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# Failed Reporting and Analysis of the Afghan Peace Process

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**Anthony H. Cordesman**

There is no Pulitzer Prize for the worst media reporting of the year, but then again, there is no prize for the least transparent reporting by a government or a prize for the most serious analytic failure by a think tank. If such prizes were to exist, however, all three prizes should be awarded to virtually every source in each category that has attempted to cover the Afghan peace process. All have failed to provide the coverage and analysis needed to address the present security situation in Afghanistan, the progress in the Afghan peace process to date, and the real world prospects for some kind of meaningful approach to either peace or security.

## **No Truth and No Transparency from the U.S. Government**

It is hard to find any U.S. government statement since the signing of the February peace accords that defines what a successful peace would be; what role – if any – the U.S. would play in funding, supporting and guaranteeing a peace; and what the U.S. will do if no agreement is actually reached. For the last four years, the U.S. has also systematically ceased to report and/or has classified metrics and data that show negative trends in the war or expose the ineffectiveness of military and civil aid. The U.S. has tried to substitute seemingly reassuring – but actually nearly meaningless – metrics but has failed. And since February, it has replaced the natural “fog of war” with an unnatural “fog of peace.”

I would have to exempt much of the reporting to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and by the Lead Inspector General (LIG) from this criticism. Both have addressed some of the problems shaping the present security situation in Afghanistan. SIGAR has also gone further in its reporting, and frankly addressed the gross over-classification of negative data on Afghan security forces, the failures in military and civil aid programs, and the failure of the Afghan government to reduce its gross corruption and political divisions. It has highlighted the problems in the civil and military side as well as the Afghan central government’s massive dependence on continued outside aid if it is to survive a peace.

In contrast, the Department of Defense has slowly and systematically eliminated most of the detailed reporting on the problems in the security sector. Moreover, for the last two years, the Department of State and USAID have provided almost no detailed analysis of the problems in Afghan politics, governance, and economics.

Time is also critically limited. Eight months have already gone by, along with a still only partially reported set of withdrawals, cut in its facilities, and Afghan government failures to actually implement reforms. There already have been major cuts in U.S. and allied forces. It is now late November, and there are only six months left before the end of May and the deadline for U.S. withdrawal.

## **Think Tanks with Minimal “Think”**

As for think tanks, far too much of their analysis has failed to address these issues as well. There again are partial exceptions. The World Bank does perform many of the functions of a think tank in examining the civil problems in developing states. The IMF has also addressed some of these issues, and the UN reporting on civilian casualties has at least addressed one major problem in war fighting. But, they have been the exceptions to a broad lack of focus on the critical problems in

Afghan governance and economic development – problems the most recent World Bank studies show may well make an effective and stable peace impossible.

Other groups like the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies by the *Long War Journal* has attempted to compensate for the fact the Department of Defense has ceased to report on how much of Afghanistan the Taliban now disputes or controls, and the fact the Taliban is not complying with the February Peace agreement. Transparency International (along with SIGAR) has highlighted the almost incredible levels of corruption in the Afghan central government.

And, speaking somewhat parochially, the analysis by CSIS has focused on Afghanistan's military and civil problems as well as the lack of any public indication that the U.S. – or any element of the Afghan government – has an actual plan for a peace, as distinguished from a focus on the peace process to the total exclusion of any focus on defining and agreeing on an actual peace.

There is, however, a deafening silence when it comes down to an actual peace, what role the U.S. should play in guaranteeing a peace and providing aid, and what the U.S. should do if the peace process fails or a peace is violated. The same near silence exists over any real world effort to examine the value of staying in Afghanistan, the cost-benefits involved, and the impact of leaving the consequences to other regional powers. It seems to be bad manners to mention the parallels to Vietnam – a country we left with a far better state of governance, military forces and security, and economics; one where we did not return; and one where the “falling of dominoes” never mattered.

### **Media Coverage with No “Think” At All**

As for the media, there have been some articles on Afghanistan's civil and military problems, the Taliban's lack of any clear interest in a workable peace, and the divisions within the Afghan government. However, there has been remarkably limited coverage of the fact the U.S. unilaterally imposed the February peace agreement on a divided Afghan government, unilaterally declared it would leave at the end of a May 2021 deadline for agreeing on a peace, and has never said anything meaningful in public since February about what form a peace should take, and what kind of guarantees and conditionality – if any – it would offer the Afghan government.

There has been minimal media reporting at best about the problems that can still cripple the ability of the Afghan government's forces to survive even with the present cuts in U.S. and allied forces. The same is true of the lack of economic progress, lasting benefits from aid, and steady growth of poverty – poverty which some recent estimates indicate will rise to 68% of the Afghan people.

There has been minimal reporting at best of the near collapse of the Afghan government's local police forces, the steady decline in local governance activity, and the lack of any serious capability to enforce the rule of law in near half of the country's Districts. There have been virtually no articles on what kind of peace the central government and Taliban could agree upon, and whether any such agreement could actually be implemented or survive. (Although in fairness, America's think tanks have done no better.) Only a few articles have attempted to address even part of what would happen in terms of the role of outside states once the U.S. leaves in May.

Most recently, media reporting hit another nadir in quality. It focused on the possibility the Trump Administration might cut the remaining U.S. official military presence in Afghanistan to 2,000-2,500 military before leaving office. This follows a pattern of incompetent reporting that seems to fixate on total personnel to the exclusion of any other metric.

The total military personnel has never been much of a metric in military history. It ignores force quality and motivation. It makes any attempt to address what the personnel withdrawals did and the effect of that said withdrawal. It ignores what the remaining personnel now do, whether their numbers *and role* are remotely adequate, and what is happening to allied personnel numbers and their role.

It ignores the intelligence and other personnel who are not fully counted in the public totals for military personnel, but who have played a critical role in supporting the small number of truly effective elite units in the Afghan Army and National Police. It also ignores the fact that significant numbers of U.S. forces in a “train and advise role” have to be deployed forward, and put in harm’s way, to really be effective.

It ignores the critical role of U.S. airpower and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems in rescuing Afghan forces from potential defeats, and how cuts in forces will affect that critical capability in the future.

It ignores the dropping numbers of diplomatic and civil aid personnel, and how limited their capability in the field now is. It ignores the cuts in the number of U.S. contractors – which vastly outnumber the number of military personnel when the peace agreement was signed and many of which have performed roles that used to be performed by uniformed military. It ignores the critical role of given facilities and the number that are closing or will close, and the steady loss of any ability to understand what is happening in the field.

Above all, it puts no pressure on anyone to actually define a peace, explain whether that peace is credible, and explain how it could be guaranteed or enforced. Put bluntly, “transparency” does not consist of an intellectual vacuum, and a “free press” does not mean being free of any serious effort.

**For more details on the issues involved, see Anthony H. Cordesman’s *Afghanistan: The Peace Negotiations Have Become an Extension of War by Other Means*, October 28, 2020, available for download at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-peace-negotiations-have-become-extension-war-other-means>.**

**Also see Anthony H. Cordesman’s *Afghanistan: No Real Peace Process and No Progress Towards Defining a Real Peace*, August 31, 2020, available for download at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-no-real-peace-process-and-no-progress-towards-defining-real-peace>.**