



## In This Volume

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### **The Doha Peace Talks: Bringing Peace or Increasing the Conflict in Afghanistan?**

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## Summary

The Taliban are a bitter reality of Afghan society, one which cannot be ignored or dismissed by any means in the future of Afghanistan, as was done so during the Bonn Conference in 2001. The United States now understands this reality and prioritized the Taliban at the Doha peace talks to sustain a formal peace process between the Taliban and the Afghan government, in order to find a way out for itself from the longest and costly war in its history.

Nevertheless, the Taliban never crossed their internal red lines in favor of any peace deals, nor did they in the Doha peace talks. Unfortunately, the Doha peace talks ended with the Taliban's military victory, and the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. This resulted in Afghans reverting back to 1996 once again, after having experienced a new democratic regime for 20 years. Furthermore, there were multiples mistakes by the US during peace talks, such as the exclusion of the former Afghan government, not agreeing on a political settlement, the weakened position of the former Afghan government, and no proper coordination of the US in a significant way with NATO and its allies.

## Introduction

Afghanistan has long been a strategically important region for the great international powers due to its geopolitical and geostrategic location, which is located at the 'Heartland'<sup>1</sup>, and can act as a bridge to Central Asia and South Asia. Historically, world powers tried to conquer the country but failed, which is why Afghanistan is referred to as the 'graveyard of empires'. From the British Empire in the 19th Century to the Soviet Union in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and, finally, the United States of America in 2021, each empire failed. The 21st Century was not an exception, yet, the NATO intervention was not successful, even with peace negotiations in Afghanistan having taken place. The Afghan – US peace talks began in December 2001, five years after the first Taliban regime. Then with the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, America and its allies engaged in Afghanistan with the purpose of combating terrorism.

The USA, NATO, the UN, and Afghans agreed and established the Republic Government of Afghanistan after the Bonn Conference in 2001. Prior to this, the Afghan Mujahideen, who were operating in Afghanistan during the Afghan Wars (1978–92) opposed the invading Soviet forces and eventually toppled the Afghan Communist government. This was later followed by the overthrowing of the first Taliban government with the assistance of the US and its allies. The Taliban were not invited to the Bonn Conference and were excluded from these *power shift* talks (Bonn Conference), because the US and its allies thought that they had defeated the Taliban, and thus there were no Talibs in the country who could oppose a new government. This exclusion from the Bonn Conference pushed them to remain as an insurgent opposition to the newly established government of Afghanistan for 20 years and significantly challenged the US mission in the country and the Afghan government.

After 20 years of military presence, the US decided to end its longest and costly war in Afghanistan through peaceful negotiations with the Taliban. After many pre-negotiations and talks, the US-Taliban agreement was signed in early 2020. Simultaneously, the US-Afghan government declaration was signed in Doha, the capital of Qatar, now known as the Doha Agreement. The first two parts of the agreement were implemented more or less successfully, resulting in the US and its allies safe withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the guarantee to prevent international terrorists from using Afghanistan as a base for activities which threaten US national security. However, the two other vital parts of the agreement, which first included a political settlement arising from intra-Afghan peace talks. The second was a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, which was to be on the agenda of Afghan intra-peace talks, but it did not even start properly and was left unimplemented. As a result, the US-Taliban war to end without greater fighting and in a peaceful way. Nonetheless, the Republic of Afghanistan-Taliban peace negotiations failed. The second phase of the Doha peace process ended with the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban's military victory.

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<sup>1</sup> Mackinder, H. J. (2004). The Geographical Pivot of History(1904). *The Geographical Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Mackinder-Geographical-Pivot.pdf>



## Exclusion of the Afghan Government

Every peace process involves negotiated steps to end war and bring sustainable peace. In this process negotiators are the key players and every negotiator should have equal rights and responsibilities toward the joint mission. In conflict zones, peacebuilders should ensure that peace agreements in conflict areas are inclusive, participatory, and locally led and supported<sup>2</sup>. The Donald Trump administration, after many pre-negotiations, initiated a platform to sit with the Taliban to negotiate and start a peace process that resulted in the Doha Peace Talks initiative. This talk was an extraordinary opportunity to be used by both the Taliban and Afghan Government, but the Donald Trump administration decided to pursue direct talks with the Taliban only, in July 2018, to jump-start more comprehensive peace efforts. The intention was to bring the Afghan government into the peace talks quickly but US officials signed the deal with the Taliban without the involvement of the Afghan government<sup>3</sup>. Not involving the Afghan government in the initial peace talks led the Taliban to question the Kabul government's legitimacy and to declare that the Taliban will not engage with the Afghan government. If the peace talks could be imagined as a triangle, the Afghan government was definitely the third side of the triangle which could have led the peace talks to a comprehensive agreement, but due to the Afghan government's exclusion this triangle was incomplete and only had two sides which solely reflected the demands of the US and Taliban. Thus, in the decision-making process of Afghanistan the Afghan government's position was severely weakened due to the Doha peace talks. Currently, if the US and international community are willing to prevent the dangers of the present crises in Afghanistan, open dialogue which includes the maligned Taliban and failed Afghan government should be a focal point for resuming the peace talks.

