Taliban have committed to breaking ties with al-Qaeda and denying safe haven to transnational terrorist groups, though the specific phrasing of these commitments has not been released. Finally, officials have indicated that the agreement would lead to “intra-Afghan negotiations” among the Taliban, the Afghan government and other Afghan power-brokers. Again, the precise wording on this point, if it is included in the text, has been kept under wraps.<sup>21</sup>

Taking at face value the public statements that the U.S.-Taliban deal, if finalised, would lead promptly to intra-Afghan negotiations, and noting that preparations for such negotiations appeared to be under way before President Trump suspended talks, the main reward for such a deal is clear: the launch of an Afghan peace process. A U.S.-Taliban deal would not itself be a peace agreement. No deal between only those two parties to the conflict could bring peace to Afghanistan. Rather its value would lie in its setting the stage for a negotiating process among Afghans. In this light, any U.S.-Taliban agreement should make clear that it is connected to and contingent on not only the start of intra-Afghan negotiations but also the Taliban’s good-faith continuation of those talks. This might mitigate the risk that the Taliban, having won an important negotiating victory regarding the U.S. troop withdrawal, enters intra-Afghan talks excessively emboldened and inclined to overplay its hand.

Even with such a commitment, there are many reasons why an Afghan peace process might stall or fail. The stakes for all parties will be high: it will be hard to forge agreement on many issues that will need to be on the agenda, including transitional governance and security arrangements, a process for revising the constitution, permanent forms of power sharing in political institutions and the security forces, the substance of and means for protecting women’s and minorities’ rights, and the role of religious authorities in governance. Finding common ground may be impossible. Whether substantive gaps between the parties are too great is, at this stage, hard to assess. The Taliban have yet to fully develop or articulate a political platform for negotiations. For the most part, the Kabul side can be expected to assert positions that involve as little change to the status quo as possible, but it has not yet pulled together a consensus-based set of positions, either.

Internal divisions could prove to be another challenge. As noted earlier, Kabul has not yet built a cohesive negotiating team; it has also not yet secured consensus on the decision-making structure to guide such a team. Many Afghans bitterly oppose bringing the Taliban into the political order at all. As for the Taliban, it has not yet elaborated its vision for political or security arrangements or tested its own ability to develop negotiating positions and potential compromises that can win suffi-

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<sup>21</sup> “Face the Nation”, CBS, 8 September 2019; Baker, Mashal and Crowley, “How Trump’s plan to secretly meet with the Taliban came together, and fell apart”, *op. cit.*

cient support within the insurgency itself. The movement has remained cohesive over years of fighting, despite its opponents' efforts to fracture it. Negotiating peace, however, will test its unity, with disillusioned fighters potentially resisting any settlement.

Neutral facilitation by a non-party to the conflict will be essential. The existing difficulty of getting all the Afghan parties to the table suggests that, once there, they will be unable to reach agreements without a facilitator. Such an individual would be able to guide the parties toward agreement through proximity talks at moments when direct talks become unproductive and to table suggested compromises. The U.S., as a main protagonist in the conflict with its own interests at stake and an active supporter of one of the Afghan sides, is ill-suited for this role.

Nonetheless, the U.S. will need to remain engaged: diplomatically, with a continued financial commitment, and by using the leverage its military presence provides to keep, as best possible, the Taliban and Kabul committed to negotiations. One risk inherent in concluding a U.S.-Taliban deal that sets out a process and timeline for a U.S. troop withdrawal is that such a deal might accelerate existing momentum in Washington toward pulling out and thus not translate the influence the U.S. enjoys into concessions by parties in intra-Afghan talks.

An Afghan peace process will likely take time, with setbacks along the way. How long should the U.S. commit to talks if they show scant sign of progress? Setting hard conditions for a withdrawal would risk an endless military presence, but setting an inflexible timeline could jeopardise chances of successful talks. There is no obvious answer beyond that Washington should at least give intra-Afghan talks the best prospects possible, using the leverage it possesses to that end. It can, of course, continually assess progress and the value of its military commitment in light of developments in the intra-Afghan talks. In any case, it retains the option of pulling out if talks are going nowhere.

## **V. Conclusion**

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The U.S. has no better option in Afghanistan than returning to talks with the Taliban. A U.S.-Taliban deal has become necessary to set the stage for intra-Afghan negotiations. The alternatives – either continuing to fight or planning to withdraw forces unilaterally without any connection to an Afghan peace process – would spell either a continued or a still bloodier war. The U.S. should finalise its draft agreement with the Taliban and use its influence – and marshal the influence of regional powers – to press the Afghan parties to prepare for immediately subsequent intra-Afghan negotiations. The U.S., regional states and European governments with stakes in Afghanistan also should persuade the parties to accept a neutral facilitator and should arrange such facilitation.

President Trump's failed attempt to use a meeting at Camp David to seal the deal – and perhaps to better the terms his negotiators had already initialled – wounded the process, but probably not mortally. The Taliban has indicated that they are prepared to pick up where the process left off, at the verge of signature.<sup>22</sup> Trump should

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<sup>22</sup> See “We can fight America for 100 years’, Taliban tells RT after scrapped peace talks”, *op. cit.*

authorise his negotiators to conclude the agreement quickly, without the complication of an elaborate signing event.

One of Khalilzad's achievements since his appointment a year ago has been to establish the credibility of the U.S. commitment to negotiating a settlement. Over the years, as U.S. efforts to launch negotiations waxed and waned, the other conflict parties doubted this commitment, as did the key regional powers. In the past year, Pakistan, China, and Russia in particular all appear to have become supportive – if not enthusiastically, at least sufficiently – of U.S. deal-making with the Taliban. This support is based on their own interest in seeing the U.S. withdraw its forces, but not too rapidly (as another key regional actor, Iran, also wants). Nonetheless, their at least tacit support will be important for concluding and carrying out an Afghan peace agreement.

Any damage President Trump's disruption of the negotiations has done could be repaired if the process resumes quickly, before momentum is lost, and if the U.S. does not overreach in any final adjustment of the deal before signature. Washington should also reassure regional players of its commitment to negotiating. If the U.S. instead abandons negotiations in favour of an indefinite military presence, those regional powers opposed to a permanent-seeming U.S. military presence might step up support for the Taliban. If the U.S. abandons negotiations and prepares to draw down, a broader array of regional powers may increase support for a multiplicity of factions, in preparation for the power struggle that could ensue absent an Afghan peace process.

It is long past the time when U.S. policymakers could credibly claim to be on track to defeating the insurgency, splintering it through ramped-up military operations and efforts to lure fighters away, or even forcing it through a military escalation into intra-Afghan talks prior to a U.S.-Taliban deal. But there is a narrow opening through which the U.S. could thread its way to laying the ground for such talks and withdrawing its forces without leaving behind an intensified civil war. The U.S. has been prioritising the pursuit of a negotiated settlement only for the past year, and yet it appears to have come close to reaching an agreement with the Taliban that could set the stage for a wider political settlement. It should not abandon those efforts now. A U.S.-Taliban deal might be distasteful to some in Washington and perhaps to more in Afghanistan. But it is a deal that comes with a prize: the chance to start a peace process that might end Afghanistan's long war.

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