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Afghanistan: cancelled talks, and elections

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Summary

The US-Taliban negotiations

An interim peace deal between the US and the Taliban was reportedly close to being signed, after a series of meetings in Qatar and the UAE.

The outlines were discussed for some time; although the text was not released.

The deal would have included [these elements](#):

- Taliban would promise not to host international extremists in Afghanistan that threatened the US or its allies
- US and NATO troops would be drawn down by several thousand, perhaps reducing the present number from about 20,000 to about 12,000
- There would be a sustained reduction in violence – a full ceasefire was mentioned earlier in talks but that now looks too optimistic.
- The Taliban would subsequently agree to negotiate with the Afghan government over power sharing

No further troop reductions would take place until the power-sharing arrangements were in place.

The Taliban has refused to include the Afghan government in the talks. It considers the Kabul government to be the illegitimate creation of Westerners.

Talks cancelled

On 7 September president [Trump abruptly cancelled the talks](#), as details emerged of a planned signing meeting at the presidential retreat at Camp David. There had been strong opposition in Washington to the deal and the signing event, although Trump blamed the cancellation on a Taliban terrorist attack in Kabul that killed a US citizen.

Security

As the US and international troop deployment has declined, the Taliban has [increased its control of Afghan territory](#). Violence against civilians is on the increase, although the Taliban may be causing a declining share of it. Many other terrorist groups operate in Afghanistan, including ISIS Khorasan, rivals to the Taliban, and al-Qaeda, who remain Taliban allies.

The NATO mission [Resolute support](#) is not a combat mission, but aims to train and support Afghan security forces. The deployment is about 16,000 personnel from NATO member states and supporter countries such as Georgia. The US accounts for about half of the mission's personnel.

The US also runs a [bilateral counter-terrorism mission](#) of about 6,000, focusing on the Taliban, ISIS-Khorasan, al-Qaeda and other groups. Some counter-terrorist operations are conducted in partnership with Afghan forces and some by US forces alone.

2019 elections

The first round of the presidential election was held on 28 September. The two most important figures in the present government, Ashraf Ghani (President) and Abdullah Abdullah (Chief Executive) are probably the [front runners](#). Turnout may have been exceptionally low, amid Taliban threats of violence to disrupt the process, but no official

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results are yet available. A second round is almost certain to be held. According to the law, it should be within two weeks of the publication of official results of the first round.

Afghanistan's neighbours

As an agreement to allow US to draw down its troops has appeared increasingly possible, Afghanistan's neighbours have been [shifting their positions](#).

Pakistan has been encouraging the negotiations. It remains Pakistan's strategy to secure a friendly government in Afghanistan and one that is not aligned with India. A dominant Taliban would play that role.

China is close to Pakistan and is interested in Afghan economic potential in connection with the Belt and Road programme. Beijing has hosted the Taliban for talks but is also wary of Islamic fundamentalism, especially given its own problems with the restive Muslim region of Xinjiang.

Russia has likewise been increasing contacts with the Taliban, hosting political talks. Moscow wants influence in a future Afghanistan but is wary of Islamic fundamentalism; the Taliban remains on Russia's list of proscribed organisations.

India's rivalry with Pakistan shapes its attitude to Afghanistan, so it has traditionally been close to the Kabul government, hoping to prevent Pakistan gaining too much influence and to protect investments in Afghanistan. India initially welcomed the cancellation of the talks, but no longer opposes the Taliban outright. If civil war returns to Afghanistan, some observers think India would side with anti-Taliban forces.

Iran has had secret contacts with the Taliban; in 2018 a meeting was publicised by the Iranian government, signalling a shift. Iran does not want the Taliban to dominate Afghanistan, but has a strong interest in stability, since it shares a long border and has problems with refugees and heroin coming over from Afghanistan.

1. US-Taliban talks

1.1 Negotiations

Talks between the Taliban and the US government started in earnest in Qatar in 2018. Although nothing was announced, some information reached the press in 2019 and expectations rose of an imminent deal.

The US is represented by Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, an experienced Afghan-born American diplomat.

In April 2019 a planned meeting in Qatar had collapsed because the Taliban objected to the size and composition of the Afghan delegation. It included some Afghan government officials attending in a personal capacity.

