



BRIEFING PAPER

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Afghanistan: any progress?

By Ben Smith

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Summary

In January 2019 the US envoy for the Afghan Conflict, Zalmay Khalilzad, announced that a framework for a peace agreement had been agreed with the Taliban: the US would withdraw its troops and, in return, the Taliban would undertake to prevent Afghanistan being used by terrorists for attacks on other countries. This was [hailed by some](#) as a breakthrough.

There remained many unanswered questions about any peace deal, such as how the present government would be involved in the discussions and what role the Taliban might have in a future government. At present the Taliban refuses to talk to the Kabul government because it does not recognise its legitimacy.

The [UK supports](#) political negotiations.

Pakistan facilitated the talks, but its role is ambiguous - [most observers accept](#) that Pakistan's ISI has supported the Taliban as a hedge against India. Pakistan's influence in the future is likely to be crucial, but relations between Pakistan and the US and India can be volatile and may affect the negotiations.

In December Trump administration officials said that half of US troops would soon be withdrawn, but pressure from Senate Republicans and others seems to have caused the administration to retreat from that position; the acting [US Defense Secretary said](#) in February 2019 that there would be no unilateral drawdown.

The UK increased its deployment to Afghanistan recently, as part of NATO's [Resolute Support](#) operation. NATO's mission is to train and support the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces rather than to engage in combat.

The UK's Department for International Development [plans to spend](#) £155 million in Afghanistan in 2019/20. £100 million on reconstruction, £20 million on humanitarian support and £13 million on education support.

The peace talks come against a background of significant setbacks for the campaign against the Taliban: the insurgents have increased the amount of territory they control and have mounted some spectacular attacks in recent months. [The UN reports that 2018](#) was a record year for civilian deaths, including the deaths of children.

Meanwhile, the government is in disarray, riven by rivalries that are partly ethnicity-based, and its performance is further handicapped by corruption. Elections to the Parliament last year were marred by insecurity. The next presidential election is due to take place in 2019.

With the Taliban in a strong position in the conflict, it is difficult to imagine their agreeing to stop fighting unless they get a powerful position in any political settlement. A majority of Afghans is satisfied with democracy, but [Afghans are not optimistic](#) about the country's direction.

1. Political negotiations

1.1 Taliban/US outline deal

US government representatives have been negotiating directly with the Taliban since December 2018, in meetings brokered by Pakistan and taking place in the United Arab Emirates. The US has previously publicly resisted the Taliban's demand for direct bilateral negotiation. The Afghan government was not involved. The Taliban does not accept its legitimacy.

Direct bilateral
Taliban/US
negotiations

US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad announced on 28 January 2019 that the sides had agreed the draft framework of a deal to end the US military operation in Afghanistan.

The Taliban promises to prevent Afghanistan being used by foreign terrorist groups and in return the US undertakes to withdraw its troops.

Details, however, remain to be settled.

- How long would the withdrawal take?
- How big would a residual US force to protect the embassy be?
- Would that force have the right to conduct counter-terrorist strikes?
- How and when will the Afghan government and other Afghan actors be brought into this?
- Will Taliban prisoners be released?

A further round of talks in Qatar is scheduled for 25 February.¹

Ahmed Rashid, a distinguished commentator on Afghanistan, described the talks as: "enormously significant" and said: "we've never been as close... to an end to the civil war in Afghanistan".²

In February the Taliban leadership said it would meet US envoy Khalilzad and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, on 18 February. Neither Pakistani nor US officials immediately confirmed the talks.³

UK response

The UK government gave its response to the developments in answer to a Parliamentary Question:

We welcome the progress made by the US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, towards revitalising a peace process in Afghanistan. His wide-ranging engagement is important in supporting and facilitating an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned political process.

¹ [‘Taliban ‘not seeking to seize all of Afghanistan’](#), *BBC News Online*, 6 February 2019

² [‘Taliban talks: Will negotiations lead to peace in Afghanistan?’](#), *BBC News Online*, 27 January 2019

³ [‘Taliban announce surprise talks with US in Pakistani capital’](#), *al-Jazeera*, 13 February 2019

We welcome regional initiatives designed to support this aim, if coordinated with the Afghan government. Recent talks in Moscow did not include representatives of that government.

The UK believes that only a political solution can achieve lasting stability in Afghanistan. The UK will continue to provide support to Ambassador Khalilzad and the Afghan government in their efforts.

The British government continues to urge the Taliban to take advantage of the current opportunity for peace, and to begin a genuine intra-Afghan dialogue by engaging with the elected government of Afghanistan.⁴

“only a political solution can achieve lasting stability”

1.2 Moscow meeting

In February 2019 a meeting took place between the Taliban lead negotiator in the UAE talks, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, and senior Afghan opposition politicians including Hamid Karzai, the former President. The Moscow talks focused on how Afghanistan could be governed in the future. The Afghan government was also excluded from the Moscow talks but representatives from some of Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries did attend.