## Not Agreeing to a Political Settlement

Despite the weakened position of the Afghan government in the Doha peace agreement, another reason why the Taliban returned to power was due to the lack of agreement on a political settlement during the Doha peace negotiations. An inclusive transitional government or a referendum allowing for an election might be the best option which would allow the Afghan nation to choose their government and make Afghans more responsible for their choice. But based on research by Claire Mills<sup>4</sup>, a researcher at the House of Commons Library, the US proposals for an interim transitional government appointed on the principle

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<sup>2</sup> Diaz-Prinz, J. (n.d.). *Peace Process*. Retrieved from U.S. Institute of Peace:  
<https://www.usip.org/issue-areas/peace-processes>

<sup>3</sup> Curtis, L. (n.d.). *How the Doha Agreement Guaranteed US Failure in Afghanistan*. Hoover Institution. Stanford University. Retrieved from [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/curtis\\_webreadypdf.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/curtis_webreadypdf.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Mills, C. (2021). *The withdrawal of military forces from Afghanistan and its implications for peace*. The Commons Library. Retrieved from  
<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9241/CBP-9241.pdf>

of equity were rejected by Ashraf Ghani who presented a three-point plan for governance that envisaged building a government within the framework of the Republic constitution, culminating in presidential elections, but this approach was dismissed by the Taliban. From the beginning of the talks, the Taliban did not sincerely engage with the political settlement and instead insisted that violence would increase dramatically in the country. Violent attacks that were launched by the Taliban ‘increased by 50%’<sup>5</sup> during the Doha peace talks. Taliban officials were sitting at the negotiation table and were enjoying luxury trips in Doha while their militants were planning to attack civilians, especially educational centers. The Kabul University attack was one of the hundreds of attacks by the Taliban, although they denied responsibility for the attack. This increase in violence resulted in a huge reaction among Afghans, including those who were part of the Doha peace talks, and among civil society, human rights activists, women, and youth. They supported a boycott of the Taliban, including pausing talks until a second decision about the continuation of the talks with the Taliban, which is why the Doha peace talks had some delays. These issues caused complexities which is why the talks did not pave the way for a viable political settlement. During this critical time, the US had to develop credible threats to punish the Taliban for reneging on its commitment to a peace deal. Nevertheless, the agreement on a political settlement should have been arranged months before the US troop withdrawal. A realistic political settlement for Afghanistan could be an inclusive power-sharing government which includes all ethnic groups, women, and minorities regardless of their sect and tribe. Only then would the US, international community, the Taliban, and the previous failed government be able to work on a realist political settlement, because the Taliban and former Afghan government had already signed the Doha agreement. Based on the agreement, both parties are in charge of agreeing to a political settlement.

### **The Weakened Position of the Afghan Government**

The Taliban returning back to power was a failure for the Afghan government. The former government had agreed to release 50,000 Taliban prisoners, including some known terrorists, without any conditions to build confidence and trust at the start of the Doha peace talks. Nevertheless, the Taliban did not agree to put something down from their side to give meaning to the intra-Afghan peace talks. Additionally, ‘the Afghan government failed to recognize that the US would eventually leave’<sup>6</sup> the country. The US came to Afghanistan with the mission of removing terrorism from the battlefield and those who attacked the US on

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<sup>5</sup> (2020). *Afghanistan violence jumps 50 percent amid peace talks: Watchdog*. Al Jazeera. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/5/afghanistan-violence-jumps-50-percent-amid-peace-talks-watchdog>

<sup>6</sup> Mills, C. (2021). *The withdrawal of military forces from Afghanistan and its implications for peace*. The Commons Library. Retrieved from <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9241/CBP-9241.pdf>

9/11. The Taliban were defeated quickly into the US operation. Upon establishing a new government and receiving huge amounts of money from the US, the Afghan government had to spend the money on real investment. The Afghan government should have used US aid money for economic infrastructure. These funds could then make Afghanistan self-sufficient. The Afghan government not only did not use this golden chance but also failed to build political consensus and national unity after the troop withdrawal announcement, which would have boosted the national security forces' morale<sup>7</sup>. Everyone remembers the voices of the Afghan National Forces who called for help, assistance, and resistance but it was reported that the leadership of the Afghan government was not keen on fighting and thus left security bases to the Taliban. The escape of Ashraf Ghani from Kabul, on the day the Taliban entered Kabul, led the country to collapse without any form of resistance. At this time, some members of the failed Afghan government are presently living overseas. Others are still in Afghanistan, fighting the Taliban directly, with weapons, and indirectly through protests, writing, and reporting. Through reporting, we see the chaos of the Taliban and their actions, which show a complete disregard for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the rule of law. This could be used as the impetus for potential unity against the Taliban.