Shortly afterwards, the US representative Zalmay Khalilzad attended a meeting in Moscow with Russian and Chinese delegates, aimed at persuading the Taliban to talk directly to the Kabul government.

On 20 August 2019, Khalilzad returned to Qatari capital Doha to resume negotiations with the Taliban; he would also visit Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, to discuss possible future power-sharing arrangements with the Afghan government.¹

Both sides said after the last meeting that progress had been made.

Outlines

According to reports, a deal was ready to be signed when the talks were cancelled.² The content of the document were widely discussed although nothing official emerged.

Ceasefire and international drawdown

A widespread reduction in violence would occur alongside the withdrawal of several thousand US and NATO troops. The troop reduction could take the number of international troops from the present level of about 20,000 to about 12,000, according to reports.³ Other reports talk of the US [withdrawing 5,000 troops](#) within 135 days and closing five US bases.

Earlier, the possibility of a full ceasefire had been raised but more recent reports suggested that a reduction was as much as could be expected.

Intra-Afghan talks

The agreement reportedly contained a commitment by the [Taliban to participate in talks](#) that would include the Afghan government.

¹ [Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad Travels to Qatar and Afghanistan](#), US State Department media note, 20 August 2019

² ['Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track'](#), International Crisis Group, 2 October 2019

³ Michael O'Hanlon, [Is the Afghanistan deal a good one?](#), Brookings Institution, 16 August 2019

International terrorists

The Taliban would undertake not to host extremist groups or allow them to plan attacks from Afghan territory against the West in general or the US in particular. Agreement on this is the most important US and Western interest; the Taliban government was, after all, felled after 9/11 because it had hosted perpetrators al-Qaeda.

Some argue that the Taliban is likely to take this commitment seriously. Not only do senior Taliban leaders recognise that hosting al-Qaeda in the 1990s was a mistake that cost them their control of the country. They are also battling 2,500 to 4,000 ISIS fighters for control in parts of Afghanistan, according to [UN estimates](#).

Others say that the [Taliban could find it difficult to prevent international terrorists using Afghanistan](#), even if they wanted to.

Armed forces

What to do with the Afghan fighters on both sides would remain a problem and is perhaps the most difficult element of any power-sharing agreement. The Taliban may want to dismantle the Afghan National Defence Security Forces and intelligence services, replacing them with their own. The Afghan government might like to assimilate vetted Taliban fighters into their own ranks. Neither of these solutions looks both desirable and feasible.⁴ If both sides keep their armed forces intact and controlling the areas they do now, consultation mechanisms, perhaps including a third party, could help avoid clashes.

1.2 Talks cancelled

On 7th September President Trump called off the talks in a series of tweets, blaming the Taliban for an attack the previous week that had killed a US service person.

The President also revealed that a secret meeting with Taliban leaders, and a separate one with the president of Afghanistan, had been set for 8 September at Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland, but that it was now cancelled.

John Bolton, US National Security Adviser, had criticised the progress of the talks, saying that Taliban commitments were too vague. Republican politicians were reported to be aghast at the prospect of the US President sitting down with Taliban leaders at Camp David days before the 18th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

On 9 September Trump said that the Taliban talks were “[dead](#)”.

Some commentators suggested that the [mounting opposition to the Taliban talks](#) was a more likely explanation for the cancellation than the September attack.

Shortly afterwards, John Bolton left his job as National Security Adviser.

⁴ Christopher Kolenda and Michael O'Hanlon, [The New Afghanistan Will Be Built on Ceasefire Solutions and Taliban Tradeoffs](#), *The National Interest*, 25 February 2019

President Trump has said that he is [still considering a drawdown](#) of US troops, despite the cancellation of talks and the warning of increased military tempo from the head of US Central Command.

Rabbani killed

On 20 September, Burhanuddin Rabbani, former afghan president and head of the Afghan High Peace Council, was killed in a suicide bomb attack. He was a leading figure in the attempt to find a negotiated solution.

1.3 Reaction

Criticism of the process

Simon Tisdall in the *Guardian* described the prospective deal as a “betrayal”,⁵ not only of the Afghan people and the Afghan National Defence Security Forces, but also of the many international soldiers who have died or been injured in Afghanistan.

