

## WORKING PAPER MANUSCRIPT

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Context

Research for this report was conducted during the winter of 2020/21 and spring of 2021, a period in which the U.S. failed in efforts to achieve agreement with the Afghan Taliban on post-withdrawal government arrangements, but went ahead with complete withdrawal, nonetheless. Thus, at the time that the report was finalised, the Afghan Republic was in power but facing the Taliban's final military offensive. The report's critique of why the preceding US-led peace process had failed to produce agreement remains valid and provides insights which help explain the Republic's rapid collapse. The principles proposed for an alternative approach to peace-making were constructed for the context prevailing in the time. The Taliban were attempting a military take-over and there were still options to avert this, although radical policy changes from both the Republic and its international partners would have been required. The pattern of armed conflict and the government and institutional structure in Afghanistan changed dramatically, relative to that addressed in the report, after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. However key recommended principles remain relevant, even with the Taliban in power, including:

- Averting a civil war is a vital common interest for all Afghans and the international community.
- The survival of the Afghan state, with an accountable and representative national government, as a state in which all tribal and ethnic groups have a stake, is a necessary condition for achievement of peace.
- The peace process should be founded on Afghan ideas of pluralism and rejection of aggression/violence.



# An independent assessment of the Afghanistan peace process June 2018 – May 2021

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Kabul, June 2021

## Executive Summary

### Findings

Between September 2018 until the present, the US-led peace initiative attempted to achieve a consensus between the parties on a road map for a political settlement in Afghanistan before the withdrawal of US and international troops. While it was underway, this initiative dominated the Afghan peace process. However, with the likelihood of success waning, Afghanistan had transitioned to a new and challenging phase of its quest for peace.

The next phase of peace talks will be among Afghans, likely led by an Afghan government. The 2018-2021 initiative attempted to achieve a pre-withdrawal agreement which would decisively transform the conflict and pave the way for intra-Afghan negotiations. This report develops a set of policy recommendations for coordinated Afghan and international actions for an incremental transformation of the conflict, based on changes on the ground in which the Taliban have launched a military offensive and Afghanistan faces the real threat of civil war without a US security umbrella.

The Taliban Movement emerged as the principal beneficiary of the pre-withdrawal effort to launch intra-Afghan peace negotiations. It successfully exploited opportunities presented by the peace initiative to boost its international legitimacy and raise morale of its military, while achieving its primary objective of getting international forces to agree to leave the battlefield. All this allowed the Taliban Movement to build the tempo of its military campaign during the period of the peace initiative. As a result, whereas the war was stalemated at the start of talks, by the time that talks stalled, the threat of violent takeover by the Taliban or civil war had significantly increased. At the end of this phase of the peace process, as the Taliban launched their post-Eid 2021 military offensive in May 2021, their militants controlled or threatened an unprecedented extent of territory and most of the national highway infrastructure.

All the main actors had a share in responsibility for the stalled peace initiative. The United States negotiated troop withdrawal directly with the Taliban but did not obtain meaningful concessions or cooperation from the Taliban on reducing violence and joining meaningful intra-Afghan negotiations, while significantly undermining the position of the Afghan Government. Repeated signalling from the US, that the Taliban Movement was ready for intra-Afghan negotiations before the withdrawal, meant that the Afghan state, the US and allies neglected the preparation for an alternative outcome. In reality, the Taliban military remained fully focused on their “BATNA”, which was a push for military victory synchronised with the US-NATO withdrawal.

The Afghan government has been correctly accused of “foot-dragging”, in particular during the critical March – September 2020 period, when the US wanted to release Taliban prisoners and move to the negotiating table as soon as possible. Probably more consequential than the delay to talks was the government’s failure to build political consensus and put on a convincing enough show of national unity after the troop withdrawal announcement to boost security forces morale. Alongside the US and Afghan Government, the Taliban and their advisers must also take some responsibility for the failure of the peace initiative. They determinedly pursued their agreement with the US and

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successfully wrung multiple concessions from the Americans. But they did not prepare their base for the compromises which would be required in an Afghan peace settlement. In effect, they appeared to be ready to accept little short of capitulation by the Kabul government, which guaranteed there would be no progress in intra-Afghan negotiations.

## **Recommendations**

We recommend continuing international engagement in support of the Afghanistan peace process but propose significant changes in approach, to reflect both the lessons of the two-and-a-half years US-led peace initiative and the changed circumstances brought about by the international military forces withdrawal. The new phase of peace-making should be guided by the following principles:

- Averting a civil war is a vital common interest for all Afghans and the international community.
- Afghan peace-making requires an integrated, multifaceted approach.
- Actions in the integrated approach should address priorities which were neglected under the 2018 initiative.
- The survival of the Afghan state, with an accountable and representative national government, as a state in which all tribal and ethnic groups have a stake, is a necessary condition for achievement of peace.
- The peace process should be founded on Afghan ideas of pluralism and rejection of aggression/violence.
- Afghan peace-making should be pursued with urgency but with appreciation that the process will take time, and with a commitment to maintain international engagement throughout the implementation phase, in the event of an agreement
- Women, particularly those from remote and rural areas, must be enabled to participate meaningfully in the peace process.
- The peace process as a whole and the work of any mediator or facilitator should benefit from rigorous reality checks as the process moves forward.

We recommend a broadening of the activities encompassed within the peace process, relative to the rather narrow focus on Track One talks and actions which characterised the 2018-2021 initiative. This reflects the need to set conditions for peace, which was not done in the run up to troop withdrawal, and thus at this point the public do not really trust the idea of peace. We propose a six-pillar architecture to shape the integrated and multi-faceted approach to peace that can meet the challenges of the post-withdrawal Afghanistan:

- **Peace Pillar One – Security**

Sustained support for and improved leadership of the ANDSF are necessary for the survival of the state and its control of territory and people, on which rest hopes for an eventual sustainable settlement. The ANDSF can be linked more closely with the peace process if they act in support of local ceasefires and if the forces are treated as a stakeholders whose personnel's voices must be heard.

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- **Peace Pillar Two – Dialogue and Taliban engagement**

There should be continued support for Track One negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban. But this should be informed by a working assumption that any progress is more likely in the long-term (2022 and beyond) rather than in the months immediately after completion of international withdrawal. The republic needs time to reverse the current Taliban momentum on the battlefield and restore the military stalemate. Meanwhile, the republic side and any facilitator should broaden Taliban engagement to include all those with influence in the movement who are potentially supportive of a settlement, including prisoner dialogue and appointment of one or more senior Taliban to high state office. But further safeguards are required to prevent Taliban exploiting the platform provided by high level dialogue as they did in their negotiations with the US.

- **Peace Pillar Three – Violence Reduction**

The Afghan government and international community should continue to demand a general ceasefire as a first agenda item in any renewed peace talks. Peace process actors should ensure that the Taliban pay a reputational price if they continue to resist the demands for a ceasefire. Meanwhile, the Afghan authorities should vigorously encourage the spread of local ceasefires, ensure a “peace dividend” to the areas covered by them and link the ceasefires to a national dialogue.

- **Peace Pillar Four - State Resilience**

The Afghan state and its allies have a common interest in ensuring that the state successfully resists any Taliban efforts to overthrow the government, so that a peace settlement can be organised around existing state structures. In support of this, the government’s leaders should commit to the compromises and limits on individual power required to maintain national unity and unified support for the ANDSF.

- **Peace Pillar Five – Consensus Building and strategic communications**

Rallying the Afghan population to support peace and making a convincing case for sustained international support will require a new narrative which expresses how the republic system, where citizens choose their leaders, is consistent with Afghan social norms and best reflects the country’s diversity. An updated narrative should also challenge the legitimacy of Taliban violence. These narratives should be projected through enhanced strategic communication, with a distinctive role taken by the ulema. A national dialogue should be launched to build inclusiveness in the peace process and create a public consensus on “end state” issues.

- **Peace Pillar Six - Diplomacy**

Afghanistan’s key objective in regional diplomacy should be to project Afghanistan as a responsible regional actor, and shore up the consensus that the survival of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and a peace settlement built around it are the best guarantees of regional stability. In its bilateral relationship with Pakistan, Afghanistan should pursue cross-border cooperation on trade, transport, border management and regional integration while simultaneously galvanizing international pressure on the perennial issue of cross-border terrorist sanctuaries. Outreach to Central Asian states should continue. However, regional engagement is no substitute for effective Afghanistan security strategy, state resilience and in-country reconciliation. More broadly, the Afghan government should recognise the need to maintain an international alliance in support of its role and the peace process that can endure a further period of armed conflict.

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The context & purpose of the study

This report is intended to contribute to the rethinking of approaches to peace-making in Afghanistan, in the light of the high-profile peace initiative which took place between 2018 and 2021 and in the wake of the April 2021 US decision to conduct an unconditional troop withdrawal.

The recommendations draw on a review of peace-making since June 2018. The June 2018 start-date was selected because this was the point of the first major departure from the way in which peace-making had been conducted over the past decade – the three-day Eid ceasefire, observed by all major parties to the conflict. The review considers the main lines of action in the peace process, the obstacles which impeded progress towards peace and the lessons learned. The retrospective sections of the review deliberately focus on lessons which can inform the future direction of the peace process. The reviewers have deliberately taken a holistic view of the post-2018 peace process. The review therefore treats lines of action such as the efforts to sustain the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces (ANDSF) and the development of the institutional architecture of peace-making as integral parts of the peace process, alongside the higher profile peace negotiations. As commentaries on the Afghan peace process abound, the review is intended to make several distinctive contributions. It highlights significant Afghan perspectives on this phase of peace-making, which have been under-represented in the debate. The review homes in on the differences between Taliban stances in the negotiations and on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as understanding these is likely to be key to plotting a successful way forward. The review also aims to bring some candour to the analysis of the peace process during a period in which fundamentally contradictory narratives abounded. For example, many actors assumed that the Taliban leadership was open to embracing a negotiated settlement, while others believed the opposite. The Afghan government claimed to be safeguarding the republican character of the state in the face of increasingly centralized decision-making. The Taliban and others decried the Afghan government as a spoiler for its reluctance to implement elements of the Doha agreement to which it had not been a party. The US insisted its bilateral negotiations with the Taliban were needed to pave the way for intra-Afghan peace negotiations but agreed to a withdrawal timetable that did not require such negotiation be seriously underway<sup>1</sup>. Detractors accused the US of conducting an irresponsible withdrawal and of appeasing and strengthening the Taliban. The review seeks to move beyond these contradictory perspectives and to focus on how lessons from the 2018-2021 initiative can inform future peace-making in Afghanistan's significantly altered circumstances.

The review was conducted by a team of three experienced analysts of Afghanistan. The analysts conducted some forty semi-structured interviews with Afghans and international figures, each of whom was identified for competence with regard to aspects of the post-2018 peace process. The members of the research team also drew on their own in-depth

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<sup>1</sup> The US did not claim it would end the war. It became clear very early on in its direct talks with the Taliban that these talks could only pave the way for intra-Afghan negotiations aimed at ending the war.

experience of the peace process in this period and a review of published sources. In conducting the research and drafting the review, the authors enjoyed full independence and therefore take responsibility for the interpretations and recommendations contained in it.

## 1.2 Context – the Afghan conflict in 2018

The initiative undertaken between September 2018 and April 2021 to achieve peace in Afghanistan was extraordinary, in terms of the intensity of the effort, the approach adopted (some aspects of which were highly disruptive) and the sheer complexity of the exercise. The United States launched the initiative, with the appointment of a Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation (SRAR). However, multiple other actors were involved, ranging from the Government of Afghanistan to the countries of the region and the United Nations. Through much of the period, the Afghan peace initiative was one of the highest-profile and most intensely pursued foreign policy initiatives globally. Ultimately the initiative failed to achieve any breakthrough in the quest for a negotiated solution to the Afghan conflict. However, the many ways in which the initiative broke with established practice for Afghan peace-making mean that many lessons are waiting to be learned and possibly applied to the next round of peace-making.

The US decision to mandate Amb. Khalilzad to negotiate directly with the Taliban based on the US assumption that there was a military stalemate that could enable serious negotiations by the Taliban, and the view of the administration that continued US troop presence was no longer in the US interest, especially given competing challenges elsewhere. In his first year and a half in office, President Trump had followed his predecessor's approach to Afghanistan. The US military pressured the Taliban in the belief that this would bring them to the negotiating table; the State Department tried to support Afghan government efforts to negotiate with the Taliban. By autumn of 2018, neither of these strands of the US strategy was making sufficient headway to allow a confident prediction of when the US might achieve its objectives in Afghanistan and bring the expedition to an end. President Trump had notably made an electoral commitment to end US involvement in protracted overseas conflicts. Moreover, a consensus was emerging within the US establishment that the costs to the US of its engagement in Afghanistan outweighed the benefits from anything which might usefully be achieved there. Seventeen years after it began, the US mission in Afghanistan was becoming difficult to justify. SRAR Khalilzad's own mission could be interpreted as a last attempt to achieve a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict, which would allow the US to conduct a responsible exit from the country. The alternative to this negotiated settlement would most likely be an unconditional US exit, irrespective of the consequences for security within Afghanistan.

Several aspects of the conflict had contributed to the consensus which was emerging in the US in 2018. Others may have registered less on the US radar but would help determine the outcome of SRAR Khalilzad's mission.

### **The scale of the conflict**

The Global Peace Index 2020 singled out Afghanistan as the least peaceful country in the world, while the Global Terrorist Index credited the Afghan Taliban Movement with having become the most violent terrorist organisation globally. By numerous parameters,

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Afghanistan's was a highly impactful conflict. Annual civilian casualties plateaued at close to ten thousand. There were no reliable figures for total fatalities. But the continuing high numbers of Afghan security personnel and insurgents being killed meant that the annual death toll was estimated at over ten thousand, ensuring that Afghanistan remained in the top three most deadly conflicts globally. The armed conflict had profound humanitarian impact, including large scale internal displacement, long-stay refugee populations in the region plus fresh migration to Europe, poverty and arrested development.

Afghanistan's status as the world's least peaceful country may have helped make the case for support of peace-making there. But, despite the significant involvement of global and regional powers in Afghanistan, most of the impact from the armed conflict was borne by the Afghan people. By 2018, to a large extent, the Afghan conflict had been contained within Afghanistan. Pakistan was the only neighbouring country which had experienced significant spill-over terrorist violence and by 2018 it had achieved considerable success in eradicating this. Global terrorist networks based in Afghanistan had been significantly degraded and, since the decline of ISIS, Islamic militancy was less credible as a strategic threat to western powers. There were significant spill-over effects from narcotics and migration, but these problems mainly affected Iran, Turkey and Europe, not the United States.

### **The Taliban**

The insurgency waged by remnants of the Taliban was the reason that the US did not withdraw its troops from Afghanistan after the Bonn Process in December 2001 had installed a broad-based and internationally recognised government. Subsequently, the Taliban regrouped and posed a significant challenge to government and international forces. By 2018, they remained responsible for most of the violence against the government and international military forces. To a significant extent, US analysis of Taliban capabilities and intent influenced the design of the SRAR's initiative.

In terms of its origins, the Taliban Movement was a network of ethnic Pashtun conservative Sunni clerics, some of whom participated in the 1980's jihad against the Soviets, in fronts run by their teachers. The Movement formally emerged in 1994, during the confusion which prevailed after the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime. They managed to grab power in 1996 and, for five years, imposed an austere and authoritarian system across most of Afghanistan, as well as sheltering Osama and an assemblage of émigré jihadists. The Taliban already had strong links to refugee communities and border cities in Pakistan. After the US toppled their Islamic Emirate, the Taliban leadership developed a safe haven in Pakistan and organised an insurgency, which they fought cross-border, from 2003 onwards. In launching the insurgency, the Taliban claimed to be fighting to expel foreign troops, to overthrow what they considered a puppet regime and to impose an "Islamic system", the nature of which was never clearly spelled out.

The Taliban insurgency successfully exploited the many weaknesses of the US-led international mission in Afghanistan and of the new Afghan government. By 2018, the Taliban had a military presence in all thirty-four of the provinces and a shadow government system, with governors appointed for all thirty-four provinces and some eighteen "commissions" which acted as shadow ministries. The Taliban proved highly effective in

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fund-raising, in particular through extorting both the legal economy and the narcotics trade. By 2018, the Taliban had failed to take and hold any major administrative centre. But they controlled or contested around a half of the landmass and few analysts saw much prospect of them being defeated within a meaningful timescale.

Studies of conditions in areas held by the Taliban found that the new generation of fighters had adopted similar authoritarian and coercive approaches to those used by their fathers in the 1990s.

Within Afghanistan, the Taliban operated as a covert organisation and opportunities for dialogue were limited. Pakistan served as the rear-base for the Taliban. But as there were many sensitivities regarding the Taliban presence in Pakistan, a dialogue there would have been seriously problematic. But, since 2012, the United States and other countries with an interest in Afghanistan had engaged with Taliban through the movement's "Political Commission" in Doha. Norway had been a particularly enthusiastic participant in this engagement and UK remained involved. Dialogues with the members of the Taliban's Political Commission in Doha provided the US and western diplomats with a window into the movement that contrasted with findings from research into Taliban practice in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The first head of the Taliban's office in Doha, Tayyab Agha, as team members Shahbuddin Dilawar and Sohail Shaheen, plus future chief negotiator Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanakzai, all presented the Taliban movement as a political organisation with views about the future of Afghanistan well within the parameters of debate among Afghans in Kabul. They seemed open to reconciliation but had a long list of grievances, ranging from the sanctions regime which treated them as terrorists, corruption in the Afghan government and, above all, the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. Their military campaign in Afghanistan notwithstanding, the Taliban had systematically used their Political Commission in Doha to court western opinion and persuade the US that its objectives in Afghanistan might be better pursued through negotiating with the Taliban than fighting against them. By the time of the Khalilzad appointment, the US was ready to test some of these claims.

### **The Islamic Republic**

The internationally recognised government in Afghanistan is that of the Islamic Republic. It has been the partner for the US and allies since its establishment through the Bonn Process. Prior to the SRAR's appointment, US strategy in Afghanistan was to provide political, economic and military support to the Islamic Republic so that it would eventually be capable of securing the country and dealing with the insurgency and other threats without the need for an international troop presence. Contrary to Taliban criticisms that the Islamic Republic was an American puppet, the political system had evolved over two decades based on a hard-argued constitutional settlement in 2004, which was intended to ensure that all ethno-linguistic groups had a stake in the Republic and that it accommodated the many interpretations of Afghan culture. When the SRAR was appointed, Ashraf Ghani was in the final year of his first term as President.

In addition to the persistent armed conflict, there were many concerns about the state of affairs in the Islamic Republic. The country was highly aid-dependent and did not have a plausible path to self-reliance, adequate headway had not been made on tackling high-level

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corruption, the electoral system was deeply flawed, most elections were bitterly disputed and there were persistent political tensions between the two main blocs which had formed a “national unity government”. A natural approach for the SRAR to take in preparing for the withdrawal of the US troops would have been to coordinate movements with the Republic and then support its efforts to resist the Taliban and eventually to persuade them to negotiate. However, after years of fruitless effort to degrade the Taliban to the point where they would negotiate and faced with an adamant Taliban refusal to deal with the Afghan government, the SRAR embarked upon a different approach. His plan was to negotiate an agreement with its adversary the Taliban first, on the assumption that this could pave the way for intra-Afghan negotiations.

### **The international troop presence**

By 2018 international military forces in Afghanistan numbered approximately 18,000 men. The US had the largest contingent. These forces included NATO troops accredited to the Resolute Support mission, plus US combat troops. Resolute Support had a mandate to “train and equip” Afghan security forces, while the US combat troops undertook counterterrorist and counter-insurgency operations. The US provided most of the firepower for aerial bombardment of the Taliban and Islamic State forces as well as essential logistical support for Afghan air operations and military intelligence. As well as the US army, the CIA was deeply involved in security operations in Afghanistan. It had worked with the Afghan intelligence service to build up a network of highly trained and equipped paramilitary forces known as 01 and 02 units, capable of conducting commando-style raids against terrorist targets. The US and NATO presence was greatly reduced relative to its peak under the Obama administration. In principle, NATO planners, had a roadmap for their support operations for the ANDSF and envisaged an endpoint – somewhere around 2024, NATO was supposed to be able to pull out leaving a fully capable Afghan security sector. But many doubts persisted about the realism of the plans to complete the capacity-building, the effectiveness of international military operations in Afghanistan and the ability of the ANDSF, which the US had helped to shape, to sustain itself in Afghan operating conditions. By 2018 many had concluded that, unless the armed conflict could be ended or the violence massively reduced, it was unrealistic to expect the Islamic Republic to sustain its security forces.

