



What Future for Afghan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration?

Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°165

Kabul/Washington/Brussels, 13 January 2021

What's new? Afghan peace talks have stalled in their opening rounds, as all parties wait for the incoming Biden administration to reveal what changes it might make to U.S. Afghanistan policy, particularly vis-à-vis the peace process and the U.S. military presence.

Why does it matter? The U.S. has been a primary driver of progress in peace talks, nudging two mistrustful parties forward. Peace in Afghanistan will ultimately depend on the conflict parties' willingness to compromise, but Washington's actions are also of vital importance.

What should be done? The U.S. should commit to continued support for the peace talks and resolve short-term challenges – including expectations of a military withdrawal by May 2021. The Taliban should commit to a significant reduction of violence, and Afghan political leaders should continue working toward a unified approach to peace.

I. Overview

Peace negotiations between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban commenced in Doha, Qatar, on 12 September, after more than six months of delay amid political dysfunction in Kabul and continued conflict. Since then, talks have only inched forward and fighting in many parts of Afghanistan has escalated. Negotiators spent three months reaching agreement on a mere three-page set of procedures for the talks and were just beginning to discuss what substantive topics to put on their agenda when they took a weeks-long break. With the Trump administration a lame duck, the incoming Biden administration's approach to the peace process uncertain, Taliban violence on the rise, and the Afghan government struggling to manage multi-dimensional security and political challenges, it is far from clear where negotiations are headed. A path is open to achieving a political settlement – by far the best outcome for a country that has been continuously at war for the last four decades – but in order for it to remain so, negotiators should stick to a basic goal during the delicate transitional period: keep the peace process alive.

The sluggishness of the Doha process appears partly linked to how closely its timeline has converged with that of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The U.S., perhaps wanting to avoid just this scenario, tried to get the process moving faster but proved unable to make its preferred timetable stick. In late 2018, at the outset of bilateral talks with the Taliban, U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad reportedly claimed that negotiators had a six-month deadline, but the talks stretched well over a year. Nor did talks speed up after the U.S. and Taliban signed their 29 February 2020 deal. The Afghan government's reluctance to accept concessions the U.S. had made on its behalf, an uptick in Taliban violence and posturing on both sides contributed to a six-month delay in starting intra-Afghan negotiations. At that point, with the U.S. election just two months away, all parties involved had good reason to move slowly, first to see who would emerge victorious and then – once it became clear that Joe Biden had won – to see whether the new administration in Washington would adhere to the February deal that forms the backdrop to negotiations.

Meanwhile, the conflict has picked up pace. After violence abated substantially in the six months preceding the February agreement, it has gradually reintensified, driven in large part by a Taliban campaign of asymmetric tactics. The resurgence in violence, spurred by the Taliban and responded to by Afghan security forces, which have resumed airstrikes and night raids, has led to an accrual of mistrust and scepticism on both sides. Any glimmers of hope among Afghans that the peace process might reduce the daily incidence of violence have now faded.

Still, this process remains the country's best hope for reaching a political settlement that can underwrite a more peaceful future: sustaining it should be the paramount objective for all parties with a stake in Afghan and regional security. Washington will remain central to this effort. Arriving at even this early fragile stage would not have been possible without persistent U.S. leverage and pressure. But with the Trump administration soon to depart, exactly how the U.S. will approach the talks going forward is unclear. The process will likely tread water until sometime after the Biden administration takes office on 20 January, when it makes more details about its Afghanistan policy known.

The position Biden will inherit is coloured by President Donald Trump's order on 17 November to cut the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan from 4,500 to 2,500 by January. This reduction came after speculation that Trump might order a full military withdrawal before his term's end, a precipitous move that almost certainly would have killed the peace process. The Taliban would likely have viewed the move as endorsing their return to power, while the Afghan government would have little to gain from negotiating after losing its greatest advantage. Even the drawdown to 2,500 troops has likely shifted the balance of leverage in the talks. Yet a lengthy extension of the U.S.-NATO mission would equally doom the process, pushing the Taliban back to all-out warfare and Kabul to dig in defending the status quo. With this quandary in mind, the Biden team should sidestep sweeping pronouncements about its intentions while it sizes up the negotiation dynamics. So long as the process stays on life support while the new team gets its bearings, there will be time to re-energise the talks and to make any necessary course corrections.

