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ISOLATING PEACE TALKS FROM A COMPLEX NEIGHBORHOOD: THE US-TALIBAN TALKS, 2018-2020

Kristian Berg Harpviken | March 2025

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Introduction

The US-Taliban peace talks, hosted in Doha from 2018 to 2020, laid the basis for the Taliban's return to power in 2021. There is broad agreement that the sidelining of Afghanistan's legitimate government was a serious weakness of the process.¹ Another significant weakness was the lack of any strategy for engaging Afghanistan's neighbors, all of which had been involved in Afghan conflicts. This weakness has received much less attention.² This paper analyzes the reasons for the absence of a regional strategy to complement the US-Taliban talks and discusses what this meant for the process and outcome. The paper begins with a brief historical account of the Afghan conflict, including the involvement of countries in Afghanistan's neighborhood. A major part of the paper is devoted to analyzing the US-Taliban talks in Doha, with a focus on the lack of a strategy for regional involvement in the process. The conclusion considers the main implications and discusses what a different approach might have achieved.



Conflict dynamics

Afghanistan has been at war since 1978, when its home-grown Soviet-oriented communists executed a coup, adopting a land reform program and a repressive practice that triggered local resistance. Neighboring Pakistan allied itself with the burgeoning resistance, using its established links with opposition leaders (many of whom were already in exile) to establish and support parties that effectively served as conduits for military support. The Soviet military invasion at the end of 1979 made Afghanistan a major battleground of the Cold War, and the US came in to support the resistance groups based in Pakistan.

The 1988 Geneva Accords concluded between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the US and the Soviet Union as guarantors, laid the foundation for the Soviet withdrawal a year later.³ The resistance movement objected to a deal with the government in Kabul. In 1992 it took power, with various groups – supported by Pakistan, Iran and other neighboring countries – engaging in a devastating civil war that laid the basis for the emergence of the Taliban. The Taliban took power in 1996, gaining control over most of the country.

The next phase of the conflict started with the 2001 US-led military intervention in response to the Taliban's hosting of Al-Qaeda, which had executed the terror attack on the US on Sept. 11. The Taliban gave in quickly and by early December a new peace treaty had been negotiated in Bonn.⁴ The international military mission in Afghanistan grew from a light footprint to a much more comprehensive state-building project. The new Afghan administration was based on a disputatious alliance of groups, many of which



Taliban fighters sitting atop a Russian-made tank Photo: Amir Shah/AP

possessed substantial military and economic capacity and enjoyed support from various states in Afghanistan's neighborhood.⁵ With Pakistan's support, the Taliban gradually developed into a coherent organization, while delegating considerable authority to its local military commanders and shadow governors.⁶

In the period 2004-05, Taliban resistance to the international mission gained steam.⁷ By 2010 there was a full-fledged war, with the international troop presence reaching some 150,000 personnel and the Taliban expanding its territorial presence. By the end of 2014 responsibility for security was transferred to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoA) and the international military presence scaled back significantly.⁸

The regional dynamics of the Afghan conflict are complex. The context is one where Afghanistan is squeezed between three regions – Central Asia, the Gulf and South Asia, each with complicated security dynamics of its own.⁹ While all the states in the neighborhood are engaged in Afghanistan, their primary security concerns relate to other states in their respective regions. For example, Pakistan – the neighboring country that has had the most persistent and encompassing interference in Afghan affairs – is motivated not so much by its bilateral concerns with Afghanistan as by its existential security concerns vis-à-vis India. The dominant analysis, which has informed international policymaking and approaches to peace processes, sees Afghanistan as the core of a much larger conflict formation.¹⁰ It analyzes the country's relations with its neighbors one by one, rather than appreciating that the neighbors' relations with Afghanistan are motivated by concerns within their respective regions.

Most states in the neighborhood supported the GoA and the international alliance, even though they all found the US military presence problematic. Aside from India, all these states gradually built a relationship with the Taliban.¹¹ The Taliban received considerable financial support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), principally in the form of private donations. It had extensive support from Pakistan, which provide sanctuary and extensive military support (including intelligence, training and tactical and strategic advice). Pakistan sought a role as the host and mediator of peace talks, but this was not backed by the GoA, the Taliban or the US.