### **Pakistan**

How to handle Pakistan had long been one of the key questions for US policy makers working on the region. US strategic interests are arguably more affected by what happens in Pakistan than Afghanistan. Pakistan is a nuclear power with a large population, a major economy, a history of dealings with China and, for better or worse, a significant global footprint. Pakistan has hosted the Taliban leadership since 2001. It is widely considered to have provided the Taliban with the strategic support that enabled them to launch and sustain the insurgency. Its premier intelligence agency, the ISI, projects influence throughout Afghanistan, both through the Taliban and independently of it. But Pakistan also poses as a force for stability, because it was waged a largely successful counterterrorist campaign on its territory and faces a threat from the remaining anti-state militants who have based themselves across the border in Afghanistan. Pakistan would clearly have to feature in any Afghan peace initiative but there were real dilemmas over how to approach the considerable influence which Pakistan exerted over the Taliban – as an asset or a threat.

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### **Ethnic dimensions of the Afghan conflict**

Most public discourse within Afghanistan denies that ethnic identity plays any significant role in national politics. Indeed, ethnicity is most often invoked to accuse opponents of irresponsibly stoking tensions. However, some reference to ethnic dynamics was necessary to understand the conflict in 2018. In crude terms, power within the Taliban movement was concentrated in the hands of Kandahari Pashtuns, allied to Zadran Pashtuns who helped the Taliban organise in the east of the country. The political system of the Republic allowed for the inclusion of all ethnic groups i.e., Pashtuns and the non-Pashtuns of the north and centre of the country. Whereas Taliban could not be said to represent Pashtuns, in their military and political strategy they clearly sought to mobilise them or to undermine Pashtun support for the government. While the Republic was ostensibly inclusive, all of its political processes such as elections were apt to involve an element of ethnic mobilisation and competition. Thus, any peace initiative in such a charged situation would have to take into account the possible impact of ethnic dynamics.

### **The new Afghanistan**

Afghanistan of 2018 had one of the world's youngest populations, nearly half of whom had been born after the Taliban government was toppled. Many of the discussions underway in 2018 asked whether the Taliban were ready to accept the realities of the new Afghanistan. These realities included an educated young workforce, with a degree of global exposure, accepting of women's role in the public space and unprepared to tolerate the kind of authoritarianism or conformism which had long been the Taliban hallmark. How to include this assertive "new Afghanistan" in the peace process was a key challenge for any architect.

### **The legacy of previous transitions and peace processes**

The history of efforts to mediate and end the Afghanistan war is almost as long as the war itself. Every Afghan President since the 1978 coup has launched initiatives seeking to reconcile the armed opposition. U.N. envoys Cordovez, Sevan, Mistiri, Vendrell and Brahimi all piloted peace initiatives in successive stages of the conflict. It is hard to overstate the extent to which previous transitions hung over Afghanistan during the 2018-2021 initiative.

The obvious parallel was the Geneva Accords of 1988, which provided the framework for the Soviet withdrawal, and then the failed peace-making which continued through the collapse of the regime in 1992 and beyond. The 1988-1992 transition was a point of reference for all key actors in Afghanistan. They were well aware that the price of failure could include civil war, flight of much of the political class and execution of those who did not get away. US actors were also bound to refer to the Vietnam example, with the Paris talks and eventual collapse of Saigon and the South Vietnamese regime. Although different lessons could be drawn from the Geneva, Paris and Vietnam examples, these transitions provided potent examples of how high the stakes were in Afghanistan 2018.

A range of lessons was also available from more recent attempts at peace-making in Afghanistan. Although Amb. Khalilzad was one of the main architects of the Bonn Process in 2001, he was well aware that one of the lessons drawn from that process was that exclusion of the Taliban from the process was a cause of the insurgency. However, subsequent efforts to include the Taliban in Afghan led peace processes, which date back as far as 2004, had all

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failed. Significant resources had been squandered on wooing the Taliban into successive reintegration programmes. But none of these achieved impact as the Taliban proved committed to resisting efforts to co-opt them without conceding meaningful political power.

## 2 An account of the peace process

### Core elements of the peace process

#### 2.1 Prelude – the ice-cream ceasefire

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 2018, President Ghani announced an eight-day ceasefire, covering the last three days of Ramazan, until the fifth day of Eid (12 to 19 June)<sup>2</sup>. This announcement heralded what was dubbed the “ice cream ceasefire”. It led to scenes which were unprecedented in the post-2002 insurgency and influenced the thinking behind the peace initiative which would follow some three months later. However, little of what played out during the June ceasefire had actually been planned by any of the conflict actors.

The initial announcement by the President was a unilateral move. Prior to the gesture, the President had revived his public diplomacy, by making a political offer to the Taliban Movement, that he would treat them as a legitimate opposition and was prepared to negotiate a peace settlement with them. These were the latest attempts, encouraged by the US, to overcome the Taliban’s resistance to dealing directly with the government and advance an Afghan-led peace process. However, the Taliban rejected the offer of political talks and doubled down on their insistence that they would only deal with the US and the issue of troop withdrawal.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of June, the Taliban announced that they would observe a three-day ceasefire, starting from the first day of Eid. The most plausible interpretation of the Taliban move is that they were “bounced” into the ceasefire. From their rejection of the political overtures, they had made it abundantly clear that they were uninterested in moving towards any reconciliation with the government. It appears that the Taliban leaders calculated that if they failed to reciprocate the Ghani move, they would provide the President with an opportunity to portray them as warmongers. This risk applied more acutely around Eid than at any other time of year, because Afghans hoped for even temporary respite. The Taliban leadership also calculated that an Eid ceasefire would be relatively costless because they already had a well-established practice of observing an unannounced truce over Eid, to give their fighters a break. In this sense, the key decision for the Taliban concerned the announcement, given that their forces were anyway unlikely to undertake operations during the three-day period.

The Taliban leadership also had a well-established habit of calibrating their response to peace moves according to the requirements of their relationship with Pakistan. Selectively cooperating with some US-backed moves such as the temporary ceasefire helped mitigate

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<sup>2</sup> The main published source for this section is Kate Clark, AAN, The Eid ceasefire

US-pressure on Pakistan and thus Pakistani pressure on the Taliban, for whom maintaining access to the safe haven there was a strategic priority.

Within the leadership, it was Mawlvi Yaqoob who ordered the announcement of the three-day ceasefire, which marked one of his first moves into strategic decision-making for the military. However, this decision should be understood as part of Taliban efforts to claim legitimacy and provide political cover for their military campaign rather than as a proactive move towards peace.

Both leaderships had limited expectations for the ceasefire. From the government side, forces were to hold back from any offensive operations and maintain their defensive positions. The Taliban leadership expected a ceasefire-in-place, in which their forces would simply refrain from fighting. Civilians expected to be able to conduct the Eid festivities free from the usual security concerns. In terms of compliance, the ceasefire went remarkably well. There were two major violations, both in Nangarhar, one of which was claimed by the ISKP. Given the highly distributed nature of the conflict in Afghanistan, the absence of security incidents across the country rendered the ceasefire highly significant.

But once they had paused their attacks, what the fighters did next was unprecedented and potentially far more subversive of the war than a three-day lull in fighting. In more than half of the country's thirty-four provinces, Taliban fighters fraternised with ANDSF personnel, government officials and members of the public. The ceasefire thus rapidly departed from anything that the two national leaderships had planned or anticipated. Large parties of Taliban fighters travelled from their fronts in the rural areas to the government-controlled district and provincial centres and cities, to celebrate Eid. This led to spectacular scenes of uniformed government forces alongside Taliban fighters and men saying their Eid prayers together. In most places Taliban left their weapons behind them, but in some they were able to enter the towns fully armed, while the ANDSF refrained from trying to disarm them. In all places the fighters were ostentatious, proudly showing themselves as Taliban and often flying the white flags of the Emirate. Some of the Taliban travelled in multi-vehicle convoys, designed as a show of strength. President Ghani himself celebrated the festive atmosphere and gave rise to the "ice cream ceasefire" label<sup>3</sup>. It could also have been called the "selfie ceasefire", because of the number of pictures which circulated, showing Taliban fighters posing with senior government officials.

Although most commentary on the June ceasefire focused on the spectacle of Taliban coming to town, in some places, security forces availed of the opportunity to travel, in uniform and with their official vehicles, into Taliban-controlled areas, to visit their Taliban counterparts. This was something which would have been unthinkable during the "normal" hostilities. Furthermore, although the fraternisation was largely spontaneous, some of the process was organised. For example, an interviewee from Faryab described how he travelled to the provincial centre on the eve of the ceasefire, on behalf of the province's

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<sup>3</sup> In a speech to official President Ghani promised to serve ice cream to the Taliban as soon they went on ceasefire. He memorably said "long live ice cream".

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<https://www.facebook.com/BreakingNEWS.Afghanisttan/videos/908688225993795/>

senior Taliban commander, to liaise regarding the anticipated mass movement of their men into town.

The government made a bid to have the reciprocal ceasefire extended. On 16 June, President Ghani announced that the ANDSF would maintain their ceasefire until 20 June and called upon the Taliban to reciprocate. However, on the third day of Eid, the Taliban announced that they were sticking to their original three-day plan and that hostilities would resume on the fourth day of Eid. Any hopes of an extension were dashed and, on the 18<sup>th</sup> Taliban fighters carried out multiple attacks, with reports of fighting from at least nine of the thirty-four provinces.

Analysts and senior figures on all sides agreed that the “ice cream ceasefire” was a watershed moment, but they differed sharply in how they interpreted its significance. An episode major enough to halt fighting throughout the country was bound to impinge on thinking about future peace strategies. But the absence of a real consensus on interpreting the ceasefire meant that contradictory lessons were drawn from the ceasefire.

The stated Taliban position on the June ceasefire was that it had successfully demonstrated the strength of the Emirate’s command structure because, on the basis of a single order issued by the leadership, fighting stopped across the country. However, many Taliban military commanders were appalled at what they regarded as a break-down in discipline. They were deeply concerned that the “jihadi spirit” which they had tried to imbue in their fighters would rapidly dissipate if such fraternisation continued or was repeated, allowing the two sides to humanise each other. Commanders worried that fighters would be seduced by the comforts of town and become reluctant to resume the fight. This concern was underpinned by ideological Taliban’s habit of considering the government-held towns as places of iniquity, where the fighters would become morally corrupted and distracted from their fight for Islamic values. The experience thus had a lasting effect on the attitude of the military command and leadership to ceasefires. In the short run, they determined to restart the fighting immediately after the expiry of the three days. Some of the fighters, whom commanders had judged to have been too open in their contact with government figures during Eid, were arrested and interrogated upon their return to Taliban territory. For the future, Taliban leaders concluded that any future ceasefire should be no longer than the Eid three days and that fraternisation should specifically be ruled out. Ironically, while the Taliban declared their ceasefire to have been a success, the experience greatly limited the leadership’s appetite for future ceasefires. This experience informed Taliban leadership response to ceasefire proposals later in the peace process.

Key figures on the government side had major concerns regarding the ceasefire process, which mirrored those of the Taliban military. In the first place, it was clear that the whole exercise had got out of control as the Taliban mass migration to town was unplanned and unprepared for. There was a real risk of public order problems, and no contingencies were in place in case any of the celebrations turned violent or in case spoilers found a way to exploit them. More profoundly, the government sceptics were concerned that the Taliban would exploit the sight of thousands of their partisans walking freely in government-controlled areas, to under-mine the morale of the men who stood against them in the ANDSF defence lines. The sceptics worried that, for the sake of a symbolic gesture, the

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government had granted Taliban a kind of impunity. Afghan soldiers were being asked to risk their lives on the frontlines to resist Taliban “terrorists”. The sight of the same “terrorists” mingling with provincial governors and even the Interior Minister could make ANDSF personnel doubt the government’s seriousness about pursuing the war to a conclusion and make them more reluctant to stand up to Taliban.

Within the High Peace Council there was an alternative perspective. According to this, the Taliban leadership may have been open to an extension of the ceasefire, but only if they could obtain a quid pro quo. The High Peace Council reported contacts with the Taliban leadership, in which the Taliban proposed establishment of a joint commission to arrange the release of prisoners and that they would be prepared to extend the ceasefire to provide an opportunity for the commission to get some men released. In the event, neither side had put in place the arrangements for a commission or a significant number of prisoner releases. Therefore, the opportunity passed. However, already in the contacts taking place in early 2018, the Taliban had signalled that they wanted prisoner releases as the main quid pro quo for cooperating in any peace process.

Perhaps most significantly the June ceasefire was seized on by US analysts as evidence that the Taliban leadership was able to exercise effective command and control over their military at all levels and in all areas. They observed that insurgent forces throughout the country held to the ceasefire and that, with the exception of the bomb in Jalalabad, even splinter groups had been obliged to follow the Taliban line. Prior to this, some analysts had claimed that the Taliban were incapable of centralised action as the movement was really comprised of multiple competing Afghan factions, with numerous Pakistani jihadi groups fighting alongside them but outside the command chain. The fact that this time all fighters took their lead from Mawlvi Yaqoob strengthened the case for any peace initiative focusing on the Taliban leadership. If Mawlvi Yaqoob could order a three-day ceasefire in a tactical move, the peace-making challenge was how to engage with the Taliban leadership and persuade them that it was in their interest to embrace a general ceasefire and end the war.

Insofar as it was possible to gauge the national mood around the ceasefire, most Afghans responded to it positively, appreciating the short-term relief and seizing upon the bout of fraternisation to build up hopes that the two main sides would find a way of ending the fighting. We assess that the Taliban moves into town were largely spontaneous and were certainly not authorised by the leadership in Pakistan. Indeed, some of the senior military commanders in-country had neither anticipated nor authorised their force’s excursion to town. Some of the Taliban parades may have been designed to intimidate government supporters and thus exploit the ceasefire. However, most of the reporting of Taliban participation in the Eid festivities suggests that they simply wanted a break from the war and that their appetite for this was whetted by the trip to town. The pattern of fraternisation can be taken as an example of the potential frailty of the Taliban command chain as within hours of the ceasefire starting the commanders had lost control and were worrying about how to regain it. The alternative lesson to be drawn from the June ceasefire was that war fatigue and a desire to find a way out of the fighting were widespread on both sides and that the Taliban leadership had good reason to fear that they could easily lose control of their fighting forces if they decided to suspend or end the fighting.

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## 2.2 Account of the US – Taliban negotiations October 2018 – February 2020

### Introduction

Between October 2018 and February 2020, the United States and Taliban representatives acknowledged nine rounds of negotiations, mainly held in Doha. After the eighth round in August 2019, the two sides had a draft agreement ready for signature. But the US President abruptly called off talks and cancelled the signing. After the SRAR's successful revival of the process and a ninth round of negotiations, the two sides went ahead and signed the 29 February agreement between the United States and the Islamic Emirate. This agreement provided for a complete withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan with an eighteen month, conditional, timetable and provided for the launch of Intra-Afghan peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Ostensibly the US-Taliban negotiations could be regarded as a remarkable success. They built on a foundation which had been laid by the previous US administration, which had opened the negotiating channel with the Taliban. They resulted in an unprecedented agreement between a jihadi movement and the United States, which provided for the withdrawal of US troops, reflecting a key US political priority. The agreement also established a framework for the Afghan parties to negotiate and pursue peace, which was the other key goal of the SRAR from the outset.

But events as they unfolded after the signing of the Doha Agreement call the apparent negotiating success into question. The Taliban failed to fully comply with the formal and informal commitments they had made under the agreement but faced few consequences for this. Although US and NATO troop withdrawal is proceeding, this happened because US President Biden decided that the threat emanating from Afghanistan no longer justified the deployment of US troops. Had Biden concluded otherwise, he could have invoked Taliban violations of the Doha agreement. And, most importantly, the cost paid by the US in terms of concessions to the Taliban, in order to secure the agreement was high and under-mined prospects for peace in Afghanistan in the near term. The deal which was supposed to make Intra Afghan negotiations possible also contributed to making them unlikely to succeed.

### The logic of the 2018-2020 negotiation process

The US approach to negotiations was underpinned by a long history of analysis of the Taliban and of US attempts to encourage a negotiations process. There had been a decade of contacts between the US or proxies and the Taliban leadership before the US launched its initiative in 2018. Former leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor played a key part in initiating these contacts. Mansoor had clearly persuaded the leadership that the Taliban stood to gain from opening negotiations with the US. Some analysts argued that killing Mansoor in a drone strike in 2016 set back hopes for peace because of his championing of talks. But a key question remained over the extent of the Mansoor pro-negotiation policy – did he merely favour negotiation with the US to remove US troops or was he interested in peace with his fellow Afghans, which would require a different negotiation process. The US entered the 2018-2020 negotiations on the assumption that Taliban were amenable to a broad peace process and that US-Taliban talks about troop withdrawal were the way to initiate it. The fact that the Taliban engaged well in the US-Taliban track but then failed to negotiate

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seriously with the government suggests that Taliban intent in opening up to the US may have been far more specific and limited than implied from the early Mansoor contacts.

As the US reworked its approach to negotiations in 2018, it addressed three core contradictions, concerning who should negotiate, how to sequence the issues and how much longer the US should devote to the effort. The US had long treated a political settlement for Afghanistan as the core issue, which had to be negotiated among the Afghan parties. While the US was keen to withdraw its troops, it had expected to address this issue after the settlement, because to do so beforehand would risk destabilising the situation or giving up negotiating leverage. But, given that the Taliban had long signalled that they considered the troop withdrawal to be the core issue and refused to negotiate with the government or address the settlement in advance of troop withdrawal, the path to negotiations was blocked. By 2018, neither military strategy nor the existing approach to negotiations offered a convincing timetable for concluding the US mission in Afghanistan, while the US administration was increasingly keen to end it within the US electoral cycle.

In the first key pivot by the US, in October 2018 it moved to direct, substantive negotiations with the Taliban political representatives in Doha and dropped its insistence that the Taliban first negotiate with the Afghan government. The US agreed to negotiate the Taliban's priority issue of international troop withdrawal on the basis that a clear signal by the US that troop withdrawal was imminent would incentivise the Taliban to negotiate a peace settlement with the government. The US calculated that the Taliban leadership would prefer to be part of an internationally supported negotiated settlement rather than taking a chance on pursuing military victory without a settlement and with the prospect of international isolation.

The logic of the negotiations also implied a significant shift in the US role. In the sixteen months of direct US-Taliban negotiations, the US embraced its position as a conflict party, negotiating with another conflict party, the Taliban, on security issues. The US stated goal in the intervention in Afghanistan was to address terror threats. Thus, it sought guarantees from the Taliban that they would split from Al Qaida and prevent militants from using Afghanistan against US interests. In return, the US adopted a timetable for withdrawal of its forces. But, having dealt with the issues that directly concerned it in the negotiating track with the Taliban, the US took on the role of facilitator, but not an interested party, in the intra-Afghan negotiations. This created obvious tensions in that, within Afghanistan, the US acted as the main backer of the government and supporter of the ANSF. But in talks, the US representative could effectively claim neutrality. This conflict caused many outsiders to argue that the UN or other international body become the facilitator.

The Taliban brought their own logic to the negotiating process. Taliban leaders saw their negotiations strategy as an extension of the war effort. They thought in terms of an integrated strategy embracing both political and military actions. They considered the invitation to negotiate directly with the US as a vindication, a sign that the US had recognised them as a power in Afghanistan. They also considered the negotiations to be a vindication of their stance of dismissing the Afghan government as a puppet, lacking in any authority and fully controlled by the US. Taliban acknowledged the need for some form of political consensus among Afghans – hence their willingness to participate in the dialogues.

