



Speech

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The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy

In this written statement to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs on 19 September, Crisis Group's Program Director for Asia Laurel Miller assesses the Trump Administration's efforts to secure a peace deal with the Taliban and the potential risks and rewards of such a deal.

Good morning, Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the invitation to testify at this important hearing on the Trump Administration's Afghanistan policy. I have been asked to assess the Administration's efforts to secure a peace deal with the Taliban and to facilitate a reconciliation process between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. I have been further asked to address the prospects for peace in Afghanistan and the potential risks and rewards of a deal with the Taliban.

I will begin by briefly reviewing the policy options that realistically are—and are not—available to the United States with respect to Afghanistan. I will then evaluate the Administration's approach to seeking a negotiated settlement of the conflict, and the prospects for that approach to lead to durable peace. Finally, I will explain my recommendation that the negotiating process that had been underway until being declared "dead" by President Trump last week should be revived as quickly as possible. Over the course of more than eight months of talks, that process had produced a draft U.S.-Taliban agreement which, according

to negotiators on both sides, was ready to be signed once President Trump gave his final assent.

What are U.S. Policy Options for Afghanistan?

The United States has three basic policy options for Afghanistan:

First, the U.S. could set and execute a plan for near-term withdrawal of all U.S. forces. Other NATO forces would certainly withdraw within the same timeframe. Without the U.S. military presence, the sustainability of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul would be questionable, particularly because of the Embassy's reliance on the military for evacuation, which can only be done by air. Any U.S. counter-terrorism operations would need to be conducted from locations outside Afghanistan or through proxy forces within the country.

The conflict would continue without U.S. direct involvement. Indeed, in the aftermath of a U.S. withdrawal the conflict would likely intensify and become more chaotic. Moreover, there is a strong chance that anti-Taliban political and security elements would fracture, particularly if U.S. funding and diplomatic engagement diminish. The speed of fracturing would likely depend on the extent to which the government in Kabul continues to receive foreign donor resources and be in a position to distribute them; the government is currently heavily dependent on such resources for its operations and especially its security forces.

If the anti-Taliban alliance does fracture, the conflict could begin to resemble the multi-sided civil war of the early to mid 1990s, which led to the emergence of the Taliban.

If the U.S. chooses this course of action, it does not need to negotiate an agreement with the Taliban, though it may want one largely for the purpose of securing a commitment to safe passage for departing U.S. troops. Any assurances from the Taliban that they will break with or counter trans-national terrorist groups—such as the assurances reportedly included in the deal the Administration has been negotiating over the last year—would likely be unreliable in circumstances in which U.S. policy is one of disengagement from Afghanistan, although the Taliban has its own reasons to counter at least the Islamic State branch in the country.

The U.S. could, while withdrawing, renegotiate its security partnership with the government in Kabul, narrowing the relationship to funding and other material support that could be provided to an extent and in ways not requiring a military presence in the country. However, if the U.S. decided to continue supporting the Afghan government absent an intra-Afghan peace agreement involving that government, the Taliban and other Afghan powerbrokers, then it would remain in an adversarial stance vis-à-vis the Taliban, which might then be unwilling to provide or adhere to any safe passage and counter-terrorism assurances. In other words, U.S. forces in this scenario—assuming the U.S. is still supporting and partnering with Afghan government forces—would probably need to fight their way to the exits.

Second, the U.S. could continue its current policy of fighting the Taliban alongside the Afghan government and conducting operations against the Islamic State and, occasionally, other terrorist groups—with its current or a somewhat reduced force level. U.S. officials have stated that the draft U.S.-Taliban agreement provides for a draw-down of U.S. forces from about 14,000 to about 8,500 (that is, to the force level

at the start of the Trump Administration) over a 135-day period; nothing has been stated publicly about the negotiated conditions or timeline for further reduction. This suggests that at least some within the Administration see 8,500 as an adequate persistent steady-state for the existing mission.

‘Staying the course,’ as this approach is often characterized, would mean that the conflict remains the bloody stalemate that it currently is, one that has been eroding in the Taliban’s favor over several years. U.S. officials, including senior military officers, have long described the conflict as stalemated and have acknowledged that military victory by either side is implausible. Maintaining the U.S. military presence would continue feeding the Taliban narrative of foreign occupation that they use to recruit and justify their fight. Staying the course, in other words, would mean perpetuating the current conflict dynamics with no foreseeable end.