II. Peace Process Perspectives

A. *The Biden Administration: Policy Direction Indicators*

President-elect Joe Biden has a longer, more detailed history of opinion and advice on Afghanistan than any previous incoming U.S. president – a record that hints at the policy directions he may take.¹ That said, Biden will be stepping into a new role as president and it is not certain that he will adhere to views he espoused as a senator or vice president.

Biden has consistently advocated for the lightest possible military footprint in Afghanistan, focused purely on counter-terrorism, and he has suggested, more than once in the last decade, that concern for the fate of the Afghan government or people should not determine U.S. policy in the region.² Still, even the desire to maintain a small counter-terrorism footprint (Biden has suggested that the force be several thousand strong) will raise difficult issues. If this past view becomes future policy, the new administration will need to confront the question of how long such a footprint should be maintained, as well as whether and how that idea can be reconciled with a peace process made possible by Washington's commitment to the exact opposite in the 29 February 2020 agreement with the Taliban.³

One area where Biden is set to differ with the outgoing administration is in placing renewed emphasis on regional stability, which was not a focus of the Trump team, and which will likely preclude any sudden and potentially destabilising significant change to the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. The Biden administration is expected to re-emphasise the need for a "responsible" withdrawal.⁴ It also will put a premium on rekindling U.S. links with close allies, including the NATO partners that work closely

¹ See Crisis Group's Asia Program Director Laurel Miller's forthcoming *Foreign Affairs* essay, as well as Kate Clark, "The Biden presidency: What choices for Afghan policy remain?", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 12 November 2020.

² See Biden's 23 February 2020 interview on CBS' "Face the Nation", in a segment entitled "Joe Biden talks Afghanistan, future of troop presence overseas". In response to the question, "But then, don't you bear some responsibility for the outcome, if the Taliban ends up back in control and women end up losing their rights?", Biden forcefully responded: "No I don't! Look, are you telling me we should be going to war with China, because of what they're doing to the Uighurs ... the concentration camps? Do I bear responsibility [for Afghanistan]? No, zero. The responsibility I have is to protect America's interests".

³ The agreement's text reads: "The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors and supporting services personnel within fourteen (14) months following announcement of this agreement. ... With the commitment and action on the obligations of ... the Taliban in Part Two of this agreement, the United States, its allies, and the Coalition will execute the following: 1) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will complete withdrawal of all remaining forces from Afghanistan within the remaining nine and a half (9.5) months". See "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America", U.S. State Department, 29 February 2020.

⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, U.S. defence officials and foreign policy analysts, October-November 2020. See analysts' input in Frud Behzan, "Afghanistan pinned hopes for change on Biden, but U.S. likely to stay course set by Trump", RFE/RL, 14 November 2020, as well as Andrew Bacevich, "Will Biden finally end the war in Afghanistan?", *The Nation*, 2 December 2020.

with and in many respects rely on the U.S. in Afghanistan, and which have made clear their concerns about the pace of withdrawal indicated by recent U.S. announcements.⁵

The Biden White House will need to develop an approach that reconciles these considerations, including its possible desire to maintain counter-terrorism-focused forces, with the U.S. withdrawal commitments in the February 2020 agreement. The process of policy review should be able to move relatively swiftly given that already-announced members of and nominees for the new national security team have experience on Afghanistan, but it will still take some time.⁶ Assuming that the Biden team holds off on major policy shifts before it completes this process, which would be prudent, big announcements may not occur prior to March or April.

As for what the new policy might look like, it remains unclear how much patience the incoming administration will have with a troubled peace process inherited from political rivals, or whether it might attempt to change at least some of the parameters. For example, without scrapping the U.S. deal with the Taliban altogether, the U.S. might attempt to pressure the insurgents to meet tougher interpretations of their commitments in the Doha agreement, especially via measurable action taken toward al-Qaeda and other groups “who might pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies”.⁷ It might even try to negotiate additional understandings bilaterally, to address the ambiguities in that deal and what critics consider its shortcomings.