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But they felt emboldened by the negotiations with the US and under no obligation to accept the Afghan government as a counterpart. Rather, the Taliban developed formulae to propose that ethnic group representatives and political party heads should serve as their interlocutors in intra-Afghan talks. For the US, their talks with the Taliban were to be a stepping-stone to Afghan peace talks. For the Taliban their talks with the US made talks with government seem less attractive, perhaps not even necessary.

### **The negotiations process**

When Dr. Khalilzad took over as SRAR, the Taliban Political Commission (TBPC) was already well-established in Doha and had ample experience of interacting with diplomats from the US and other western countries, meeting visiting delegations and travelling abroad for events such as the Moscow dialogues. The members of the TBPC styled themselves as a shadow foreign ministry and set out to represent the positions of the Islamic Emirate with all diplomatic tools available. One of the SRAR's first acts, barely a month after his own appointment, was to obtain the release by Pakistan of Mullah Baradar, the jailed former deputy to the Taliban's first leader Mullah Omar. The Taliban leader went on to appoint Mullah Baradar head of the Political Commission, with the status of deputy leader and responsibility for supervising the anticipated negotiations. The release and appointment of Mullah Baradar meant that the US envoy effectively got to pick his Taliban counterpart. Pakistan's alacrity in releasing Mullah Baradar after nearly a decade signalled that they were prepared to cooperate at a high level with the new US initiative. It also indicated that the Taliban were prepared to enhance the status of their delegation in Doha. The original members of the TBPC were considered in the movement to be diplomats without any independent authority over strategic decision-making. The real power to make or block decisions rested with the Taliban military. As one of the original senior Taliban commanders and former deputy to Mullah Omar, Mullah Baradar was a part of the inner circle with influence in decision-making. This did not mean that he could sit in Doha and take decisions on the movement's behalf. Rather, and unlike his TBPC predecessors, Mullah Baradar would be a part of strategic decision-making by the leadership in Pakistan. The SRAR went further to boost the weight of the TBPC by prevailing on the Qatar authorities to remove remaining restrictions on the five former Guantanamo prisoners Mullahs Fazl Mazloom, Khairullah Khairkhwa, Noorullah Noori, Abdul Haq Wasikh and Nabi Omari. This allowed the Taliban to appoint them to the TBPC. Mullah Fazl in particular had served as Taliban Chief of Army Staff and, like Baradar, was respected as one of the movement's top generals. The SRAR thus ensured that his counterparts had real gravitas within the movement.

Once the SRAR had succeeded in having the TBPC upgraded, talks proceeded, with eight rounds in Qatar and one round in the UAE. They were deliberately structured and conducted as classic, conventional, state to state negotiations. The two delegations set and worked through their agenda and periodically reported back to their headquarters for consultations and instructions.<sup>4</sup> In the Taliban case, this meant that during intervals between negotiation rounds, TBPC delegations flew back to Pakistan to meet with the

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<sup>4</sup> But a former minister interviewed in Kabul articulates the challenges in the US Taliban negotiations as follows; The US has been superficial and hasty in its deal with the Taliban. The absence of the Afghan government at the negotiating table. Human rights values were not taken into account in the negotiations. Absence of a strong and credible mediator.

leadership and the Pakistani authorities. The US used the negotiation venue in Qatar as a way of flying in principals to meet directly with Mullah Baradar and team. These included commander of US forces in Afghanistan Gen. Miller and Secretary of State Pompeo. Both sides also observed effective disciplined control of their messaging, through which they repeatedly reported steady progress and avoided leaks or recriminations. The Taliban were happy to be seen to be involved in a conventional formal negotiation because this was part of their strategy of legitimisation. They wanted to be seen and dealt with as a quasi-state actor.

### **How Taliban approached the negotiations**

The Taliban proved remarkably skilful in navigating the negotiations process. Under guidance from the Pakistan-based leadership, the TBPC successfully negotiated an agreement which was remarkably favourable to the movement. While doing so they succeeded in maintaining the cohesiveness of the movement, despite fears of splits, and greatly enhanced the movement's profile both globally and within Afghanistan.

In terms of the core business of the negotiations, the Taliban consciously adopted an approach of "no compromise". Members of the Political Commission briefed the leadership that they were stonewalling the Americans, i.e., they stated their conditions to the Americans and then defended them as long as necessary, until the Americans came round to accepting them. The Political Commission thus claimed to the leadership that any negotiated agreement would be achieved without Taliban compromise. Although there is clearly an element of bluster in this description of their handling of negotiations, during the Political Commission's feedback sessions in Pakistan they made no attempt to prepare the rest of the movement for compromise. Rather, Taliban spokesmen made occasional reassuring comments about the prospects of a negotiated peace, while negotiators and the leadership systematically avoided the compromises that might have helped make peace possible. In effect, what the Taliban demanded, the US side accepted as the price of agreement that met the minimum US requirements.

In terms of the substance of the negotiation, the Taliban remained primarily focused on achieving a commitment to a complete withdrawal in as short a timeframe as possible. For the Taliban, the envisaged agreement with the US was primarily a framework for withdrawal. This would be sufficient for them both to declare victory (because they could immediately claim credit for expulsion of the "occupier") and to achieve victory (because removal of US forces would enable them to defeat the government forces). Beyond the main focus on the troop withdrawal, the Taliban sought some US recognition of their future role in government. For this they agreed to the formula that Intra Afghan Negotiations would agree a "future Islamic system". This formula was one of the key examples of calculated ambiguity in the agreement. Diplomats who needed to demonstrate that the process was leading to an Afghan settlement were able to argue that the Taliban were not demanding restoration of their Emirate and were set to negotiate the future arrangements for government i.e., a peace settlement. But in their own communications the Taliban used the formula "Islamic system" as shorthand for any system of government which they dominated.

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From as early as October 2018, the Taliban developed a narrative of victory, representing the US-Taliban talks as proving that the US had “admitted its defeat in Afghanistan” and claiming that the focus in the talks was on how the Taliban could grant the defeated US forces “safe passage” as they exited the country. The Taliban deliberately propagated the notion that the talks with the US offered them a route to power and called on all Afghan forces to submit to or ally with them.

The Taliban used their political mission in Doha, as well as the attention which they received around the negotiations, to step up their efforts to claim international and domestic legitimacy. Their representatives conducted multiple high-profile visits to countries in the region and beyond. In reporting these missions to their supporters in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Taliban cited their representatives’ busy schedule as evidence of the world’s acceptance that the Taliban were destined to rule Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

### **Challenging the assumptions underpinning negotiations**

The underlying assumption of the US push to Intra Afghan negotiations was that the Taliban leadership was prepared to accept a power-sharing role within a government comprised of fellow Afghans which enjoyed international support, for the sake of gaining access to resources and avoiding triggering another round of civil war, in which their opponents could be confident of external support. The SRAR team and other diplomats who held early discussions with the Qatar-based Taliban representatives, concluded that the Taliban were prepared to embrace this historic bargain, though they did not explicitly agree to negotiations led by the current government. But as the process moved on, the Taliban leadership told its base that it had rejected the notion of sharing power with the Republic side. The narrative shared within the movement simply emphasised that the US-Taliban deal secured the withdrawal of US troops and put the Taliban in a position to retake power. In their messaging to supporters the Taliban leadership did not even acknowledge the political compromise on which the US negotiation strategy was based. Taliban actions during the period of the attempted Intra Afghan Negotiations were consistent with how they negotiated with the US – uncompromising.

### **Interpreting what Taliban meant when they said they endorsed peace**

During the US-Taliban negotiations, Taliban spokesmen frequently reaffirmed the movement’s commitment to peace. This was helpful for US supporters of the negotiations, as Taliban talk of peace seemed to vindicate the US starting assumption around negotiations – that the Taliban were prepared to entertain a grand bargain, including reconciliation with their Afghan rivals. Even in the Taliban’s internal narrative, senior figures periodically expressed their hopes that the negotiations with the US would allow for the achievement of peace in Afghanistan. However, Taliban leadership conceptions of peace were highly contingent. For them “peace” meant a conclusion of the war on their terms, i.e., complete withdrawal of the US troops and establishment of a Taliban-led government in the

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<sup>5</sup> A negotiating team member observed “Unfortunately, the Taliban are unpredictable. Their understanding of new global issues is simple and rudimentary. This is what makes it difficult to make a deal with”.

wake of the withdrawal. In effect, the Taliban insistence on peace through victory amounted to a decision to continue the war until their terms were achieved.<sup>6</sup>

### **The September 2019 collapse of negotiations and how the deal was revived**

On 6 September, the US announced that the plan to sign an agreement with the Taliban had been cancelled and the talks were suspended. It was then revealed that a high-profile signing ceremony, involving Taliban representatives and the US president had been planned at Camp David, before the whole exercise was aborted.

The last-minute abandonment of the agreement which had been finalised during the eighth round of negotiations is best understood as being symptomatic of some of the chaotic handling of business in Washington at the time. However, the fact that the US took first steps to revive the suspended talks within a month of the suspension indicated that in the US policy establishment there was a high degree of commitment to achieving the goal of an agreement with the Taliban.

Within both Kabul and Washington, there was some opposition to the substance of the deal in the making. From an Afghan perspective, the key objections were, firstly, that the impending agreement allowed the Taliban to achieve their main goal – US commitment to troop withdrawal – without giving any firm undertaking to a ceasefire. Secondly, the Afghan government was excluded and thus the Taliban also would get to claim diplomatic victory without even having to meet with the government once. From a US perspective, the commitment to zero residual military presence and an 18-month withdrawal timetable were major concessions, while Taliban guarantees about foreign militants were weak.

However, despite the substantive shortcomings of the draft agreement, in the US debate following the suspension of the process, the prospect of no agreement (implying either an open-ended commitment to the conflict or an irresponsible exit) was considered to be even worse. Therefore, little more than a month after US diplomats had been ordered to cease contact with the Taliban, the SRAR was able to travel to Pakistan and meet with Taliban representatives under the pretext of discussing possible release of US hostages. Thereafter, in another highly significant move, on 19 November 2019, the two American University of Kabul professors, Timothy Weeks and Kevin King, kidnapped by the Taliban, were released by their Taliban captors, in exchange for the Taliban deputy leader Khalifa Seraj's brother, Anas Haqqani, who had been imprisoned by the Afghan government. This prisoner release provided the Taliban with a further example of how it could reach an agreement with the US and then wait for the US to use its influence with the Afghan government to ensure compliance.

In Pakistan also, the Taliban leadership had concluded that an agreement with the US, at least as favourable as the one drafted in the eighth round, was far better for the Taliban than the alternative of no agreement. Therefore, within two weeks of the prisoner swap, the ninth round of US-Taliban negotiations was launched.

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<sup>6</sup> A senior figure in the HCNR represented the impact of Taliban attitudes on negotiating prospects “The probability of failure of the negotiations in Qatar is 50/50. The main challenge in peace process is Taliban. They would like to be at the centre of the peace talks and to be decisive in shaping the future political system. Therefore, there are serious differences in the goals of the negotiating parties”.

### **Understanding the agreement and its implications**

US-Taliban negotiations resumed after the Taliban prisoners had been released and transferred to Qatar. The broad parameters of the agreement remained unchanged from the one that was shelved in September. The Taliban sought to hold the US to all commitments which it had made in the previous rounds and sought additional concessions. This was fully consistent with the negotiating approach which the Taliban representatives had advertised to their leadership – make demands and wait for the US to accommodate them. The main modification which the US sought in the second attempt to finalise an agreement was the inclusion of provisions for limited violence reduction measures (detailed in the section below). Emboldened by the experience of the prisoner-hostage swap, the Taliban negotiators demanded strengthened commitments to the mass release of Taliban prisoners.<sup>7</sup> The provisions around prisoner releases came to be one of the key points of controversy regarding the final version of the US-Taliban agreement.

### **The sense of bargain favouring the Taliban**

Afghans associated with the Republic considered that the deal between the US and the Taliban was one-sided, heavily favouring the Taliban.<sup>8</sup> This was the Taliban assessment also. Taliban commented that, of all the concessions they wrested, securing the release of five thousand of their comrades from jail, while the jihad was ongoing, was an unprecedented achievement. Afghans on the Republic side observed that the Taliban succeeded in sticking to their main objectives, without making any substantive concessions. They observed that the US-Taliban deal made concessions on behalf of the Afghan government, without obtaining any quid pro quo for the government. The SRAR was referred to ironically as the chief Taliban enforcer, because of the way in which he pressurised the Afghan President to comply with Taliban demands. Confidants of the SRAR argued the compromises which he made, in pursuit of an agreement with the Taliban, were necessary as the US had far less leverage than many commentators appreciated. However, one reason that the US was able to make so many concessions was because on the core US-Taliban issue there was some convergence of interests – both sides wanted to withdraw US troops. The key concessions made by the US in dealing with the Taliban included agreeing to exclude the Afghan government from the first stage of negotiations<sup>9</sup>, according the Taliban elevated diplomatic protocol (treating them like government representatives), delinking the issue of ceasefire and political negotiations from the issue of troop withdrawal (dropping the “nothing agreed until everything agreed” principle), accepting a more rapid troop withdrawal timetable, allowing Mullah Baradar to sign on behalf of the Islamic Emirate, securing the release of the highest value Taliban prisoners held by the government (brother, uncle and cousin of the Taliban deputy leader), securing the release of a further 5,000 prisoners, significantly reducing military pressure on the Taliban, including incongruous items in the text of the agreement which accommodated the Taliban’s idea of being a state (for example, the Taliban promise not to issue passports to foreign militants), and taking a lenient view of complaints of Taliban non-compliance with conditionality. However, from the perspective of the Republic, further concessions to the Taliban were potentially very costly as they could

<sup>7</sup> In interview, negotiating team member observed “Issues such as the release of prisoners, should not have been included in the US Taliban agreement. Rather, it could be dealt during the intra-Afghan talks.”.

<sup>8</sup> A majority of the interviewees in Kabul, believe that the US-Taliban deal, promoted Taliban as a legitimate and recognized political group and the concessions made to Taliban granted them a greater position on the negotiations table.

<sup>9</sup> A member of the HCNR leadership commented “absence of the Afghan government in US-Taliban negotiations was a huge mistake by US, particularly the concessions made to Taliban on behalf of the Afghan government was a disaster.”

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involve surrendering rights and power. Therefore, from the Republic point of view, they went into negotiations with the Taliban after the Taliban had learned that they could refuse to compromise and rely on the SRAR to force the government to concede any point on which the Taliban made a stand. The Taliban's track record of avoiding compromise represented a major challenge in the attempt to reach an intra- Afghan negotiated settlement

### **The reluctance of the US to call Taliban actions breaches of the conditionality in their agreement**

The US public position after the signing of the February agreement was that US commitments, primarily the troop withdrawal, were conditional, and that the US reserved the right to determine whether the conditions were met. Those who had long favoured a serious diplomatic effort to end the war with the Taliban argued that it was necessary for the US to agree to a withdrawal timetable, so as to persuade the Taliban that the issue of "occupation" was settled and thus create an opportunity for Afghans to at least begin to negotiate an internal settlement before the troop withdrawal actually came into force. By this formulation, troop withdrawal would have been conditional on Taliban moving towards that internal settlement. But the conditionality in the February agreement was limited and ambiguous. The Taliban were supposed to restrain foreign militants from using Afghanistan to threaten the US and its allies. The reduction of violence was not a part of the published text, but, based on verbal undertakings given to the US before the signing of the agreement. Clearly foreign militants continued to play a role on the battlefield, to have a significant presence in multiple provinces and to have contact with the Taliban intelligence commission, after the February Agreement. But whether this constituted a breach was ambiguous. With regard to violence, by prosecuting their 2020 military campaign, the Taliban manifestly breached what the US said was the spirit of the agreement.

### **Prisoners and negotiations**

After the clauses on troop withdrawal, the clauses in the Doha Agreement dealing with prisoners arguably had the most practical implications. Unsurprisingly, the interpretation of these clauses and pressure for prisoner releases played an out-sized role during the implementation phase of the agreement.

The agreed text committed the US to "work with all relevant sides on a plan" to release "up to five thousand" Taliban prisoners and up to a thousand government prisoners, before the scheduled start of Intra Afghan Negotiations. Further, the US committed to completing the "goal of releasing all the remaining prisoners" in the three months after the date set for negotiations to start. The only behavioural guarantees offered by the Taliban for their fighters who were supposed to be released was that they would be bound by the overall agreement and would not "pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies."

It was entirely predictable that the Taliban would insist on demanding a prisoner release as part of any agreement. Their chief negotiator, Abbas Stanakzai, had included this in their list of prioritised CBMs in the first Moscow dialogue. Historically, the Taliban sought prisoner releases in most of their previous engagements with international actors and the Afghan government. For example, an exchange of prisoners was the only concrete outcome from the talks which followed the establishment of the Taliban presence in Doha. Hizb Islami also insisted on prisoner releases when it signed its agreement with the government. Patronage

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relations meant that commanders had an ongoing responsibility for the welfare and eventual release of their men after capture. Therefore, the Taliban operated a Prisoners Commission to deal with prisoners' affairs and this commission had been one of the most active Taliban bodies participating in the regular humanitarian dialogue in the Gulf, which preceded the Qatar talks.

But the cumbersome wording of the agreement on prisoners reflected a central contradiction in the US-Taliban agreement. The US no longer held prisoners in Afghanistan. The prisoners whose release the Taliban sought were all held by the Afghan government, which was not a party to the agreement. In effect, the US committed to use its good offices to seek their release, it did not have the authority to order the prisoners' release.

The Taliban chose to apply a maximalist interpretation to the text they had negotiated. They Treated the "up to five thousand" formula as a promise that all five thousand would be released before negotiations went ahead. They chose to interpret the US commitment as meaning that the US would secure the prisoner releases from the government, with no need for the Taliban to have any dealing with the government. For the Taliban, this was a remarkable vindication of their stance that authority rested with the Americans, not the government.

The only precedent for release of prisoners on this scale in Afghanistan was at times of regime change. Established Afghan practice of releasing prisoners through presidential decree, on festive occasions or as a CBM, typically involved dozens or hundreds of prisoners, not thousands. Also unusual was that the mass prisoner release was to take place amidst ongoing conflict and without any meaningful check on prisoner's post-release activities. The majority of conflict in Afghanistan consisted of fighting between the Taliban and government forces. A promise that released Taliban fighters would pose no danger to the US and allies was of little comfort to Afghan security forces who were the ones directly in the firing line.

The Taliban made use of the prisoner release clause to reassure their base that the agreement with the US was in the Taliban's interest. The prospect of mass releases was much referenced in internal discussions on the negotiations and head of the Prisoners' Commission Nurudin Turabi, circulated an audio message to the membership, in which he pledged five thousand men would be released once the agreement was signed, and another seven thousand thereafter. The handling of the prisoner releases was one of the ways in which the US-Taliban agreement helped reinforce the authority and central control of the Taliban leadership over their movement. Turabi emphasised that the Political Commission would retain full control of the process of finalising lists and managing the releases – no one needed to go behind the Commission's back to petition the Afghan authorities.

When the releases actually happened, the vast majority of the men released returned to combat or other official positions within the Islamic Emirate. Some Taliban officials denied that this was happening, but the denials were unconvincing, in particular as no safeguards were in place to deter a return to combat. The movement celebrated the return of its prisoners and the Taliban deputy leader, Mullah Baradar, allowed himself to be filmed while addressing released prisoners and instructing them on their duty to continue the jihad.

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Interviewees identified the prisoner release clause as the part of the US-Taliban agreement which most helped to undermine the government position.<sup>10</sup> The scale of the releases, amounting to in the order of 10% of the Taliban fighting forces, was sufficient to boost Taliban military capabilities in the 2020 fighting season, in particular as released fighters were considered motivated, experienced, loyal and capable of taking up command positions. But the main effect was that on morale. The mass release of their armed opponents contributed to the decline in morale of the ANDSF. It both directly increased the threats to their security and created the impression that the government they served lacked authority.