In 2018, Afghanistan was the world’s deadliest conflict, measured by those killed directly in fighting. This fact signifies the high cost of the conflict to Afghans but does not fully encompass the human and other costs. Among those other costs, Afghanistan, so long as the conflict rages, will be unable to achieve self-sustaining economic growth and will under-spend on development in favor of its enormous security spending. Moreover, even with continued U.S. support, the ability of Afghan security forces to sustain their capabilities over a long haul is deeply challenged by their heavy losses and high turn-over.

Third, the U.S. could seek an end to the war and an end to the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan through a negotiated settlement. In early 2011, after two years of laying groundwork, the U.S. unveiled what appeared to be an unambiguous policy of pursuing peace negotiations; then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the U.S. was “launching a diplomatic surge to move this conflict toward a political outcome.” Nearly a decade ago it had already been apparent that a

military victory for the U.S. and its Afghan allies was not on the cards. Nevertheless, the U.S. did not put pursuit of a negotiated political settlement at the center of its Afghanistan policy until 2019, after an uptick in the military effort in 2017-2018 failed to produce any positive change in the trajectory of the conflict.

This option is the only one of the three that has the potential to reduce violence in Afghanistan and enable the U.S. military to withdraw in permissive conditions. Because it holds the promise of violence reduction, it is also the option that—if successful—would best preserve Afghanistan’s social and economic development gains of the last 18 years.

Success is not guaranteed, however; the Taliban, Kabul, and to some extent other Afghan powerbrokers, have votes over whether a political settlement of their conflict can be achieved. The influence of external backers—all the Afghan parties have relations with foreign governments—may not be enough to deliver those votes, even assuming all those backers press for a settlement. Giving this option the best chance for success would require the U.S. to accept some uncertainty about the timeline of its military withdrawal, though domestic political factors likely will militate against an open-ended presence and though the U.S. could start withdrawing at least some forces once it has reached its own agreement with the Taliban. Still, U.S. engagement in Afghanistan—both its military presence and its financial assistance—is the main source of U.S. leverage to push forward a negotiation. Some level of U.S. military presence during a reasonable time period, even if that presence is reduced, would give intra-Afghan negotiations the best prospects for success. Should the U.S. conclude that those negotiations will not succeed in the foreseeable future, it could reconsider the viability of its continued military presence.

Despite the uncertainty, this option is superior to the first two not only because it may lead to reduced violence but also because it does not close off either of the other options. As a negotiation proceeds and the prospects for its

conclusion become clearer, the U.S. could still decide whether to stay or go.

To summarize the key points, none of these options has the potential to result in military victory for the U.S. and its Afghan allies; neither of the first two would enable the Afghan government to become self-sustaining in its fight against the Taliban in any foreseeable timeframe; and only the third option aims for reduction of violence.

Why is the U.S. Negotiating with the Taliban, and Only the Taliban?

Even among those who accept the desirability in principle of a negotiated settlement, many have criticized the Administration for negotiating exclusively with the Taliban, cutting out (so the argument goes) the Afghan government, and failing to secure an early ceasefire. This approach is seen as dismissive of the long-standing U.S. rhetoric that a peace process should be “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.” Understandably, the Administration’s approach is deeply frustrating to many Afghans opposed to the Taliban who feel that their fate is being determined without the involvement of those who represent their interests and who want to see a rapid reduction in violence.

The Administration’s decision to negotiate bilaterally with the Taliban about the terms for a U.S. military withdrawal and a narrow set of other issues prior to peace negotiations among Afghans was indeed a concession to the Taliban. The Taliban has long insisted that it would engage in a peace process only by negotiating first with the U.S. regarding its highest-priority demand (a U.S. withdrawal), and later with other Afghans on other issues including the shape of a future Afghan governance structure. There is no mystery as to why the Taliban has stubbornly stuck to this position: In this way, the Taliban may win a major negotiating victory up-front and then enter talks with the government and other Afghans with its leverage and appearance of legitimacy significantly enhanced and its rank-and-file assured that it is making gains at the table. The Taliban has also long

rejected an early ceasefire because they see their actions on the battlefield as the source of their leverage and a means of maintaining their group cohesion.