One issue the new team will have to prioritise is how to handle the May 2021 deadline for troop withdrawal set out in the February 2020 agreement. Given the late start of Afghan talks, the multiple deadlines that have already been missed in the February deal, and reports that senior U.S. military officers and some members of Congress are staunchly opposed to a full withdrawal along the timeline specified in the Doha agreement, it is hard to imagine a Biden administration pulling out all U.S. troops by that date.⁸ In order to preserve the framework of the Doha agreement, the U.S. would need to revisit the timeline with the Taliban, who are likely to strongly oppose much delay.

⁵ For additional detail on the perspectives of Washington’s NATO and European partners, see Crisis Group’s EU Watch List entry, “Keeping Intra-Afghan Talks on Track”, 30 September 2020.

⁶ Those with Afghanistan experience include the nominee for Secretary of Defense (and retired four-star general), Lloyd Austin, as well as the nominees for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and Under Secretary of Defense, Colin Kahl, both of whom served as Biden’s national security advisors during his tenure as vice president (when Biden stood apart from much of the Obama administration’s senior staff in his policy advice on Afghanistan). The incoming U.S. national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, until recently a Crisis Group Trustee, also served as a senior adviser to Biden between stints working in senior roles under Hillary Clinton at the State Department and in her presidential campaigns.

⁷ See “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan”, *op. cit.* Contrary to popular misperceptions about the agreement, it does not call for the Taliban to “sever ties” with al-Qaeda in strict and unequivocal terms. Rather, the agreement commits the Taliban to “send a clear message that those who might pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan”, and calls for the group to instruct its members not to cooperate with such groups. Al-Qaeda is the only group referred to by name in the agreement as one that “might pose a threat” to the U.S. There is no text in the public agreement that specifies how and by whose authority any other group might be determined to pose such a threat. Nor is there any specification of how the Taliban’s commitments might be measured.

⁸ On the delays in the Afghan peace process, see “Keeping Intra-Afghan Talks on Track”, *op. cit.*; Andrew Watkins, “Intra-Afghan Negotiations Set to Begin”, Crisis Group Commentary, 11 September 2020; and “Afghan Leaders End Political Impasse”, Crisis Group Commentary, 20 May 2020. See also Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Afghan leader digs in on peace talks despite progress, officials say”,

Counter-terrorism will be another major issue. An indefinite presence of even a small number of U.S. counter-terrorism forces, which was long Biden's preferred approach to Afghanistan, would prompt more than vocal opposition from the Taliban. Should the U.S. dig in too deep signalling an intention to keep an enduring military presence in the country, it could drive the Taliban away from the negotiating table entirely, back to a campaign of unrestricted warfare. Such a signal would also prompt negative reactions from regional powers, including Iran, Russia and China, which are wary of the U.S. leaving too quickly but also of having U.S. troops permanently in what they consider their backyards.⁹

Some in U.S. national security circles suggest that Biden might be able to at least maintain a light, strictly counter-terrorism-focused footprint in Afghanistan until a peace settlement is reached, but the most likely timeline of negotiations is expected to extend well beyond any delay of a full withdrawal the Taliban might feasibly accept.¹⁰ Critically, the Afghan military would be unable to hold back Taliban advances, even in a number of provincial capitals, without U.S. air support.¹¹ If the U.S. limited aerial and other forms of support strictly to targeting transnational terrorist groups, the Afghan government could soon find itself losing significant battlefield momentum to the Taliban. A U.S. counter-terrorism mission would likely either revert to providing substantial support to Kabul's war with the Taliban or risk losing its local partner.

As president, Biden can continue to pursue a political settlement to end the war in Afghanistan, or he can opt for an enduring counter-terrorism mission. But absent what would be a highly unlikely about-face by the Taliban, he cannot have both.

