



AFGHAN PEACE TALKS AT A STANDSTILL - YET AGAIN

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On September 7, 2019, President Trump tweeted that a secret meeting with the Taliban, and a separate meeting between him and President Ghani at Camp David had been cancelled over the Taliban killing a US soldier.¹ As a result, Trump declared on September 9, 2019 that the talks with the Taliban were effectively “dead” as killing a US soldier to get the “upper hand” in negotiations was going too far.²

Despite two decades of bloody conflict in Afghanistan, the last few months had seen rekindled hope for a political solution being reached in the Afghan conflict. From July 7-8, 2019, Taliban leaders and members of the Ghani government, although in an unofficial capacity, met for the first time in the intra-Afghan Doha conference where both sides agreed to a reduction of violence.³ Following the 9th round of direct talks between the US and the Taliban in Doha on September 2, 2019 Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation had declared that the US and Taliban had “an agreement in principle”.⁴ It seemed like the complex Afghan jigsaw was finally coming together and political peace was right around the corner.

¹ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1170469618177236992>, September 7, 2019

² Philip Ewing, “Trump Fires John Bolton In Final Break After Months Of Internal Policy Division,” *NPR*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/10/724363700/trump-fires-john-bolton-in-final-break-after-months-of-policy-divisions>

³ “Doha Conference: Taliban Agrees To Reduce Violence,” *Tolo news*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/doha-conference-taliban-agrees-reduce-violence>

⁴ Anisa Shaheed, “US And Taliban Reach Agreement In Principle: Khalilzad,” *Tolo news*, September 2, 2019. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/us-and-taliban-reach-agreement-principle-khalilzad>

Had the meeting at Camp David taken place, it would have been the first time the Taliban would have negotiated with a US President on US soil. However, Trump's justification for halting talks due to the Taliban's violence against US soldiers is flimsy reasoning to say the least, since the Taliban's violence and insurgency are nothing new. Since 2001, thousands have lost their lives in the conflict, including around 2400 US soldiers, and so far 16 of these soldiers have died in 2019.⁵ However, despite thousands of deaths and ongoing violence as a result of the Taliban's insurgency, the nine rounds of Doha diplomacy over the last more than one year since 2018 had been successful in getting an agreement from the Taliban before it was shot down by President Trump. Even though Trump declared the talks as dead, they are by no means buried. According to US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, despite the US soldier's death, the US was still interested in a peace deal, clearly indicating that the apparent derailment of talks is more than just about another US life being added to the thousands lost already.⁶

Since the first round of direct talks began between the Taliban and the US in Doha in 2018, the peace process has been hostage to four interconnected issues: counter-terrorism assurances from the Taliban, withdrawal of foreign troop, ceasefire, and intra-Afghan talks. While it appears that progress had been made on getting counter-terrorism assurances from the Taliban, the other three issues have continued to linger on.

While confusion continues to revolve around Trump's abrupt decision to abandon talks, one major reason for the sudden collapse in talks can be alluded to open divisions within the US administration regarding US foreign policy towards Afghanistan. Other than the excuse of a soldier's death, infighting between Trump's internal body of advisors may have led to the derailment of the peace process and dismissal of the national security advisor, John Bolton on September 10, 2019.

Figures like Bolton had made no secret of his hawkish style of foreign policy and strong opposition towards engaging with the Taliban, and had been at loggerheads with figures like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Zalmay Khalilzad who have been strong advocates for direct negotiations with the Taliban.⁷ In the last few months, Bolton was reportedly intentionally

⁵ "Timeline: US Military Presence in Afghanistan," *Al Jazeera*, September 8, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/timeline-military-presence-afghanistan-190908070831251.html>

⁶ Sarah Westwood, Kevin Liptak and Devan Cole, "US Still Interested in Taliban Peace Deal, Pompeo Says," *CNN*, September 8, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/08/politics/mike-pompeo-taliban-peace-talks-cnn/index.html>