The process of the releases was tortuous and much commented on. It was strung out for six months, instead of the ten days anticipated in the agreement text. The Afghan government assigned its NSC to screen prisoners for release and authorised batches for release rather than authorising the full five thousand. This allowed the government to seek some degree of leverage in its dealings with the US, in the run-up to the anticipated Intra Afghan Negotiations. The process was further complicated as the release process neared completion and the government was faced with the problem of releasing prisoners convicted of the most heinous crimes against Afghans, as well as some high-profile killers of NATO forces. By this stage, the Afghan President had calculated that it was prudent not to be seen to be creating obstacles to convening negotiations. Therefore, he convened another Loya Jirga and obtained from it a mandate to release the remaining prisoners, as well as a fresh endorsement of the government's negotiating position.

The text committed the Taliban to release a thousand ANDSF from their detention as a reciprocal gesture.. The Afghan authorities had previously dealt with the challenge of captured personnel through in-country efforts, which included raids on Taliban jails, ad hoc negotiated exchanges and, often, initiatives by relatives to lobby or bribe Taliban captors. There had been no push by the Afghan government to bring the issue of captured ANDSF to the national level negotiating table with the Taliban. Indeed, in the negotiations with the US, the Taliban did not produce evidence that they actually held a thousand prisoners. The inclusion of the ANDSF prisoners in the US-Taliban deal is best understood as an attempt to make the release of thousands of Taliban prisoners look less imbalanced.

After the completion of the release of the first five thousand prisoners, Taliban officials continued to reassure the movement that they had a binding commitment from the US for the release of another seven thousand prisoners. This helped them to justify continuing engagement, even after negotiations deadlocked. It was also a useful tool for them in their dealings with the US and European diplomats. By January 2021, the Taliban Political Commission had worked out that US leverage over the Afghan government and ability to extract concessions such as prisoner releases was declining. Nevertheless, the Taliban diplomats were able to continue demanding prisoner releases and de-listing, and to set these as conditions for participation in talks. As the leadership by then appeared

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<sup>10</sup> Parliament member, Shahgul Rezayee, former head of Human rights commission, Sima Samar, deputy chair of HCNR, Haji Din mohammad, former head of national directorate of security, Rahmatullah Nabil, deputy chair of HCNR, Akram Khpalwak, and many other interviewees confirms that the government position was undermined in US-Taliban negotiations.

unconvinced of the utility of negotiation, the unfulfilled prisoner release was a convenient cover for holding back from talks.

### **Negotiations versus elections**

Afghan domestic political timetables emerged as a constraint on the US – Taliban negotiating process, in particular because the US peace architecture included installing an interim administration early in the process. Afghan presidential elections were scheduled for April 2019, on the basis that President Ghani's first term expired in May. Although this was not publicly acknowledged, Afghan stakeholders understood that the SRAR's first preferred timetable was to complete his negotiations with the Taliban within six months, so as to achieve an agreement in time to launch Intra Afghan Negotiations before the presidential election. In the event, shifts in the electoral timetable loosened the constraint. Elections were rescheduled for late September because of delays in election logistics, independent of the Taliban negotiation process. This postponement provided a more realistic negotiating timetable for the US and Taliban teams.

The immediate consequence of the collapse of the September US-Taliban deal was that the prospect of commencement of Intra Afghan Negotiations before the presidential election vanished. Kabul-based Afghan politicians reported that, until the end of August, the SRAR had told them that he did not expect the election to take place because the Taliban had said that their first move once negotiations were convened would be to propose postponement of elections, to create space for pursuit of the peace government idea. Politicians believed that the SRAR would use negotiations as a way to wind up the existing Afghan government, postpone elections and install a caretaker. The Afghan Election Commission announced the official campaign period as talks collapsed. The stated US position had been that the US regarded a peace agreement as a higher priority than elections, but the US had appropriately avoided committing publicly to any specific scheme to get the negotiators to trigger a postponement. However, the incumbent president, Ashraf Ghani, had worked on the assumption that the elections would go ahead and had successfully fundraised and put in place a campaign infrastructure. Politicians who were not a part of President Ghani's campaign team claimed that the uncertainty over whether the election would take place had put them at a disadvantage. In particular, none of them had conducted fund-raising on a par with the President's team.

Polling went ahead at the end of September 2019 and produced a disputed result with both major candidates claiming victory. The vote-counting and dispute process dragged out for over five months, culminating in the Election Commission declaring that President Ghani had narrowly won in the first round. The main challenger, Dr. Abdullah rejected the result and so he had himself inaugurated president in a ceremony which ran parallel to President Ghani's inauguration. In the run-up to the elections, the US priority remained securing agreement with the Taliban and moving to the Intra Afghan Negotiations. But others argued that if the elections could produce a broadly representative and legitimate government, this might have had the best chance of securing a favourable agreement in Intra Afghan Negotiations. Afghans perceived that the US missed opportunities to help burnish the democratic and pluralist credentials of its partner in Kabul. Subsequently, once the US had secured its agreement with the Taliban, Dr. Abdullah's team complained that the US preoccupation with negotiations prejudiced its post-election positions, as the US had to

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recognise President Ghani's re-election so as to win some cooperation on the move to negotiations.

### Conclusion

The SRAR's team and many US experts have argued that the concessions made to the Taliban in the course of the US-Taliban negotiations were justified by the US lack of leverage. They argue that negotiating in this way with the Taliban was the only possible way to obtain the twin US negotiating objectives of a framework for responsible troop withdrawal and a route to intra Afghan negotiations.

Although the agreement was signed between the United States and the Taliban, it has had enduring impact on the freedom of movement for other actors in the Afghan peace process, most notably the Afghan Government. The negotiations marginalised the Afghan government while emboldening the Taliban. Clauses in the agreement, such as the mass prisoner release, tipped the military balance in favour of the Taliban at a time when Afghan forces were about to take full responsibility for resisting them. Meanwhile, in the critical years prior to withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US focus on its relationship with the Taliban made the Afghan government and the political class feel they were being ignored. Ultimately an imbalanced agreement provided for international troop withdrawal but did lead to intra-Afghan negotiations. Afghans designing the next phase of the peace process would have to manage the reality of an emboldened Taliban movement whose negotiators had concluded they could refuse to compromise and still obtain their objectives.

### 2.3 Account of the intra-Afghan dialogue, 2018 – February 2020

In the year and a half running up to the finalisation of the US-Taliban agreement a series of dialogues brought together Taliban representatives with Afghan officials and political and civil society representatives. These dialogues included conferences in Moscow on 9 November 2018, 5 and 6 February 2019 and on 28-29 May 2021. The government convened a four-day Loya Jirga in Kabul from 29 April 2019 (without Taliban participation), which was followed by a dialogue in Doha on 7 and 8 July ("Intra Afghan Peace Conference"), organised jointly by the German government and Qatar<sup>11</sup>. The second intra-Afghan conference in Moscow took place on March 18, 19 and 20<sup>th</sup> in 2021 with participation of representatives of US, China, Pakistan and Russia. Among the highlights of the conference were a verbal clash between Marshal Dostum and Mullah Fazl, member of Taliban's delegation who had been detained by Marshal Dostum after the fall of the Taliban. As a sign of the elusiveness of reconciliation, after this, Dostum left the meeting and flew to Uzbekistan the next day. In similar vein, Taliban negotiator Abbas Stanekzai made sharp remarks condemning the Afghan government and politicians for their conduct with the Taliban in the past. In contrast, the meeting produced a joint declaration of Russia, China, the United States and Pakistan which rejected the option of re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate. The verbal confrontation between the members of the delegations and the tension in the meetings were considered by Afghan analysts to confirm that a negotiated agreement was unlikely. These events ran parallel to the US – Taliban negotiation track in a period when the Taliban

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<sup>11</sup> Main reference – Thomas Ruttig, "Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed", AAN Feb 2019.

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were firmly holding back from talks directly involving the Afghan Government. The intra-Afghan dialogue rehearsed both the substantive issues and the practical challenges which would have to be confronted when the Afghan parties reached the negotiating table.

On one level, the dialogues demonstrated that, in line with pre-Khalilzad exercises such as the 2012 forum in Chantilly, it was possible to convene the Taliban political representatives with the multiple constituencies from the Republic side and for them to have a substantive conversation. This was relevant to the practical challenge of convening Intra-Afghan Negotiations, given that the Taliban's opening position was that they would not deal directly with the Afghan government. In the nine months from the first Moscow dialogue to the July 2019 Doha dialogue, the Taliban found formulae to rationalise their sitting with senior Afghan government officials. From the outset, they were content to meet with senior Afghan politicians, in particular former mujahideen leaders, whom they acknowledged as the other legitimate political force in the country. The Taliban likewise seemed to have no objection to inter-acting with Afghan civil society. The Moscow dialogues were attended by leaders of the High Peace Council (HPC) but it is not clear that this indicated anything about willingness to meet with government as the HPC leadership had long tried to claim that their institution was independent of the executive. Karim Khalili the Chair and his deputies Deen Mohammad and Attaullah Saleem, were all senior mujahideen figures in their own right. By the time of the July dialogue, the organisers were able to include at least three senior government officials in the Republic delegation, without encountering serious Taliban objections. The dialogues also established what would come to be the parameters for women's participation in the eventual negotiations. Women participated in all Republic delegations, and this was accepted by the Taliban representatives. But there was no prospect of a woman being nominated to the Taliban delegation.

The Taliban used the Moscow dialogues to air their opening positions in the new peace process. They favoured a confidence building measures approach, whereby the US would demonstrate its seriousness in pursuing reconciliation with the Taliban. At this stage, the CBMs they prioritised were removal of Taliban leaders from sanctions lists, release of prisoners, formalising the Taliban's Doha office and ending propaganda against the Taliban. It is noteworthy that three of these demands essentially related to the Taliban's attempts to gain international legitimacy and could only be considered tangentially related to peace.

The series of dialogues also provided an opportunity for participants to explore common ground on the substantive issues. The dialogues indicated a degree of consensus<sup>12</sup> on the need to end the war through intra-Afghan negotiations, the importance of preserving Afghan sovereignty, acknowledging Islam as the country's religion and the governing system as Islamic, preserving rights including for women but subject to the poorly defined caveat of consistency with Islam. For example, no dialogue participant could oppose the idea that Afghanistan's system of government could be Islamic. Supporters of the Afghan government could argue that the 2004 constitution was already an Islamic system, in that there was a constitutional bar on any law inconsistent with the Shariat. But the Taliban's definition of an Islamic System seemed to be synonymous with Taliban control of the government.

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<sup>12</sup> Former head of NDS, Rahmatullah Nabil says "The quest for consensus should not be limited to a few political leaders. Political leaders are everywhere, pretending to represent the people. However, there are many different strata in the society. Regional consensus must also be inclusive. Monopoly of power should not be done under any reason. Monopoly will not work in any way."

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The ceasefire was one issue on which there was no consensus. Members of the Republic delegations repeatedly proposed an immediate general ceasefire as evidence that the Taliban were serious about pursuing peace. But the Taliban refused to entertain the calls for a general ceasefire in advance of the completion of international troop withdrawal, even though they favour preserving the national security institutions

The issue of handing power to a transitional government to pursue the peace process persistently hung over the dialogues. Even when the transitional mechanism was not tabled on the agenda, detractors of the idea suspected that the participants would use the fringes of the meetings to work on power-sharing formulae to replace the incumbent government. Both the SRAR and President Ghani articulated their concerns at the outset. The SRAR said that he was worried that President Ghani might try to block any peace process which threatened his hold on power. President Ghani in October 2018 announced his opposition to any transitional mechanism which involved him handing over power to an un-elected transitional government.

The prospect that it might be possible to agree a power-sharing transitional government was one of the motivations for some of the Afghan political figures participating in the early dialogues. In effect, this would have entailed a new coalition between the Taliban and most likely the former jihadi leaders or parties. The appeal of a “peace government” was boosted by the fact that it surfaced alongside a political struggle in Kabul over impending presidential elections. President Ghani’s term was due to expire a little over six months after the US-Taliban talks started. Opponents of the President were concerned that he would be able to exploit incumbency to have the upper hand in any election. They worried that the deterioration in the security situation relative to the 2014 election would make real campaigning difficult, while providing a cover for fraud. Supporters of the transitional government idea proposed it as a feasible alternative to presidential elections. The politicians most enthusiastic about the transitional mechanism idea were people who believed they might be nominated to join or lead the government. Others considered a peace government a plausible alternative to a problematic presidential election conducted during conditions of war. During the period of the dialogues, the US avoided openly endorsing the transitional government idea. The US position that “the priority is peace rather elections” was sufficiently ambiguous to encourage Afghan enthusiasts for a transitional government that they could count on US support. One result of this was that several Kabul-based figures who participated in the dialogues tried to persuade the Taliban to endorse them as a potential neutral but Taliban-friendly head of transitional government. The most bizarre manifestation of peace dialogue driving ambition to head a government was a campaign launched by Dubai-based businessman Ahmad Shah Durrani. Despite his lack of any track record of public service or politics, Ahmad Shah started extending invitations to a wide range of Afghan politicians and civil society figures, to stay at his expense in Dubai and discuss supporting him as transitional head of government.

Gauging Taliban responses to transitional or power-sharing government ideas during the initial phase of intra-Afghan dialogue was challenging as the members of the Taliban Political Commission, used calibrated ambiguity regarding the future. They avoided openly demanding the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate, with a Taliban monopoly of power,

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which many assumed was their real position. But they also avoided taking any clear position on the power-sharing or other transitional ideas. Already in the Moscow dialogues, Afghan politicians could see that the Taliban representatives were keen to reach out to them and treat them with respect. But most concluded that the real Taliban intention was to detach them from the government so as to gain support for a restoration of Taliban power rather than a peace settlement. The July 2019 dialogue in Doha was attended by 45 Afghans from Kabul including some of the veteran figures of the Islamic Republic such as Syed Mansoor Naderi. Although this was the most professionally facilitated of the dialogues, many Republic politicians concluded that there was little prospect of persuading the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire and share power with the government. They concluded from them a unified Republic negotiation position was vital as a safeguard against being outmanoeuvred by the Taliban.

Afghan participants in the dialogues wondered whether the “Taliban have changed”, in the sense of whether they had moderated their authoritarian approach to governance and radically conservative position on social policy and enforcement of religious injunctions. The general feedback from participants was that they were disappointed to find that the Taliban more or less took pride in showing themselves firm in their original positions. Despite the confirmation of common ground on ending the fighting and asserting national sovereignty, participants concluded that Taliban did indeed aspire to re-impose their conservative and authoritarian vision, albeit with some modest compromises in recognition of how society had evolved in the last 20 years.

The tension between the SRAR’s efforts to prepare the way for an eventual transitional set-up and President Ghani’s adamant opposition to this approach affected the dialogue process. In April 2019 the Qatari Special Representative tried to host a major intra-Afghan dialogue in Qatar, but the parties could not agree on lists of participants. The most popular explanation of the demise of the Doha dialogue blamed the government side for proposing an unrealistically large delegation, consisting of over two hundred people. A Doha-based Talib famously tweeted that the invitation list looked more like a wedding party than a peace delegation. However, the Taliban side had prepared an equally long list. However, the real tension over the dialogue planned for Doha concerned the President’s plan to hold a Loya Jirga in Kabul. The tension was a proxy for a struggle to control the agenda of the dialogue. Given the President’s declared opposition to any transitional government formula, he was naturally suspicious of a large event outside Afghanistan. The Loya Jirga went ahead in Kabul at the end of April, with delegates representing all districts. In keeping with recent Loya Jirga exercises, this was a mixture of popular participation (three thousand delegates expressed themselves in small group discussions and plenary) and top-level orchestration to ensure agreement on the organisers’ prepared conclusions. Accordingly, the Loya Jirga agreed a text which called for a general ceasefire and a peace agreement with the Taliban which maintained the existing constitution. It did not endorse the transitional government idea. The President accepted the mandate provided by the Loya Jirga and promised to use it to frame a peace roadmap which would guide the Afghan position in possible future talks.

The dialogues in 2018 and 2019 gave early indications that agreement in the subsequent

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intra-Afghan negotiation, was likely to be elusive. Taliban participants were constrained to articulate an “official line” of Taliban policy which was nominally pro-peace but uncompromising on substance. Nevertheless, dialogues were generally conducted civilly. Facilitators worked hard to draft positive-sounding final communiques calling for peace. But most non-Taliban participants left having reached the conclusion that there had been little reform of the movement’s hard-line policies and that the Taliban had little intention of compromising on their quest for complete power

#### 2.4 Account of Intra-Afghan negotiations – the promise and reality

In the end, no substantive or meaningful Intra-Afghan Negotiations (IAN) took place within through May 2021. The concessions made to the Taliban in the first phase of the initiative (US-Taliban talks) which were justified as the price to bring the Taliban into IAN and an eventual peace settlement, did not serve the intended purpose.

There are sharply differing perspectives on the reasons for and consequences of the failure to convene negotiations. The main difference relates to the interpretation of Taliban strategic intent.

Those who were optimistic about the prospects for the IAN—the “grand bargain optimists” believed the Taliban were prepared to support a peace process outlined by the SRAR. The main observations of the grant bargain optimists were:

1. a power-sharing transitional government headed by an acceptable non-Talib, a general ceasefire, a political roadmap with slots for the Taliban in state structures and eventual elections for parliament and president and sustained international assistance to achieve a peace dividend.
2. The Pakistan authorities also were prepared to support the peace deal and used their leverage with the Taliban to accept the offer.
3. However, supporters of the peace settlement in the Taliban leadership required to show immediate benefits to the movement to justify it, and therefore continued to insist upon CBM measures such as prisoner releases.
4. Doubts about the Biden administration’s commitment to the US-Taliban agreement forced the Taliban to stand back from the process in early 2021.
5. President Ghani’s public opposition to any agreement which shortened his tenure as president alerted the Taliban to the likelihood that the government side would scuttle any attempt to finalise the settlement.
6. Differences between the Taliban and the government were bridgeable but to achieve this would require clearer commitment to the agreement from both the government and the US.

Those who were sceptical about the prospect for a “grand bargain” believed the Taliban intent was to orchestrate the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, topple the government by force and seize power. The main observations of the sceptics were:

1. The Taliban were happy to use negotiations to help get the US out of Afghanistan, boost their own claims to legitimacy and achieve specific perks such as prisoner

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releases. But they also feared being manoeuvred into an agreement which fell short of Republic capitulation, and therefore avoided joining substantive negotiations.

2. The sceptics also believe Pakistan systematically avoided pressuring the Taliban for serious participation in the IAN, advising them to participate symbolically in all events but leaving substantive positions up to them. They were motived by the need to maintain their relationship with the US. Meanwhile, ISI continued to support to the insurgency.
3. As long as the Taliban were primarily focused on advancing their military position, there was little scope, for productive engagement in the IAN.
4. Meanwhile, The SRAR deliberately made maximum use of constructive ambiguity to keep all parties hopeful that an agreement on terms favourable to them was attainable.

Western diplomats and some of the Afghans involved in the negotiation were optimistic. But by May, most Afghan political and civil society figures had become pessimistic. The Taliban's insistence on escalating their 2021 military campaign in the run-up to unconditional US withdrawal, along with the apparent failure to prepare the movement for any political compromise, and the lack of Taliban urgency in joining IAN together indicate that the leadership had decided to pursue military victory rather than a negotiated settlement. However, an important caveat is that the Taliban reluctance to negotiate seriously need not be permanent. Indeed, one of the key tasks for the next phase of the peace process must be how to create the conditions whereby the Taliban embrace a negotiated peace settlement.