Of course, these benefits for the Taliban have equal and opposite costs for Kabul. And for that reason, the U.S. for many years resisted the Taliban's demand. The cost of that resistance was no peace process. With no sign that the Taliban would relent and in light of the priority the Administration has placed on pursuing negotiations since late 2018, the U.S. relented instead. The benefit has been opening the first real opportunity to move toward a negotiated settlement.

To be clear, the U.S. has tried and failed to deliver the kind of peace process that critics of the Administration's approach would prefer. That more-desirable approach would involve including the Afghan government at the table from the start of the process; putting the U.S. troop presence on the table but not front-loading it in negotiations; and securing a ceasefire early in the process. From the perspective of U.S. interests and those of its Afghan allies, this approach would unquestionably be a better option. But it is one that is not now realistically available. The Taliban's refusal has proven non-negotiable. If it was ever potentially negotiable in the past decade (which is uncertain), President Trump's often-expressed desire to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan has likely reinforced the Taliban's refusal.

No evidence suggests that the Afghan government on its own could launch its preferred form of a peace process. Certainly, the United States has not stood in the way over the last decade and, indeed, has long urged Kabul to take the necessary predicate step for any peace process of building a cohesive and consensus-based negotiating team and platform supported by the main anti-Taliban political forces. That predicate step appears to still be a work-in-progress. Informal contacts and dialogue between the Taliban and anti-Taliban political figures, including government officials, have taken place over many years, but these have not proven convertible into substantive negotiations.

Those who advocate that the U.S. should adopt the more-desirable approach I described overstate American leverage and ignore the actual history of failed U.S. efforts to pursue that approach. U.S. leverage does still exist, but it is no greater now and will be no greater in the future than before U.S. diplomats conceded to the Taliban's insistence on bifurcating and sequencing negotiations into a U.S.-Taliban track followed by an intra-Afghan track.

U.S. negotiating leverage includes the pacing and conditioning of a U.S. military withdrawal, the prospect of continued financial assistance for Afghanistan from the U.S. and from other donors who follow the U.S. lead, and the potential normalization of the foreign relations of a government that includes the Taliban, which the Taliban appear to value. The Taliban have made clear that, rather than once again leading an assistance-starved pariah state, they prefer to be part of an internationally legitimized government that continues to enjoy receipt of external resources—Afghanistan being a poor, land-locked country that throughout its history has required such resources.

To what extent the Taliban will compromise in order to achieve this preferred outcome is not yet clear and will not become clear until negotiations among Afghans are well underway. What is evident, however, is that this preference and the prospect of negotiating a U.S. military withdrawal have not been strong enough incentives to motivate the Taliban to enter into a negotiating process that brings the Afghan government to the table from the outset and that includes an opening-stage ceasefire.

What Are the Potential Risks and Rewards of a U.S.-Taliban Deal?

Any evaluation of the substance of the draft agreement that the Administration has negotiated with the Taliban must be caveated by acknowledging that the text has not been made publicly available and Administration officials have said little about its content. The few details that have emerged include that the text provides for an initial phase of U.S. military draw-down of approximately 5,500

troops over 135 days. The trigger for starting the draw-down and what happens after the initial phase have not been revealed. Further details include that the Taliban has committed to breaking ties with Al Qaeda and denying safe haven to any terrorist groups that might threaten the United States, though the specific phrasing of these commitments has not been made public. Finally, officials have indicated that the agreement would lead to the opening of “intra-Afghan negotiations” among the Taliban, Afghan government, and other Afghan power-brokers, but what, if any, specific wording on this point is included in the text has not been stated publicly.

Taking at face-value the public statements that the U.S.-Taliban deal, if finalized, would lead immediately to intra-Afghan negotiations, and noting that preparations for such negotiations appeared to be underway, the main reward for such a deal is clear: the launch of an Afghan peace process. It is important to recognize that a U.S.-Taliban deal would not itself be a peace agreement. There is no deal to be made only between those two parties to the conflict that could bring peace to Afghanistan. Rather the value of the deal lies in its being a prelude to a negotiating process among Afghans that could, if successful, bring peace to Afghanistan. As explained earlier, no other attempted means of putting such a process in motion has succeeded.

