



Briefing Note

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Are the Taliban Serious about Peace Negotiations?

This is the second in a series of three Briefing Notes that discuss and analyse the nascent peace process in Afghanistan, focused on frequently raised questions.

On 29 February, the Taliban and the U.S. signed an agreement that commits the U.S. to a fourteen-month phased withdrawal of military forces in exchange for Taliban commitments to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a safe harbour for terrorists. The agreement also obligates the Taliban to commence peace negotiations with the Afghan government and other Afghan power-brokers. This breakthrough comes after a decade of on-and-off U.S. and other efforts to catalyse a peace process, throughout which observers have questioned the Taliban's willingness to negotiate a political settlement that will require substantive compromise. The group's willingness to compromise remains an open question, but its interest in probing whether it could achieve its objectives through a negotiated settlement appears genuine – prompted, at least in part, by the elusiveness of a clear military victory.

Are the Taliban Negotiating in Good Faith?

Many Afghans have expressed concerns that the Taliban are not sincere in seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict, pointing to the group's continued violence and rhetoric of victory in jihad. The Taliban have demonstrated sustained interest in dialogue with U.S.

and Afghan interlocutors – most overtly and concretely, by engaging in negotiations with the U.S. for over a year, culminating in the 29 February agreement that commits the group to entering talks with the Afghan government. “We are tired of war”, said a mid-level Taliban commander from Kandahar who was present at the movement's inception. “Who has suffered the most from this war? Of course, we want peace”. War-weariness aside, some in the Taliban movement seem to regret missing out on the post-2001 influx of foreign aid, as a generation of urban Afghans enjoyed opportunities that skipped past many war-torn villages. To interlocutors such as Crisis Group, they express hope that they could share in continued donor largesse after a settlement. If nothing else, such sentiments suggest a willingness to talk.

The fundamental question, however, is whether the Taliban are willing to compromise on substantive issues of power sharing, a future political structure, governance and rules for public life. That remains unclear and can only be truly tested during intra-Afghan negotiations planned to commence soon.

To date, the Taliban have been ambiguous in their statements on these matters. Some members have told Crisis Group and others that relevant discussions have not taken place comprehensively within the movement. One of the group's clearly identifiable red lines is the [desire to maintain cohesiveness](#), even in the event of a political transition. Yet the wide variety of individual, regional and factional views

within the Taliban make it difficult to assess what compromises might threaten to divide the group. There may be limited enthusiasm for peace talks among some of the more hardline elements within the younger generation of Taliban fighters, but [those ranks also include many](#) who appear to be tired of fighting. If the peace process can be ushered forward and the group's leadership given time to develop firmer positions on a political settlement, there is potential for those leaders to garner their followers' adherence to compromises. Fighters across the spectrum of Taliban viewpoints appear to [respect their leaders' strict edicts](#), as evidence, most recently, by the group's discipline during the seven-day reduction of violence period that led up to the signing ceremony with the U.S. in Qatar.

Although the group's political office in Doha has progressed on the path toward intra-Afghan talks, sceptics question whether the agreement the group signed with the U.S. in February was merely a smokescreen. They note that the Taliban has internally trumpeted its success in forcing the U.S. into a timeline for troop withdrawal, without being obliged to commit to reaching a peaceful resolution with the Afghan government or to respect the current constitution. The Taliban's willingness to accept a mutual reduction of violence before the signing improved the political atmosphere surrounding talks and signalled Taliban buy-in for the process. But, as human rights activists have told Crisis Group, the group's swift resumption of violence against Afghan security forces after the deal's signing and [its framing of the agreement as a "victory"](#) have again heightened suspicions that the group may simply be biding its time before attempting a military takeover once the U.S. has withdrawn.

The Taliban Lack a Clear Path to Military Victory

There is legitimate reason to wonder whether, in the wake of a U.S. withdrawal, the group might seek to gain power violently regardless of the status of talks at the time. But there are also

several reasons to believe that the Taliban may prefer to explore other options.

First, fears that the Taliban could return to absolute power through military means, even after Western disengagement, are probably exaggerated. The Taliban failed to conquer all of Afghanistan in the 1990s, and their old opponents are far better armed and resourced today. A serious Taliban effort to retake Kabul or other northern cities would meet strong resistance.

Secondly, at least some leading Taliban figures appear to be aware of this. In discussions with diplomatic officials and other interlocutors, Taliban figures have indicated awareness that the group lacks a clear path to military victory – hence, arguably, their willingness to at least test a political pathway back to power.

In addition, the group also must fight on a second front, against the ISIS affiliate in eastern Afghanistan. Taliban leaders have contended that their victories against the so-called Islamic State Khorasan Province would [free up resources](#) to focus on their main fight against the government, but the trend in 2019 actually showed a rising number of Taliban battles against the small ISIS branch – and the terrorist group continues to claim complex attacks in Kabul.

Why the Taliban May Now See Negotiations as Their Best Option

Diplomacy might prove more fruitful for the Taliban than pursuing outright military victory. So long as they can sufficiently achieve their objectives through negotiation, they will not only avoid the costs of further war but also gain legitimacy in the bargain. The [Taliban have cautiously tested](#) with Afghans and Americans political options for resolving conflict since the days after the U.S. intervention. These earlier engagements, however, failed to offer them real prospects of reaching their core aims: withdrawal of U.S. troops and installation of an "Islamic system". Now those goals seem achievable, as the U.S. grows serious about exiting and a number of Afghan political figures indicate some readiness to renegotiate – at least to some

as yet uncertain extent – the nature of the state system.