After the signing of the Doha Agreement the main focus of US efforts was to convene the IAN, as promised in the text. The US applied maximum pressure on the Afghan government to convince them to go ahead with prisoner releases and nominate a delegation and appoint the new

High Council for National Reconciliation to oversee the negotiating brief. Despite the intense US effort that went into convening the talks, when the two delegations gathered in Doha, the Taliban blocked the move to substantive talks. They ensured that the first negotiating round, from September to December 2020, was devoted entirely to procedural discussions. After an intense three months review, the Biden administration decided to continue efforts to re-invigorate the Afghan peace talks. It kept SRAR Khalilzad in post and continued to push for the start of substantive talks. In March, the US argued for a peace conference in Istanbul, as a way of accelerating moves to discuss the core issues, although after some diplomatic consultation, it was clarified that the new conference would complement the Qatar talks rather than replacing them. The Taliban set conditions for participating, which effectively blocked the effort to hold the conference before 1<sup>st</sup> May and the passing of the date originally scheduled for the completion of the international forces pull out. In contrast, the Republic side, despite their own reservations, made an effort to demonstrate readiness to go along with Istanbul Conference. Although official US policy remains that the Istanbul meeting go ahead, the move faces formidable obstacles. The Taliban 2021 military campaign is fully operational, increasing pressure on government positions. From a Taliban perspective, the start of US withdrawal has further reduced US leverage and tipped the

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military balance in favour of the Taliban. This makes the Taliban less inclined to participate in a decision-making conference at this time.

**Summary of the attempts to orchestrate IAN, Mar 2020 – May 2021**

The Doha Agreement provided for IAN to start on **10 March 2020**.

The Government held its “prisoners jirga” between **7 and 9 August**, clearing the way for the release of a final batch of prisoners on **13 August**.

The Taliban and Republic delegations gathered in Doha on **12 September** for a ceremony to mark the beginning of IAN.

For ninety days, **from 13 September to 13 December**, the two delegations in Doha were locked in procedural discussions over the rules and procedures and the agenda. There were no substantive negotiations during this session and most meetings were conducted by committee-size groups.

Around **2 December**, a small group meeting of the delegations agreed draft rules and procedures, which were forwarded to Kabul for approval.

**On 13 December**, after confirming the agreement of rules and procedures, the two delegations in Doha agreed a 23-day break. Mullah Baradar and senior Taliban travelled to Pakistan.

**On 5 January 2021** some members of the negotiating teams returned to Doha. But several senior Taliban figures were absent and Republic negotiators reported that, in informal discussions, Taliban seemed to be taking a hard-line, uncompromising approach.

Between **January and April 2021**, some of the negotiators and facilitators remained in Doha. Some promising discussions, in a semi-formal format, covered CBMs and peripheral issues on which there was common ground. But no substantive negotiations took place.

**On 6 March**, Secretary of State Blinken sent and publicised a letter to President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, calling for a high-level conference in Istanbul to focus on core issues and achieve rapid progress towards a settlement.

**On 13 April**, the UN, Qatar and Turkey jointly announced the plan for the Istanbul conference to take place on 24 April and last for ten days, in line with SoS Blinken’s proposal.

**On 21 April**, Turkey postponed the planned peace conference, due to the Taliban’s failure to confirm attendance

As of **late May**, US policy remained that a peace conference should go ahead in Istanbul, to complement negotiations in Doha, where substantive IAN have yet to begin. Taliban have announced suggestions for a Turkey meeting which directly contradict the US approach.

The Republican side and some diplomats working in support of the negotiation process were surprised by the Taliban reluctance to move beyond procedural issues. However, the Taliban approach was consistent with what negotiators had described to their counterparts in Pakistan – lay down conditions and then wait as long as is necessary for the other side to compromise and accept them. It took three months for a compromise to be agreed, in which the two teams acknowledged multiple documents, including the US-Taliban

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agreement as under-pinning the talks. The sides agreed a similar compromise on the agenda, whereby both sides submitted lists of priority agenda items and agreed to pursue the composite list. However, the delay in moving to full plenary negotiations meant that the context shifted again, with the US presidential election and defeat for President Trump. This injected a new element of uncertainty into the Taliban – government talks. The parties agreed a winter break once they were able to announce agreement on the rules and the agenda, which enabled both negotiating teams to return to their headquarters for consultation before addressing the substantives.

Once the two delegations had assembled in Doha, the Taliban refused early consideration of a ceasefire. The Taliban view violence as their primary leverage and were determined to continue to press that advantage over the government forces. While the text of the Doha Agreement provided for a “comprehensive and permanent ceasefire” to be agreed along with the political settlement, the Taliban insisted that a ceasefire had to await the formal start of intra-Afghan negotiations. The Republic, on the other hand, argued for an immediate ceasefire. This demonstrated the Taliban determination to continue their military campaign until their conditions for intra-Afghan negotiations were met.

**The republican delegation in Doha performed above expectations** in the sense that, despite the diverse political backgrounds, they rapidly built a consensus and developed a modus operandi. They were united by a sense of the importance of pursuing peace while safeguarding against the return of Taliban rule.

**There was a concern that the republic might fragment – but this did not happen**  
 The loose political coalition defining the Islamic Republic held together surprisingly well in the face of the multiple challenges posed by the peace process. An outright political crisis was averted during the power struggle around the 2019 presidential elections and the negotiation and implementation of the May 2020 political deal between the Ghani and Abdullah camps. The Taliban made multiple overtures to senior political figures in the Republic suggesting collaboration, but apparently failed to win over any significant figure. The SRAR tried to cultivate a constituency within the Republic prepared to support the replacement of the government with an interim set-up, an idea that had been discussed among Kabul elites in several quarter for some time. President Ghani regarded this as an existential threat. In any case, the idea of a “peace government” never really caught on, despite the fractiousness of Kabul elite politics. National politicians continued to deal with and recognise the authority of the government, the electoral dispute was ultimately resolved with a new political agreement between the two main teams. All but a handful of leadership level political figures joined the relevant level of the HCNR and factions continued to accept the Republican negotiation team as representing them in the peace process. The main reason for this cohesiveness in the face of internal grievances and external pressures was Republic politicians’ common interest in resisting Taliban takeover. The US did not play as active a role in brokering the Ghani – Abdullah political agreement as they did in 2014. Nevertheless, there was a consensus among most Republic politicians that continued US support was essential for their survival. Continued US support for the government encouraged politicians to line up behind it.

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**It had been hoped that the Qatar-based Taliban would push the leadership in Pakistan towards compromise and acceptance of a “grand bargain”. But there is evidence for the opposite.** Mullah Baradar and his associates in Doha became the public face of Taliban participation in the peace process. Hopes for progress from the February US-Taliban agreement towards a comprehensive Afghan peace settlement rested upon the idea that the Taliban diplomats in Qatar would appreciate the logic of the grand bargain that the Taliban were being offered and then convince their comrades in Pakistan to embrace it. The grand bargain underlying the negotiations was that the Taliban would take a substantial share in a plural state, achieve international legitimacy and gain access to international resources to finance the Afghan state post-settlement, in return for embracing political compromise with the Islamic Republic and ending their military campaign. However, it appears that Mullah Baradar did not raise the idea of political compromise with Taliban leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Instead, they enabled the notion to take hold that the US-Taliban deal represented a victory over the US that would allow the Taliban to take power after US withdrawal.

### **Complementary elements of the peace process**

#### 2.5 Account of the pursuit of the regional and international consensus, 2018-2021

The United States sought to build a consensus among regional powers, and international powers with a track record of engagement in Afghanistan, in support of direct negotiations with the Taliban eventual military withdrawal. It had long been recognized that regional and other stakeholders would have to be satisfied that an Afghan political settlement did not compromise their security interests if it were to last. US financing of the Afghan security forces over two decades had brought a semblance of political stability to Afghanistan, and security benefits by containing the aggressive jihadi groups which have operated in Afghanistan. Therefore, the US wanted to ensure that countries which had benefited from the US stabilisation of Afghanistan during its military intervention should accept a stake in the process of stabilising Afghanistan after the withdrawal.

In advocating for support of the process, the SRAR emphasised the US-Taliban security negotiations were setting conditions for a ceasefire and political settlement. The SRAR encouraged the powers to prepare for delivering assistance in the post-agreement phase. In that sense, the SRAR’s peace narrative provided a counter to the Taliban’s victory narrative. By focusing international and regional partners’ attention on post-settlement assistance, the SRAR was able to hold out to the warring parties the prospects of a peace dividend.

The US Secretary of State and several international envoys attended the 29 February 2020 agreement signing ceremony in Doha. Their presence and a statement of endorsement by NATO members boosted the international legitimacy of the agreement. This had been a concern for the Taliban negotiators who had used the idea that they were signing an important international agreement with the US to convince the leadership to authorise them to go ahead.

Beyond the signing ceremony, the US encouraged the formation of a support group of countries with missions in Doha able to contribute to the facilitation of the Intra Afghan Negotiations. Along with the US, Norway, Germany, Uzbekistan and Indonesia deployed

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diplomats and offered support to the Qatars hosts in facilitation of the talks. This role was however strictly limited, because the Taliban and Qatars preferred to avoid any formal external facilitation.

The efforts to build and maintain an international consensus in support of the peace process were successful insofar throughout the two and a half years, western allies and the regional powers gave numerous statements of support and called on the Afghan parties to fulfil their obligations. While some, had reservations about US concessions to the Taliban and pressure on the Afghan government to release Taliban prisoners convicted of heinous crimes, these concerns did not lead them to breaking with the US. This criticism was reflected in EU readiness to offer public support to Afghan government positions. But the specific break in consensus had no practical adverse implications for the conduct of the peace process.

An area which tested the international consensus around the peace process concerned the regional and international powers which hosted Taliban political delegations. The main Taliban envoy and his Doha-based colleagues travelled extensively, including to Moscow, the Central Asia republics, Turkey, Beijing and Tehran. In its international outreach, the Taliban delegation in Doha styled itself as a foreign ministry in waiting. The envoys travelling to capitals presented themselves as representatives of a movement which had successfully concluded a treaty with the United States, and which hoped soon to achieve political power in Afghanistan. Most countries received the Taliban envoys with a significant level of protocol and the Taliban were able to use the optics of their reception to build upon the victory narrative. They were able to tell their rank and file that they had in effect achieved international recognition. Supporters of a negotiated settlement would have preferred that the Taliban representatives be received in a more low-key manner consistent with their status as a party to peace talks, not government representative.

By March 2021, the US concluded that the peace process was not proceeding fast enough and launched an effort to broaden the process to include regional and international players at a conference in Istanbul scheduled for April 2021. This was conceived of as a high-profile effort to increase the international pressure on both the main Afghan parties to accelerate the process and arrive at a road map for a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement. The US circulated a draft provisional agreement, as a way of pushing the parties to lay out their positions on the key issues of form of government, constitutional reform and security. The move to Turkey was calculated to involve another powerful Muslim country as a stakeholder, which would hopefully push both sides towards a settlement, while keeping other facilitators such as Qatar, still engaged. In addition, the US proposed that the UN take a role as facilitator, alongside the important role of Qatar as host of the talks in Doha. An expanded role for the UN had been considered at several stages during the process. US support for UN facilitation was ostensibly designed to capitalise on the perception of the UN as a neutral body but was also understood as providing an option for the SRAR to pass on some of his mediation role to the world body.

## 2.6 Account of Pakistan's role in the peace process

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Pakistan's long border with Afghanistan and its hosting of both a large refugee population and much of the Taliban movement leadership made it an inevitable player in the peace process. The Pakistan had a clear interest in the outcome of the process, and the ability to use its influence over the Taliban in favour of a settlement or to act as a "spoiler". The logic was that progress towards peace in Afghanistan and a managed US withdrawal improved security in Pakistan and created economic opportunities. Conversely, a badly managed US withdrawal from Afghanistan, leading to civil conflict, expansion of the power of militant jihadist organisations and ultimately a Taliban victory, would adversely affect Pakistan more than any other state. Furthermore, Pakistan had long felt threatened by the expansion of Indian influence in Afghanistan. As an important participant in the Afghan peace process, Pakistan could try to mitigate India's influence in the country. However, key parts of the Afghan leadership believed the Taliban to be a proxy of the ISI with little autonomy in decision-making. Thus, any attempt to negotiate with the Taliban was essentially a charade, as all important decisions must be referred to the ISI advisers. While it would have been possible for the Pakistan military to decide that a settlement suited its interests and to back it, hard-line Pakistan sceptics in Kabul assumed that the ISI and the Pakistan Army would prefer to play a "double game" of publicly proclaiming support for peace, while continuing to back their proxies' fight against the Afghan government.

The SRAR deliberately made an early visit to Pakistan, to seek the civilian and military authorities' support for the process. He was remarkably successful in obtaining the cooperation of the Pakistan authorities given his previous reputation as a Pakistan hawk.

**The US invested significant effort in obtaining Pakistani cooperation** with the peace initiative. It relied upon the Pakistan army as a key interlocutor with the Taliban, to urge the movement's compliance as the initiative unfolded. In return, Pakistan received reassurance that its concerns were being addressed in the shaping of the post-US intervention Afghanistan and there were visible steps towards a warming of the US-Pakistan relationship. Pakistan's most concrete early assistance was the release of Mullah Baradar, so that he could take up a position as head of the Political Commission and chief negotiator.

The US and Pakistan faced a dilemma regarding the presence of the Taliban leadership in Pakistan. This had previously been cited by both the US and the Afghan government as evidence of the Pakistan's complicity in Taliban violence. But, if the US was to draw on Pakistani influence over the Taliban to reach a settlement, the presence of the leadership in Pakistan might prove an asset. The decision to focus the negotiating efforts in Qatar somewhat alleviated the dilemma. The Political Commission in Doha became the visible face of the Taliban Movement, which engaged with all relevant international actors, and which did not have a Pakistani stamp on it. Mullah Baradar and other members of the Political Commission, on visits to Pakistan, had publicised meetings with the Foreign Minister and others, in line with appropriate protocol. But, in reality, away from the cameras, they met with the ISI and others, where substantive issues were discussed.

The Taliban leadership regarded their relationship with the Pakistan authorities as strategically important because their access to the safe haven in Pakistan had been crucial to the success of their insurgency inside Afghanistan. Therefore, when the Taliban were faced with demands that they negotiate with the US and the Afghan government, Taliban

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leaders first considered the implications for their relationship with the Pakistan authorities and then the broader implications of the negotiations, in terms of outcomes and perceptions. Pakistan's principal role, from 2018 onwards, was to convey messages and advice to the Taliban leadership regarding the movement's involvement in negotiations and response to other peace process moves. Taliban reported that the most consistent message conveyed to them by the Pakistani authorities was to stay at the negotiation table. Taliban claimed that the Pakistani authorities generally refrained from advising them on actual negotiating stances. However, once Intra Afghan Negotiations started in Qatar, Republic negotiators soon concluded that the Taliban negotiating team received strong and binding external advice, which they assumed came from the Pakistani authorities.

Throughout this phase of the peace process, public messaging conducted by the Pakistan government supported the process and advocated Taliban compliance with it, including in areas such as reduction of violence where the Taliban were reluctant. However, the Pakistan authorities did not appear to apply any more direct pressure on the Taliban inside Pakistan, either to comply with requests from the SRAR regarding negotiations, or to hold back from military operations. Instead, Taliban headquarters in Pakistan continued to function unhindered throughout the period. Pakistan, in particular Quetta, Peshawar and Thal continued to function as the rear-base for the Taliban's military campaign in Afghanistan. Taliban forces continued to benefit from facilitation by the Pakistan military, unaffected by the diplomatic moves. The SRAR recognised that the Taliban would insist upon continuing to fight while the negotiating process continued. But their Pakistani hosts also supported a classic "talk and fight" strategy.

## 2.7 Attempts to achieve a general ceasefire and reduction of violence

Given that part of the impetus towards the 2018-2021 peace process was derived from the June 2018 temporary ceasefire, there was widespread expectation among actors involved in the process that it would lead to further temporary ceasefires and ultimately a general ceasefire. The SRAR built this expectation into the original peace process architecture, by providing for a ceasefire as one of the four pillars to be agreed. The demand for a ceasefire was one of the points of agreement among the different constituencies on the Republic side and was at the top of the Republic's list of negotiations agenda items. However, these actors seem to have under-estimated the strength of Taliban resistance to the idea of general ceasefire. Thus, while both sides continued to observe three-day ceasefires over subsequent Eids (with fraternisation prohibited by the Taliban), but that there was no progress towards a general ceasefire.

In the first phase of the US-Taliban negotiation, prior to February 2020, the Taliban refused to discuss a ceasefire, on the basis that they must first settle the issue of foreign troops. This was the main focus of the US-Taliban negotiations and thus the US adjusted its expectations, consigning the issue of ceasefire and Intra Afghan Negotiations, to the second phase of negotiations to be addressed once there was a US-Taliban agreement.

In internal discussions, it became clear that the Taliban had two main objections to entering a ceasefire. First, Taliban leaders believed it was military leverage which had persuaded the

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US to negotiate with them, and that any concessions could only be secured if they continued the military campaign. Second, partly on the basis of the June 2018 ceasefire, they doubted their ability to maintain discipline and keep fighters in their units if they were allowed to pause the fighting for anything other than a short interval.

As the US side sought to finalise its agreement with the Taliban after the resumption of their talks in December 2019, they still faced demands for a ceasefire from the Republic side. Therefore, the US and Taliban agreed a “Reduction of Violence” formula in place of a full ceasefire. The assumption was that a reduction in attacks and casualties would constitute a tangible peace dividend, but Taliban commanders would be free to keep their men in the field and operating, if at a lower tempo, which would mitigate the risk of them drifting into civilian life.

The US required that the Taliban observe an 80% reduction in violence levels for a week as a condition of proceeding to sign their agreement in Doha. The Taliban successfully passed this test, which was again widely interpreted as a proof of the effectiveness of their command and control and of the ability of the Political Commission in Doha to communicate decisions on behalf of the movement as a whole, which would then be honoured by the military. However, the disruption to the Taliban campaign by the one- week pause was limited by the fact that it took place in February, when most Taliban armed groups had yet to emerge from their winter break. While the requirement for the one-week pre-signing pause was unambiguous, the US Secretary of State and military commander (of RS) further stated that the US was entering into the agreement on the understanding that the Taliban would, after signing, deliver a “meaningful and sustained” reduction in violence. This was not reflected in the text of the agreement.

Once the US-Taliban agreement had been signed, the Taliban did cease operations against international forces and any Afghans protecting them, as they had agreed. However, the degree to which the Taliban complied with verbally agreed restraint measures became a subject for debate. The Taliban committed to suspend their suicide bomb campaign against targets in Kabul and to refrain from attacks on provincial centres. The SRAR subsequently asserted that the Taliban also refrained from attacks on district centres, but others claimed such attacks remained frequent. The most meaningful of these measures, in terms of reduced civilian harm, was the pause of the Kabul suicide bomb campaign which was largely the work of the Haqqani network which operated under the protection of the ISI. However, violence in the capital continued, shifting to attacks which were less politically compromising for the Taliban. Some complex suicide attacks continued but responsibility for these attacks remained ambiguous and contested. Less ambiguous was the new campaign of targeted killings, in Kabul directed against figures associated with the government, both military and civilians, such as civil society and media figures. Although the Taliban officially denied responsibility for these killings, the movement had a track record of assigning “guerrilla” squads for such targeted killings in government-held towns and administrative centres. The US military and the Afghan authorities concluded that the target killings in Kabul were primarily a revised version of the prior Taliban campaign.

The Taliban did not fully adhere to the agreed prohibition on full-scale attacks on provincial centres. While they did not capture any provincial centres in the year after the Doha

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Agreement, in the last quarter of 2020 they launched large scale assaults on the provincial centres of Kunduz, Helmand and Kandahar, all of which were only repulsed by coordinated action from the ANDSF and US forces, including significant aerial bombardment. Taliban forces did observe a form of restraint in these provincial scale operations as well as other attacks on district centres. While attacking the security perimeters and taking the ground around these centres, they held their forces back from a final assault. This restraint made sense for the Taliban in military terms because it meant they could tighten their sieges of multiple administrative centres without risking the high casualties which they would suffer when trying to overrun military bases.

Debate on over-all levels of violence continued through 2020 and into 2021. The best way to describe the Taliban campaign after February 2020 was that Taliban continued a high level of violence calibrated to be arguably consistent with the Doha agreement. Taliban initiated attacks largely cancelled out the gains from the reduction in Kabul suicide bombings and reduced US aerial bombardment. Any hopes that the peace process would bring reduced violence and civilian harm largely evaporated by spring 2021.