For this reward to be fully realized, it will be important for the U.S.-Taliban agreement to make clear that it is connected to and contingent on both the start and the Taliban’s good-faith continuation of intra-Afghan negotiations. An explicit Taliban commitment to peace negotiations should be required. Even with such a provision in the deal, muscular American diplomacy and a continued financial commitment will be needed to keep both the Taliban and Kabul committed to negotiations for the duration. But if either side fails to follow through on its commitment, the U.S. will remain in a position to exercise either of the first two policy options I described earlier.

A further reward for the U.S.-Taliban deal, assuming it leads to an Afghan peace process, is

that it might enable a U.S. military withdrawal that does not leave an intensified civil war in its wake. A withdrawal under those circumstances could be seen as best honoring the American and Afghan sacrifices in the war. In addition, the Taliban’s counter-terrorism assurances could become meaningful insofar as the Taliban becomes part of the legitimate governing structures of Afghanistan as a result of a peace process. In those circumstances, the Taliban would have a stake in keeping Afghanistan attractive to foreign donors and investors.

A U.S.-Taliban deal poses two main risks. The first is that by front-loading an important negotiating victory for the Taliban the group may enter intra-Afghan talks excessively emboldened and inclined to over-play its hand. As a result, its willingness to compromise may be insufficient for intra-Afghan agreements to be reached. Whether this risk materializes and its magnitude if it does will only be known once intra-Afghan talks are underway. The U.S. would need to elicit help from regional powers with influence over the Taliban to mitigate this risk.

The second risk is a political one here in Washington. By setting out a timeline and process for U.S. withdrawal—if indeed that is what the deal does—already-existing momentum toward withdrawal regardless of an Afghan peace process might be accelerated and the leverage the U.S. currently enjoys might not be translated into concessions by parties in intra-Afghan talks. I discount what would seem the obvious additional risk that the Taliban does not follow through on any counter-terrorism assurances it makes as part of the deal because, as noted earlier, those should be considered unreliable in any event unless the U.S. stays engaged in promoting a peace process and the Taliban becomes part of legitimate Afghan governance.

Can the Taliban be Trusted?

A question frequently asked in the public sphere as the U.S.-Taliban negotiating process has been underway is whether the Taliban can be trusted to fulfill any commitments. This is

the wrong question to ask. Peace processes intended to resolve active conflicts are not premised on pre-existing trust, they are premised on the idea that, through negotiations, enough overlap in interests can be identified or forged that the resultant agreement is one the parties will have sufficient incentives to implement. *Put simply, peace negotiators make deals on the basis of interests, not trust.*

This point will be as valid for intra-Afghan negotiations as it is for U.S.-Taliban deal-making. In both cases, whether there are, in fact, sufficiently overlapping interests can only be tested through talks. It can be hoped that trust will be built in the course of intra-Afghan negotiations—and it is difficult to foresee effective implementation of any Afghan political settlement without some measure of trust—but mechanisms for monitoring, verification and external support for implementation will be needed regardless.

Some also raise the question whether the Taliban can be trusted not to take Afghanistan back to the days of its harsh rule as the Islamic Emirate in the latter half of the 1990s until the U.S. overthrow of the regime in 2001. In this regard, the particular question is raised whether gains of the last 18 years for women's and minorities' rights will be compromised through a peace deal. Again, the Taliban's *ex ante* trustworthiness is not the pertinent issue. Rather, the question is whether the government, other anti-Taliban power-brokers, and the Taliban can reach agreement on terms for political and social life in Afghanistan that they all can sufficiently accept. The answer is not certain to be 'yes,' but the possibility of 'yes' can only be tested through negotiations.

How Likely is an Afghan Peace Process to Lead to Durable Peace?

A necessary preface to evaluating the likelihood that an Afghan peace process succeeds is recognition that the U.S. has failed to defeat the Taliban militarily for 18 years and has only spent one year so far putting peace efforts at the forefront of U.S. policy.

That said, there are many reasons why an Afghan peace process might stall or ultimately fail regardless of how energetically the U.S. works toward its success. First and foremost, the substantive gaps between the parties' visions for a settlement might prove too great. Whether this will prove to be so is, at this stage, very difficult to assess. The Taliban side has yet to fully develop or articulate a political platform for negotiations. The Kabul side can be expected to assert positions that involve as little change to the current system as possible, but it has not yet pulled together a fully developed and consensus-based set of positions either.