B. *Taliban Actions and Aims*

A central question from the conclusion of the February 2020 agreement onward has been whether the Taliban would meaningfully reduce their use of violence and, if not, what that might mean for sustaining the peace process. It is inarguable that the insurgency remains operational, even aggressive, across the country. The group has adapted its behaviour in notable ways, in what appears to be an attempt to keep its fighting force as active as possible without jeopardising its deal with the U.S. (the text

The New York Times, 30 November 2020. On military and congressional resistance to Trump's desired withdrawal timeline, see Helene Cooper, "Top general declines to endorse Trump's Afghan withdrawal timeline", *The New York Times*, 12 October 2020.

⁹ Crisis Group remote interviews, regional diplomatic officials and political analysts, 8 and 29 October, 9 and 18 November 2020. See Barnett Rubin, "There is Only One Way Out of Afghanistan", *Foreign Affairs*, 9 December 2020; and Timor Sharan and Andrew Watkins, "Meeting in the Middle? Russia, Afghanistan and Europe", Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 6 December 2020.

¹⁰ Suggestions for an extended yet limited military presence include Madiha Afzal, "America should stay in Afghanistan until an intra-Afghan deal is reached – not forever", Brookings Institution, 13 October 2020; and Jonathan Schroden, "Afghanistan will be the Biden administration's first foreign policy crisis", *Lawfare*, 20 December 2020. On the likelihood of protracted negotiations outlasting any short-term extension of the withdrawal deadline, see the speech delivered to the UN Security Council by Laurel Miller, "Afghanistan's Peace Process Will Be Long, Incremental and in Need of a Mediator", 20 November 2020.

¹¹ See National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib's admission that the Afghan security forces required U.S. air support to defend Helmand province's capital in October 2020. "Taliban conflict: Afghan fears rise as US ends its longest war", BBC, 20 October 2020.

of which was conspicuously silent on the issue of intra-Afghan violence).¹² That calculus seems to have led the Taliban to test the limits of U.S. acceptance, by gradually resuming tactics and campaigns it had curbed in the run-up to 29 February. By October, Taliban fighters threatened the outskirts of Helmand's capital in a large-scale assault, stepping beyond one of the key restrictions – no sustained assaults on provincial capitals – the group had imposed on its own forces earlier in 2020. The Taliban repeated similar behaviour in neighbouring Kandahar weeks later and also targeted a number of strategic district centres.

Meanwhile, a campaign of unclaimed killings targeting government officials, activists, clerics and journalists has rocked urban centres. Afghan officials pin these killings on the Taliban, the Taliban dubiously blames the Afghan intelligence service, and independent analysts fear they may stem from a combination of coordinated insurgent activity and the opportunism of organised criminal elements seeking position and profit amid the fog of asymmetric war.¹³

While it is not fully clear what larger strategy may lie beneath the Taliban's gradual re-escalation of violence, beyond maintaining its options between talks and conflict, its approach seems in part pegged to U.S. political developments. The Taliban's offensive in Helmand began just days after Trump's statement that all U.S. troops "should return home by Christmas". It followed a pattern in 2020 of the Taliban mounting notable acts of violence shortly after interactions with or statements by U.S. officials.¹⁴ Conversely, the group's rhetoric shifted sharply from victorious to conciliatory once U.S. electoral results started to become evident.¹⁵ The correlations between the Taliban's behaviour and U.S. actions and statements do not follow an especially clear logic but could reflect an ongoing effort by the group to test possible shifts in what the U.S. will tolerate, and calibrate the group's tactics and messaging in light of an evolving situation.¹⁶

Some Taliban interlocutors who spoke to Crisis Group also suggest the group's leadership, at least its powerful military hierarchy, believe that its intensified use of violence in mid-2020 was an effective means of pressuring the Afghan government into releasing all 5,000 on a list of Taliban prisoners – a provision of the U.S.-Taliban deal that Kabul strongly resisted but ultimately honoured. The Taliban's perception, as conveyed to Crisis Group, seems to ignore or downplay the decisive role that U.S. pressure played in swaying the Afghan government.¹⁷ This approach and rationale

¹² See Andrew Quilty, "Taliban opportunism and ANSF frustration: how the Afghan conflict has changed since the Doha agreement", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 12 October 2020.

¹³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Afghan and Western security analysts, Kabul, Kandahar, Oslo, Brussels and Doha, September-December 2020.