He attributed progress in the deal to a desire by President Trump to withdraw US troops before the next presidential election: “...here is Trump, the well-heeled Vietnam draft-dodger, walking away on two good legs and looking to cash in electorally.”

After the cancellation

The Taliban said that more [Americans would die](#) after the cancellation of the talks. US General in charge of Central Command, on a visit to Afghanistan, said following the suspension of talks that the US is likely to accelerate the pace of attacks, corresponding to any increase in Taliban attacks. The increased tempo would cover “a total spectrum”.⁶

Attention switched to the situation inside Afghanistan.

With the assassination of Rabbani, head of the High Peace Council and a Tajik former warlord from the north of the country, Shashank Joshi of the Royal United Services Institute said that Afghanistan could be heading for an ethnically-based civil war:

The northern forces never disarmed, and they've probably begun rebuilding their strength to prepare for the worst-case scenario. They would find willing sponsors. In the 1990s, Russia, Iran and India chipped in. Today, a richer and more ambitious India would hit back at the rise of Pakistani influence in Afghanistan that would result from any Taliban takeover. Delhi already sends billions of dollars, and probably sees Saleh⁷ and his allies [in the Kabul government] as guarantors of Indian interests.⁸

Resumption of the process?

Both the Taliban and the US administration have said that they are open to re-starting the talks. Mike Pompeo said that the Taliban needed to

⁵ Simon Tisdall, '[Donald Trump's 'peace agreement' is a betrayal of Afghanistan and its people](#)', *Guardian*, 19 August 2019

⁶ '[U.S. military likely to ramp up operations against Taliban - U.S. general](#)', *Reuters*, 9 September 2019

⁷ Amrullah Saleh is Ghani's running mate (see Candidates, below).

⁸ '[Afghanistan is lurching towards a civil war: The assassination of the man trying to woo the Taliban makes peace talks even less likely](#)', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 September 2019

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abandon violence and show "[significant commitment](#)" to peace to enable talks to resume.

Taliban chief negotiator Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai said the Taliban had done nothing wrong to continue fighting while the talks continued and indicated [willingness to re-open talks](#): "From our side, our doors are open for negotiations".

The Taliban was also confident that the US would return to the negotiating table:

The Islamic Emirate has a solid and unwavering policy. We called for dialogue 20 years ago and maintain the same stance today. And we believe the United States shall return to this position as well.⁹

Two senior former US officials, one Republican and the other Democrat, called for negotiations not to be abandoned altogether:

President Trump's decision this month to call off peace talks with the Taliban should not obscure the fundamental fact that a political settlement of the Afghanistan conflict remains the best way to protect U.S. national security interests and prevent terrorist attacks from originating in the region.¹⁰

The UK government, too, talked of the "fundamental need" for talks:

There remains a fundamental need for a peace process in Afghanistan in order to secure a better future for Afghanistan. All sides have stated their commitment to achieve this. To make that possible, the British Government supports a swift return to dialogue, and calls on all sides to reduce the violence.¹¹

⁹ ['Why the Failed U.S.-Taliban Talks Represent a Victory for India'](#), *Foreign Policy*, 10 September 2019

