

After almost two decades of U.S. warfighting in Afghanistan, one could be forgiven for feeling confused about U.S. strategic objectives for the country. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the logic was to overthrow the Taliban – who at the time controlled Afghanistan while playing host to Osama bin Laden – and to kill or capture members of al-Qaeda. After a successful invasion, the international community hurriedly arranged a political process in Bonn under the chapeau of the United Nations, that would culminate in the Bonn Agreement – a roadmap for Afghanistan’s stable, democratic future. By 2005, under the auspices of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, Afghanistan had successfully conducted both Presidential and Parliamentary elections ending a ‘transitional’ political period. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the U.S.-led Enduring Freedom campaign had successfully overthrown the Taliban and al-Qaeda, with the majority of its fighting base being displaced into Pakistan and the remainder being killed, captured or reconciling with the Karzai administration.

Fast forward 15 years and Afghanistan faces a political gridlock, unable to announce Presidential electoral results from its September Elections; systemic corruption – Transparency International ranks Afghanistan as 177th on its Corruption Perception Index from a list of the 180; and a Taliban-led insurgency that has seen the Taliban go from a ‘defeated’ group in 2002, to a movement that now controls or influences almost 50% of the country’s territory. This year, for the first time since the war began, the majority of civilian casualties have been attributed to Pro-Government Forces (the Afghan National Security Forces and its International Partners) rather than the Taliban. All of this has come at a considerable cost – analysts estimate that the U.S. has spent approximately US\$975 billion on the war effort and lost thousands of lives.

It is perhaps not surprising then that the U.S. has reached the conclusion that a political settlement with the Taliban will be central in order to deliver on President Trump’s stated objective of withdrawing U.S. forces from conflicts around the world. In September last year, Trump appointed Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, an experienced diplomat and former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and the United Nations, as U.S. Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation to spearhead a peace effort and conduct direct talks with the Taliban.

After almost 12 months of negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban, complemented by U.S. sustained engagement with Kabul, regional capitals and European allies, Khalilzad brokered an agreement in Doha that would provide a timetable for the withdraw of U.S. forces along with commitments from the Taliban on a reduction of violence coupled with an agreement to enter intra-Afghan negotiations that would define the contours of a political settlement. The Doha ‘agreement’ was never signed. A week before it was to be made public, President Trump canceled the process via tweet and called off a trilateral meeting that had been hastily arranged at Camp David. In the ensuing 3 months, Khalilzad has not been given official permission to meet directly with the Taliban and President Trump has made clear he wanted to see ‘concessions’ in the form of ceasefires, in order to reengage. A small breakthrough came in November when a prisoner exchange took place that secured the release of a U.S. and an Australian professor who had been held by the Taliban.

However, it was not until President Trump’s surprise visit to Afghanistan last week on the occasion of Thanksgiving where he made public remarks in support of a peace agreement, that paved the way for Khalilzad to conduct face to face talks with the Taliban to reanimate the Doha agreement.

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The major challenge for Khalilzad is convincing the Taliban to deliver further concessions having had both parties already agree to the terms. What makes the task particularly complicated is these additional concessions come in the form of a reduction in violence and a ceasefire - which were seen as an outcome of the original agreement and not a pre-condition. This has made it a hard sell for Khalilzad and an even harder sell internally within the Taliban movement. The fact the U.S. has backflipped once before has also raised concerns within the Taliban movement that even if they do commit to a ceasefire, the U.S. may renege on its commitment and use the ceasefire against them.

It is only a few days since the U.S. and the Taliban reengaged directly in Doha, Qatar but early indications are positive. Despite no public announcement, there are indications that an informal undeclared reduction in violence has been put in place in select areas in Afghanistan. In addition, there are multiple reports of Taliban forces fighting against the Islamic State in Afghanistan alongside, or with the support of, Afghan national security forces. For its part, the Taliban have indicated a willingness to accommodate and deliver on additional U.S. concessions. It is too early to say whether these confidence building measures will be sufficient to convince President Trump to conclude the Doha agreement. There is clearly a strong desire to deliver on his pledge of bring troops home. However, an agreement with the Taliban is fraught with political risk and as we near the U.S. presidential elections, it becomes less likely that the President will be willing to expose himself to any possible fallout from a deal with the Taliban.

Assuming, for a moment, that the Doha Agreement is concluded in the coming month or so, one should expect that the next phase of the peace process will be more complicated - the intra-Afghan dialogue. There are few constituents within today's Afghanistan who desire a diluting of many of the hard-won social freedoms that many urban, and to some extent rural, Afghans now enjoy. But before the intra-Afghan dialogue can be even put on the table, the current Afghan elite have a more pressing problem – how to resolve the current electoral crisis that risks becoming a much larger constitutional crisis. At the end of the day, it's Afghanistan, the so-called 'graveyard of empires' and despite the efforts to extract U.S. troops from Afghanistan, there is always the possibility that talks will fail and President Trump will come to the conclusion of his predecessors, that the status quo isn't such a horrible policy.



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