



# Asia-Pacific Foundation

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## **APF Analysis – Afghanistan**

### **The Taliban Negotiations & The Consequences of Leaving Afghanistan**

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#### **Executive Summary**

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, the West had two main objectives in Afghanistan. Firstly, to deny al-Qa’ida a sanctuary from which to plot, train, and launch terrorist attacks globally. Secondly, to remove the Taliban regime from power and enable an alternative political system that would prevent extremist forces from growing and harbouring terrorism. Both were largely accomplished. However, the Taliban and a-Qa’ida shifted their apparatuses to neighbouring Pakistan and plotted attacks from there.

Despite having an opportunity to consolidate the good will and achievements in Afghanistan and help the Afghan people get back on their feet, the George W. Bush administration, along with then British Prime Minister Tony Blair made the decision to invade Iraq and remove the dictator Saddam Hussein. By transferring resources, equipment and military personnel to Iraq, the Bush and Blair governments hindered a favourable outcome for Afghanistan.

Taking away the focus and resources from Afghanistan enabled al-Qa’ida and the Taliban to reconstitute and replenish their ranks. It will be long forgotten in the annals of time, but by March 2003, the Taliban had been decimated and on the verge of extinction. The Iraq War, a war of choice, unlike Afghanistan, gave the Taliban an opportunity to make a disturbing comeback.

After 18 years of struggle in Afghanistan, the entire West has pursued a negotiated departure from the country, that is supposed to not look like an admission of failure or abandoning Afghanistan. Ironically, that is now what it is looking like, once again.

The West has found a willing Taliban entity, led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, to achieve this. The problem is that the Mullah Baradar faction, part of the Quetta Shura Taliban, is one of the weakest of the Taliban militias and is at the mercy of the Pakistani military who have their own agenda vis-a-vis Afghanistan. It's worth remembering the Taliban is not a single monolithic group. There are several entities, ranging in terms of power and resources.

Mullah Baradar has no control over the other Taliban factions. Therefore, whatever the agreement is with the West, such as not harbouring terrorists like al-Qa'ida, the other Taliban groups are not duty-bound to adhere to it. In any case, one of the most powerful Taliban factions, the Haqqani Network retains the strongest ties with al-Qa'ida and have shown zero intention to abandon their relationship with jihadist groups. All indications show that terrorist groups will seize the opportunity to return to Afghanistan the moment Western troops leave. From there, they will use Afghanistan's ungoverned spaces as a platform to once again recruit individuals from the West.

The Mullah Baradar Taliban also can't speak for the ISIS affiliate Wilayat Khorasan (IS-KP) in Afghanistan, which is a serious and growing threat. They too will be free to plot attacks on the West from Afghanistan, much like al-Qa'ida did. History is painfully repeating itself.

It is also flawed that the negotiations do not involve the government of Afghanistan since it obviously has a vital interest in the outcome. The substance of the negotiations primarily relates to when U.S. troops will leave the country. The West is willing to commit to a troop withdrawal schedule whilst the Taliban have ratcheted up the violence across Afghanistan which includes killing civilians. The Taliban claim they will try to work out some sort of deal with the official government but there is no meaningful indication of what that would look like.

The sacrifices of NATO troops, who have given blood and treasure for an honourable outcome in Afghanistan, demand that the West should have negotiated an outcome that does not amount to abandoning Afghanistan. A definite and workable settlement involving the Afghan government should be a minimum requirement for any troop withdrawal. There should also have been assurance of protection of women's rights and civil society. However, all of this is absent, much to the Taliban's satisfaction.

There should be no doubt that the Taliban will forcibly extend their control within Afghanistan, fuelled by opium cultivation. This would in turn restart a civil war and consequently result in substantial civilian deaths and exacerbate the number of refugees fleeing Afghanistan. With Western troops leaving, it will have devastating consequences for the civilian population who rely and depend on them for their own safety.

### **Negotiating With The 'Taliban'**

In July 2017, the Trump administration's policy towards Afghanistan was largely unchanged from the Obama administration. Washington planned to support stronger governance within Afghanistan, and by January 2018, implemented a strategy to increase the number of U.S. troops with the aim of targeting the opium trade which the Taliban largely controls and profits from.

However, the policy changed 180 degrees with the sudden resignation of U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis on 20 December, 2018, after President Trump announced his intention to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation and tasked with negotiating with the Taliban factions. During the Ronald Reagan administration, Khalilzad was one of the individuals promoting the induction of Arab fighters into the Afghan conflict with the Soviets in the 1980s.