## 2.8 Accounts of sustainment of the ANDSF – a neglected pillar of the peace process?

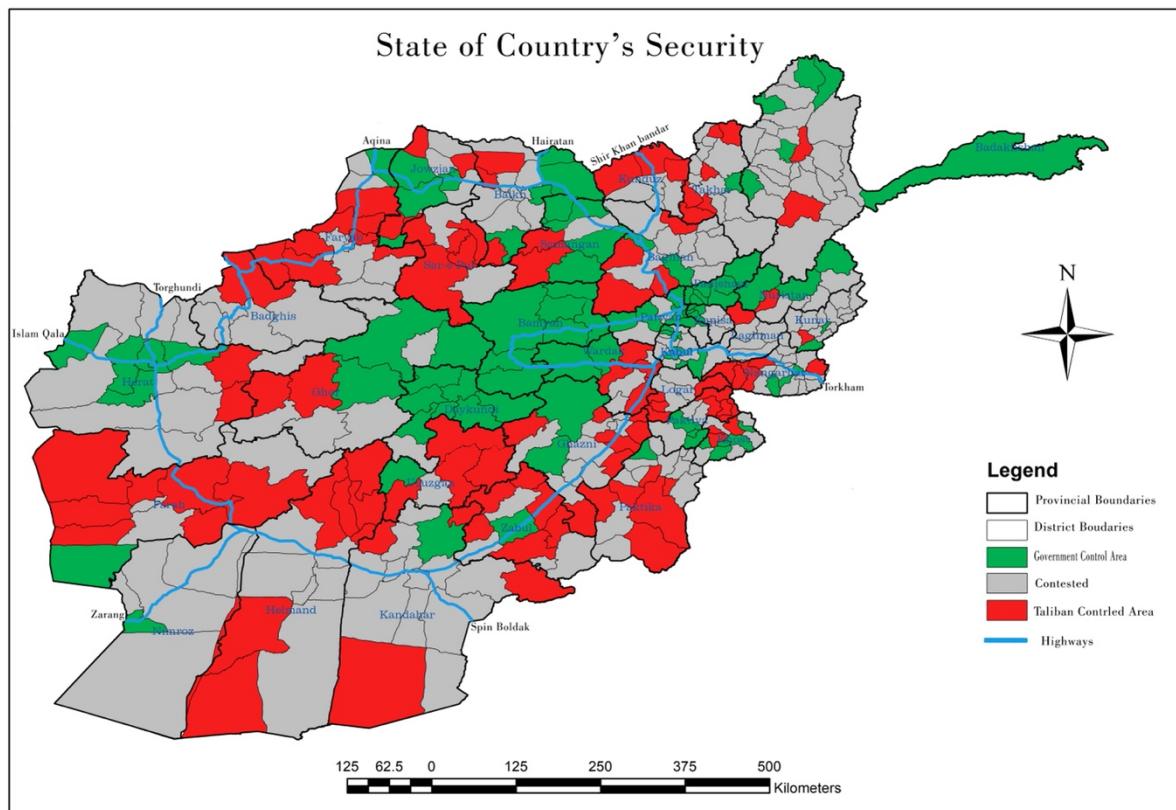
One of the key planks of the international engagement in Afghanistan has been the assistance to the national security forces. This was the principal role of NATO's Resolute Support mission, as well as one of the key donor priorities. Capacity building and sustainment of the ANDSF have long been acknowledged as priorities within the stabilisation agenda. These lines of activity were rarely discussed in the context of the 2018-2021 peace process, although the US and other donors had stated throughout that they would continue financial support to the security forces, subject to stricter accountability of donor funds. The lesson from the 1989 Soviet withdrawal was clear: the PDPA regime succeeded in holding the army together and creating a window for political negotiations as long as it retained access to Soviet material assistance. In the transition away from the US military intervention, it is important to continue support to the ANDSF, to hold open the possibility of a national level settlement.

The two key remaining areas in which the ANDSF depend on external support are air operations and finance. In spring 2021, SIGAR assessed that an abrupt withdrawal of US personnel involved in supporting Afghan air operations would lead to a rapid reduction in the capability of the Afghan air corps, at a time when planes and helicopters are fundamental to the Afghan war effort. The majority of funding for the army, police and intelligence service still comes from the US and other western donors. Maintaining steady access to resources is critical to the survival and effectiveness of the ANDSF, The US-Taliban negotiations and the agreement had a negative effect on ANDSF morale. Despite attempts by the Afghan government to invoke national unity, some in the ANDSF concluded that the political elite intended to save itself by cutting a power-sharing deal with the Taliban. Those tasked by the Taliban with outreach to the ANDSF seized upon soldiers' fears of abandonment to encourage them to surrender to the Taliban as soon as possible.

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After the US-Taliban agreement, while the Taliban military campaign against the Afghan government, changed little, US action against the Taliban, especially aerial bombardments, was greatly reduced. During 2019, US forces aggressively pursued Taliban forces. In 2020, after the agreement, the US only conducted bombing raids against Taliban forces which were directly attacking Afghan positions. They restricted these strikes to the duration of the attack and after checking with the joint military liaison in Qatar, to ensure compliance with the agreement. This amounted to an abrupt reduction in US air support provided to Afghan forces, while there was no corresponding reduction in pressure from the Taliban. This pushed the Afghan forces to rely on their ground operations (for example increased use of D30 artillery pieces in support of ground forces) and the Afghan air-force, whose capabilities far lag behind those of the US. The net result was that Taliban forces enjoyed greatly enhanced freedom of manoeuvre throughout Afghanistan. Taliban forces' morale and effectiveness were boosted and those of Afghan government declined. The restriction on US support to the Afghan forces helped to tilt the military balance in favour of the Taliban. The outcome of this tipping balance, by the end of the peace initiative, is illustrated below. By June 2021, the Taliban controlled more districts than the government. They dominated a majority of Afghanistan's highway sections, as commercial or military traffic travelling between most regional centres had to pass through one or more Taliban-controlled stretches, where there was a risk of Taliban check-points or ambushes.

Figure 1 Control of Afghanistan's Districts and Highways, as of 21 June 2021



Source: key informants in Kabul and regions, interviewed by researchers and updated to 21 June 2021

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### 3 - Findings - taking stock of the 2018-2021 initiative

The US-led peace initiative attempted to launch substantive intra-Afghan negotiations political settlement in Afghanistan, before the withdrawal of US and international troops. While it was underway, this initiative dominated the Afghan peace process. However, the effort has not yet succeeded, and the window is rapidly closing. This signals the need for updated peace process objectives and modus operandi which acknowledge that Afghanistan has transitioned to a new and challenging phase of its quest for peace.

May 2021 is likely to emerge as the point at which realistic prospects for diplomacy to begin a credible peace process before troop withdrawal passed. The US-Taliban agreement anticipated that international troops would be out by May 1.. Although the US unilaterally extended the timetable for withdrawal by up to three months, it was never realistic to expect progress on a settlement in the final weeks of withdrawal. The loss of US leverage and Taliban confidence that the military balance was decisively tipping in their favour meant that the Taliban were unlikely to make the political compromises necessary for a settlement in the period immediately after 1<sup>st</sup> May. The US push for a broad-based peace conference in Istanbul should be considered the last opportunity for a pre-withdrawal road map to peace. The conference has been postponed twice and is unlikely to be convened before all the troops are gone, while US and UN efforts continue to press the parties to attend.

The recommendations below focus on the range of actions required to contribute to the eventual success of peace talks in the new context of an Afghan state without a US security umbrella and in the face of the real threat of civil war.

The Taliban Movement emerged as the principal beneficiary of developments since September 2018. It successfully exploited opportunities presented by the peace initiative to boost its international legitimacy and raise morale of its military, while achieving its primary objective of getting international forces to agree to leave the battlefield. The Taliban deliberately build the tempo of its military campaign after the Doha agreement. As a result, whereas the war was stalemated at the start of talks, today the threat of violent takeover by the Taliban or civil war has significantly increased.

All the main actors had a share in responsibility for this state of affairs. The United States negotiated troop withdrawal with the Taliban but failed to obtain meaningful concessions from them, while significantly undermining the position of the Afghan Government. Repeated signalling from the US, that the Taliban Movement was ready for negotiations, meant that the Afghan state, the US and allies were not prepared for the alternative of a withdrawal deadline with no path to a negotiated settlement. In reality, the Taliban military remained fully focused on their “BATNA”, which was a push for victory synchronised with the US-NATO withdrawal.

The Afghan government has been widely accused of “foot-dragging”, in particular during the critical March – September 2020 period, when the US wanted to release Taliban prisoners and move to the negotiating table as soon as possible. Probably more consequential was the government’s failure to build political consensus and put on a convincing enough show of national unity to boost security forces morale, after the troop withdrawal announcement.

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Alongside the US and Afghan Government, the Taliban and their advisers must take primary responsibility for the failure of the peace initiative. They determinedly pursued their agreement with the US and successfully wrung multiple concessions from the Americans. But they did nothing to prepare their base for the compromises which would be required in an Afghan peace settlement. In effect, they turned out to be ready to accept little short of capitulation, which guaranteed there would be no progress in intra-Afghan negotiations.

Although the centrepiece of the 2018-2021 initiative was Track One talks, we identified seven strands. The outcome of each of these strands offers valuable experience to inform the design of the next phase. The June 2018 three-day ceasefire can be considered a prelude to the initiative. This ceasefire highlighted how analysis of the opaque workings of the Taliban could influence peace process design. The US concluded from the success of the ceasefire that the Taliban movement was militarily and politically cohesive. In future planning the US would take this cohesiveness largely for granted. The ceasefire ensured that the US would work through the Taliban leadership assuming that they could deliver the military whenever a settlement was reached.

The US-Taliban negotiations constituted the first strand of the peace process. The nine rounds of negotiations, from October 2018 to February 2020 demonstrated that the Taliban could negotiate in a disciplined and professional manner, with a significant degree of coordination between the leadership in Pakistan and the negotiating team. Insofar as they produced an internationally witnessed agreement between the Taliban, providing for withdrawal of US troops and a pathway to intra Afghan Negotiations, they can be considered a success. But the price paid was high and the dividends in terms of progress towards peace did not materialise. The terms of the agreement heavily favoured the Taliban at the expense of both the Afghan government and the US. And, although the agreement was notionally conditional, the US chose not to impose consequences on the Taliban for breach of conditions. In the event there was little sign of Taliban moves to restrain foreign militants, sustain the reduction of violence, embrace a ceasefire or seriously conduct political negotiations.

As a second strand, from November 2018 onwards, multiple rounds of intra-Afghan dialogue brought Taliban representatives face-to-face with the different constituencies who comprise the Afghan republic. On one level, the very fact that the dialogues happened on successive occasion proved that it was possible to convene Taliban and non-Taliban and for them to find some common ground. However, the common ground was limited to the generalities of the desire for a peaceful, united Afghanistan, with Islamic principles underpinning public life. Many non-Taliban concluded from the dialogues that the Taliban were still committed to regaining their monopoly of power. Contrary to some expectations, the heterogenous constituencies of the republic found common ground when they found themselves confronted with Taliban representatives, intent on splitting them.

Intra-Afghan Negotiations constituted a third and much-awaited strand. After six months of intense efforts by the US SRAR and the release of over five thousand Taliban prisoners, Intra Afghan Negotiations were inaugurated in September 2020 and dragged on until April 2021. However, in reality, formal talks remained procedural. There was no progress on substantive issues. The Taliban felt obliged to show some level of engagement with the talks

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process, to avoid providing an excuse for the US to walk back from its agreement with the movement. But, by the time that talks were convened, the Taliban were unconvinced of the need to settle and thus opted to run down the clock.

As a fourth strand, the US invested significant effort in shaping a regional consensus in favour of a peaceful Afghanistan, not dominated by the Taliban, after the US exit from the country. Ostensibly, all regional players were aligned in favour of the peace initiative objectives – a government – Taliban deal, US withdrawal and post-withdrawal stability. But it is doubtful whether this diplomatic consensus had much practical effect on the real course of the war. Pakistan continued its support to the Taliban, alongside cooperation with the US in facilitating talks and high-level contacts with Kabul. Other regional actors, such as Iran, Russia and the Central Asian republics hedged by expanding their operational level contacts with the Taliban.

US engagement with Pakistan can be considered a fifth strand of the peace process. This cooperation helped to deliver the procedural successes of the initiative. Pakistani facilitation and advice led to the release of Mullah Baradar to lead Taliban negotiations and helped keep the Taliban engaged in the negotiations process. However, this US-Pakistani cooperation did not generate sufficient pressure on the Taliban to pursue the elusive intra-Afghan settlement. And the Pakistan army opted to maintain some support to the Taliban military campaign, notwithstanding their cooperation with the US peace initiative.

Attempts to achieve a ceasefire or at least reduce violence were a sixth strand. The US-Taliban agreement delivered a Taliban commitment to end attacks against international forces. But the peace initiative did not result in a general ceasefire or even serious negotiations towards one. The Taliban insisted on sustaining their military campaign against the Afghan government alongside the US-led attempts to initiate talks. The Taliban gave undertakings regarding limited restraint, such as pausing mass casualty attacks on Kabul and holding back from province-level assaults. These measures notwithstanding, the Taliban succeeded in incrementally taking territory and degrading Afghan forces, all the while claiming legitimacy for participating in a peace initiative. The process did not temper the Taliban's determination to advance their goals by force.

Although this work received less publicity than the talks, support for the ANDSF can be thought of as a seventh strand of the peace process. Ostensibly Afghan government and international efforts to sustain and augment the ANDSF, to ensure that they were in a sound position to secure Afghanistan after eventual US withdrawal, continued alongside the peace talks. However, the peace initiative had several negative impacts on ANDSF capability which helped to offset the ongoing investment. By the time the initiative had run its course, the ANDSF capability to contain the threat from the Taliban was in doubt and major highways and main population centre were under threat. This vulnerability of the ANDSF is critical to long term prospects of peace. Given that the Taliban leadership held back from the option of a pre-withdrawal settlement, the long-term prospects for a post-withdrawal settlement depend upon the ANDSF holding their ground and denying the Taliban military victory.

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## 4 Recommendations

### 4.1 Principles to guide peace-making

The next phase of the peace process should draw upon the experience of the past two and a half years in which the US and allies made a concerted effort to launch a comprehensive peace settlement in Afghanistan through Track One talks before the US military withdrawal. This effort has yet to succeed, in large part because the Afghan government was not involved at the beginning, and the US focused narrowly on achieving an acceptable US military withdrawal, and the Taliban took advantage of the process to improve their position in post-withdrawal Afghanistan. A change of approach is needed to fit the current context and the lessons from the 2018-21 experience. we recommend new directions in Afghan peace-making and the following revised set of principles to guide the process:

- **Averting a civil war is a vital common interest for all Afghans and the international community.** There is a real threat of a new phase in the conflict being precipitated by the atmosphere of uncertainty and a potential Taliban effort to take power by force. Recognition of this common interest in averting the new phase of armed conflict should be the basis for all parties to participate in the peace process. the international community should stand prepared to use economic, political and diplomatic tools to pressure all parties to end violence and build peace. Continued international interest and commitment to the peace and the future of Afghanistan is likely to be key to averting a civil war and convincing the Taliban to join negotiations for a political settlement.
- **Afghan peace-making requires an integrated, multifaceted approach.** For integrated Afghan peace-making, the multiple lines of action required to end the armed conflict should be pursued simultaneously and complementarily. Actions taken by Afghans, at the local and national level, should form the basis for any regional and international support to peace-making. Lines of action in this integrated approach should include security, dialogue, violence reduction, state resilience, diplomacy and consensus-building. Through the integrated approach, peace process actors can ensure that no single spoiler or troubled negotiating track is able to block progress, and that international diplomacy is founded on Afghan ground realities. Furthermore, an integrated approach which provides a framework for meaningful participation by political leaders, civil society organizations, media, women and youth will broaden the sense of ownership of the peace process, relative to the top-down approach pursued during 2018-21. Successful pursuit of an integrated, multifaceted approach will require a rationalisation of the current peace institutional architecture in Kabul, as illustrated in the appendices, and clarification of roles of whichever bodies are retained.
- **Actions in the integrated approach should address a variety of priorities which were not directly addressed under the 2018 initiative.** In particular, maintaining the morale and effectiveness of the ANDSF should be a high political priority for both the Afghan leadership and donors. The Taliban should be held to account for their continued reliance on violence. Pakistan should be challenged over its continued hosting of the infrastructure enabling the Taliban military campaign. There should be ramped up support to local peace-making. The US should affirm its enduring interests in Afghanistan and pursue these by investing in the integrated peace-making approach and continued financial assistance.

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- **Government Reform efforts are key to peace.** As a core element of the integrated approach, the Afghan political leadership should address legitimate grievances around lack of transparency and concentration of power within national government. This will strengthen core constituency support for the Republic and disarm Taliban propaganda against it.
- **The survival of the Afghan state, with an accountable and representative national government, as a state in which all tribal and ethnic groups have a stake, is a necessary condition for peace.** The integrated peace process should therefore reinforce the role of Afghanistan's government institutions and its independent civil society organizations. Reinforcing the inclusiveness of state institutions and political processes, enhancing accountability, democratic reforms and realising the rights of the country's minorities should be restored to their rightful role as a key part of the peace process and used as a foundation for reconciliation with armed opposition.
- **The peace process should be founded on Afghan ideas of pluralism and rejection of aggression/violence.** The Taliban continued armed campaign against the Afghan government despite the agreement on withdrawal of international troops and current high levels of violence has rendered this principle vital. In accordance with this principle, Kabul peace process actors and the international community should vigorously oppose a Taliban military takeover and should appropriately sanction them for any forceful territorial gains once negotiations are underway. Conversely, Afghan leaders on the government side should commit to pursue a common national approach to peace. They should both avoid being co-opted through separate deals with the Islamic Emirate and avoid excluding the Taliban by closing off realistic routes to reconciliation.
- **Afghan peace-making should be pursued with urgency but with appreciation that the process will take time, and with a commitment to maintain international engagement throughout the implementation phase, in the event of an agreement**  
Part of the unintended legacy of the 2018-21 initiative is the renewed Taliban confidence in their ability to achieve victory. This confidence has increased the likelihood of a period of escalated armed conflict during 2021 and likely reduced prospects for achieving a negotiated settlement until 2022, or whenever the Taliban military reassess their prospects. In any case, the Afghan conflict is complex and bringing determined conflict actors into a settlement is a challenge. Therefore, international and Afghan partners in the peace process should commit themselves to a multi-year effort," but should avoid the sense of drift which preceded the 2018 initiative and should maintain steady pressure for progress on the multiple lines of actions.
- **Women, particularly those from remote and rural areas, must participate meaningfully in the peace process.** This should include women living in Taliban-controlled areas. The inclusive and meaningful participation of women increases their chances of securing their legal status. The High Council of Women of Afghanistan, in close cooperation with the High Council for National Reconciliation, can play a helpful and effective role in mobilizing, coordinating, informing and involving women in the peace process. At the same time, the international community and its role in supporting the meaningful presence of women and ensuring their rights in the peace process is key, and this support in cooperation with the Government of Afghanistan and the HCNR on the one hand, and putting diplomatic pressure on the Taliban, on the other hand, would be possible.

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- **The peace process as a whole and the work of any mediator or facilitator should benefit from rigorous reality checks**, which can be supported by a variety of independent researchers. Peace process actors should be informed of the evolving reality on the ground in Afghanistan, which will provide a check against the long tradition of diplomatic subterfuge and of actors exaggerating their role in Afghan society. The reality checks should encompass the social, cultural and political context, and the roots of violent conflict.

Pillars of an Integrated, multi-faceted peace-process:

#### 4.2 Integrated Peace Pillar One – Security

##### **Sustainment of the ANDSF**

The US and other allies of Afghanistan should maintain assistance promised to the Afghan government to sustain the national security forces (ANDSF) as the main defence against a Taliban military campaign and the fundamental foundation of political stability. These two functions are necessary to avert a civil war and set conditions for an eventual settlement. In addition to finance, the US and its allies should continue work with the Afghan authorities to ensure continuity in the provision of vital services upon which ANDSF operations depend, in particular Afghan air operations and signals intelligence. Operational requirements and sovereign decisions by the Government of Afghanistan should determine the institutional arrangements adopted to support the ANDSF post international troop withdrawal, subject to the legal requirements of donor funding. Given that the expected reduction in violence after the Doha agreement did not occur, the Afghan Government should not be bound by its provisions.<sup>13</sup> To maintain the confidence of its allies in the utility of continued support to the ANDSF, the Afghan government should ensure that all branches have highly effective leaders, and that this leadership is insulated from political and factional competition.