⁷ Peter Baker, Mujib Mashal, and Michael Crowley, "How Trump's Plan to Secretly Meet With the Taliban Came Together, and Fell Apart," *New York Times*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/08/world/asia/afghanistan-trump-camp-david-taliban.html>

excluded from key meetings on Afghanistan as many believed his demands for a tougher stance would derail negotiations.⁸ There have also been reports that Bolton had started leaking details about the Camp David talks, perhaps to derail them, showcasing how internal divisions in the Trump camp are undermining the peace process.⁹

This internal tug of war particularly on the future of Afghanistan has clearly left US foreign policy in disarray. With the emergence of the John Bolton fiasco, fissures in Trump's foreign policy team seem to be more apparent than ever, further highlighting that lack of clarity on US foreign policy towards the Afghan issue leading to the derailment of talks.

A major pre-requisite to sustainable peace in Afghanistan has always been the Taliban and the Afghan government negotiating with each other. The Taliban have historically refused to do so under the justification that Kabul is a puppet of the US. However, the Taliban are not the only ones standing in the way of negotiations, an important factor that is often overlooked is the deep-rooted political and ethnic divide in Afghanistan. Divisions within and outside the Afghan government have also been a major spoiler in the peace process. After a string of deadly attacks in the last few months by the Taliban that left over a 100 people dead in the first week of September 2019 alone, internal political pressure has been mounting on the Ghani government regarding weak governance, failure to provide security, prevent ethnic strife, as well as the peace negotiations.¹⁰

Political opposition have made it clear that they are doubting the capabilities and intentions of the Ghani government and have put significant pressure on him ahead of the September 28 elections with Rahmatullah Nabil, a former intelligence chief and critic of Ghani, stating that "national consensus on the peace debate" is badly needed.¹¹ The increased pressure even resulted in Ghani's intelligence chief, Masoom Stanekzai, having to resign on September 5, 2019 dealing a major blow to Ghani's internal government.¹²

There is also significant friction between the Ghani government and the US over what Ghani views as the US acting unilaterally in terms of the peace talks. Afghan officials criticized the US backed agreement which had been finalized "in principle" between Khalilzad and the Taliban as

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Danna Bash, "Trump Fires John Bolton: Live Updates," *CNN*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/john-bolton-trump-resign/index.html>

¹⁰ "Timeline: US Military Presence in Afghanistan."

¹¹ Mashal, Mujib, "U.S. Deal With Taliban Meets Afghan Resistance as Violence Intensifies," *New York Times*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/05/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-deal-ashraf-ghani.html?module=inline>

¹² Ibid.

not having sufficient measures to ensure stability.¹³ Furthermore, Afghan officials also cried foul that in this deal, the US had negotiated release of thousands of Taliban prisoners in Afghan jails without actively consulting the Afghan government.¹⁴ This feeling of betrayal has slowly been festering under the surface of the Afghan political Diaspora for a while, and internal fragmentation and conflict has only led to its exacerbation. Unfortunately, without the full and sincere support of the Afghan government, future talks will remain in jeopardy.

Although it was not the main reason, the Afghan Taliban's refusal to reduce their violence has always been an obstacle in the negotiations and played a significant role in the Camp David summit being cancelled. Several actions, such as the Taliban carrying out a string of deadly attacks during the 7th round of US-Taliban Doha talks which caused over a 100 casualties in July 2019,¹⁵ have resulted in the US doubting the sincerity of the Taliban's promises and intent for peace, making peace talks more difficult. Furthermore, recently in July 2019, the Taliban released a video which insinuated that the deadly 9/11 attacks were not caused by al-Qaeda but were rather a slap on the "dark face" of the US for their "interventionist policies".¹⁶ Releasing this video so close to the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks not only pushed US further away from trusting the Taliban, but also launched a flurry of ridicule from US political Diaspora regarding negotiations with the Taliban. The recent death of the US soldier is only a reflection of over 100 casualties that took place in the first week of September 2019 and the US is likely to look at any Taliban promises with even more suspicion, making the peace process that much more difficult.¹⁷