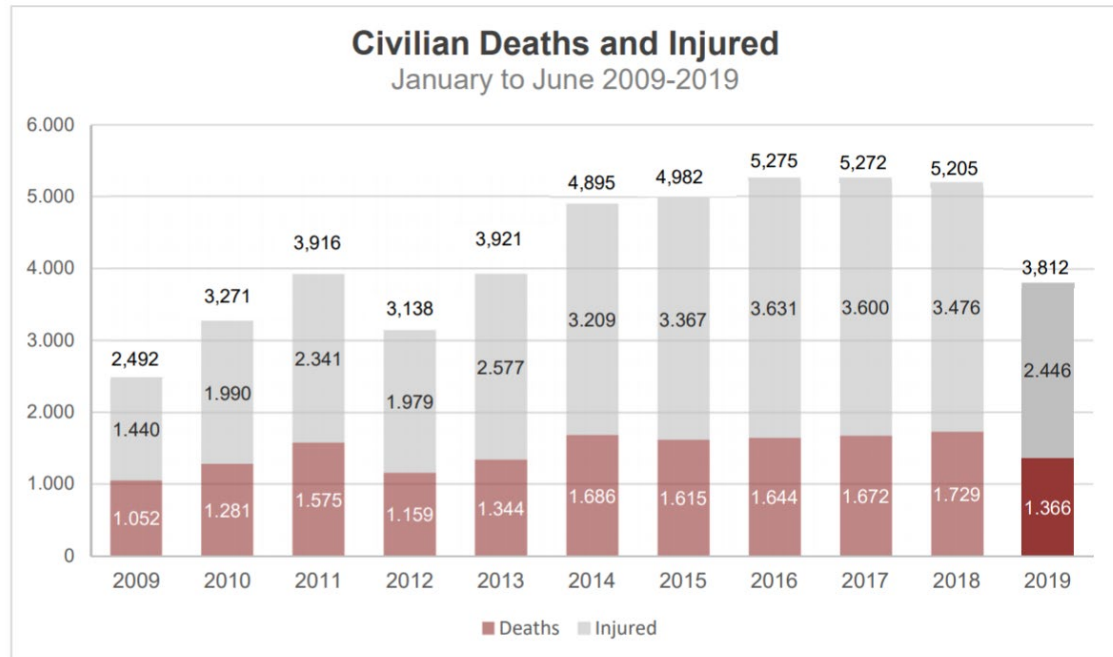
¹⁰ 'Don't leave the Afghan peace talks for dead', *Washington Post*, 26 September 2019

¹¹ [HC Written question – 290428, 2 October 2019](#)

2. Security

2.1 Violence against civilians

The United Nations report for the first half of 2019 showed that the rate of civilian deaths and injuries caused by the conflict is increasing:



Source: [UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan](#)

The number of fatalities caused by the Taliban decreased during the period of the report, accounted for by fewer deaths caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The number of deaths caused by pro-government forces' aerial and search operations increased.

Fighting intensified during the Taliban's traditional spring offensive in 2019. It has left the Taliban in a stronger military position now than at any point since 2001, although establishing a clear picture of what's happening in Afghanistan is notoriously difficult, and some statistics are no longer produced or no longer in the public domain.¹²

The Taliban has been increasing its control over Afghan territory, although the government is stronger in the big cities.

2.2 Terrorist groups

A total of at least [18 terrorist groups](#) operate in the country. The Taliban has influence over many of them, such as al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Some [8,000-10,000 foreign terrorists](#) are in Afghanistan according to the UN..

¹² [Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief](#), Congressional Research Service, 19 September 2019

ISIS

There are 2,500 to 4,000 terrorists with allegiance to ISIS-Khorasan in the country, centred largely on the eastern provinces of [Kunar and Nangarhar](#). Some are international and some disaffected former Taliban fighters.

Although ISIS-Khorasan has not yet conducted international terrorist attacks from Afghanistan, the group remains a significant threat to the West and could get stronger in the event of a collapse of the Afghan government.

Al-Qaeda

The Taliban and al-Qaeda [remain allies](#); al-Qaeda even pledges allegiance to Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's Leader of the Faithful, making al-Qaeda technically part of the Taliban. and the al-Qaeda leadership may aim to re-group in Afghanistan, once the Taliban stabilises its control of its home areas.

It is not clear that the Taliban would or could prevent them doing that, or under what conditions; the Taliban refused to abandon al-Qaeda in 2001. Some argue it is highly unlikely that a pledge not to host al-Qaeda would be honoured:

For the Taliban, AQ was a guest that later became part of their movement, and there is no indication at all that the Afghan Taliban would cut their ties with AQ and other Islamist terrorist groups.¹³

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

IMU tends to support ISIS-Khorasan, although the movement is fragmented; some members work with the Taliban. Its aim is to establish itself in Afghanistan in order to bring about an Islamic state to the north of Afghanistan.¹⁴

Islamic Jihad Union

Close to the Taliban, it aims to expel US troops from Afghanistan and overthrow the government of Uzbekistan.

2.3 International troops

Resolute Support mission

NATO leads the non-combat [Resolute Support](#) mission to train and otherwise support the Afghan security forces. The mission was launched in January 2015, after the closure of the previous International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in December 2014, when responsibility for security was transferred to the Afghan national defence and security forces.























NATO member states also contribute to Afghan security financially.