Thomas Ruttig of the Afghan Analysts Network said that the Moscow meeting was driven by “Russian sniping at the US”;⁵ aiming to undermine the US-led process and re-establish Russian credentials in the country. Another local analyst said that the Taliban has always wanted two tracks, one with the US and another with Afghan elements opposed to the Kabul government.

“Russian sniping”

Some commentators have suggested that some participants in the intra-Afghan meeting in Moscow would prefer to put off the election and set up a caretaker government to oversee a transition.

1.3 Pakistan’s role

The US-Taliban talks come at a difficult time in relations between Washington and Islamabad. In September 2018 the Trump Administration suspended \$300 million in military aid to Pakistan, in response to Pakistan’s alleged reluctance to act against the Taliban.⁶ Much more US aid had been suspended at the beginning of the year.

In December the designated leader of US Central Command, General McKenzie, said:

At this time, however, Pakistan does not appear to be using the full extent of its influence to encourage the Taliban to come to the table. We continue to see the Taliban being utilized as a hedge against India rather than as part of a stable, reconciled Afghanistan.⁷

⁴ [Written question – 218176](#), 12 February 2019

⁵ [‘Explainer: Why There Are Two Competing Tracks For Afghan Peace’](#), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 7 February 2019

⁶ [‘Pentagon cancels aid to Pakistan over record on militants’](#), *Reuters*, 1 September 2018

⁷ [‘Afghan security forces’ deaths unsustainable: U.S. military official’](#), *Reuters*, 4 December 2019

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Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said that, instead of criticising Pakistan for secretly backing jihadi groups, US envoy Khalilzad had asked Islamabad for help and that had resulted in the UAE talks.⁸

Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan will continue to be significant, as signals emerge that the US will pull back and the Taliban will get some sort of role in a new government. Analysts have warned that Pakistani military intelligence, having covertly supported the Taliban for years, could turn its attention to Kashmir, the territory disputed by Pakistan and India.⁹

The bomb that killed 40 Indian paramilitary police in Indian-administered Kashmir in February 2019 was claimed by Pakistan-based *jihadi* group Jaish-e-Mohammed (J-e-M) and brought the Kashmir dispute sharply into focus. It increased fears that militants from groups such as Lashka-e-Taiba and J-e-M, as well as the support of Pakistani military intelligence, could be shifted from supporting the Taliban to attacking Indian targets in Indian-administered Kashmir, in the event of a settlement in Afghanistan.

An Indian air force strike on an alleged Jaish-e-Mohammed training camp on 26 February 2019 further stoked up the conflict over Kashmir. The Pakistanis said that they would respond in their own time.

Kashmir?

⁸ ['Pakistan Takes Credit for Arranging Upcoming US-Taliban Talks'](#), Voice of America, 15 December 2018

⁹ ['Bombing raises fears of Afghan militant's shift'](#), *Financial Times*, 21 February 2019

2. Drawdown imminent?

2.1 US policy

US policy on Afghanistan, as in some other countries, has been difficult to pin down.

A Trump administration official told the media on 20 December 2018 that the US military had been ordered to prepare to withdraw about half of its troops from Afghanistan. It came as a surprise to other Western and Afghan officials. The comments came hours after Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said that he would resign after disagreeing with the President over Middle East policy and were linked to the decision to withdraw troops from Syria, according to the administration official.¹⁰

On 28 December a White House spokesman said that President Trump had not yet ordered the Pentagon to withdraw troops, apparently contradicting the earlier reports.

On 30 January, Senate Republicans overwhelmingly backed a motion by the Leader of the Republican majority, Mitch McConnell, declaring ISIS/Daesh in Syria and Afghanistan remain a serious threat to US interests. The motion was widely taken as a rebuke to the President's justification for withdrawing troops: that ISIS [had been defeated](#).

On 14 February, Acting US Defense Secretary Patrick [Shanahan said](#) that any troop reductions would be coordinated with NATO allies: "There will be no unilateral troop reductions. It will be coordinated. We're together."

