



BRIEFING PAPER

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Afghanistan - July 2020 update

By Ben Smith

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Summary

US military forces have been in Afghanistan since 2001, making it their longest war. US President Donald Trump indicated in February 2019 that he would extricate the US from “[endless wars](#)”, but the Administration’s first attempt at a peace deal with the Taliban [fell apart at the last moment](#) in September 2019.

The Administration soon re-started talks, however, and in February 2020 announced that a [deal had been signed](#). The major elements of the agreement were:

- The US to draw down its forces from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days (with proportionate decreases in allied force levels) and withdraw all of its forces within 14 months.
- The US to remove sanctions on Taliban members by August 2020
- The US to facilitate prisoner exchange between the Afghan Government and the Taliban
- The Taliban to commit to not allowing members of the Taliban or other groups, including al-Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten the US or its allies, including by preventing recruiting, training, and fundraising for such activities.
- The Taliban to start intra-Afghan negotiations by March 2020.

In June 2020 the US was slightly ahead of schedule in the drawdown of troops but there was little sign of substantive negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Government.

There are [widespread concerns](#) that the withdrawal, which will include personnel from other NATO countries, could lead to more widespread and intense conflict in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban has committed not to allow Afghanistan to be a base for terrorist attacks against the US and its allies, links between the Taliban and al-Qaeda (and other terrorist groups) are still strong.

An Afghan Government was finally assembled in 2020 after disputed presidential elections in 2019. That removed one obstacle to intra-Afghan talks, but some analysts fear that the Taliban may be waiting for the US to withdraw before trying to bring the Government down. Whether the US and its allies maintain funding for the Government and the Afghan National Security Forces will be [crucial for the Government’s survival](#).

Afghanistan has always been the stage for the rivalry of larger countries, and that remains the case. Afghanistan’s neighbours may intensify their struggle for influence after US forces withdraw, exacerbating longstanding ethnic divisions by backing proxies. Entrenched disputes between, for example, India and Pakistan, or [Saudi Arabia and Iran](#), could be played out in Afghanistan.

The coronavirus pandemic has hit Afghanistan’s already inadequate health service hard. The UN has reported that both the Taliban and Afghan Government forces have [attacked healthcare facilities](#).

1. US-Taliban peace agreement

US and coalition troops have been in Afghanistan for almost 20 years. In August 2017 President Trump announced a new strategy aimed at a political settlement and, in 2018, direct US-Taliban negotiations started. In the [February 2019 State of the Union Address](#), President Trump said:

Great nations do not fight endless wars. [...] I have [...] accelerated our negotiations to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan. Our troops have fought with unmatched valor — and thanks to their bravery, we are now able to pursue a political solution to this long and bloody conflict.

The first round of negotiations collapsed in September 2019, however, just as a document was reportedly about to be signed.¹ President Trump said the talks were “dead”, but the process re-started about three months later.

The second round of negotiations between the US and the Taliban concluded with the signing on 29 February 2020 of the “[Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan](#)”. Present at the signing were US Afghanistan Envoy Kalmay Khalilzad, Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Pakistan’s foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi.

The terms of the agreement were for:

- The US to draw down its forces from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days (with proportionate decreases in allied force levels) and withdraw all of its forces within 14 months.
- The US to remove sanctions on Taliban members by August 2020
- The US to facilitate prisoner exchange between the Afghan Government and the Taliban
- The Taliban to commit to not allowing members of the Taliban or other groups, including al-Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten the US or its allies, including by preventing recruiting, training, and fundraising for such activities.
- The Taliban to start intra-Afghan negotiations by March 2020.

There was a lull in violence before the agreement was signed, but since 29 February the level has increased “[dramatically](#)”.

The US announced in June that it had completed the 8,600 troops drawdown a month ahead of schedule. Negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Government, however, were not delivered on time. In mid-June 2020, Taliban and Afghan Government representatives said that “preliminary” negotiations could begin when the agreed prisoner exchange is completed.

¹ For more on the first set of negotiations, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Afghanistan: elections and cancelled talks](#), October 2019

Both sides agreed to talks in Doha, the Qatari capital, to take place, and [reports suggested talks could start later in June](#). Negotiations over the prisoner exchange have been difficult, however, contributing to continued delays.

The UK Government supports the peace agreement:

The US-Taliban agreement is a positive milestone. It is important that talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government start soon to maintain momentum.