##### **Acknowledgement of ANDSF as peace-process stakeholder**

The ANDSF should be treated as a stakeholder in the peace process. This would constitute due recognition that progress towards a settlement depends upon sacrifices by members of the ANDSF to ensure the state's survival, as well as on the overall force's capability. Likewise, members of the security forces stand to be most directly affected by peace process outcomes. Elevating the ANDSF to the status of a stakeholder would offset Taliban efforts to demoralise security force members with a narrative that a deal has been done over their heads.

Consultations on the peace process conducted by the Reconciliation Council should include the ANDSF, to ensure that its personnel's voices and concerns are heard and incorporated into strategy, to counter any sense of alienation felt by those on the frontlines. Leaders of the Republic should rally domestic political support for the ANDSF reinforcing the message that they have a stake in the peace process and the Republic which they are defending and that there is a political consensus around the security strategy which they are implementing.

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<sup>13</sup> In the US-Taliban deal, the US committed that, in addition to its military personnel, it would withdraw all “private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel”. In working out how to service ANDSF requirements, the Afghan Government should not be bound by this.

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### **Role of ANDSF in supporting ceasefires and SSR**

The ANDSF should develop the capacity to participate in and support area ceasefires and other appropriate violence reduction or confidence building measures. The development of ANDSF expertise in local ceasefires should be used to ensure that this support is systematic and not ad hoc. The ANDSF support for local ceasefires should include deconfliction (avoidance of attacks against groups who are on ceasefire), protection (threat mitigation for areas covered by ceasefires) and monitoring. As the area covered by local peace initiatives grows, the ANDSF should dedicate significant personnel and resources to its support functions and integrate this role into its campaign plan against the Taliban offensive. The ANDSF should use the capacity and expertise developed in supporting local peace initiatives to help develop its competence for operation of an eventual national ceasefire.

### **Prospects for integration of fighters into the armed forces and demobilisation**

The ANDSF should prepare to assist implementation of any agreed process for integrating Taliban fighters into the Afghan forces. The Taliban leadership's current decision to sustain the conflict means that there is little short-term prospect of any general integration process. Instead, the more immediate prospect is for limited integration of Taliban fighters arising from LPs. The ANDSF should consolidate its expertise in integration techniques and make this available as required by progress in sub-national agreements with the Taliban. This will also enable the ANDSF to maintain capacity to conduct integration and demobilisation at scale, when progress on a national assessment allows it.

### **Curtailing arms supply to the Taliban**

There should be a renewed effort to restrict the ability of the Taliban to acquire advanced weapons systems and the materiel on which it depends to sustain its armed campaign. Current items of concern include thermal imaging equipment, which the Taliban have imported in significant numbers to boost their sniping capability, military drones which they seek and explosive materials which they import in bulk through Pakistan to fuel their IED campaign. The Government of Afghanistan should be provided with intelligence and expertise to track and source these items. The United Nations should consider bans or sanctions against manufacturers or intermediaries who provide military supplies to the Taliban.

## **4.3 Integrated Peace Pillar Two – Dialogue and Taliban engagement**

### **The “end state” and alternative routes towards it**

Sustainable peace in Afghanistan will require a state which is pluralist in character, reflecting the country's diversity, and in which all citizens feel they have a voice. The most plausible “end-state” compatible with sustainable peace is a reformed version of the current Islamic republic, under-pinned by a political agreement which brings Taliban on board as a member of the coalition which supports the state.

Afghanistan and its allies should remain open to the option of a grand bargain-style peace settlement negotiated between the Afghan government and the Taliban, in which the Taliban ends the armed conflict and integrates with the state in exchange for an agreed set of reforms. However, they should also recognise that this option is unlikely in the short run.

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The alternative route towards a settlement involves a more bottom-up approach. This would require successful resistance by the ANDSF to the Taliban offensive and area peace deals in which local Taliban are persuaded to halt their offensives in exchange for a share in local decision making. This would, over time, reduce the credibility of Taliban leadership claims to be in the verge of victory. This in turn could either persuade the Taliban leadership to return to the negotiating table or establish the conditions for incremental peace-making involving such parts of the Taliban which were prepared to leave the fight.

### **The future of “track one” peace negotiations**

Effort to keep “track one” negotiations going should continue, although prospects for real progress are likely minimal in the short run. Future international support for this effort should emphasize the need for compromise on all sides, and discourage any Taliban expectations that they can assume power by force and maintain international acceptance.

The Afghan government and international facilitators of the track one talks in Doha should indicate their readiness to continue these negotiations with the representatives of the Taliban leadership. They should protect the forum in Doha as a venue where Afghans can safely explore options for a settlement and communicate with the Taliban leadership. Facilitators and the negotiating teams should pace themselves to be able to pursue talks into 2022 or beyond. Any hiatus could be used by facilitators and the government team to update the peace roadmap underpinning their negotiating position, in the light of developments on the ground. The peace process actors should also review ways in which to discourage the Taliban delegation in Qatar from exploiting its presence to boost the military effort (for example through fund-raising and propaganda).

### **Resetting engagement with the Taliban**

During 2018-2021, peace diplomacy shifted away from a condescending approach to the Taliban in which they were expected, in effect, to capitulate. Both the government and its international allies dealt with the Taliban more respectfully and seriously as a political force, with whom they sought political accommodation rather than capitulation. This pivot was appropriate and should be sustained.

However, the approach to engagement with the Taliban should be recalibrated in the light of the Taliban leadership’s exploitation of their presence in Qatar to travel internationally to strengthen their armed campaign and project their victory narrative; their reluctance to begin serious substantive negotiations, and their reluctance to take into account the war fatigue within Taliban ranks<sup>14</sup>.

Alternative approaches to engagement with the Taliban building on these observations should include:

- The international mediator and Reconciliation Council should broaden their engagement with the Taliban to include credible figures within the movement who have influence and are prepared for meaningful dialogue.

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<sup>14</sup> We also propose measures to ensure that the government remains practically and visibly committed to achieving peace. Measures to reduce the Taliban’s ability to exploit the peace process should be part of a balanced effort to keep the parties focused on ending the war.

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- The UN Sanctions Committee should tighten its use of the sanctions against the Taliban figures not directly engaged in negotiations. Member states should then enforce the implied travel ban.
- The Afghan government should unilaterally try to include a small number of former senior Taliban officials to appropriate and prominent state positions, including cabinet, as a way of practically demonstrating the capability of the government to provide a role and voice for former Taliban. This can then be used to build the narrative that post-international troop presence, Taliban would be welcome in the government and therefore need not continue fighting for the Emirate. The Reconciliation Council should screen candidates for such roles to ensure that they contribute positively to the public discourse on reconciliation. The Reconciliation Council should also systematically work with any such Taliban appointees to ensure that they use their new role for confidence building within Taliban networks.

### **Prisoners**

The Afghan authorities should adopt an unambiguous policy against any mass prisoner release until a general ceasefire is in place. To support this policy, the Afghan government should objectively assess the impact of the mass prisoner release conducted during 2020. Mediators involved in the peace process should not repeat the mistake of pressing the Afghan government for another mass prisoner release.

With mass prisoner release put on hold until a settlement, the government, perhaps acting through its HCNR, should engage Taliban prisoners as an important political constituency, with a stake in reaching a settlement, rather than treating them as a bargaining chip. The prison dialogue could develop into an important forum to address final settlement issues and identify confidence building measures. Importantly, the prison dialogue could engage particular Taliban networks linked with specific area peace initiatives. Expanding the engagement with prisoners is one of the ways in which the Afghan peace process can be broadened to include multiple lines of action, to move beyond the Track One negotiating track, which dominated during 2018-2021.

#### **4.4 Integrated Peace Pillar Three – Violence Reduction**

##### **General ceasefire**

Afghanistan should continue to press for a general ceasefire as a first step in any revival of the peace process. The ANDSF and political leadership should develop and keep updated credible plans for implementing such a ceasefire. However, Afghanistan and allies should assume that the Taliban leadership will continue to oppose any general ceasefire until they have exhausted opportunities to advance militarily. The main contribution of the ceasefire demand will be to contribute to the narrative that the Taliban are the party responsible for continuing the war.

##### **Local peace and area ceasefires**

In advance of the possible eventual national settlement, the government, possibly acting through its HNRC, should systematically pursue Local Peace Initiatives which provide

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opportunities for moving incrementally towards an eventual sustainable peace. The common denominator in such Local Peace Initiatives should be a ceasefire, to hold until a national settlement is in place. The scope of LPs, and the range of cooperation mandated by them, should be allowed to vary according to local conditions. Potentially they could even address participation in local administration in erstwhile Taliban-controlled areas, with the government recognising officials appointed based on local consensus. Such local peace initiatives should draw their legitimacy from cooperation between accepted civilian community representatives and insurgents in the area, who are prepared to act independently from the Islamic Emirate's leadership. The Afghan authorities should vigorously encourage the spread of such local ceasefires, ensure a "peace dividend" to the areas covered and link the ceasefires to a national dialogue. The national dialogue would allow the pioneers of local peace initiatives to contribute to "end state" issues, drawing upon their competence and authority within the insurgency and local community. Support for local peace initiatives should be informed by a "theory of change" through which multiple local actions help progress towards a nationwide ceasefire and settlement.

#### 4.5 Integrated Peace Pillar Four - State Resilience

##### **Strategic partnership underpins the peace process**

Afghanistan's allies and the Afghan political leadership should recommit to their strategic partnership in the light of the international troop withdrawal and the Taliban's continued military campaign. The working assumption behind the partnership should be that the Afghan state and its allies have a common interest in ensuring that the state successfully resists any Taliban effort to overthrow the government.

The Afghan state, in this context should embrace the broadest spectrum of political groups and civil society. This will help convince the Taliban that the state is in fact viable and will not fade away in the face of their military assault. Therefore, the Taliban's best option is to reconcile with the state. The enduring and broad-based international partnership with the state continues to be an important element of the Afghan state's viability.

##### **Realistic measures to enhance state effectiveness**

Afghanistan's political leadership should acknowledge that international partnerships cannot substitute for domestic statecraft and reform. The existential threat of state collapse and civil war posed by the Taliban military campaign in the wake of the international troop withdrawal and the inconclusive 2018-21 initiative warrants extraordinary measures by the Afghan political leadership. The government's leaders should commit to the compromises and limits on individual power required to maintain national unity and unified support for the ANDSF.

As an essential part of the response to the existential threat to the Afghan state, the Afghan political leadership must renew its efforts to ensure that the state is inclusive and effective. The full range of constituencies including key ethno-linguistic groups, the clergy and religious conservatives, former mujahideen, youth, women and civil society, must feel they are represented and have access to power. Progress on building that inclusivity within the government will enhance its credibility with the Taliban in advance of a settlement and demonstrate that the government need not concede to any suggested 50 percent power

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sharing with the Taliban. It should be noted that the Taliban have not claimed to be inclusive in their own ranks, as they claim legitimacy from their religious, jihadi and anti-imperialist credentials.

With regard to state effectiveness, the Afghan political leadership and donors alike should prioritise measures from the longstanding reform agenda. Addressing high level corruption would be an obvious priority, in particular as it affects security forces, senior appointments and major contracts. Emergency or radical measures to accelerate these overdue reforms should be supported as a way of increasing the resilience and legitimacy of the Afghan state in the face of the resource crunch and increased military threat. While warding off the threat of a looming civil war, electoral reforms are a less pressing priority. However, they will be required before any further attempt to hold national elections.

### **The rentier state**

In addition to urgent institutional reforms to enhance state effectiveness, Afghanistan's political leadership and international allies should also, over time, address what has been dubbed the "rentier state" i.e., the dependence of the state on rents paid from abroad, including corrupt payments and the centralised manipulation of contracts and procurement by senior state officials and leaders. One of the political priorities should be promotion of accountability and transparency to counter the perception (and reality) that state power confers access to vast revenues. Dismantling elements of the rentier state which developed during the international military presence will help counter Taliban criticism of the state and constitutes an essential element of any sustainable peace.

### **Transitional mechanism**

The unwillingness of the Taliban to suspend violence or signal readiness for political compromise means any plan for early hand over to a transitional government is likely to be exploited by the Taliban. Expectations that the US or other powers would somehow impose a transitional mechanism have caused uncertainty and enabled political actors to procrastinate in coming to grips with compromises need to move a peace process forward.

An alternative approach of keeping the current government structure in place until there is a ceasefire and agreement on a political road map is more likely to preserve critical state institutions such as the ANDSF during an extended negotiating process. this is also consistent with the Taliban approach, in that the Taliban remain committed to retaining their quasi-state structure, the Islamic Emirate, until there is a settlement.

## **4.6 Integrated Peace Pillar Five – Consensus Building and strategic communications**

### **The narrative of Afghanistan's government**

For the leaders of Afghanistan's government to rally the population and make a convincing case for sustained international support, they will require a new narrative which expresses how this republic form of government is consistent with Afghan social norms and best reflects the country's diversity. Such a narrative should challenge the notion that the post-2001 political order in Afghanistan was merely a product of imported liberal state-building. This new narrative would make it clear to Afghans what vision of their country they are defending in resisting the Taliban's attempts to reimpose their Emirate.

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### **A credible narrative of peace**

The government side also require a fresh narrative about the peace process as it moves into a new phase. This narrative should be compelling to the various pro-government constituencies as well as to members of the Taliban. Elements of the narrative should include the importance of reconciliation in the wake of US troop withdrawal, appeals to Afghan national unity and peace as a form of resistance to foreign interference, and challenging continued Taliban violence as illegitimate. The Reconciliation Council should develop this narrative and ensure that it reflects popular aspirations.

### **Strategic communication**

To achieve resonance of new narratives with both Taliban and pro-government constituencies, the Afghan state will need to improve its strategic communications. Strategic communications around peace should be rooted in Afghans' lived experiences and cultural references. Resolutions passed by ulema bodies should be included to appeal to Taliban constituencies.

### **Role of ulema in strategic communication**

The government and its HCNR should revive efforts to ensure that the Afghan ulema clearly de-legitimise the continuation of the Taliban's military campaign. These efforts should be implemented as part of the integrated peace process, rather than being conducted in isolation. They should also be structured to ensure the participation of independent ulema, who may be critical of the current government, but capable of contributing to the consensus around the need to end violence and allow a peaceful political process.

### **National dialogue and the new Afghan social contract**

The government and other stakeholders in the peace process should acknowledge the need for a renewed social contract as one of the requirements for sustainable peace. A national dialogue should be initiated as a way of building inclusivity in the peace process and enabling a public search for consensus on "end state issues", such as the place of religion in the state, economic and social rights, minority rights' guarantees, civil liberties and the structure of government.

A national dialogue approach could be used to legitimise a new roadmap to peace and determine a formula for pluralism backed by Afghan society. To ensure that the Taliban understand this expression of popular will, Taliban participation through proxies (e.g., former Taliban senior leaders, ulema considered close to the movement or local commanders involved in launching area peace initiatives) should be considered. Although the national dialogue would be fully Afghan owned, a UN role in facilitation would be helpful in signalling the meaningfulness of the process and ensuring that results could be incorporated in negotiations with the Taliban.

A key strategic role of a national dialogue would be to give expression to the aspirations of many groups within the large number of constituencies who are frustrated with the status quo and who harbour grievances around lack of social justice, corruption, concentration of power and marginalisation of the emergent new-generation leaders. Built into the concept of the national dialogue should be the idea that the peace process should address a broader

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reform agenda than that likely to be articulated by the government or the Taliban. The commitment to a broad reform agenda is necessary for the state to successfully reinforce the coalition on which the current constitution was founded.

The participation of women in peace process, and the protection of their rights, would be more effectively implemented through the national dialogue. Therefore, the High Council of Women and the HCNR, through joint and active work, can play a role to effectively integrate women in the process, and reflect the views, concerns and needs of women in the new roadmap for peace, and provide the ground for its implementation through on-going advocacy and the provision of necessary support from national and international stakeholders.

#### 4.7 Integrated Pillar Six - Diplomacy

##### **Pakistan**

During the 2018-21 process, the US pivoted away from publicly admonishing Pakistan for hosting the Taliban's leadership and calling on Pakistan to do more to control Taliban violence. Instead, it relied on Pakistan to use its influence on the Taliban to get them to cooperate with the peace process. Pakistan viewed this shift in US approach as validating what they had told the US from the beginning—negotiate with the Taliban, do not go to war with them. As a result, they did increase pressure on the Taliban to get serious about negotiations, compromise and a ceasefire, but stopped short of closing down Taliban sanctuaries. From an Afghan perspective, the Pakistan's professed cooperation was more rhetorical than practical, as they continued to enable the Taliban military campaign. In any case, Pakistan continues to hedge their bets, reluctant to break ties with the Taliban until it is clear that a political settlement in Afghanistan will be sustainable and not offer India undue influence in Kabul.

However, this need not stand in the way of efforts to improve Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral relations. Pakistan and Afghanistan should make full use of their bilateral mechanisms (mainly MFA to MFA), to develop cross-border cooperation on trade, transport, border management and regional integration.

To address the safe haven issue, Afghanistan should offer to revive intelligence sharing mechanisms with Pakistan and, through these channels, push for Pakistani action against Taliban military preparation activities taking place on the Pakistan side of the border. Afghanistan should also document to the highest professional standard possible the ways in which the “safe haven” operates and the impact it has on the conflict in Afghanistan to counter the Pakistani narrative that the conflict is purely an Afghan problem. Afghanistan should consider redoubling its efforts to mobilise diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to address the safe haven issue, realizing that Afghanistan would then have to be prepared to respond to Pakistan's concerns that the TTP has similar safe haven on the Afghan side of the border.

Afghanistan should increase its engagement with the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan to discourage any support for or involvement in Taliban activities in Pakistan. The government and HCNR should treat the refugees in Pakistan as an important constituency,

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to be included in any national consultations and dialogue on peace, so that refugee issues are on the agenda in such processes. More ambitiously, the HCNR should mobilise networks within the refugee communities to advocate for reconciliation and counter Taliban effort to appropriate refugee institutions such as madrassahs for their own purposes.

### **The region**

It has long been assumed that any Afghan peace process must include a regional dimension, as regional powers have the ability either to destabilise Afghanistan or, conversely to use their good offices to reinforce an internal settlement.

Afghanistan's key objective in regional diplomacy should be to project Afghanistan as a responsible regional actor, and shore up the consensus that the survival of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and a peace settlement built around it are the best guarantees of regional stability. Key states have already stated publicly that they do not support a return of the Islamic Emirate. The goal should be to expand that list. The Afghan government will be in direct competition with the Taliban, who will argue that they will dominate the government after the international withdrawal, and that they are responsible actors, from who the region has nothing to fear. It therefore needs a sophisticated and credible diplomatic strategy.