"no unilateral troop reductions"

2.2 UK involvement

Deployment

Asked in the House of Commons whether the Administration's apparent plan to withdraw troops would encourage the Taliban to be obdurate, a UK defence minister said:

Our collective long-term commitment to the objective remains unchanged. We have a long-term intention that NATO and its partners should not reduce their military presence unless conditions on the ground change.¹¹

The UK had in fact announced in July 2018 an increase to its deployment. 440 extra personnel in non-combat roles would go to Afghanistan, taking the total UK contribution to around 1,100 personnel.¹² The extra troops were due to arrive in early 2019.¹³

UK is increasing its deployment

¹⁰ ['U.S. to Withdraw About 7,000 Troops From Afghanistan, Officials Say'](#), *New York Times*, 20 December 2018

¹¹ [HC Deb 22 January 2019, c117](#)

¹² [Statement on Afghanistan](#), HC Deb 11 July 2018, c973-81

¹³ [Troops in Afghanistan: July 2018 update](#), Commons Briefing Paper, 18 July 2018

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In answer to a PQ,¹⁴ the government set out the following figures for the number of service personnel deployed in *Operation Tora*, the UK contribution to [Resolute Support](#):

Operation Tora	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Navy	30	30	20	40
Army	1,030	980	1,030	1,220
RAF	340	480	290	450
Tri-Service Total	1,400	1,500	1,340	1,710

2.3 Operation Resolute support

The stated aim of the NATO operation in Afghanistan, [Resolute Support](#), is to train and support Afghan National Security Forces, not engage in combat; NATO has consistently ruled out any return to combat. NATO defence ministers [agreed in November 2017](#) to increase the total number of troops from 13,000 to 16,000 during 2018.

¹⁴ [HC Written question – 211186](#), 29 January 2019

3. UK aid

According to the Department for International Development, more than half of all Afghans are living below the poverty line, and there were more than 2.5 million returning refugees or internally displaced people in 2018. The UK DFID plans to spend £155 million in 2019/20. £100 million of that will go towards reconstruction, while some £20 million goes on humanitarian support and £13 million on education support.¹⁵

¹⁵ DFID [Afghanistan country profile 2018](#)

4. Situation in Afghanistan

4.1 Conflict

The Taliban have gained momentum in recent months and now, according to several sources, control or are contesting more territory than at any time since 2001, when their government was ousted.

In the second half of 2018, the Afghan government's control of territory and population decreased significantly, according to the US, with 63.5% of Afghans now living in areas controlled by the government.¹⁶ Gains by the Taliban meant it controlled areas containing 10.8% of the population, a slight increase.



[Afghanistan: Administrative Divisions.](#) [Material held in the public domain](#) courtesy of University of Texas

The UN Afghanistan mission's annual report on the protection of civilians revealed that 2018 had seen a record high for the number of civilian casualties,¹⁷ including a record number of children killed in 2018. The number of deaths was 11% higher than in 2017. There was

ISIS in Afghanistan

¹⁶ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *42nd Quarterly Report to Congress*, 30 January 2019, p65

¹⁷ *Afghanistan Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 2018*, UNAMA/OHCHR, February 2019

an upsurge in suicide attacks, mostly carried out by the Afghan branch of ISIS/Daesh. The leader of US Central Command said in February that the so-called Islamic State of Khorosan Province (ISKP) is using highly sophisticated methods and represents a serious threat to the US.¹⁸ ISKP has been present near the centre of Afghanistan in Sar e Pul and Faryab provinces, and near the Pakistan border in Nangarhar province.

Afghan government forces, US forces and sometimes the Taliban are battling with some success against ISIS: 200 ISIS fighters surrendered to the Taliban in August 2018.

ISIS Afghanistan's integration with the organisation in Iraq and Syria is not known, but some veterans from the Levant have been captured in Afghanistan.

A ceasefire was called by the Taliban in June 2018, to coincide with Eid al-Fitr. The Taliban leadership wanted to show that the group can stop the fighting if it wants to. It successfully reduced conflict, and opponents celebrated together in the street.

Eid al Fitr ceasefire

Taliban fighters mounted several high-profile attacks from their rural strongholds in 2018, entering provincial capitals of Ghazni and Farah. They have also killed thousands of the *arbakai*, local militiamen deployed to protect pro-government rural areas. They control several major roads, including parts of the all-important ring road.

The Taliban have also assassinated government officials, pro-government clerics and other political figures. In October 2018 the most powerful man in southern Afghanistan, the police chief in Kandahar, was killed in the governor's compound by a guard. The governor was wounded but survived. The attack was partly aimed at disrupting the parliamentary election.¹⁹

Powerful figures assassinated

The Afghan government is not winning the battle to control its territory, then, although NATO government officials argue that the Afghan people have taken charge of their security and capability of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces is growing.²⁰

4.2 Governance

The Afghan government continues to perform poorly. Despite the agreement ending the post-2014 election impasse and setting up the National Unity Government, the administration remains riven along ethnic lines, with the President, Ashraf Ghani, seen as representing Pashtuns and the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, representing Tajiks. The Taliban is made up largely of Pashtuns.