The UK is committed to supporting the Afghan people, including through our contribution to NATO Resolute Support Mission.²

² [HC Written question – 901591, 17 March 2020](#)

2. The implications of a full-scale US withdrawal

The US has committed to withdrawing all US troops (about 12,000) from Afghanistan by 2021. The 7,000 or so European and other NATO troops would leave proportionately, according to the deal.

When the US first proposed a political solution, it was to be the outcome of a successful military operation. The Taliban are, however, probably in a [stronger military position](#) now than at any time since 2001.

The Afghan National Security Forces would [find it difficult](#) to hold off Taliban attacks if the US and its allies withdraw. If the ANSF disintegrate, their weaponry could pass into the black market.

Civil war?

[Most observers think](#) that the withdrawal could well lead to all-out civil war between the Taliban, Islamist militant groups, various other militias and warlords and remnants of the ANSF. Fighting might align with ethnic divisions: violence has often pitted the Taliban (largely of Pashtun ethnicity) against the rest, particularly the Northern Alliance, traditionally dominated by Tajiks.³ The Taliban has, however, tried to downplay its Pashtun origins recently, [appointing a Shia](#) of Hazara ethnicity as the 'governor' of the Taliban's northern district.

Terrorism

The Taliban has not renounced its allegiance to al-Qaeda, the global Islamic terrorist group. A [recent UN report](#) said "al-Qaeda has been operating covertly in Afghanistan while still maintaining close relations with the Taliban." The UN team also reported that the senior leadership of al-Qaeda is still present in Afghanistan, along with hundreds of armed operatives. Al-Qaeda is: "quietly gaining strength in Afghanistan, while continuing to operate with the Taliban under their protection."

ISIS has fared worse than al-Qaida. Both the Taliban and the Afghan National Security Forces have been attacking ISIS bases in Afghanistan. Its main base was almost eradicated in November 2019 and a replacement base was attacked in early 2020. The UN team still estimates ISIS fighter presence in Afghanistan at [around 2,200](#).

There are thousands of foreign terrorist fighters looking for a purpose and a salary in Afghanistan. The Taliban have about 60,000 of their own fighters. As well as maintaining its links to al-Qaeda, the Taliban harbour fighters from Lashkar e-Taiba and Jaish Muhammad, two Pakistan-based groups that carry out attacks against India. Both have alleged links to Pakistani intelligence. The [Taliban also hosts Central Asian](#) and Uighur terrorist fighters.

³ For more on Afghanistan's ethnic divisions, see the Commons Briefing Paper [The 'Afpak policy' and the Pashtuns](#), June 2010

At present, significant counter-terrorist action in Afghanistan is carried out in joint US-Afghan National Security Forces operations. Under the withdrawal plans, US anti-[terrorist operations would continue for a while](#) and then might be conducted from bases in neighbouring countries.

3. Prospects for the Kabul government

Government formation

President Ghani, the incumbent, had been declared the winner of the September 2019 presidential election in February 2020, having won [50.6 per cent of the vote](#). Ghani thereby just avoided a runoff with his opponent Abdullah Abdullah, on about 40 per cent of the vote. Abdullah challenged the results, but they were upheld after a review.

On 17 May 2020 the impasse over the disputed 2019 results was resolved and a government was formed. Under the terms of the agreement, Ghani remained President, while former Chief Executive Abdullah was appointed head of a High Council of National Reconciliation, with executive authority and the right to appoint half of the Cabinet.

The Taliban has in the past seen the Afghan Government as a puppet regime installed by the West and has refused to talk to its representatives. Now, the US-Taliban peace agreement may be softening that position. The formation of a government removed one important obstacle to talks between the Taliban and Kabul. Both sides indicated after the Government formation deal that preliminary negotiations on post-withdrawal politics would start soon.

Taliban policy

Taliban insist on an "Islamic" government and [reject the current constitution](#). They do say that they would allow women to work within an "Islamic framework".

With hard-line elements in the Taliban talking of a military victory over the US, however, apparent reconciliation with the Afghan Government may just be a ploy to get US troops out before attempting to bring the Government down. The Taliban is riven by factions – at present the central leadership has eclipsed more [hard line elements who oppose any negotiations](#) at all, but these have not gone away.

In May 2020 there was a spate of attacks on Afghanistan's electricity infrastructure. The Taliban denied responsibility for the attacks, though analysts noted that the level of co-ordination and sophistication suggested that they were involved.⁴ Power cuts from such attacks undermine public confidence in the Government's ability to provide security, services and a better life.

