

The Pakistan Policy Symposium



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Engineering an Endgame in Afghanistan

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Last year, **Pathways to Change – Pakistan Policy Symposium**, a two-day event jointly organized by the Wilson Center and INDUS, convened expert scholars, academics, and practitioners from the United States and Pakistan to explore Pakistan's recent achievements in economic, political, and foreign affairs as well as its opportunities to address current and future challenges. Speakers and panelists focused on identifying practical, innovative, and above all actionable policy solutions. The following series of policy briefs, which draw on discussions from the symposium, will be of interest to the academic and scholarly communities; diaspora audiences; business and policy circles; and any general audiences interested in Pakistan, U.S.-Pakistan relations, or international relations on the whole.



Afghanistan has reached a stalemate, and it is an increasingly painful one.

Recent surges of violence have caused more than 1,000 casualties among Afghan troops in just two months, adding to the striking toll of more than 28,000 killed over the last four years. The impact on the civilian population has been even more devastating. According to data reported by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), in the first nine months of 2018 there were 8,050 civilian casualties, of whom 2,798 died and 5,252 were wounded.

The upsurge in violence is largely due to the increasingly assertive behavior of Taliban forces. Thanks in great part to targeted operations against pro-government militias entrusted to guard government-controlled rural areas, the insurgents over just two years managed to nearly double their territorial control (from 9 to approximately 15 percent).

Still, despite this apparent success, the Taliban's ability to effectively contest the government's authority has remained territorially fixed at one third of the country's nearly 400 districts. This has largely been due to the still-tangible strength of the Afghan security forces in urban areas, who have enjoyed external financial and logistical support aimed at shoring up their capabilities to combat insurgencies across the country. Moreover, as a result of increased violence, popular support for the Taliban across the country is extremely low. The insurgents are perceived as the largest security threat (significantly more than ISIS or criminal groups) by all ethnic groups, especially in rural areas where attacks have been most frequent. Their ideology is too extreme for urban Afghans, who are inclined to overwhelmingly endorse notions

of political pluralism and (some) women's rights—in stark contrast to Taliban ideology. Lastly, and most importantly, while the Taliban are certainly able and willing to wage insurgency in the months (and years) to come, they are equally aware that as long as U.S. and NATO troops remain in the country, overthrowing the government in Kabul is nowhere within their reach.

However, they are also picking up important signals from U.S. officials and commanding officers, who are ardently looking for an exit strategy from Afghanistan. Conflict weariness has prompted Gen. Austin Scott Miller, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, to point out that the war “is not going to be won militarily” and that the only option for everyone involved is to look for a political solution.

Indeed, with no victory in sight, mounting costs in human lives, wrecked infrastructure, and perennially paralyzed governing institutions, Afghanistan seems to be stuck in a very destructive impasse. Not surprisingly, all sides involved, in their own way aware that outright military victory is unattainable, appear to be looking for a face-saving way out of this predicament through a negotiated solution.

In situations of this kind, negotiations may offer a suitable alternative through which core interests can be protected and promoted. More importantly, negotiated solutions generate a unique advantage as they grant much needed legitimacy to the actors and related interests that have been jeopardized by the violence used to achieve them unilaterally. However, the fact that parties may explore negotiations is primarily an indication of conflict fatigue, and in no way a guarantee that negotiations will yield a mutually acceptable solution that all parties are willing to implement. As

a consequence, whenever talks start, they may be hijacked by one or more actors for devious reasons—such as using them to stall, regroup, rearm, gather international support, or improve one’s own capacity. This is most likely if (and when) a party perceives no sense of urgency to commit to the bargaining process in a meaningful way and compromise with other sides.

Of all parties involved in the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban seems to be the least determined to engage in a consequential concession-making process. Currently, its reluctance to negotiate directly with the Afghan government is combined with the sporadic use of targeted violence—including attacks on high-ranking Afghan security officials and seizures of roads that connect to main urban centers. The employment of force is a useful off-the-table tactical tool used to improve one’s bargaining power. This tactical fortitude permits the Taliban to publicly maintain a list of maximalist demands. These include a complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the full transposition of Islamic law into the country’s legal framework, and a political system that permits the Taliban to assume a central role in any decision-making process.

While in conflict dynamics such statements are useful in order to maintain a sense of resolve and direction, in the negotiation process the ultimate goal is to look for formulas that would accommodate essential expectations that inform such maximalist public claims. To make such designs enticing, the parties involved need to perceive them as once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that need to be immediately seized, otherwise they may be lost forever.