Afghanistan is third from bottom of Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index 2017](#). The number of school age children out of school increased to 44% according to a report by Unicef in mid-2018, reversing the trend: the number of children in school had

¹⁸ ['US officials warn ISIS Afghanistan poses major threat'](#), CNN, 19 February 2019

¹⁹ ['Kandahar Assassinations Show Rising Taliban Strength in Afghanistan'](#), International Crisis Group, 19 October 2018

²⁰ [HC Deb 11 July 2018, cc973-81](#)

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consistently been increasing since the removal of the Taliban government in 2001.²¹

Opium poppy production was down in the latest UN Office on Drugs and Crime report, but this was largely because of a severe drought that hit Afghanistan in 2018. The failure to control poppy cultivation was attributed by the UN to governance failures:

...rule of law-related challenges, such as political instability, lack of government control and security, as well as corruption, have been found to be among the main drivers of illicit cultivation.²²

According to Anthony Cordesmann, a long-time observer of Afghanistan, the Western-backed government is a “mess”:

Afghanistan’s current government is a fractured, ineffective mess. It is deeply divided between a mutually hostile President and CEO, and many of their key rivals. It lags years behind in holding a new election, and its latest government reorganization may strengthen its security efforts but has brought even more rivals into the government.

The Afghan legislature has little real control over how money is actually spent, and has its own corruption problems in both its elections and in every action it takes when in session. There are deep ethnic, sectarian, tribal and regional divisions in both Afghan politics and governance from the local to the national level that undermine its unity and effectiveness, and sometimes lead to violence that affect its politics. Much of the country is controlled by mixes of power brokers that include warlords and narcotraffickers, and severely limit the central government’s role and influence outside “Kabulstan.”²³

Poppy production
down but only
because of drought

Parliamentary election 2018

The October 2018 election had been postponed several times and, in the event, was a chaotic affair. The Independent Electoral Commission was widely accused of corruption and mismanagement. The final results of most provinces have not yet been published, nearly four months after the poll. Supporters of failed candidates blocked roads, and even the airport for half a day, showing a widespread unwillingness to accept the results.

Presidential election 2019

A presidential election is scheduled for July 2019 and both the incumbent Ashraf Ghani and his opponent in the 2014 election runoff, Abdullah Abdullah, have registered to run, along with former national security adviser, Muhammad Hanif Atmar. Several other powerful figures, some close to the former president, Hamid Karzai, are also on the list of candidates.

²¹ [‘More Afghan Children Are Out of School, Reversing a Trend’](#), *New York Times*, 4 June 2018

²² [‘Sharp drops in opium poppy cultivation, price of dry opium in Afghanistan, latest UNODC survey reveals’](#), UNODC press release, 19 November 2018

²³ Anthony H. Cordesman, [‘Afghanistan as Vietnam Redux: Bomb, Declare Peace, and Leave?’](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 January 2019

Provincial and district elections are due at the same time, along with the postponed parliamentary election in the Ghazni province, where the election was postponed in 2018 because of the security situation.

5. Outlook

The sequencing of the peace negotiations will be crucial. The Taliban is unlikely to agree to a ceasefire unless a transition to a new political settlement in which they have a political role is imminent and guaranteed. They otherwise risk negotiating themselves out of existence, according to the International Crisis Group:

In the meantime, the Taliban seem poised to continue fighting. The group is configured to draw strength from its performance on the battlefield, not from politics. As a Taliban fighter told Crisis Group recently: "The reason everyone is talking about us is our military power and fighting ability; otherwise, nobody would have been talking about peace and reconciliation." In some respects, the prospect of a peace agreement threatens the Taliban's existence in its current form. They do not seem likely to give up the fight prematurely.²⁴

"Taliban poised to continue fighting"

Since 2014 more than 45,000 members of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces have died, according to comments by President Ghani at Davos in January. The next commander of US Central Command said in December: "Their losses have been very high. They are fighting hard, but their losses are not going to be sustainable unless we correct this problem".²⁵ General McKenzie said that Afghan forces were not capable of securing the country without help from the 14,000 US troops in the country.

Given Kabul's present weakness even with the support of US troops, a drawdown of half of US troops would be likely to exacerbate the Afghan government's problems. It would therefore probably embolden the Taliban to plan for Afghanistan's future without the Western-backed government. In this it seems that the group has some support in Moscow.

Afghan opinion

In the largest annual opinion poll of Afghans, published in December 2018, only a third of respondents said the country was moving in the right direction.²⁶ On a more positive note, 60% said they were satisfied with democracy (an increase over the previous year) and 53% believed reconciliation between the government and the Taliban is possible. However, a substantially higher proportion of Pashtuns was optimistic about the future than Tajiks, Hazaras and other minority ethnic groups. Perhaps some of the optimism in Afghanistan is in expectation of Pashtun/Taliban ascendancy.

²⁴ ['Interpreting the U.S. Talks with the Taliban'](#), International Crisis Group, 29 January 2019

²⁵ ['Afghan security forces' deaths unsustainable: U.S. military official'](#), *Reuters*, 4 December 2018

²⁶ [Survey of the Afghan people](#), Asia Foundation, 2018

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