Mediation dynamics

A peace process with no formal mediator

As early as 2009 the US had declared its interest in pursuing reconciliation with the Taliban and preparing the ground to end its military engagement in Afghanistan. Until 2018, however, peace diplomacy proved subordinate to the US military campaign, and most efforts were geared towards encouraging individuals or groups within the Taliban to swap sides.

Since 2009 the Taliban had demanded that talks be sequenced, first negotiating directly with the US about international military withdrawal and thereafter conducting intra-Afghan peace talks. The Taliban perceived the Afghan government as US puppets, while claiming recognition by being on a par with a major global power. By the summer of 2018 President Trump concluded that the US should engage in direct talks with the Taliban, excluding both the country's legitimate government and the whole layer of regional players.¹²

The US-Taliban negotiations in 2018-20 took place without a formal mediator. Qatar served as the host of the talks, but neither the US nor the Taliban wanted a third party to be involved as a fully-fledged mediator. Although Qatar was not in the room during direct negotiations, it worked directly with each of the parties to gain progress, engaged in discussion on the agenda and ground rules for the talks, introduced its own experts to guide on technical issues and regulated the presence of other countries in Doha throughout the process.¹³



US representative Zalmay Khalilzad (left) and Taliban representative Abdul Ghani Baradar (right) sign the agreement in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020.
Photo: U.S. Department of State/ Ron Przystucha

Qatar is a tiny but resource-rich state that has sought to build influence and visibility beyond the Gulf through a combination of economic, military and diplomatic means, including peace diplomacy.¹⁴ When President Trump decided to talk directly to the Taliban, Qatar was well placed to host the negotiations by virtue of having hosted the Taliban's Political Office (in effect, a combination of foreign ministry and negotiation delegation) since 2010.¹⁵ Hosting the negotiations proved extremely beneficial to Qatar when they kicked off in fall 2018 since the country was at that time subject to an all-encompassing blockade by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with the Qataris concerned about military intervention. The diplomatic capital gained with the US proved vital for Qatar's survival.¹⁶

An effect of Qatar's limited role was that much of the outreach to Afghanistan's neighbors was left to the parties themselves. For the US, this came naturally. After all, until mid-2018 the US had refused to acknowledge that it was a party to the conflict and had positioned itself as a prospective mediator. A significant limitation on the US, however, was its inability to engage bilaterally with Iran because of its adversarial relationships with that country. The Taliban, on the other hand, systematically reached out to all countries in the neighborhood. All these countries, with the exception of India, officially received Taliban delegations preparing for a possible negotiated Taliban return to power.

A fast-paced process with hiccups

Talks between the US and the Taliban started in earnest in fall 2018 and the agreement was signed on Feb. 29, 2020. They initially progressed quickly and the parties were close to an agreement in spring 2019. Preparations to host an intra-Afghan dialogue in Oslo were initiated. The talks stalled for a few months following a suicide attack in Kabul that killed a US soldier, after which President Trump cancelled a planned signing ceremony with the GoA and the Taliban at Camp David.¹⁷ The Taliban reacted by saying it had never committed to attend the ceremony, consistent with its long-held view on finalizing a deal with the US before talking to what it dubbed 'other Afghan parties.' Simultaneous with the signing of the peace agreement in Doha, the US and the Afghan government signed a declaration in Kabul, effectively dictated by Washington and reflective of the US-Taliban deal.¹⁸

The essence of the deal

The US-Taliban 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan' entailed a US commitment to ensure the withdrawal of all international forces from Afghanistan in return for a Taliban guarantee to prevent terror groups from staging attacks against the US and its allies from Afghan soil.¹⁹ By extension, the Taliban would not attack international personnel during the withdrawal. The Taliban committed to engage in peace talks with other 'Afghan parties' (still refusing to acknowledge the government), including negotiations for a ceasefire. In addition, there were a number of confidence-building measures, most importantly the US commitment to lobby for the removal of international sanctions against key Taliban individuals and to orchestrate a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and

the Afghan government. The US asserted that the implementation of the agreement would be conditions-based, and there were secret annexes to the deal, codifying a so-called Reduction-in-Violence (RiV) and other issues.

Other parties

Most importantly, the GoA was excluded from the talks despite its protestations.²⁰ As part of the final agreement, however, the US made commitments that only the GoA could deliver on, such as a prisoner exchange. The exchange was presented by the signatories as a confidence-building measure but was seen by the GoA as an unacceptable concession that they only delivered after a lengthy process and considerable US pressure.