Second, internal divisions on each side may prove too difficult to overcome. As noted earlier, Kabul has not yet built a cohesive negotiating team or secured consensus on the decision-making structure to guide such a team. On the other side, because the Taliban has not yet elaborated its political vision, the group has not tested its own ability to develop negotiating positions and potential compromises that can win sufficient support within the movement itself.

For these and other reasons an Afghan peace process will take time—perhaps more time than American patience will allow. A third reason for failure could be that the U.S. does not preserve enough of its leverage to see the process through, if not to the end, at least to somewhere well along the way.

In addition to the exercise of U.S. leverage, a successful peace process is implausible without neutral facilitation by a non-party to the conflict. The difficulty of getting all the Afghan parties to the table suggests that, once there, they will be unable to reach agreements without facilitation. A facilitator would be positioned to guide the parties to agreement through proximity talks at moments when direct talks become unproductive, and to table suggested compromises. The U.S., as one of the main antagonists in the conflict with its own interests at stake and as an active supporter of one of the Afghan sides, is ill-suited to play this role.

Whether an Afghan peace process is likely to succeed in establishing durable peace

in Afghanistan is a different question than whether it is likely to produce a peace agreement. The former goal is the larger and more difficult one. This is why a distinction is often drawn between peace negotiations and peace-building, the latter being a longer-term and more complex process. No matter how comprehensively an Afghan peace agreement responds to the grievances and power struggles driving conflict, it can only be a partial solution. After more than four decades of conflict, of which the post-2001 conflict is the latest phase, a settlement that focuses on the interests of the latest configuration of conflict actors is necessary but probably insufficient. Furthermore, any peace agreement is a limited vehicle for conflict resolution; but an agreement and the process of compromise and consensus-building that produces it can set a foundation for peace. Ultimately, the will of the parties to make an agreement stick and to resolve inevitable disputes over implementation will determine whether the foundation holds or crumbles, and therefore whether the opportunity will exist for longer-term peace-building.

Can and Should the U.S. Resume Talks with the Taliban?

Because peace negotiations are the best of the three options available to the United States and because, as explained earlier, a U.S.-Taliban deal is now a necessary step toward such negotiations, the deal-making process should be resumed. President Trump's failed attempt to use a meeting at Camp David to seal the deal—and perhaps to try to better the terms his negotiators had already initialed—disrupted the process, but probably not fatally. The Taliban has indicated that it is prepared to pick up where the process left off, at the verge of signature.

One of the achievements of chief U.S. negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad since his appointment a year ago has been establishing the credibility of the U.S. commitment to negotiating a settlement of the conflict. Throughout the years of waxing and waning U.S. effort to launch negotiations, this commitment had been doubted not only by the other conflict parties but, importantly, by the key regional powers.

Over the last year, Pakistan, China, and Russia in particular all appear to have become supportive—if not enthusiastically, at least sufficiently—of U.S. deal-making with the Taliban. Of course, this support is based on their own interests in seeing the U.S. withdraw its forces, but not too-rapidly (this is an interest shared by another key regional actor, Iran). Nonetheless, their support will be important for concluding and ultimately implementing an Afghan peace agreement.

The recent disruption of the negotiations has undoubtedly damaged U.S. credibility. That damage could be repaired, however, if the process resumes quickly, before momentum is lost, and if the U.S. does not now over-reach by trying to raise the bar for agreement. Concerted diplomatic outreach to the regional players to reassure them of U.S. commitment to negotiating will be needed. If the U.S. instead abandons negotiations in favor of an indefinite military presence, it should be prepared for the regional powers' opposition to a permanent-seeming U.S. military presence to materialize in the form of stepped-up support for the Taliban.

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No one on this Committee, and no one who wishes to see the United States pursue an effective policy in Afghanistan can be pleased with the set of options available to policy makers. It is long past the time when U.S. policymakers could credibly claim to be firmly on the road to producing desirable outcomes in Afghanistan. However, there is a narrow opening through which the U.S. could thread its way to ending its longest war without leaving an intensified civil war in its wake. The U.S. has only been prioritizing the pursuit of a negotiated settlement for the last year and yet appears to have come close to reaching an agreement with the Taliban that would allow for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. It should not abandon those efforts now. Such a deal with the Taliban will be distasteful to some here in Washington and perhaps more in Afghanistan. But it's a deal that comes with a prize: the chance to start a peace process that might end the Afghans' even longer war.