Funding

Just as important as the physical presence of US and coalition forces is the international financial and training support for the ANSF and the wider Afghan Government. Without that, the collapse of the Government is all but guaranteed. There is a ministerial [pledging](#)

⁴ 'Fragile infrastructure challenged by recent spike in militant attacks on Afghan electricity network', *Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, 10 July 2020

[conference in November 2020](#) to collect funding for the years 2020 – 2024.

Former top commander in NATO, retired Admiral James Stavridis, said that funding is crucial:

The real key to whether Afghanistan avoids falling into an even longer civil war is the degree to which the United States and NATO are willing to fund and train the Afghan security forces over the long term.⁵

⁵ [‘Afghanistan War Enters New Stage as U.S. Military Prepares to Exit’](#), *New York Times*, 1 March 2020

4. The neighbouring countries

Without US and NATO military presence, regional powers could scramble for influence and that could exacerbate ethnic divides in the country. Iran is close to Afghanistan's Tajik minority and the Shia Islam Hazaras, while Turkey tends to back the Uzbeks. Russia, India, other Central Asian countries (and possibly the US) could support Northern Alliance parties again. Pakistan supports the largely Pashtun Taliban.



Russia

After years of Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan, Russia retains deep connections to the country. Russia supported the Northern Alliance in the 1990s civil war. More recently Moscow has had a reconciliation with the Taliban, going so far as to invite representatives to Moscow, in part because of increasing rivalry with the US. As well as cultivating the Taliban, something which may have started [as long as 10 years ago](#), Russia has forged relationships with various powerbrokers and militias as proxies to use in the event of civil war in Afghanistan.

Both the Russian Government and the Taliban have denied [recent reports](#) that a Russian military intelligence unit had offered bounties to the Taliban for killing US and coalition troops in Afghanistan.

Practical partnership with Iran in Syria has made for easier collaboration in Afghanistan, where Russia and Iran perceive a common interest in getting US troops out.

Pakistan

Prime Minister Imran Khan has long opposed the US military presence in Afghanistan, favouring a peace deal with the Taliban. The Pakistani military and intelligence welcome an ascendant Taliban because that means that any power-sharing arrangement coming as part of a peace deal would be more likely to align with Pakistan's vision of "strategic

depth” in Afghanistan – that is, a Pakistan-friendly government in Kabul, invaluable in the event of India/Pakistan conflict.

After a rocky start to US/Pakistan relations, with President Trump cutting military aid over alleged [terrorist links](#), Pakistan is [back in favour](#) in Washington. Pakistan did a lot to facilitate the negotiations between the Trump Administration and the Taliban; the Pakistani foreign minister was present at the signing ceremony for the second incarnation of the peace deal in February 2020.

Pakistani elements continue to back the Taliban. The UN monitoring team found that: “it is clear that the [Taliban are not struggling](#) with respect to recruitment, funding, weapons or ammunition.” While there are other sources of funding, analysts conclude that the Taliban remains well supplied mainly because of support from Pakistan. Indeed, a report for the US Congress in May 2020 found: “Pakistan continues to harbor the Taliban and associated militant groups in Pakistan, such as the Haqqani Network, which maintains the ability to conduct attacks against Afghan interests.”⁶

India

India has been a significant supporter of the Afghan Government, opposing the Taliban as a proxy of strategic rivals Pakistan.

Indian economic aid and private investment have been very important to Afghanistan, including in infrastructure, education, energy, transport and agriculture. India is the [biggest provider of development aid](#) to Afghanistan of any country in the region. China, which increasingly [sees India as a rival](#) in Afghanistan, has done much less.

Unlike China, India is not talking to the Taliban. [Analysts for Carnegie India](#) argue that remaining on the sidelines while a hostile Taliban shares power in Kabul is not a recipe for protecting Indian interests; the Indian government should instead use the 2020 peace deal as a way to become more involved in the reconciliation process.

China

China has big economic interests in Afghanistan: a 30-year concession to mine copper and a 25-year contract to develop oilfields, for example.

In 2019, a direct, two-way [freight train service between China and Afghanistan](#) was inaugurated, opening up a new trade route by way of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, under the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

After the collapse of the first US-Taliban process in June 2019, China hosted a [Taliban delegation in Beijing](#) and participated in talks with Russia, Pakistan and US Special Representative Khalilzad in Moscow in 2019.