The one Taliban entity that was willing to enter talks with Khalilzad, has been the Mullah Baradar faction which is affiliated to the Quetta Shura Taliban. Its leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, is based in Quetta, Pakistan.

To assist U.S.-Taliban negotiations, in 2018, Pakistan quietly released Mullah Baradar, from a Karachi prison where he had lived with relative freedom and all the comforts of home. Baradar, who is regarded as very close to the Pakistani military establishment, became the Taliban's deputy political leader and chief negotiator in Doha, Qatar.

The Pakistani military has been facilitating the negotiations between Washington and the Taliban. Paradoxically, Pakistan has tried to downplay their support for the Taliban, whilst at the same time arguing that any deal with the Taliban has to be leveraged through them.

The US-Taliban talks have been long, cumbersome and intense. They usually start around noon Doha time and have on occasions continued until three or four in the morning of the following day. Multiple rounds of talks illustrate the challenges in negotiating with just one Taliban faction.

Oddly, the U.S. did not demand a ceasefire from the Taliban. That could be because Mullah Baradar doesn't speak for the other Taliban militias. However, therein lies the problem. A deal with one Taliban group which has little authority will not serve Afghanistan very well and exposes the limitations of the 'peace talks'.

Since the death of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, the Taliban has had an extremely fragmented leadership. Effectively, Baradar's role on behalf of the Taliban is to verify that the West does intend to leave. The caveat from the West is that the Taliban should cease attacks on U.S. troops and not support or harbour jihadist groups such as al-Qa'ida or IS-KP. There is no guarantee that the rest of the Taliban factions, including the Haqqani Network, will fall in line. Yet somehow there is meant to be a prospective power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan.

The Trump administration also wants the Taliban to adhere to holding talks with the Afghan government and imposing a countrywide ceasefire. Washington has made clear that a violation of these conditions could force it to keep the remaining troops inside Afghanistan.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops is the fundamental issue for the Taliban who do not expect the West to pull out all their soldiers in the first phase. Washington has already announced a partial withdrawal but there are concerns about issuing any promises for further withdrawals for the time being.

The release of Taliban prisoners is also a major topic of the 'peace talks'. The Taliban want Anas Haqqani, the incarcerated Haqqani Network member to be one of those released. That would require the Afghan government having to agree which would be deeply unpopular both in Kabul and amongst the U.S. military, who have suffered numerous fatalities and injuries at the hands of the Haqqani Network. In 2012, the U.S. designated the Haqqani Network as a terrorist organization.

These issues explain why there have been delays in announcing a formal deal with the Taliban. The U.S. military have repeatedly expressed their deep reservations to the Trump administration that the West is conceding too much ground with the Taliban which could undo the efforts that have been put into Afghanistan over the last 18 years. The U.S. military are also concerned that the Taliban will not fulfil its obligations to end ties with terrorist groups, hold meaningful talks with the Afghan government and adhere to a ceasefire.

## **Consequences For The Afghans**

A consequence of the Taliban gaining greater legitimacy in Afghanistan is that they would forcibly extend their control within Afghanistan. This would in turn restart a civil war and consequently create an increase of civilian deaths and exacerbate the number of refugees leaving Afghanistan. Western troops, if any are left, would may be restricted in what operations they would be allowed to engage in based on an agreement with the Taliban. This would be devastating for the civilian population who rely on them for their own safety.

A key missing component to these ‘peace talks’ has been the Ashraf Ghani government who the Taliban have always vehemently refused to negotiate with. Khalilzad wants to reach an agreement with the Taliban before the Afghan presidential elections on 28 September, 2019, despite the number of deadly attacks carried out in Kabul and throughout Afghanistan. Whoever is the next president of Afghanistan will have to face the prospect of being forced into a potential power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban.

The military-backed Imran Khan government in Pakistan has also been pushing to delay the Afghan presidential elections. When Khan met Trump in Washington D.C. in July 2019, he proposed that the U.S. puts pressure on the Afghan authorities to postpone elections and instead form a national unity government.

This was deeply unpopular with Afghans who have long resented what they see as Pakistan’s interference in their domestic affairs, particularly its support and sponsoring of the Taliban. Afghans fear power-sharing will embolden the Taliban to crush their fragile democracy and seize power at a time when the country’s security will be vulnerable due to the withdrawal of foreign forces.