Domestically, the movement known as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which emerged in 2015, expressed no interest in talks. Indirectly, though, their existence was a constant reminder to the Taliban that compromises deemed unacceptable by its radical supporters might lead to defections to ISKP.

No other domestic actor was engaged directly in the peace process. There were a number of meetings on the sidelines, with various representatives of civil society and different Afghan political actors.²¹ Here, too, Qatar leveraged its role as host, effectively giving the Taliban a veto on who would gain access to Doha. In the absence of a GoA presence, the civil society representation enabled the government and its constituent groups to gain indirect access to the main parties to the talks.

There was no mechanism for engaging states from the neighborhood in the peace process, other than the US and Taliban outreach to individual states. The so-called Istanbul process, which had been set up in 2011 to foster regional cooperation for development and stability in Afghanistan, would ideally have been a platform for regional engagement during the talks. Referred to as the Heart of Asia process, it was rooted in the idea that Afghanistan was at the core of a wider integrated region, and it grew to include well over 30 countries, focusing mainly on economic cooperation rather than on security and conflict settlement.

Competition among third parties

There were mediation efforts prior to the US-Taliban talks.²² One attempt was the 2015 Murree process, named after the Pakistani town in which the talks were hosted.²³ These talks came about after the US, through China, had exerted pressure on Pakistan, the Taliban's key military supporter. The talks included representatives of the Afghan government, China, Pakistan and the US. The Taliban representatives, it turned out, were picked by the Pakistani hosts. They did not have authorization from the Taliban leadership and the talks fell apart.

A serious bid came from Russia, which initiated the so-called 'Moscow Process' in 2016, engaging representatives of the Taliban and other Afghan groups.²⁴ This process remains alive to this day (March 2025).²⁵ Russia did not use the platform to directly challenge the Doha talks, but the existence of a credible alternative process did strengthen the Taliban's hand.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is shown with Taliban representatives **Photo:** Russian Foreign Ministry

Once the US-Taliban talks were underway, regional actors sought to sideline Qatar as the host. The UAE, in sync with Saudi Arabia, pursued a peace initiative throughout much of 2018 but failed to get Taliban buy-in. Iran, with support from Russia, India and the Afghan government, tried to get a regional peace initiative off the ground in 2018 and 2019. Exploiting the pause in the Doha talks in late 2019, China sought unsuccessfully to initiate intra-Afghan talks. Interestingly, none of these regional initiatives included all relevant neighboring states, nor did they seek to address directly the involvement of neighbors in the Afghan conflict.

Effects of regional dynamics on mediation

A single track in a complex conflict

Since there was no designated regional track in the peace process, the complexity of the conflict was in effect dealt with by limiting the talks – to the extent possible – to the two main parties. The interested regional actors followed the talks closely and most of them had designated representatives in Doha for this purpose, but they remained on the sidelines, mainly as recipients of information, using whatever leverage they had with the parties to nudge the process toward a favorable result.

The involvement of neighboring states defines what is possible

For the neighbors, the main levers of influence were far removed from the actual talks and related to other economic initiatives and whatever military involvement the neighbors had with the parties. The consistency of Pakistan's support for the Taliban's military offensive was decisive for the movement's calculations. The Taliban could afford to let the talks draw out and take a rigid stance on the issues most important to them. It remains unclear whether they ever genuinely envisaged an end to the conflict through an intra-Afghan peace process that would result in some form of power-sharing arrangement.²⁶



Taliban fighters hold a flag for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in August 2022 **Photo:** Ali Khara/Reuters

Once the talks were in motion, from fall 2018, there was no serious regional challenge to the Doha process. However, the continued military support to the Taliban (particularly from Pakistan) impeded the resolution of the conflict as it emboldened the Taliban on the battlefield and allowed it to exploit the vacuum created as international military forces moved from a combat role to a support role.

The US aim in the negotiations reflected changes in Washington's view of the world, which first emerged with President Obama's so-called Pivot to Asia. The US National Security Strategy that the Trump administration issued in 2017 relegated counter-terror to tertiary status. Primacy was given to the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China and Russia and secondary status was given to 'rogue states' (Iran, North Korea). A logical implication of this overall strategic reorientation was the ending of US military engagement in Afghanistan.²⁷

Negotiation strategies and the neighborhood

Given that Qatar served as a host rather than a mediator of the talks, its influence on process design and strategy was limited. Both the US and the Taliban preferred an approach that isolated the talks from the regional complexities and excluded a secondary regional track.²⁸ Both parties dealt with the neighboring countries on a bilateral basis. The purpose was mainly to solicit diplomatic support for their respective positions and convince the neighbors that the outcome would not be detrimental to their core interests. While neighboring countries used their presence in Doha to convey their priorities, they had limited impact on the negotiations.