### **Lack of Proper Coordination of the US with NATO and its Allies**

The US did not 'coordinate the peace talks in a meaningful way with NATO and its allies'<sup>8</sup> to come up with a specific international mechanism for ending the war and bringing peace to Afghanistan. In the two past decades the US along with NATO and its partners spent hundreds of billions of dollars on training and equipping the Afghan National Defense & Security Forces and the Afghan government<sup>9</sup>. Yet, when it came to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the final decision came from the US as the main player of the joint combat terrorism mission in Afghanistan. Seth G. Jones, the Harold Brown Chair and Director of Transnational Threats at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, published a testimony on 'War and Peace in Afghanistan' and pointed out that 'a frustrated NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, lamented after the U.S. announcement: "The price for leaving too soon or in an uncoordinated way could be very high. Afghanistan risks becoming once again a platform for international terrorists to plan and organize attacks on our homelands. And ISIS could rebuild in Afghanistan the terror caliphate it lost in Syria and Iraq"'<sup>10</sup>. In July 2022, Al Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri was targeted during a CIA operation and was killed in Kabul. This obviously indicates that the Taliban provided him refuge. In the future, any political initiatives related to Afghanistan should be coordinated properly with all the relevant stakeholders involved and political leaders should be held

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, P.1

<sup>8</sup> Jones, S. G. (2020). *War and Peace in Afghanistan*. CSIS. Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/111095/witnesses/HMTG-116-AS00-Wstate-JonesS-20201120.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous. (n.d.). U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/US-Withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Jones, S. G. (2020). *War and Peace in Afghanistan*. CSIS. Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/111095/witnesses/HMTG-116-AS00-Wstate-JonesS-20201120.pdf>

accountable for their actions, in case of unanticipated situations like when Ashraf Ghani fled Afghanistan and the Taliban took over the country by force.

## Recommendations

I propose the following two options to address the current crisis and violation of human rights in Afghanistan:

- Resuming the Doha peace talks as an established platform for the sustainable end of the conflict in Afghanistan. Thus, a similar event to the UN conference on Afghanistan held in Doha on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023 would potentially be the right place to put the US-Taliban Agreement on the table for the US, the international community, the Taliban, and former Afghan government representatives, both in the diaspora or inside Afghanistan, to agree on a realistic and inclusive political settlement, in the form of a power-sharing government or federal government. This could start at the senior officials' level who can work on a new agenda and test its feasibility, and perhaps move to another peace agreement with the support of the US, the UN Security Council, the international community, the Taliban, the former Afghan government, and regional powers, such as Pakistan, Iran, and China, in order to reform the Afghan government.
- Considering the current situation in Afghanistan, any assistance that could strengthen the Taliban's power should be stopped, since the Taliban are still under international sanctions and are continuing to violate Afghan citizens' fundamental rights. One option is for the international community to exert pressure on the Taliban through diplomatic and economic means, including sustained sanctions, to ensure that they respect human rights and uphold their commitments to the international community. This could involve coordinating efforts among regional and international actors, such as the United Nations, in order to hold the Taliban accountable for their actions and to promote international norms and standards in Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

The crisis of human rights and women's rights, the ban on girls' education, the ban on women's employment, torture, capital punishment, the searching of private property, and the arrests of non-Pashtun ethnic groups with no justifiable reasons, especially of Panjshiri-Tajiks, and providing a safe haven for international terrorists in Afghanistan are the main outcomes of Taliban governance, during the past two years of their extremist regime. Besides this, hunger, poverty, and forced marriage has been the daily reality faced by the country's citizens. Recently, on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023, BBC Persian reported that 'The Supreme Court of the Taliban has announced that it is committed to implementing the limits and retribution. This court has said that the courts of this group have issued 175 retribution sentences, 37 stoning



sentences, and four cases of killing by putting under the wall'<sup>11</sup>, which is fundamentally against international human rights. The Biden Administration had warned the Taliban that they will watch their actions closely. Clearly, now is the right time for the US, the UN, and the international community to strongly react to the continued violation of human rights by the Taliban.

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<sup>11</sup> (2023). *The Supreme Court of the Taliban is "awaiting the approval of the leadership" for dozens of death sentences, stoning and demolition of the wall*. BBC Persian. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/cx70gqx60dpo>

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