About 16,000 personnel from NATO member states and partner countries are deployed in support of the Resolute Support mission.

¹³ Farhan Zahid, '[US-Taliban talks won't lead to lasting peace](#)', Middle East Institute, 19 August 2019

¹⁴ CIA World Factbook, [Afghanistan based terrorist groups](#)

According to NATO's figures dated June 2018, the US is contributing 8,475 troops to Resolute Support, while the UK contribution is 650. Other substantial contributors are Germany, Italy, Georgia, Romania and Turkey, as shown in this table:

	Albania	83		Germany	1,300		Portugal	170
	Armenia	121		Greece	6		Romania	679
	Australia	270		Hungary	93		Slovakia	36
	Austria	18		Iceland	2		Slovenia	8
	Azerbaijan	120		Italy	895		Spain	40
	Belgium	78		Latvia	36		Sweden	29
	Bosnia-Herzegovina	60		Lithuania	50		the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia ¹	44
	Bulgaria	158		Luxembourg	2		Turkey	563
	Croatia	106		Mongolia	120		Ukraine	11
	Czech Republic	245		Montenegro	20		United Kingdom	650
	Denmark	155		Netherlands	100		United States	8,475
	Estonia	40		New Zealand	13			
	Finland	29		Norway	55			
	Georgia	870		Poland	247			
							Total	15,997

[Source: NATO](#)

Resolute Support consists of five train, advise and assist commands (TAACs), respectively in Kabul (led by Turkey), Kandahar (US), Herat (Italy), Mazar-e Sharif (Germany) and Laghman (US).

US bilateral counterterrorism mission

As well as contributing to the NATO mission, the US has a [bilateral counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan](#), consisting of some 6,000 troops. These combat the Taliban, ISIS-Khorosan and al-Qaeda operations, both in partnership with Afghan forces and unilaterally.

3. Afghan domestic politics

3.1 Unity government

At present Ashraf Ghani is President and Abdullah Abdullah is Chief Executive of the outgoing unity government, in an arrangement arrived at through US mediation after the last, closely fought election, whose results were widely disputed.

The unity government has not brought much unity:

Ghani and Abdullah's five-year rule as a Unity Government has been a tumultuous one marked by relentless bickering and infighting. Corruption remains rampant.¹⁵

3.2 Presidential election campaign

Until 7 September there had been doubts whether the election would take place at all, and campaigning had been almost non-existent in some places. Several candidates withdrew.

With the talks "dead" and the prospect of a deal with the Taliban off the table for now, attention returned to internal politics and the presidential election and campaigning picked up.

The suspension of the peace talks also caused the Taliban to increase the tempo of their attacks. On 17 September a suicide bomber attacked a campaign rally of President Ashraf Ghani, killing 26. Another suicide bomb attack shortly afterwards killed 22 and wounded many more near the US Embassy and the Afghan Ministry of Defence.

3.3 Candidates

Both leading figures in the outgoing government – Abdullah Abdulla and Asraf Ghani – were on the ballot paper, joined by 13 others. One of the biggest names, **Hanif Atmar**, National Security Adviser to President Ashraf Ghani until 2018 and Interior Minister under President Karzai, dropped out of the race in August, citing security concerns.

Other candidates withdrew and some running mates switched sides at the last minute. The Electoral Commission said that several candidates [had not notified it formally](#) of their withdrawal or change of affiliation, which meant that their names would go on the ballot paper incorrectly and votes for them would be discounted.

Ashraf Ghani is a Pashtun and former academic who spent much of his life in the US. He trailed his rival Abdullah in the first round in 2014 but won the second round, an exercise that was widely considered to be plagued with election fraud.¹⁶

¹⁵ ['Top 5 Afghan presidential candidates in Saturday's election'](#), *Washington Post*, 28 September 2019

¹⁶ Information in this section taken from [Who is who in Afghanistan](#); 'Who's Who Among The Afghan Presidential Candidates', *RFE/RL*, 27 September 2019; ['Top 5 Afghan presidential candidates in Saturday's election'](#), *Washington Post*, 28 September 2019

He became President in the Unity Government brokered by the US.