Regional elements in the agreement

Several issues codified in the US-Taliban agreement and/or in the US-GoA joint declaration are of regional significance. A critical issue was whether Afghanistan, following the withdrawal of international forces, would host international terror groups.²⁹ The US sought a guarantee from the Taliban to prevent the presence of any such actor but ended up accepting as a final formulation that "the Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qa'ida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies."³⁰ This formulation obliges the Taliban to prevent terror attacks from Afghan soil but does not exclude the hosting of groups with a record or capacity for committing such attacks. Also, the reference to the 'United States and its allies' means – at best – a weak commitment when it comes to controlling terror groups active in the regional context, of which there are many with a foothold in Afghanistan.³¹

Reflecting the major role that Pakistan has played in supporting the Taliban, which was a major preoccupation of the GoA, the US-GoA declaration makes the point that “(t)he United States commits to facilitate discussions between Afghanistan and Pakistan to work out arrangements to ensure neither country’s security is threatened by actions from the territory of the other side.”³² This point does not appear in the US-Taliban agreements (but may be covered in the secret annexes). It is also noteworthy that this point focuses on Pakistan only, not on the relationship between Afghanistan and other neighboring countries. It applies a particular – but widespread – understanding of the relationship between Afghanistan and its neighbors, which is seen narrowly in bilateral terms.

A conspicuous absence is that neither the US-Taliban agreement nor the US-GoA declaration says anything about limitations on the future armed capacity of the Afghan state. This had been a consistent concern of neighboring countries, in particular Pakistan. The Taliban, which had taken steps to formulate a foreign policy from around 2010 onwards, had been explicit about pursuing an independent position in the neighborhood and not posing a military threat to any country, but had not suggested any restrictions on Afghanistan’s military capacity. The US-GoA declaration, in fact, takes steps to assure the GoA that the US would help Afghanistan with its security capacity after withdrawal: “enhance the ability of Afghan security forces to deter and respond to internal and external threats.”

Beyond this, the public agreements make no mention of any mechanism for ensuring commitment by neighboring states to the US-Taliban agreement, the intra-Afghan peace process or any deal resulting from the latter (apart from the US committing to facilitate discussion between Afghanistan and Pakistan, discussed above). One may argue that this was premature, and would rather form part of the agenda for the ensuing GoA-Taliban talks, but in reality these followed a similar set-up, in which Afghanistan’s neighbors were kept at a distance, and no modality was set up for talks or consultations with them.

Conclusion

The US-Taliban peace process was a negotiation between a global superpower and a domestic resistance organization, designed and implemented in a way that shielded the process not only from the influence of Afghanistan’s legitimate government, but also from the country’s neighbors and their intricate regional orientations. Ultimately, neither the Taliban nor the US had any interest in engaging the neighbors. For the US, the objective was to withdraw militarily while minimizing the risk of future terror attacks from Afghan soil. For the Taliban, the objectives were to ensure the US withdrawal and maximize political power. In the process, it needed to maintain Pakistan’s military support, which was possible without Pakistan being involved in the talks.

A number of regional mechanisms relevant to Afghanistan were set up after 2001, but none of these was deemed fit for purpose when it came to the peace process. In hindsight, a mechanism should have been built, including all major states in Afghanistan’s neighborhood, that could have been used as a secondary track (or several tracks) during the US-Taliban talks and envisaged intra-Afghan talks.

Would the end result have been different had there been a mechanism for engaging the neighbors? The exclusion of Pakistan, given its extensive military support for the Taliban, strengthened the Taliban’s hand. Furthermore, with no influence on the peace process, neighboring countries adopted a hedging strategy, engaging with the Taliban and thereby legitimizing it. Moreover, various factions within the divided Afghan government mobilized support from different neighboring states, further weakening the government’s ability to speak with one voice. The bottom line, however, was that neither the US nor the Taliban was interested in a regional track, yet the exclusion of a regional track contributed to the end result of the Taliban taking power.

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