Taliban negotiators in Qatar seem inclined to avoid a Pyrrhic path to victory – pursuing a military conquest that devastates their own organisation, is not recognised as legitimate and that once again makes Afghanistan a pariah state, leaving Taliban leaders sanctioned, trade routes blocked and international aid money cut off. A Taliban representative told Crisis Group that his colleagues are hopeful that the billions of dollars in foreign assistance now flowing to Afghanistan might continue after a peace agreement, something that almost certainly will require an inclusive government and meaningful Taliban compromise on rights and governance issues (such as protections for women’s rights). The importance the Taliban places on the status international legitimacy confers was hammered home by the group’s apparent interest in an elaborate signing ceremony in Doha on 29 February.

As an insurgent group that exerts political leverage primarily through violence, the Taliban may be ripe for negotiations now; strong enough to make gains at the bargaining table while they are still able to marshal high levels of military activity, but not without concerns about their own organisational cohesion. Even in the face of a record-high number of U.S. airstrikes in 2019 and early 2020, the insurgent group held onto significant gains across the countryside. Yet this aerial campaign has exacted a high personnel toll, and after its recent deal with the U.S., Taliban leaders have no guarantee that rank-and-file fighters will maintain their fervour if international troops indeed pull out. In a few locations, the absence of a foreign enemy has already quieted the insurgency: for instance, the Panjwai valley, south west of Kandahar city, was the birthplace of the Taliban movement and later became a major battlefield for American troops and their NATO allies. The withdrawal of NATO forces made the valley less violent: “Without the foreigners, the Taliban lost their motivation”, a local security official told Crisis Group.

Other locations have [suffered growing violence](#) despite the absence of international troops, so the trend is not clear, but the resumption of attacks after 29 February illustrates the Taliban leadership’s cause for concern: some commanders have geared back into action, while others have allowed their pace of operations to lull.

Did the Taliban Already Get Everything They Want?

Over a year ago, the U.S. acceded to the Taliban’s preferred sequencing for negotiations: bilateral discussions with the U.S. on foreign troop withdrawal, followed by talks among Afghans about everything else. After years of failed peace efforts, the U.S. acquiesced in the Taliban’s Americans-first strategy as a way of getting talks started. Critics have noted a number of ambiguities embedded in the text of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and cite these as new reasons to doubt the group’s good-will. The agreement’s [harshest critics](#) suggest that the Taliban received everything they wanted, while even [more measured critiques](#) noted an imbalance in the deal’s terms.

It is true that the agreement contains ambiguities that have already raised challenges, including the terms of a controversial prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the Afghan government, as well as a lack of clarity on whether foreign forces will completely withdraw if peace talks stretch past fourteen months or fail to progress. But the flip side is that the deal’s terms provide flexibility that the U.S. can use to both pressure the Taliban and urge negotiations forward, without applying strict conditions that might not survive the inevitable stumbling blocks in any complex peace process.

This approach of negotiating with the U.S. first, gaining assurances, and talking to Afghans later has offered the Taliban a new degree of international acceptability, enhanced leverage for the next stage of talks, and the promise of achieving its strategic aim. But the group’s new-found legitimacy is unlikely to stick, if it stone-walls in negotiations or reneges on its deal with the U.S. As long as a road to political resolution

of the war appears viable, involving compromises that Taliban leadership deem acceptable, this path will offer the group critical advantages that an unrestrained return to insurgency never could.

Are the Taliban Living up to Their Commitments?

The Taliban's agreement with the U.S. obligates the group to take anti-terrorism measures as well as sit with the Afghan government to negotiate a peaceful settlement. The group implemented a week-long period of agreed reduction in violence across the country prior to signing the agreement, but in the following days, Taliban attacks on Afghan forces quickly resumed – in one instance prompting a [U.S. airstrike to protect government forces](#). The group's public statements have not only declared victory against a foreign occupation but also called for continued struggle to establish “an Islamic system” in Afghanistan. Observers have noted that the group has failed to explicitly denounce al-Qaeda the same way it has ISIS, although the agreement with the U.S. did not require it to do so.

Combined with contradictory statements from U.S. officials on their expectations, especially regarding the level of violence they consider tolerable under the deal's terms, these acts have [fuelled concerns](#) that the Taliban is skirting its commitments to the U.S. But the group does not appear so far to have violated the publicly available text of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, which does not require continuation

of the 22-29 February reduction in violence. Critiques of the agreement overlook the military reality that the Taliban were unlikely to be forced into greater concessions than those made. The Taliban have insisted on [continued violence as their primary means of leverage](#) over the Afghan government. Unfortunately, as has been the case in many other peace processes around the world, intra-Afghan negotiations are unlikely to begin and progress under a complete ceasefire.

The Taliban have shown persistence in pursuing a negotiated path to ending Afghanistan's conflict, even though much of their behaviour and rhetoric continues to raise suspicion. Little is lost, however, by testing the Taliban's potential to negotiate seriously. Much could be gained, not least the opportunity to curb violence in the deadliest war in the world. Neither the Taliban nor the Afghan government have fully prepared themselves for talks; both sides lack substantive bargaining positions and a well-articulated vision for a peaceful Afghanistan. Both sides also suffer from a corrosive lack of trust in their opponents. Still, negotiating peace does not require trust in the good faith of the other side at the outset. It will require patience, as any peace process will probably involve many false starts and disappointments. Practical steps could be taken to [improve these talks' chances for success](#), including some that Crisis Group previously has outlined, but the key ingredient will be a sustained willingness to search for common ground – even as challenges and suspicions arise on both sides.