Ghani picked **Amrullah Saleh**, an ex-intelligence chief and minister of the interior, as his principal running mate. Saleh is a prominent Tajik. Ghani's other vice-presidential candidate is Sarwar Danish, an ethnic Hazara and a current vice president.

Abdullah Abdullah is a Tajik and presently Chief Executive in the Unity Government. He is a former member of a US-backed mujahideen. After the fall of the Taliban government, he served as foreign minister under president Karzai until 2005.

Abdullah's vice-presidential candidates are **Enayatullah Babur Farahmand**, an Uzbek supported by Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former militia leader who swapped sides for the 2019 election, and **Asadullah Sadati**, a Hazara.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. He is a Pashtun and leader of Hizb-e Islami. He headed one of the US-backed mujahideen groups that fought the Soviet invasion in the 1990s. He was designated as a terrorist by the US until signing a peace agreement with the Ghani government in 2016.

Ahmad Wali Massud, a Tajik from Panjshir, is brother to Ahmad Shah Masood, the Northern Alliance leader killed in a suicide bombing in 2001.

Rahmatullah Nabil is another Pashtun and a Major General and former head of the National Directorate for Security under President Ghani.

3.4 First round

The first round of the presidential election took place on 28 September 2019. It was originally scheduled for April 2019 but has been postponed twice by the [Independent Election Commission](#). Turnout in the first round was reported to be [as low as 20%](#), amid Taliban threats to disrupt voting violently. That would be the lowest turnout since the invasion in 2001. Official turnout figures are not available at the time of writing and there is no clear information on the number of polling stations that did not open because of security fears.

The Ministry of the Interior said that 68 attacks against polling stations had taken place, leading to three deaths and 37 injuries; officials said there were no mass-casualty attacks. The official version of events was questioned, however, with [journalists calculating](#) that many more died than were revealed in the official figures.

A low turnout and lack of clarity over election statistics both threaten to undermine the legitimacy of the result when it is announced. Contested results after the "[fraud-ridden](#)" 2014 election caused a standoff that lasted for months and split the country.

3.5 Second round

Results of the election will not arrive for several weeks and a runoff is likely to be needed, as no candidate is likely to receive more than 50%

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of the vote. Ghani and Abdullah are widely expected to fight the second round, although both have claimed that they got more than 50% in the first round. According to [Afghan electoral law](#) a second round should take place within two weeks of the date of the announcement of final results of the first round. First round results are not expected for some weeks.

4. Regional powers

Afghanistan's neighbours – Pakistan, China, India and Iran – are keeping a close eye on US intentions. US drawdown remains the priority in Washington, despite the cancellation of the talks. The prospect of a reduction in US and NATO military presence should encourage Afghanistan's neighbours to strengthen their intervention; this could be beneficial, according to some:

The international system abhors a vacuum. From a realist standpoint, it is likely that a U.S. pullout will open the Afghan theater to a host of regional powers rushing in to protect their interests. This strategic rebalancing is a reality that should be encouraged rather than feared.¹⁷

What are those interests that neighbours might rush in to protect?

4.1 Pakistan

Pakistan has close relations with the Taliban and would see a US withdrawal followed by Taliban dominance as a strategic gain for Pakistan.

What that would mean for relations between India and Pakistan, presently highly volatile, is unclear but would be a concern. India has supported the Kabul government.

In December 2018 Pakistan sponsored talks in the UAE involving the Taliban, US, Saudi, Pakistani and UAE representatives.

The future of Kashmir is important to Pakistan; Islamabad wants to exchange working for a smooth withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan with getting US mediation between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. The Taliban rejected any linkage with Kashmir.¹⁸

4.2 China

Beijing has concerns of its own about Islamic fundamentalism, particularly the Taliban's alleged links to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Uighur unrest in western China.

These concerns have not stopped Beijing cultivating better relations with the Taliban, whose representatives have visited several times, starting in 2017. Beijing may conclude that the possible drawdown of the US-led military campaign shows that maintaining good contacts with the group is the best way to protect Chinese interests in the Uighur region.

The Chinese leadership has, however, maintained good relations with the Kabul government, too.

China is interested in Afghanistan's mineral resources and potential as a transit route, and could link Afghanistan to the Belt and Road initiative.