The Taliban has been perennially incapable of recognizing such opportunities, and

rather prone to overestimating its ability to yield absolute gains. However, under the auspices of an ongoing diplomatic initiative led by U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, the Taliban leadership seems to be interested, at least on some levels, in exploring the potential benefits of a negotiated solution. At the same time, the insurgents are not refraining from on-the-ground activities that bolster their confidence in negotiating from a position of power, as evidenced by a surprise attack in January 2019 that killed 47 and wounded 54 Afghan soldiers. And yet, just a few hours after that assault took place, direct U.S.-Taliban talks were resumed in Qatar. Although such attacks do not automatically destroy the prospects of a negotiated solution, they raise important concerns about the depth and scope of the ongoing talks. In the existing circumstances, it would be implausible to expect that current talks yield a comprehensive peace agreement anytime soon. A more realistic strategy would be to look for incremental gains through a series of interim agreements that can serve as trust-building and momentum-generating devices.

As in any endgame scenario, success is contingent upon all parties’ willingness to make crucial (and costly) concessions in order to construct creative solutions. Washington has already indicated that its earlier publicly stated ambition to prevent the Taliban from seizing any form of control of Afghanistan is no longer a true priority. In 2011, President Obama left no doubt what the U.S. priorities were, claiming: “Our purpose is clear: By preventing the Taliban from reestablishing a stranglehold over the Afghan people, we will deny Al Qaida the safe haven that served as a launching pad for 9/11.” By contrast, in 2017, President Trump asserted: “Someday, after

an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but nobody knows if or when that will ever happen.”

Evidently, at the moment, the main U.S. objective is still to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven. With the ISIS threat becoming more palpable in Afghanistan, the United States and the Taliban—which is a rival, not an ally, of ISIS—seem to have some common ground.

Such (unprecedented) U.S. readiness to engage directly with its former foe and recognize the insurgents’ future role in a political solution for Afghanistan represents a unique opportunity for the Taliban. Taking advantage of this opening warrants a reciprocal move from the Taliban leadership, which needs to reformulate some of its unwavering goals. Even though publicly the Taliban has depicted the foreign troop presence in Afghanistan as a deal breaker (that is, foreign troops must leave in order for the Taliban to lay down arms), the acceptance of a more permanent presence of U.S. troops may be a pragmatic and prudent choice. Indeed, in a hypothetical case where the Taliban gradually joins the political system, there would be less reason for U.S. troops to fight the Taliban as the short- to mid-term goal would presumably be to fully disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate the Taliban fighters into (new) Afghan governing structures. As a result, the U.S. presence would no longer be perceived as an occupation, but rather as a security guarantee, able to deter any type of spoiling behavior from unenthused local actors.

In light of recent disclosures of President Trump’s ambition to pull out nearly half of the 14,000 U.S. troops currently in

Afghanistan, it is important to refrain from any radical moves that may upset the fragile (and deteriorating) stalemate that has been achieved. A sudden and drastic withdrawal would inevitably send a clear signal to the Taliban that strategic patience may work in their favor, and that it is just a matter of time before all foreign troops leave Afghanistan. Since the existing stalemate is unequivocally more self-serving for the Taliban, and the insurgents seem ready to play an infinite game, the only fruitful bargaining strategy for the United States is to focus on small incremental tradeoffs that can generate momentum and provide the Taliban with clarity about the potential gains of compliance and immediate costs of any form of defiance.

For now, the U.S. military is reportedly contemplating a withdrawal primarily within the range of 3,900 troops—roughly the same number of new American troops deployed to Afghanistan in August 2017. This may be a more prudent step: On the one hand, the U.S. and NATO military relevance would remain undisturbed, and on the other it would be a signal to the Taliban that their strategic goals may be fulfilled through a negotiated solution, if they remain committed.

While they may also look for further small concessions, such as the release of Taliban prisoners, all small gains, ideally, would be contingent on the Taliban’s willingness to commit to a much anticipated cease-fire. If the two sides can pass this threshold, then talks may expand to include Afghan authorities, thereby paving the way for the exploration of a broader and more inclusive political solution to the protracted armed conflict.

Keeping the Taliban committed would require active engagement from Islamabad.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan seems to have already proven Pakistan's pivotal role in facilitating recent talks in Qatar, and in the UAE before that. Recent remarks by U.S. Senator Lindsay Graham, during a visit to Islamabad, where he praised Khan's longstanding call for reconciliation with the Taliban, may be an indication that the United States and Pakistan are reaching a necessary degree of convergence regarding the pursuit of a political solution in Afghanistan. Needless to say, a Pakistan-backed endgame in Afghanistan would offer a unique opportunity for a normalization of U.S.-Pakistan relations.

As in any endgame, when the parties reach the last stage of negotiations, envisioning the future becomes more real. Yet everything is contingent upon a true readiness (and even optimism) not only to get out of a painful conflict, but also to get locked into a solution that fosters interdependency, mutual gains, and a propensity to expand cooperation into other societal domains.

Ultimately, the initial negotiations that have taken place between Taliban and U.S. officials in recent weeks, particularly if eventually joined by Afghan representatives, have a unique opportunity to build momentum and create enticing solutions. The tantalizing potential result could be the end of a conflict that has dragged on for more than 17 years, and the emergence of a meaningful future for Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

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