Afghanistan: No Real Peace Process and No Progress Towards Defining a Real Peace

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It should not come as a shock to anyone that we have made it through two U.S. political conventions with virtually no meaningful reference to the Afghan War and to the prospects for any real peace in Afghanistan. The Afghan conflict has become a war that most Americans have every reason to forget.

When Americans are forced to remember the Afghan War – because of a news report on some new act of violence or the latest failure to move forward towards a real peace process – they can still dismiss it on the grounds that there is some form of peace process in place and that the problem of Afghanistan is supposed to be solved in the future. Equally important, almost no American lives are being lost, and the costs of the war have dropped to the point where they no longer seem important.

The fact remains, however, that simply having debates over the release of prisoners – and over actually holding even one meaningful meeting between the two sides that have to make and implement an actual peace – does not begin a real peace process. It does not begin to address all of the complex power sharing, political, legal, constitutional, security, foreign presence, transitional arrangement, and monitoring/verification issues raised in serious outside studies of what it will take to form a real peace, such as the RAND study by Laurel Miller and Jonathan Blake.1

Furthermore, some six months have now elapsed out of what was supposed to be a 14-month process, and no one from any side has suggested what form such peace might actually take.

The Taliban has made no tangible proposals, and it still rejects the legitimacy of the Afghan central government. It has not ended its ties to Al Qaeda, has taken divided positions on peace, and has increased its level of violence against the Afghan government in some areas. To the extent it has moved toward a “peace,” it has only used ceasefires and rhetoric to try to win support from the Afghan people, and it has limited its levels of violence in dealing with U.S. targets in ways that give the U.S. reasons to withdraw.

The Afghan central government has done as much to resist U.S. pressure to make concessions to the Taliban in order to move forward in the peace process – demonstrating one of the only signs that a real unity exists in government activity. President Ghani did hold a 3,000 person Loya Jirga on the peace process in late April 2019 that seemed designed as much to produce a consensus to resist hardline Taliban pressure as it was intended to move the peace process forward. It did not produce any clear proposals, and it was crippled by the fact that Ghani’s rival – Abdullah Abdullah – did not attend.2

The U.S. negotiation of a peace agreement in February 2020 did force the Afghan government to take a more unified approach. President Ashraf Ghani issued a decree at the end of March that established a 21-member team to negotiate with the Taliban in Qatar. It was headed by his rival in the 2019 presidential election, Abdullah Abdullah, and gave the Afghan government some degree of unity in negotiating with the U.S. as well as with the Taliban. In practice, however, the Taliban initially refused to negotiate with the team on the grounds that the team did not take all parties into account – even though Abdullah Abdullah did support it publicly. 3
Ghani also held another Loya Jirga in early August to give himself more support and exercise some control over limiting the release of Taliban prisoners. On August 30, 2020, he created a 46-person High Council for National Reconciliation – again headed by Abdullah Abdullah – but with nine women with one of them serving as Abdullah’s deputy. Its membership is largely political, and once again, it seems designed more to resist Taliban pressure rather than to move quickly forward towards a real peace.

At the same time, the Afghan central government has not made any clear progress towards creating an effective process of governance. It remains all too ineffective at the political level and in dealing with the nation’s civil, economic, and security challenges. The ability of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to stand on their own remains as uncertain as ever. And, the U.S. keeps talking about force cuts without defining the actual levels involved and without showing that a peace effort can survive a full American withdrawal.

To the extent there are meaningful reports by international bodies, it is clear that the Afghan central government remains divided, corrupt, and ineffective. The World Bank has not updated its governance indicators since 2018, but Afghanistan has been scored as one of the worst governed countries in the world since the late 1960s.

The initial defeat of the Taliban in 2001-2002 did little to change these ranking, and the 2020 peace effort came after the collapse of its latest Presidential and legislative elections. No media or official reports show a meaningful improvement in any category since 2008. Both the World Bank and Transparency International have long rated Afghanistan as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and Transparency International still ranks Afghanistan as the 25th worst country in the world in 2019.

The Afghan central government government is now totally dependent on outside aid for most of its income, and it is seeking new IMF loans after new promises of reform. It now functions largely in the more heavily populated urban areas. Even where it does actually govern, it faces a massive employment crisis, a steady rise in poverty rates, and it is providing increasingly worse government services.

The World Bank issued a development update called Surviving the Storm in July 2020 that shows the Covid-19 crisis has made still further cuts in Afghan incomes, and that any recovery is uncertain at best. Its assessment of the peace process is all too clear, and few outside the actual peace negotiators would dispute it:

COVID-19 has hit Afghanistan in the midst of a difficult political transition, an intensifying conflict, and significant uncertainty regarding future grant support. A power-sharing agreement has now been signed between the two parties contesting the outcome of the September 2019 presidential elections. Implementation is now underway, leading to changes in senior staff across key ministries. While a peace agreement has been signed between the US and the Taliban, laying the foundations for negotiation of a comprehensive political settlement, Taliban attacks on Afghan security forces have intensified. The future of international assistance remains in question. The US has substantially reduced troop numbers over 2020, with further reductions likely. Current grant pledges expire at the end of 2020, and international partners are due to consider future aid commitments at an international conference in November. Without progress towards a sustainable peace and commitments to continued grant support from international partners, medium-term prospects appear increasingly grim.