Power-sharing in Afghanistan would also face three critical challenges. The first, is the Taliban, ideologically oppose participatory democracy and will resist it as aggressively. Secondly, the country’s current political establishment will fear a power-sharing with the Taliban because it naturally threatens their authority and survival, literally. The Taliban have engaged in numerous political assassinations.

Thirdly, is the limited administrative capacity of the Afghan state. Afghanistan, has a limited pool of competent bureaucrats. Power sharing will result in the Taliban wanting their own people to be involved in administrative machinery. They will be at odds with the current Afghan civil servants, which will lead to multiple failures in decision-making and policy implementation.

Throughout the ‘peace talks’ with the Taliban, the Trump administration considered recognising the Taliban as the ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’ which presents them as a government in waiting. Any reference to that legitimises the Taliban as an equal actor in Afghanistan alongside the Kabul government. It also implies that the Taliban is a genuine representative of Islam and thereby legitimising their brutal actions over the past 18 years as religiously justified. The Taliban pushed very hard for this recognition in several draft proposals during the Doha talks.

There is also a deep concern shared by civil society groups both within Afghanistan and the wider Afghan diaspora that the rights of women would revert back to a level that only existed when the Taliban was in power pre-9/11. Female representation at negotiations with the Taliban have been negligible at best.

With the Taliban in Afghanistan, institutional education will regress and collapse. Educational development is one of Afghanistan’s principal success stories. There has been a substantial rise in active student participation since the Taliban regime was overthrown. This progress is due to a combination of support from the international community and focused provision from the Afghan

government. Education is the third biggest budget disbursement after security enhancement and critical national infrastructure.

For Afghan women, education is even more pivotal in challenging political, social and economic marginalisation. According to the World Bank, estimates of adult women's literacy rates across Afghanistan vary from 17% to 24%. However these figures oscillate drastically and the disparities are more apparent amongst the southern provinces, where the Taliban still have a strong presence. UNESCO reports that women in Kabul have a literacy rate of 34.7%, while women in Helmand, a culturally conservative province which currently under Taliban rule, has a literacy rate of just 1.6%. This is worth keeping in mind considering the Taliban's violent misogynistic views are towards women. Should their power expand, women's rights will collapse.

Afghanistan's progress on university education is another success story. Since 2001, the existing universities have grown and expanded their student population, while over 120 new private universities have been created. Nationally, university admissions have risen from a mere 7,900 students in 2001 to 300,000 students in 2017. Again, this tertiary education growth, is not part of the Taliban's goals. If anything, the Taliban will dismantle all tertiary education or make it solely focused on their medieval doctrine.

If Taliban rule in their current areas of influence is any indication, it will mean severe regressions on individual rights, ushering in a return to civil war and chaos. In Afghan territory they already control, the Taliban have brought back public floggings, amputations and executions. Women have suffered the most.

## **Missed Opportunities**

It's worth recalling that the original plan for a post-Taliban Afghanistan advocated rapid nation building. However, such a vision was no longer feasible once the war in Iraq began. Many in the West became increasingly convinced that a stable and acceptable outcome in Afghanistan was not possible. They naively believed that Afghanistan has never been administered effectively and is simply ungovernable.

Much of today's perception of Afghanistan centres on the widespread fear that whatever the military outcome, there is no Afghan political end state that is both acceptable and achievable at a reasonable cost. However, there were numerous missed opportunities to enable Afghanistan develop on its own from both community and security levels.

Local communities remain an essential source of Afghan identity and a critical base of governance and accountability. This is especially clear in the case of the local jirga (community council). Traditionally, the community council was a place to solve problems and negotiate over common goods and burdens, with its more prominent members serving as liaisons to the central government.

These bodies may differ in their power and representation, but they are still found today in virtually every community. This traditional and local base of legitimacy had always provided the potential foundation for stable governance in the future. However, after the war in Iraq, the West was unwilling to invest in developing this and provide the heavy lift to make it institutionally entrenched within Afghanistan's politics.

NATO was also initially ill-prepared to conduct security sector reform (SSR) programmes of the size and scope required in Afghanistan. Problems of communication and coordination, damaged trust and intensified frictions, contributed to initial gross under-resourcing to develop the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

Initial plans for Afghanistan focused solely on military operations and did not include the development of an Afghan army, police, or supporting ministerial-level institutions. Critical ANSF capabilities, including aviation, intelligence, force management, and special forces, were not included in early NATO force-design plans. Furthermore, some NATO nations deployed forces with very restrictive national caveats, which hindered the deployed forces' ability to travel and engage with the ANSF.