¹⁴ The earliest example came just days after the 29 February agreement, when the Taliban launched an offensive hours after President Trump spoke to senior Taliban figures in Doha. In response, the U.S. military launched defensive airstrikes to protect Afghan forces. See Eltaf Najafizada and Josh Wingrove, "U.S. strikes Taliban hours after Trump's call to militants", Bloomberg, 3 March 2020. On Trump's statement, see Amanda Macias, "Trump says he wants troops in Afghanistan 'home by Christmas,' but it's unclear that will happen", CNBC, 8 October 2020.

¹⁵ See "Statement of Islamic Emirate Regarding Recent American Elections", press release, Voice of Jihad, 10 November 2020.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Afghan and Western security analysts, November-December 2020.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Taliban figures, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Gulf states, September-November 2020. The decisive U.S. role in pressuring the Afghan government was confirmed by U.S. and other

align with a Taliban pattern of behaviour dating back years: at critical political moments in Afghanistan, the group often steps up violence to sap public confidence in the state and broadcast its willingness to fight until victorious.¹⁸ Overall, this pattern bodes ill for prospects of meaningfully reducing violence while negotiations are under way, and illuminates the Taliban's behaviour since negotiations commenced in September: the group appears to have recommitted to using violence as a means of leveraging favourable political outcomes.

The resumption of violence does not mean, however, that the Taliban have abandoned negotiations as a potential path to securing their objectives. The group knows how much it has benefitted from its deal with the U.S. throughout 2020: the agreement led to the release of thousands of Taliban fighters, it raised the group's international profile significantly and U.S. troops continue to leave. The fact that the group has repeatedly insisted on its commitment to the deal underscores how valuable it perceives the promised withdrawal of foreign military forces to be. This position, paired with the insurgency's daily impact across the country, has only deepened criticism among some Afghans that Washington's agreement with the Taliban has left them out in the cold. But it also points to the fact that, if the U.S. remains engaged in the peace process, the Taliban are likely to keep testing talks as an advantageous means of securing their political objectives. At the same time, until it achieves those aims, the movement will almost certainly continue to employ violence to preserve its status as a powerful force regardless of the talks' outcome.

Less certain is what the Taliban's political objectives might be. What has become increasingly clear is the leadership's collective interpretation of their deal with the U.S.: Taliban officials have issued a number of statements, both for global audiences and for internal consumption, suggesting that the Doha agreement was, in effect, a framework for bringing the movement back to power.¹⁹ Although Taliban officials have also made verbal pledges that any future government stemming from a political settlement will be "inclusive", the totality of the group's messaging since 29 February conveys outsized expectations of its role in a future state.²⁰ The Taliban clearly view themselves as the country's dominant political force and only legitimate authority, with little acknowledgment of the need for compromise.

While this posture raises the question of the group's capacity to make concessions, it might also be linked to the leadership's scepticism of the Afghan government's intentions. Crisis Group has spoken to a number of Taliban figures who expressed serious doubts about senior Afghan government officials' commitment to pursuing

Western officials with direct knowledge of discussions between the two states on the matter, as well as by several former senior Afghan officials. Crisis Group interviews, August-September 2020.

¹⁸ This pattern of escalatory violence can be charted, for instance, in correlation with Afghanistan's election cycles. See "2019 Election Violence – Election-Related Violence in Afghanistan and Its Impact on Civilians", UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 15 October 2019; or Joshua Partlow, "Violence data show spike during Afghan presidential election", *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2014.

¹⁹ See Sami Yousafzai and Tucker Reals, "What do the Taliban want out of the long-awaited 'intra-Afghan' talks?", CBS News, 15 September 2020.