There is no way to estimate how things would change after a peace settlement because no one has publicly discussed how the central government and the Taliban could cooperate in forming a government and actually governing. So far, the Taliban has not fully committed itself to even
talking to the central government, and no one has proposed any form of civil structure of governance, rule of law, and economics that could be the basis of a stable and successful peace.

What is clear is that such a government would have to get most of its income from foreign aid, and that they would have to find some way to blend modern economic and governance with neo-Salafi Islamic extremist goals. They would also have to deal with competing factions within each group, deal with massive corruption, and share an economy where the only major domestic source of hard currency income is the export of narcotics.

The February 2020 peace accords also have done nothing to affect the level of internal violence. They do seem to have led to fewer Taliban attacks on U.S. personnel, but they have not led to any major cuts in attacks and Afghan civilian or military casualties. Furthermore, the peace accords have not produced any proposal for an actual peace agreement that would somehow blend the military forces of the central government and the Taliban – allowing them to cooperate in dealing with terrorist groups like Al Qaeda or ISIS, establishing a rule of law, and avoiding new power struggles and civil conflict.

The Department of Defense 1225, the SIGAR Quarterly Reports, and the Lead Inspector General reporting in mid-2020 all show that the central government forces are not winning the war – although they also are not yet decisively losing it. Afghan versus Afghan violence remains high, and the ability of Afghan central government forces to survive in the face of the Taliban if the U.S. does withdraw is extremely uncertain.

The July 30, 2020 report to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) makes the present security situation brutally clear:

...In late June, the Afghan NSC spokesman said, “The Taliban’s commitment to reduce violence is meaningless, and their actions inconsistent with their rhetoric on peace,” while the NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, Stefano Pontecorvo, called the level of Taliban violence “totally unacceptable.”...Meanwhile, Afghanistan’s acting ministers of the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the director of intelligence were summoned to parliament on June 22 for questioning on the rise of security incidents and crime...

With regard to whether continued Taliban attacks on the ANDSF violate their commitments in the U.S.-Taliban agreement, DOD said “The assessment of Taliban compliance with the agreement is still under interagency review.” On July 15, General Kenneth McKenzie, commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), told Voice of America, “I would not say that [the Taliban] have yet [kept up their commitments] ... we expected to see a reduction in violence. And ... the violence against the Afghans is higher than it’s been in quite a while. It’s one of the highest, most violent periods of the war that we see to date. Average lethality is down just a little bit. But the number of enemy-initiated attacks is, in fact, very worrisome.”

The U.S. has also failed to provide any public indication of what its role would be in securing a peace or dealing with the war if the peace effort collapses. The U.S. may already have cut its presence to levels that make it impossible to continue an effective combat support and train and assist effort if the peace process continues to fail. The U.S. has announced some broad figures for...
total U.S. military – cuts from around 12,000 before the peace agreements to 8,600 in July, and further cuts to 5,000 by November.

The U.S. has not announced actual personnel levels or described where the cuts have taken place. There are no reliable figures as to how many American and allied soldiers are actually left, how many contractors are still being hired, and what the level of support that the U.S. is providing by way of train and assist efforts.?

U.S. Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) stopped reporting data on U.S. combat air missions and support in April 2020, although earlier data warned that the cuts in land forces might well have increased the need for U.S. air support: “The last summary, which was posted in February—the same month as U.S. and Taliban officials announced a deal to end the war—showed a high operational tempo in the country. U.S. aircraft in Afghanistan that month released 360 weapons, the second highest February total in at least 11 years.”

There also are no clear figures on how many civilians are left in the giant U.S. Embassy in Kabul or in any outlying areas, on the effectiveness of U.S. economic aid, and the actual areas the Afghan central government can still secure and govern.

A few symbolic ceasefires do not begin to define what the security aspects of a peace settlement between the central government and the Taliban would look like, and they do not show that one is even possible. They do not begin to show how ANDSF could survive without massive continuing aid, which presumably could not be shared with the Taliban or without U.S. security guarantees to intervene if anything goes wrong. And, once again, no one has yet suggested any proposal for a future government that would combine today’s central government forces with those of the Taliban. Even the most optimistic and well-meaning voices are absolutely silent as to how a peace could possibly work. Almost as silent as the U.S. government is as to what will happen if the United States actually withdraws.

About the most that can be said about the peace effort to date from a “realist” view is that leaving may be the best solution even if no peace settlement can be reached or actually work. There is some risk that Afghanistan could become a center of international terrorism, but that risk is not clearly worse than the risk in many other countries where the U.S. is not involved in a war.

There also are many other governments in a COVID-19 world who desperately need U.S. aid, who have demonstrated the capability to use outside aid effectively, and where a limited amount of money might well make a far greater difference in providing stability and ending a terrorist threat. More broadly, the U.S. has few strategic interests in Central Asia, and leaving the region would force China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan’s other neighbors to deal with Afghan instability. Afghanistan would become even more of a human tragedy, but it would not be an American tragedy.