### **International stakeholders**

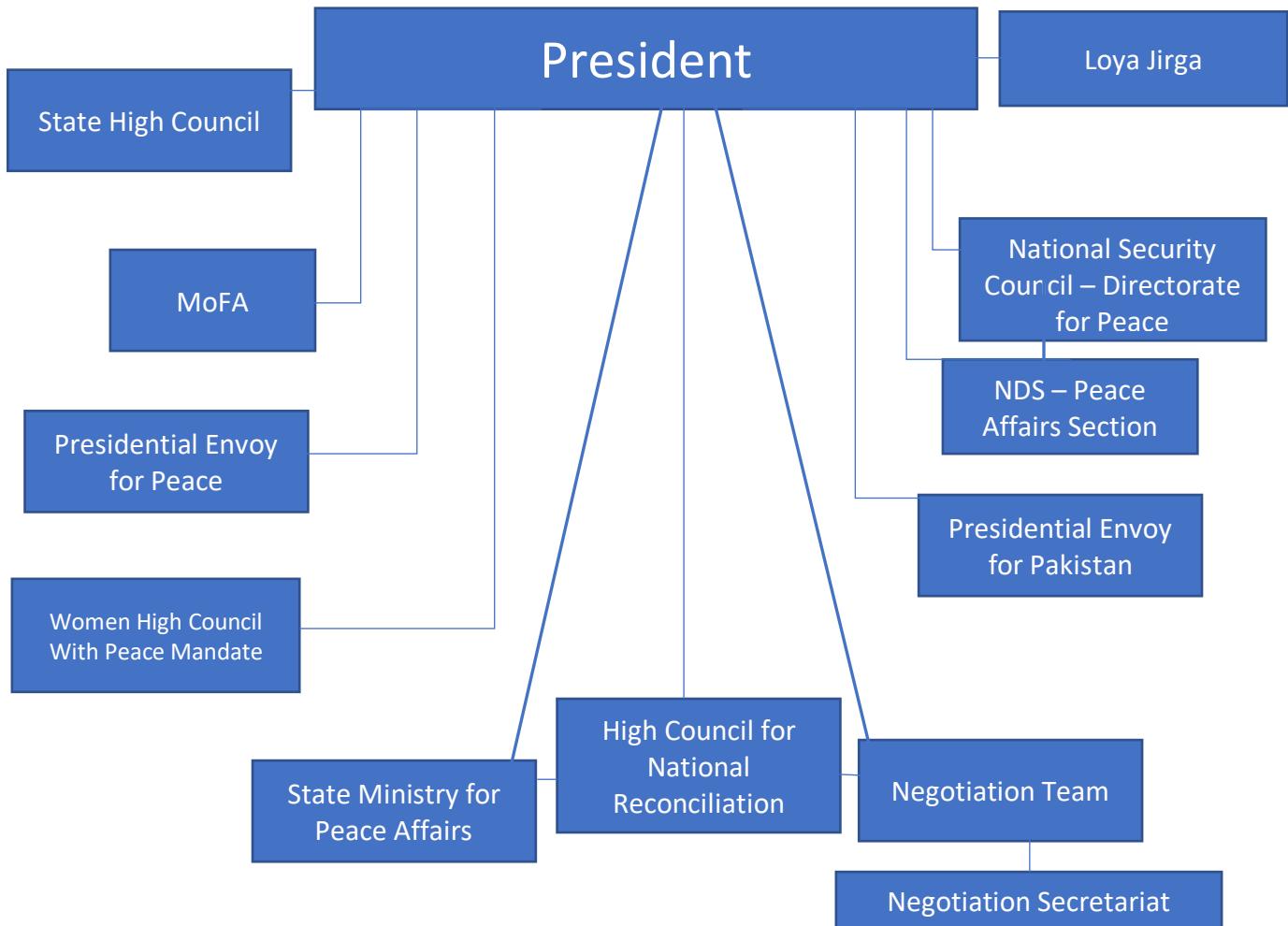
Afghanistan's key challenge in dealing with international stake-holders will be to retain their confidence so that they honour commitments to continue economic and security assistance beyond the completion of the troop withdrawal. This will require effective leadership of the ANDSF to that it can counter Taliban advances, a credible roadmap to peace, and substantial progress on corruption, accountability and inclusivity. These are major challenges given the government's past performance.

With the US led peace initiative stalled, perhaps terminally, the Afghan government is free to take the lead in redesigning the peace process. However, it should recognize the need for continued international support for the peace process, and the likely need some form of UN mediation role. This means accommodating the views of partners who have been involved in peace efforts over the years, and whose support is essential through what seems likely to be a further period of armed conflict.

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## 5 Appendices

### 5.1 Afghanistan's institutional architecture of peace



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Table: Current peace architecture elements

BODY	COMPOSITION	PEACE MANDATE
<b>President</b>	Head of executive, judiciary and legislation	Final say on all issues from negotiation strategy to security.
<b>State High Council</b>	Proposed to consist of women representatives, prominent Jihadi and Political Party Leaders	Discussion on the mandate of SHC is underway, including debate over whether it is to be executive or consultative
<b>Loya Jirga</b>	Members of parliament, provincial councils, district councils, elders, youth, women, civil society and Gov cabinet members	To decide or advise the government on national level peace issues. However, its advice or decisions are not binding
<b>NSC – Directorate for Peace</b>	NSC – Heading the three security pillars, including NDS, MoI and MoD	Directly implements peace initiatives or tasks allocated to the NSC e.g., 2020 prisoner releases
<b>NDS – Peace Affairs Section</b>	A directorate dedicated to peace affairs reporting to NDS director and NSC	Coordinates support from NDS to peace efforts e.g., Taliban reintegration and local peace.
<b>Presidential Envoy for Peace</b>	The President's Special Representative for peace has been appointed by presidential decree	Advises and represents President on peace, is a member of the Cabinet, the National Security Council, and HCNR
<b>Presidential Envoy for Pakistan</b>	The President's Special Representative for Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations has been appointed by presidential decree	Authorized individual dealing over peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan reporting to the president
<b>Ministry of Foreign Affairs</b>	Political affairs section	The ministry deals over international aspects of peace, however in limited manner
<b>Women High Council – with peace mandate</b>	Twenty-six governmental bodies' representatives are included in WHC, plus female deputy governors of the provinces	The protection of women's rights in the peace process, and efforts in this area, have been stated as the goals of this institution.
<b>High Council for National Reconciliation – HCNR</b>	Including Jihadi leaders, political groups and all segments of the society. HCNR has 46 leadership members and 7 deputy chairmen	Suppose to lead and manage the peace process, however reporting to the president
<b>Negotiation Team &amp; its secretariat</b>	Twenty-one individuals, including four women representing the Afghan Gov, coming from different segments of the society and political groups	Conducting negotiations with Taliban in Qatar
<b>State Ministry for Peace Affairs</b>	Minister, deputies and multiple directorates, with offices in all zones of the country	Operating as general secretariat of peace process, is trying to define an operational role for itself, however reporting to the president and HCNR

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## 5.2 Afghanistan Peace Process: Chronology of Key Events<sup>i</sup>

27 Feb 18: President Ghani offered the Taliban a peace settlement including an amnesty.

15-17 Jun 2018: Eid Ceasefire- First ceasefire declared by Afghan govt. and Taliban for three days of Eid since 2001

28 Jul 18: U.S.-Taliban openly acknowledged meeting in Doha without Afghan government rep

05 Sep 18: Zalmay Khalilzad has been named Trump's special adviser to Afghanistan. His job was to try to bring the Afghan government and the Taliban to a reconciliation.

13 Oct 18: U.S. Special representative for Afghan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad travelled to Doha to meet the Taliban

25-Oct-18: Pakistan releases Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar and Taliban emir appoints Baradar to lead peace talks as head of Qatar office/"Political Commission".

09-Nov-18: Moscow hosts first Afghanistan dialogue attended by High Peace Council members, Afghan politicians and Taliban delegation

5-6 Feb 19: Moscow Dialogue. Taliban reps meet with Afghan political opposition figures.

21-28 Jan 19: U.S.-Taliban begin overt bilateral negotiations in Doha

6-7 Feb 19: Kabul politicians delegation meet Taliban delegation for dialogue in Moscow.

12 Feb 19: Taliban announced formation of a 14-member peace negotiating team ahead of fresh round of peace talks with the US envoy in Doha. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar is head of delegation, with Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanakzai as chief negotiator.

20 Apr 19: Original presidential election date; later postponed to 20 July and again postponed to 28 Sep 2019.

29 Apr 19: Four days Consultative Loya Jirga held in Kabul by the Afghan government to discuss peace with more than 3,200 delegates seeking to agree on a common approach to peace talks with the Taliban. Ashraf Ghani resists being side-lined from US-led peace process

7-8 Jul 19: Intra-Afghan dialogue. Unofficial dialogue takes place in Doha between the Taliban and an Afghan civil society delegation.

28 Jul 19: Presidential election campaign period commences, ending 25 Sep 19.

22-28 Aug 19: The U.S. and Taliban reached an "agreement in principle".

06 Sep 19: Camp David Debacle. U.S. President Donald Trump reveals the collapse of a secret plan to host Taliban delegation and abandons plan to sign agreement

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28 Sep 19: Election Day.

04 Oct 19: Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, makes official visit to Pakistan as head of Taliban Political Commission (TPC)

19 Oct 19: Preliminary Presidential election results announced.

19 Nov 19: American University professors Timothy Weeks and Kevin King released by their Taliban captors in exchange for Taliban deputy leader's brother, Anas Haqqani.

29 Nov 19: Thousands of Abdullah supporters rallied in Kabul over alleged electoral fraud.

18 Feb 20: Election Commission declares Ashraf Ghani declared the winner of Afghanistan's presidential vote.

22 Feb 20: The 'reduction in violence' week between the US and the Taliban started after midnight on 22 February. It was to open the door for a US-Taliban deal on troop withdrawal and anti-terrorism guarantees.

29 Feb 20: Doha Agreement. The U.S., and Taliban sign agreement on timetable for US troop withdrawal.

1-2 Mar 20: Roadblocks. President Ghani rejects the terms of a prisoner exchange envisaged by the U.S.-Taliban agreement.

09 Mar 20: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has taken an oath for a second term. Rival Abdullah Abdullah holds his own swearing-in ceremony.

23 Mar 20: US to cut \$1bn of Afghanistan aid over failure to agree unity government.

27 Mar 20: Afghan government introduced its negotiating team to peace talks.

17 May 20: Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah have signed a power- sharing deal.

24 May 20: Eid Ceasefires. The Taliban announced an Eid al-Fitr cease fire, and the Afghan government reciprocates. On 31 Jul 20 ceasefire declared for Eid al-Adha.

7-9 Aug 20: "Prisoners Jirga": President Ghani declares he lacks authority to release 400 controversial Taliban prisoners and calls for a Loya Jirga. The Jirga approves the release.

13 Aug 20: A batch of 80 Taliban prisoners were released from Pul-e- Charkhi Prison in Kabul.

24 Aug 20: Taliban announced their 20-member negotiating team for peace talks.

29 Aug 20: In a decree, President Ghani announced the formation of HCNR under leadership of Abdullah.

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09 Sep 20: "Roadside bomb targeted first Vice President convoy as the official travelled to work. 10 civilians were killed and 15 people, including one of Mr Saleh's bodyguards, were wounded." Mr. Saleh, a former head of the Afghan intelligence services, escaped with slight burns on his face and hand.

12 Sep 20: Intra-Afghan Negotiations; Taliban negotiating team and the Afghan government gather in Doha.

21 Nov 20: Ghani introduced his cabinet nominees to WJ for vote of confidence. In three rounds of voting on 21-30 Nov and 2 Dec respectively confirmed 20 and rejected 5.

02 Dec 20: After nearly three months, the Afghan government and the Taliban have reportedly agreed on a three-page document setting out the rules and procedures for talks.

16 Dec 20: A Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar travelled to Pakistan in response to an invitation from Islamabad.

24 Dec 20: Video footage has emerged of Taliban deputy leader Abdul Ghani Baradar acknowledging that the group makes all decisions related to the Afghan peace talks after consulting its leadership and clerics' council based in Pakistan.

04 Jan 21: Ahead of the second round of Afghan peace talks, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, deputy leader of the Taliban, leading a delegation paid a three-day visit to Pakistan and met Pakistani authorities.

**05 Jan 21: Peace negotiators return to Doha for the resumption of talks between the government and the Taliban teams.**

06 Mar 21: SoS Blinken letter to Ghani and Abdullah calls for international conference to fast-track peace agreement.

18 Mar 21: Second round of Moscow platform for Afghan talks including jihadi leaders, HCNR, the Afghan government and the Taliban delegation from Qatar.

13 Apr 21: President Biden announced that US will withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan over the coming months, U.S. officials said, completing the military exit by the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks

### **US-Taliban Negotiations**

23 Jul 18: Alice Wells reportedly held talks with Taliban political leaders in Qatar and discussed progress over possible peace talks.

12 Oct 18: First round of US-Taliban negotiations. A Taliban delegation has met with US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in Qatar to discuss ending the Afghan conflict.

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12 Nov 18: Second round of US-Taliban negotiations. Zalmay Khalilzad met Taliban officials in Qatar for the second time where they discussed the issue of ending the war in Afghanistan.

17 Dec 18: Third round of US-Taliban negotiations in Abu Dhabi. Zalmay Khalilzad had a 3-day meeting with Taliban representatives during the third visit of his mission. Representatives of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE were also presented in the talks.

22 Jan 19: Fourth round of US-Taliban negotiations. "Following American acceptance of the agenda of ending invasion of Afghanistan and preventing Afghanistan from being used against other countries in the future, talks with American representatives took place today in Doha." Said Zabehullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesperson.

25 Feb 19: Fifth round of US-Taliban negotiations. Two weeks' negotiation took place between US and Taliban in Qatar. After two weeks of discussions in Doha, Qatar, American officials said they were close to reaching a final agreement on a potential U.S. troop withdrawal and a Taliban pledge to no longer allow terrorist attacks from Afghanistan.

05 May 19: Sixth round of US-Taliban negotiations. US and Taliban negotiators have wrapped up the sixth round of peace talks with "some progress" made on a draft agreement for when foreign troops might withdraw from Afghanistan, a spokesperson for the armed group has said.

03 Jul 19: Seventh round of US-Taliban negotiations. "These six days have been the most productive of the rounds we've had...we made progress on all the issues that we have been discussing," Khalilzad was quoted as saying.

03 Aug 19: The eighth round of US-Taliban negotiations. "We've concluded this round of talks that started Aug 3 between the US and the Taliban. Over the last few days, the two sides focused on technical details. They were productive. I am on my way back to DC to consult on next steps." Khalilzad tweeted

08 Sep 19: US President Donald Trump says he has called off peace negotiations with the Taliban that sought to end America's 18-year war in Afghanistan.

04 Oct 19: Taliban negotiators said they have met in Pakistan with Zalmay Khalilzad, for the first time since President Donald Trump in September called the peace process "dead."

07 Dec 19: Ninth round of US-Taliban negotiations. The United States resumed talks with the Taliban in Qatar, three months after President Donald Trump abruptly halted diplomatic efforts that could end the US's longest war.

29 Feb 20: US and Taliban sign deal on path to peace. The deal signed by U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban's Political Deputy and Head of the Political Office Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

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07 Sep 20: In a move, Taliban replaced head of their negotiation team, replaced Sher Mohammad Stanikzai with Sheikh Abdul Hakeem, a close aide of supreme leader, Sheikh Haibatullah, for peace negotiations with the Afghan government.

08 Mar 21: Khalilzad circulates “discussion paper” outlining plans for an interim power-sharing government between the Taliban and Afghan leaders.

### **Major Terrorist attacks**

21 Mar 18: Terrorist attack in Kabul claimed by ISIL, which resulted in at least 33 people killed and 65 injured.

23 Apr 18: ISIL terrorist attack on a voter registration center in Kabul that resulted in the deaths of at least 50 and about 100 people injured.

24 Dec 18: Terrorist attack in Kabul that resulted in at least 43 people killed and 27 injured.

31 Dec 18: Terrorist attack in northern Sar-e-Pul Province and Balkh Province targeted Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, resulting in at least 27 security forces killed and 20 injured.

01 Jul 19: Terrorist attack claimed by the Taliban resulted in the death of at least 35 people and more than 70 injured in Kabul.

17 Sep 19: Attacks in Kabul and Charikar, Parwan Province resulting in at least 38 civilians killed and more than 80 civilians injured.

19 Sep 19: Attacks in Qalat and Zabul Province resulting in at least 20 people killed and more than 95 people injured.

18 Oct 19: Terrorist attack in the Haska Mena district in Nangarhar Province. The attack resulted in the death of at least 60 people and almost 60 injured.

25 Mar 20: Terrorist attack took place at a Sikh-Hindu temple in Kabul. ISIL claimed responsibility, which killed at least 25 people.

27 Oct 20: Explosion hits Kabul Kawsar tutoring center killed at least 24 people and 57 wounded.

02 Nov 20: Kabul University attack: At least 32 people were killed, and 50 others injured in an attack on Kabul University. ISIL claimed responsibility for the attack.

21 Nov 20: ISIL claim responsibility for rocket attacks, which hit several buildings in Kabul.

22 Nov 20: At least 30 Afghan Security personnel were killed and at least 24 were wounded in a car bombing in Ghazni.

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20 Dec 20: A car bombing in Kabul targeting lawmaker Khan Mohammad Wardak killed at least nine people and injured 20 others. Wardak survived the blast.

13 Mar 21: Eight people died, and 50 others are wounded in a car bombing near a police station in Herat Province.

### **Istanbul Intra-Afghan Negotiation initiative**

12 Mar 21: Turkey Foreign Minister Mevlut Cayusoglu attends a joint press conference following a tripartite meeting with his Russian and Qatari counterparts and announced Turkey's conference of Intra-Afghan Negotiations to be held soon.

03 Apr 21: The Republic of Turkey, the State of Qatar, and the United Nations were to co-convene a high level and inclusive conference from 24 April – 4 May 2021 between representatives of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Turkey was to host the conference in Istanbul.

13 Apr 21: Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem Wardak said the movement will refrain from taking part in any conference until foreign troops withdraw from Afghanistan.

21 Apr 21: Turkey announced that it is postponing a much-anticipated Afghan peace conference in Istanbul until the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

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No, we couldn't win in Afghanistan. But we shouldn't leave without a peace deal. Laurel Miller, Crisis Group, 17 December 2019

Peace hopefully for a few days: a ceasefire for Eid as Helmand marchers approach Kabul, Ali Mohammad Sabawoon, AAN, 11 June 2018

Peace in the districts (1): A chasm between high talks and local concerns in Afghanistan, S Reza Kazemi, AAN, 11 Dec 2019

Peace in the districts (2): Prospects, approaches and an emphasis on a 'good peace', S Reza Kazemi, AAN, 20 Dec 2019

Prospects for peace: the way forward in Afghanistan, Laurel Miller, Crisis Group, 10 March 2020

Still ifs and whens: the US and Taliban inch towards a bilateral agreement, Thomas Ruttig, AAN, 13 Feb 2020

Taking stock of the Taliban's perspectives on peace, Crisis Group, 11 August 2020

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The Eid ceasefire: allowing Afghans to imagine their country at peace, Kate Clark, AAN, 19 June 2018

The Eid ceasefire: what did some of the people think, AAN, 29 Jun 2018

The release of Mullah Baradar: a contribution to the peace effort?, Kate Clark, AAN, 28 Oct 2018

The road to Turkestan or: more theses on peacemaking in Afghanistan. Manifest No 2, Thomas Ruttig, AAN, 28 Feb 2018

The Trump administration's Afghanistan policy, Laurel Miller, Crisis Group, 19 September 2019

Trump ends talks with the Taliban: what happens next? Kate Clark AAN, 8 Sep 2019

The US and Taliban announce agreement on Afghanistan, Andrew Watkins, Crisis Group, 21 February 020

US-Taliban agreement still in the air: debates about ceasefire versus reduction of violence, Thomas Ruttig, AAN, 30 Jan 2020

US Taliban talks: an imminent agreement without peace? Martine van Biljert and Thomas Ruttig, AAN, 30 Aug 2020

Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief

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Afghanistan Pathways to Peace

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Designing a Comprehensive Peace Process for Afghanistan

[https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Designing\\_a\\_Comprehensive\\_Peace\\_Process\\_for\\_Afghanistan.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Designing_a_Comprehensive_Peace_Process_for_Afghanistan.pdf)

The U.S. decision to withdraw from Afghanistan is the right one

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/15/the-us-decision-to-withdraw-from-afghanistan-is-the-right-one/>

What Future for Afghan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration?

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Don't abandon peace for Afghanistan

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/dont-abandon-peace-for-afghanistan/>

A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan Talks: No Women, No Peace

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Analysis – A critical stage in Afghan peace process

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Role of Pakistan in Afghanistan Peace Process

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349004908 Role of Pakistan in the Afghan Peace Process](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349004908)

Neighbors in a New Normal? Pakistan and Afghanistan beyond 2021

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US – Afghanistan Joint Declaration

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Afghan Peace Process: Prospects and Challenges for Pakistan

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