²⁰ For two interviews that bookend the group's messaging, reflecting new language on political inclusivity but also the group's clear expectations that it will dominate any multiparty or pluralist governing arrangement, see the Al Jazeera English interview with Taliban negotiator Khairullah Khairkhwa, "What will it take to achieve lasting peace in Afghanistan?", 11 July 2020; and the Shamshad News interview with Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid, 7 December 2020.

an end to conflict through a power-sharing agreement – a perspective that mirrors widespread suspicions about the Taliban among Afghan and Western officials. The Taliban’s disbelief stems in part from the history of Afghan reconciliation efforts since 2009, which these figures framed as little more than veiled attempts to splinter their movement into more easily defeated factions, rather than genuine attempts at peace.²¹ Taliban figures also point to recent official rhetoric as evidence that leaders in Kabul seek to stoke conflict.²²

One sobering conclusion has come increasingly into focus over the course of the past year: the Taliban seem unwilling to cease their use of violence during what could be lengthy peace negotiations, whether to ensure that talks produce results they deem acceptable or to allow them to fall back quickly upon military means if talks fail. Many observers accordingly ask if peace talks that bring Afghans no peace are worth pursuing.²³ Yet, deeply unsatisfying as the Taliban’s approach may be, and galling as it is that acts of war on both sides continue to cause civilian suffering, the possibility of de-intensifying the conflict will remain viable only so long as talks continue.

C. *Kabul’s Challenges*

The Afghan government was critical of U.S.-led efforts to negotiate a political settlement from the start and it has been something of a reluctant partner in the effort ever since. The core concession made by Washington that kickstarted the process, to sit bilaterally with the Taliban without the Afghan government present, was described in 2018 by Afghan officials as a betrayal that delegitimised the authorities in Kabul.²⁴ In view of these misgivings, Kabul’s approach has been to cooperate with U.S. requests, but also to slow the process as much, and as creatively, as possible.²⁵

²¹ On the history of unsuccessful attempts to splinter the Taliban (and the persistent narratives that encourage such attempts), see Andrew Watkins, “Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction and Future”, U.S. Institute of Peace, 23 March 2020.

²² Two examples cited included 1) First Vice President Amrullah Saleh’s 11 December allegation that the Taliban threatened to turn Kabul into “a Shia slaughterhouse”, denied by the Taliban and denounced by Shia Hazara leaders as fearmongering, and 2) officials’ insistence that the Taliban were behind an explosion in Ghazni that killed fifteen children and wounded more than twenty others, though investigations quickly determined that previously unexploded U.S. or Afghan ordnance caused the blast. See Mohammad Haroon Alim, “Saleh: Daesh-Taliban threatened to turn Kabul into Shia slaughterhouse”, Khaama News, 12 December 2020; and “Unexploded device killed children in Ghazni’s Gilan”, Pajhwok Afghan News, 19 December 2020.

²³ Afghans and others have repeatedly voiced scepticism since February. To cite pieces from just one outlet, see, for example, William Daley, “Kabul under siege”, TOLO News, 28 December 2020; and Afrasiab Khattak, “Afghan peace: illusion and reality”, TOLO News, 11 October 2020.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Afghan officials, Kabul and remotely, 2018-2019.

²⁵ The Afghan government’s creativity reached an apex when it called for a Loya Jirga in August 2020 to resolve the fate of the last 400 Taliban prisoners meant to be released. The Loya Jirga, a traditional institution convened in modern times to ratify constitutions, resolve national disputes and unify the state’s approach to key issues, had been called most recently by President Ashraf Ghani in early 2019 in an apparent attempt to reassert control over a peace process that had become dominated by U.S.-Taliban talks and foreign interference. Analysts criticised this new “prisoners’ Loya Jirga” as a political stunt, pointing to the timing and the seemingly arbitrary determination that the final 400 of the 5,000 jailed fighters warranted exceptional consideration. See Kate Clark, Ehsan Qaane and Ali Yawar Adili, “The end of the Jirga: strong words and not much controversy”, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 3 May 2019; and Thomas Ruttig, Ali Yawar Adili and Obaid Ali, “Doors

When, in September, nascent peace talks almost immediately reached an impasse, Kabul was relieved of some international pressure as progress became more dependent on daily engagement between the two teams in Doha.²⁶ But as negotiating teams appeared to forge a compromise resolving initial disagreements in late November, reports emerged of resistance from the presidential palace – prompting donors and foreign allies to call for political leaders other than President Ashraf Ghani to play a larger role in crafting the Afghan government’s approach to peace.²⁷ Kabul’s halting pace recalled its approach to carrying out the prisoner exchange indicated in the U.S.-Taliban agreement, which stretched out over six months and, as noted, inched forward only under recurrent U.S. diplomatic pressure. Kabul will likely continue in the same vein even if the Biden administration presses it to move as quickly as possible to reach a political settlement.