¹⁷ ['Ending America's Endless War in Afghanistan'](#) *National Interest*, 6 October 2019

¹⁸ Harsh V Pant, ['India's Afghanistan policy should rapidly adapt to the evolving realities'](#), Observer Research Foundation, 3 September 2019

A former Pakistani ambassador to Afghanistan said: “China is taking a longer-term view of Afghanistan, which is based on its economic interests as the U.S. plans to step back.”¹⁹

China, like India, is likely to play a stronger role in future.

4.3 Russia

Russia has been strengthening ties with the Taliban, hosting several conferences on Afghanistan in Moscow. Russia is also keen to expand its influence in the region and would see a US withdrawal as a good opportunity.²⁰ The ties with the Taliban may have come at the expense of relations with Kabul, however.

In May, a Taliban delegation met with Afghan politicians led by former Afghan president Hamid Karzai in Moscow, billed as a celebration of the 100th anniversary of Russian relations with Afghanistan. Before the meeting Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov called for a swift withdrawal of US and international troops.

The event was criticised in Kabul for including Karzai and the Taliban and excluding the Afghan government, despite the Taliban’s continued presence on the Russian list of designated terrorist organisations. Russia has in the past involved Kabul in discussions.²¹

4.4 India

India welcomed the cancellation of the Afghan peace talks, saying that any new negotiations [should include the Kabul government](#). India has supported the Afghan government against the Taliban, to counter India’s long-term rival, Pakistan, which is closer to the Taliban.

India has moved away from outright opposition to the Taliban peace talks, however, as the Taliban has ended its diplomatic isolation, making contacts with the US, Russia, Iran and China.

India now sees its main interests as protecting investments and Indians working in Afghanistan, and to prevent Afghanistan being used by the Pakistani security forces as a training ground for Muslim extremists who might attack India.²² India’s growing wealth and confidence in foreign policy suggest a stronger role in Afghanistan in the future.

4.5 Iran

Iran’s reaction to the news of the cancellation of the talks was to reiterate its demand for the removal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. A large US troop presence across the long Afghan/Iranian border is a security concern for Iran, given the hostile tone coming out

¹⁹ ‘Afghanistan peace talks open way for China’s Belt and Road’, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 27 August 2019

²⁰ ‘US troop drawdown complicated by Afghanistan’s resurgent Taliban’, *Financial Times*, 13 August 2019

²¹ ‘Russia’s Falling Out With Kabul’, *The Diplomat*, 6 June 2019

²² Avinash Paliwal, ‘The ‘India Question’ in Afghanistan’, *Lawfare*, 6 October 2019

of Washington and tensions in the Gulf.²³ Despite the call for foreign troops to leave, Iran has sometimes tacitly co-operated with the US over Iran, happy to have someone contribute to stability next door.

Iran has had secret talks with the Taliban for some time, but in late 2018 Tehran publicised a meeting for the first time. Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif said in January 2019: “I think it would be impossible to have a future Afghanistan without any [role for the Taliban](#)”. He went on:

Nobody in the region believes that a Taliban dominated Afghanistan is in the security interests of the region. I believe that is almost a consensus.²⁴

Iran does not want to see a civil war break out in Afghanistan. With “progressive and inclusive refugee policies”,²⁵ Iran already hosts almost a million registered Afghan refugees, according to the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees. There could be as many more unregistered. Another wave would not be in Iran’s interest.

Iran also has a problem with opium and heroin, most of it coming from Afghanistan. A strong central authority that successfully restricts opium production in Afghanistan is very much in Iran’s interest.

Thirdly, it would be a problem for Iran if Sunni Islamic fundamentalists hostile to the Shia regime in Tehran took control of Afghanistan or any part of it. The presence of ISIS in Afghanistan is a major concern to Tehran.

In late 2018, Iran announced that it was strengthening security along the Afghan border. The possibility of ethno-sectarian conflict on that eastern border is ominous for Iran, especially given the Sunni-Shia tensions to its west.

²³ For more information see the Commons Briefing Paper [The Iran nuclear deal and rising tensions in the Gulf](#), October 2019

²⁴ [‘Iran says Taliban must have Afghan role, but can’t dominate’](#), *Reuters*, 9 January 2019

²⁵ [‘Iran needs more help to support Afghan refugees – UNHCR chief’](#), UNHCR press release, 4 September 2018

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