Another problem was that educated and advanced members of the ANSF were often offered positions in specialized units, removing talented junior officers from conventional forces thus creating a brain drain and the regional units suffered. The constant turnover of NATO trainers impaired the training mission's institutional memory, effective monitoring and hindered the relationship building, forcing ANSF units to adapt to new NATO trainers and advisors and try to establish new relationships again. Providing advanced Western weapons and management systems to a largely uneducated Afghan ANSF without appropriate training and institutional infrastructure also created long-term dependencies and fiscal support on some nations.

### **The Taliban, al-Qa'ida and IS-KP Nexus**

As we saw in 2001, the main issue remains a question of 'ungoverned spaces' and 'lawless territory' in Afghanistan that cannot be left unchecked. Operating from safe territory provides terrorist groups with the ability to carry out more global attacks. Wherever lawless territory exists terrorists will congregate because it allows them to gain training and thus carry out more deadly attacks. For Afghanistan, this includes not just al-Qa'ida but also IS-KP and their respective affiliates.

Al-Qa'ida has a long-lasting relationship with the Taliban and has been continuously growing stronger as reported by the UN in 2019. The historical connection with the Taliban is what makes many sceptical of Mullah Baradar's claims not to host them in Afghanistan. In addition, the propaganda video 'Preparation for Jihad' published by the Haqqani Network, demonstrated the close ties with al-Qa'ida.

Its head, Sirajuddin Haqqani, celebrated the historical alliance with al-Qa'ida. His late father, Jalaluddin Haqqani was one of Osama bin Laden's earliest allies providing sanctuary and logistics. Files recovered in Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad compound in Pakistan highlight the degree to which al-Qa'ida's men cooperate with Sirajuddin and his forces inside Pakistan and Afghanistan. Furthermore, 50% of the footage shot in al-Qa'ida's propaganda operations from its as-Sahab media platform, are located within the Haqqani Network territory inside Pakistan. This is an enduring relationship.

IS-KP, on the other hand has been growing stronger since 2014. In 2019 there has been increasing evidence showing that IS-KP fighters are now using US firearms that they have captured from the ANSF. They are also increasingly attacking security forces across Afghanistan using night-vision goggles and lasers that were either stolen from Afghan and international troops or bought on the black market. With this new battlefield visibility, night-time attacks have proliferated. What happens if they or the Taliban get their hands on more lethal military hardware such as ANSF tanks or aircrafts?

IS-KP were a faction of the Taliban that broke away after it was revealed that former Taliban leader Mullah Omar had died years ago and it was concealed by the leadership. The IS-KP rebranded themselves as an affiliate to ISIS, yet this wasn't a substantial ideological change. The Taliban and ISIS share many traits including their opposition to democracy, secularism, minorities

and women's rights. They both also like to visualise their violence through social media platforms.

IS-KP are largely composed of fighters from Orakzai and Mohmand agency in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Central Asians are also involved with IS-KP including Sayvaly Shafiev who leads a group of approximately 200 fighters who hail from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well as ethnic Uyghurs.

The group has arguably surpassed the Taliban in terms of brutality. They have beheaded Afghan civilians including children and posted their videos on social networks. IS-KP also provides justification of these incidents as well as lectures, ideology and instructions via Zello which is an app that emulates push-to-talk (PTT) walkie-talkies over cell phone networks.

IS-KP has a stronghold in four provinces and clashing regularly in Jowzjan & Sar-e-Pul. Over past few months we have seen heightened number of suicide attacks, all of them with high number of casualties and often targeting civilians. IS-KP does not seem to be going away.

How can the West still justify withdrawing from Afghanistan when it clearly has the potential of returning to being a cesspool for terrorism, which will have direct and consequential ramifications for the West itself?

The West, whose temporary relief in leaving the region will eventually succumb to the stark reality that their nationals will be travelling to Afghanistan for terrorist training. This will mirror the situation in Syria and Iraq with ISIS. However, this time the West will find it much harder to go back into Afghanistan with the crowded field of Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China, all of whom will be very reluctant to let in anyone else.

There is an emerging Great Game Redux in Afghanistan involving all the major regional actors who will want to utilise their relationships with both the Afghan government and the Taliban to benefit from Afghan's abundance in natural minerals. Ironically, this will have only been possible because of the efforts of Western troops over the last 18 years.

Nothing paints the future bleaker than the overall assessment of what we are facing in Afghanistan today.

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