

The 16-year old Afghanistan war is the longest war in the history of the U.S. military, and there are no indications that the conflict will abate. The complexity of the challenge represented by the Afghan conflict is reflected by the collective struggle that the U.S. and the wider international community face in articulating pathways toward a political settlement between all the stakeholders to the conflict, that would stabilise Afghanistan and allow for a withdrawal of international forces.

While the U.S. has been slow to release the findings of its Afghanistan Strategy Review due to internal disagreement, from several interactions Dragoman has had with White House, State and Defence officials, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions about the current administration's posture. These include heightened scepticism about the value of dialogue with the Taliban, and shifting views on the Taliban's relationship to international terrorism.

A troop surge seems likely, but as Senator McCain recently noted at a press conference in Kabul, even if the U.S. had a clear political strategy, the absence of a cadre of professional diplomats in Kabul and Washington makes implementation nearly impossible. For the U.S., continued status quo level of support to Kabul is relatively low cost politically and financially. Even if, paradoxically, it will ultimately be a Republican administration that is willing to spend the domestic political capital required to drive forward a peace process with the Taliban, the prevailing mood in D.C. suggests significant progress toward that end is unlikely in the near future.

The public division between President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah has highlighted the fragility of the Ghani-led National Unity Government (NUG), as a government and as a model. The NUG's problems have been further demonstrated by dysfunction and turnover within the cabinet, a Vice-President in exile, a series of protests from an Afghan polity fatigued with ongoing conflict, sophisticated attacks in the heart of Kabul, and corrupt and inept governance. The NUG would collapse without the level of financial and military support currently provided by the U.S. and will continue to promote the collective counterterrorism narrative, as part of necessary measures to sustain itself.

Despite the Taliban's leadership level split between the Mansur network and mainstream Quetta Shura, the movement continues to inflict unsustainable casualty levels on the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The Taliban's coercive capacity has enabled it to control large swathes of territory, and it now holds in excess of 40% of the country. In a civil war as advanced as in Afghanistan, people tend to passively or actively support whoever is in control, for the sake of security. While no actor can, therefore, claim to be winning 'hearts and minds', many communities across the country accept Taliban rule to the alternative.

Further undermining stability is the hedging behaviour of regional actors, who in the context of a weak and divided central state, U.S. policy ambiguity, Taliban military advances, and the persistent rise of the Islamic State, see few alternatives than to engage with Afghanistan via proxies. Pakistan provides sanctuary for critical sections of the Taliban leadership. For Rawalpindi, squeezing the Taliban could create more enemies than it removes, and, in any case, doubts remain about its ability to force the

Taliban to a political compromise. Meanwhile, India is providing lethal assistance to the ANSF and investing in infrastructure projects, including along Afghanistan's eastern border; Russia is increasing direct outreach and is reportedly providing military support to the Taliban, and Iran and Gulf patronage variously benefit both Kabul and insurgent groups.

Despite this grim picture, taking stock of political outreach efforts since the Saudi-led peace initiative in 2007, there is ample evidence of progress. At that stage, the Taliban were listed along with al-Qaeda on the United Nations 1267 sanctions list, the U.S. and the wider international community had limited contact with the Taliban movement and almost no clarity on their core interests, and there was little discussion of a negotiated political settlement.

By 2014, the U.S. had set out a policy of fighting and talking; U.S., German and Norwegian efforts had resulted in a sustained dialogue with the Taliban; there was stated interest from all sides in better understanding the contours of a political settlement; and the significant confidence building measures of a high-profile hostage exchange (1 U.S. Soldier for 5 Guantanamo detainees) and the opening of a Taliban Political Office in Doha have all been successfully implemented. Recent peace initiatives – Afghan-led, unilateral and multilateral – have so far failed to gain traction, but suggest a growing consensus on the need for an inclusive process to stabilise the country.

Notwithstanding these developments, the setbacks have been significant, including targeted killings of key leaders (by the Taliban of Burhanuddin Rabbani, Afghanistan's chief peacemaker as Head of the High Peace Council, by the U.S. of the Taliban's leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansur) as well as a general deterioration in the security situation and record levels of violence against civilians – both Afghan and members of the international community – punctuated by a massive bomb in central Kabul in late May 2017 that left 150 civilians dead, hundreds more maimed, and the diplomatic quarter severely damaged.

Visions of peace vary significantly, both between conflict parties and within them. For the Afghan government and the U.S., the prevailing vision is of the Taliban joining the current post-Bonn Conference political order. Under such a plan, the Taliban would follow a path akin to the recently reconciled insurgent group referred to as 'HiG' – members of the group begin to contest elections, secure some senior appointments, and then engineer a symbolic reconciliation with the leadership at a later date. For the Taliban, accepting such a vision of 'reintegration' would be the foolish strategy at its mildest, and surrender at its most extreme. The Taliban are acutely aware that power in the current political structure in Kabul is bestowed along the lines of patronage. Taliban elites, without comparable patrons to the U.S. and wider international community, would quickly be marginalised, and potentially even targeted post a reintegration-style agreement.

The Taliban do not have a clear vision of the form of a post-political settlement Afghan state. What is known is that they seek a more 'representative' government with a prominent status for Islam. Having been excluded from the Bonn process, they have

noted on occasion that the system of governance should be determined by an inclusive Constitutional Loya Jirga (National Council Meeting).

The 'cost' of a negotiated settlement would be mostly borne by both Afghan elites, who have benefited enormously from foreign patronage post-2001, and some of Afghanistan's urban population, who would see a negotiated settlement as a setback to the political rights and freedoms they currently enjoy. For the U.S. and the wider international community, a settlement with the Taliban would be a dramatic walking back from its vision of a tolerant democracy committed to upholding human rights, including the rights of women, equal access to education, and a free media. Some elements of the U.S. security community also consider that a negotiated settlement would undermine U.S. interests in the region, which they see as better served by maintaining permanent military capability on the doorsteps Iran, China, Russia and Pakistan.

While the major stakeholders in the Afghan war – the U.S., the Afghan Government, and the Taliban – appear to be preparing for escalation of the conflict, President Trump has said little about the conflict and is reportedly reluctant to commit the U.S. to a new strategy, knowing that a new policy means that he owns the problem. With up to 1 trillion dollars of resource potential untapped in Afghanistan and much bigger policy challenges for the U.S. Administration to wrestle with, a small group of the President's inner circle in the West Wing have begun to explore discreetly whether there is an opportunity to 'Make a Deal'. It is a long shot, but given that the Afghan conflict will ultimately be settled by a political agreement, be it this year or a decade from now, a long shot maybe a risk worth taking.



security and counterterrorism.

Tom Gregg is currently an Advisor at the Geneva-based Center for Humanitarian Dialogue and a non-resident fellow of New York University's Center on International Cooperation. He has facilitated regional cooperation agreements between the governments of Afghanistan and its neighbours in South/Central Asia and the Middle East. He has also advised various European and African governments on issues around regional cooperation,