To make matters worse, the Taliban are likely to intensify their insurgency and violence as they view the "death" of the talks as a sign of political betrayal from the US. The Taliban spokesman in Doha, Suhail Shaheen, stated in an interview on September 10, 2019, that the Trump tweets took the Taliban by "surprise" and "undermine US credibility" as they had a deal that had been finalized and agreed upon by both parties.¹⁸ This sentiment of betrayal seems to be spreading in the Taliban camp

¹³ Mujib Mashal, "Taliban Talks Hit a Wall Over Deeper Disagreements, Officials Say," *New York Times*, September 8, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/08/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-camp-david.html>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "All-Afghan Peace Summit Announced Following Deadly Kabul Attack," *RFE/RL*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/all-afghan-peace-summit-announced-following-deadly-kabul-attack/30032888.html>

¹⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, and Bill Roggio, "Taliban Justifies 9/11 Attack, Blaming America's 'Interventionist Policies'," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/taliban-justifies-9-11-attack-blaming-americas-interventionist-policies.php>

¹⁷ "Timeline: US Military Presence in Afghanistan."

¹⁸ Masood Saifullah, "Taliban Spokesman Suhail Shaheen: 'We Had Finalized a Peace Deal with Americans'," *DW* September 10, 2019, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/taliban-spokesman-suhail-shaheen-we-had-finalized-a-peace-deal-with-americans/a-50370153>

as Zabiullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, followed by stating on September 10, 2019, that there were “two ways to end occupation in Afghanistan, one was jihad and fighting, the other was talks and negotiations”, and, “if Trump wants to stop talks, we will take the first way and they will soon regret it”.¹⁹ Although the Taliban have reiterated that they remain committed to the agreed upon peace deal, Zabiullah Mujahid’s provocative statements combined with the US’s increased suspicion threaten to throw a wrench in the peace works.

While the Taliban have traditionally justified their insurgency to liberate Afghanistan from foreign control, it cannot be stressed enough that the group’s justification is weak to say the least. Since 2014, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) assumed responsibility for the security of Afghanistan and majority of the casualties since then have been Afghans. In essence, contrary to their statements, the Taliban have primarily been fighting and killing fellow Afghans, not foreign forces. Moreover, the groups justification for not engaging with Kabul as a puppet of US also does not warrant recognition, since the group has openly been engaging with the puppet master, the US. Hence, the internal hypocrisy and division within the Taliban are not doing any favors to the peace process either.

With the elections around the corner and the peace talks at a standstill, confusion and uncertainty continue to encircle Afghanistan’s future. With calls to revive the peace process within the US administration, as well as by the international community, at this point in time, it is too early to definitively say if President Trump has completely abandoned the peace process. There might still be space to revive talks as US officials have emphasized that, “the peace drive was not over” as the deal had neither been accepted nor rejected.²⁰ What is even more interesting is that Trump may have cancelled the meeting, but he also fired the main opposition to the meeting, John Bolton, leaving the question of Trump’s new direction for US foreign policy a complete mystery.

The only certainty at this point is that if the peace process fails , the Taliban will continue to intensify their insurgency, whilst internal differences in all camps, divisions over ethnicity in Afghanistan and party politics in US and Afghanistan will further exacerbate the already volatile situation. But for the moment, more violence, bloodshed and tribulation lie ahead for Afghanistan until a political solution is reached.

¹⁹ Charlie D’Agata, “Taliban Warns U.S. ‘Will Soon Regret’ Abandoning Peace Talks,” *CBS*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/taliban-warns-us-will-soon-regret-abandoning-afghanistan-peace-talks-september-11-anniversary/>

²⁰ Baker, Mashal, and Crowley, “How Trump’s Plan to Secretly Meet With the Taliban Came Together, and Fell Apart.”