The original emphasis on economic relations has been [overshadowed by China’s security concerns](#) in Afghanistan, however. China wants to ensure that anti-Chinese militancy does not spread from Afghanistan

⁶ [Operation Freedom’s Sentinel](#), Lead Inspector General’s report to the US Congress, Department of Defense, January – March 2020

and that Uighur Muslim militants get no support from the Taliban. The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP, an Uighur group) and the Pakistani and Afghan branches of the Taliban have been linked at various times.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that China will replace the US in trying to guarantee stability in Afghanistan; it is unlikely to invest anything like the effort and money the US has done over the past two decades. Beijing may have concluded that US investment yielded little strategic gain and that the Taliban is likely to end up controlling at least part of Afghanistan. Good relations with the Taliban should make it easier to influence the group in pursuit of China's security objectives.

Iran

Iran is one of Afghanistan's most important sources of foreign aid and has been responsible for significant investment into the country. US officials and NATO commanders have [alleged](#) that Iran has attempted to undermine the Western mission in Afghanistan by providing ammunition and facilitating training camps for militants in Afghanistan. The Iranian Government denies this.

The UN recently organised a [meeting of the Six Plus Two Group](#). After the Taliban seized control of much of Afghanistan in 1996, this group brought together the six neighbours of Afghanistan plus Russia and the US to discuss Afghanistan (and to counter the Taliban, a Sunni Muslim organisation that aroused hostility in Tehran).

The recent meeting was interesting in that it brought back bilateral discussions between Iran and the US; they have significant shared interests in Afghanistan, especially in boosting trade while suppressing heroin and Sunni extremism.

Saudi Arabia's feud with Qatar and Qatar's relatively accommodating policy towards both the Taliban and Iran have made it easier for Iran to "[change its tune](#)" on the Taliban and [maintain dialogue](#) with them, while simultaneously backing the Afghan Government.

Saudi Arabia

There are reports of support from Saudi Arabia for the Taliban, including the hard line Haqqani Network. The Haqqani Network has been vehemently opposed to any negotiated settlement with the US, preferring an unalloyed military victory. Saudi and Pakistani influence may have helped the Haqqani Network to relax that opposition.⁷

Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada has visited Saudi Arabia, and Taliban representatives are reported to have [met the Saudi Crown Prince in Pakistan](#) after the signing of the deal with the US. This has raised fears in Iran that the Taliban is getting too close to its Saudi rivals.

⁷ 'Taliban peace deal at risk amid renewed internal divisions and regional rivalries', *Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, 3 July 2020

5. Coronavirus

Afghanistan has several factors that point towards a severe coronavirus epidemic: its health infrastructure is poor, and it shares a porous border with Iran, which had the region's worst outbreak. There are perhaps three million Afghan refugees in Iran and hundreds of thousands have been [returning to Afghanistan](#) this year.

The Afghan economy is expected to [contract by up to 4 per cent](#) in 2020, with the negative impact of the pandemic outweighing improvements in weather conditions.

The pandemic has complicated the delivery of the 2020 US/Taliban agreement: the United States announced in March that it was pausing the movement of personnel due to concerns about COVID-19, although the withdrawal resumed quickly after that. In June it was reported that most of the Taliban leadership in Doha, Qatar, had the virus. A Taliban spokesperson said that leader Haibatullah Akhunzada was recovering.

In May 2020 the UK Government underlined its concern in a PQ answer:

We are deeply concerned about the spread of COVID-19 in Afghanistan. The pandemic and its secondary effects will create significant challenges for Afghanistan as it aims to overcome the legacy of over 40 years of conflict and become a more stable and prosperous state. We remain committed to working closely with the Afghan Government to improve the country's security, development and governance and will continue to provide diplomatic support to help push for a sustainable and inclusive peace process.

On the immediate response to COVID-19 in Afghanistan, the UK contributes significantly to the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund - providing 75% of its funding - which has allocated \$1.5 million to the World Health Organisation to implement their response plan and \$27m towards the multi-sector response in country. We will continue to assess the need for further assistance as the situation develops.⁸

On 20 June the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan released a report on attacks on healthcare facilities:

...the situation [has] deteriorated: the Taliban continued abducting healthcare workers and attacked a pharmacy; the Afghan national security forces carried out deliberate acts of violence and intimidation affecting a healthcare facility, workers and the delivery of medical supplies; and unknown gunmen perpetrated an attack on a maternity ward in a hospital in Kabul, resulting in dozens of civilian casualties.⁹

⁸ [Written question - HL4116, 14 May 2020](#)

⁹ [Deliberate attacks on healthcare in Afghanistan during Covid-19 pandemic – UN Special Report](#), Press release, 21 June 2020

6. Further reading

[*Afghanistan: elections and cancelled talks*](#), October 2019

[*Afghanistan: any progress?*](#), February 2019

[*Troops in Afghanistan: July 2018 update*](#), July 2018

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