This go-slow approach is underpinned by concerns among Ghani and his senior staff, shared by much of Afghan civil society, that the U.S.-led peace process has placed the government at a severe, even existential disadvantage. A number of Afghan officials worry that a political settlement, under the present circumstances, would scrap the constitutional order erected over the past two decades and essentially restore the Taliban to power.²⁸ Many feel betrayed both by international partners’ retraction of financial and military support, and the fact that these partners have begun outreach to the Taliban’s political office in seeming anticipation of them playing an official role in Afghan governance.²⁹

Some critics accuse Ghani and his advisers of resisting the peace process to preserve their own political power, as both the Taliban and political opposition leaders have made clear they anticipate that the country will be led by a “clean slate” following any political settlement.³⁰ In response, figures within and close to the presidential

opened for direct talks with the Taleban: the results of the Loya Jirga on prisoners and peace”, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 12 August 2020.

²⁶ Upon commencement of negotiations in September, international pressure (as well as support) distinctly shifted away from intervention with Ghani and senior officials over to the government’s negotiating team; diplomats gathered in Doha to observe and quietly influence the team’s daily engagement and stances taken during talks. For the first few months, as both sides quickly entrenched in disagreements over the talks’ rules and procedures, criticism that Kabul may have impeded progress was muted as attention focused on the team’s positions – not wholly dictated by the presidential palace but rooted in internal consensus, including among team members unaligned with Ghani. Crisis Group interviews, Western and Afghan officials, September-November 2020.

²⁷ For reports of Ghani’s role in delaying progress in the talks, see Gibbons-Neff, “Afghan leader digs in on peace talks”, *op. cit.* On international calls for a dispersal of decision-making authority on peace among Afghan political figures, see “UK calls for ‘urgent establishment’ of Reconciliation Council”, TOLO News, 28 November 2020.

²⁸ See Mohammad Reza Bahrami, “Afghan talks: a road leading to peace?”, TOLO News, 26 September 2020.

²⁹ In March, the U.S. took the dramatic step of publicly scolding Afghan political leaders for delay in resolving the political dispute over presidential election results, threatening to cut \$1 billion in aid. Throughout the year, U.S. diplomatic messaging chastised the Afghan government for what it framed as insufficient progress on anti-corruption and good governance reform. See Watkins, “Afghan Leaders End Political Impasse”, *op. cit.*; and William Byrd, “Dismembering Afghanistan’s Ministry of Finance”, U.S. Institute of Peace, 31 March 2020.

³⁰ For example, see political figures’ reactions in Zahra Rahimi, “Some political leaders remain absent at council meeting”, TOLO News, 5 December 2020. Interestingly, in 2020 the Taliban’s messaging

palace have told Crisis Group that resistance to an unravelling of the political order is not only deeply principled, but also rooted in mistrust of mujahedin-era Afghan stakeholders – as much as (if not even more than) the Taliban.³¹ Ghani is renowned for his expansive vision of a prosperous future Afghanistan, and his tenure has elevated younger, progressive officials.³² Fears that negotiators might bargain away Afghans' rights, freedoms and (for some) new urban lifestyle are reinforced by the latest international calls for the political opposition, consisting of older and mujahedin-era elites, to play a greater role.

Whatever the Afghan government's concerns, it is in an increasingly untenable position. Because of the military's dependence on U.S. airpower, which since February the U.S. has strictly limited to defending Afghan bases, Afghan security forces have diminished ability to mount offensive campaigns or even hold territory in the face of large-scale Taliban assaults. Financially, the country's international supporters have signalled wariness of making long-term commitments, confirmed by dips in the amount and duration of aid pledged at a major donor conference in Geneva in November.³³ Local and provincial governance remains highly dysfunctional due to perennial issues of corruption and crime – the latter of which is reportedly worsening in Kabul and other cities like Kandahar and Herat.³⁴

The possibility that the U.S. may withdraw all its troops, regardless of conditions, has spurred senior officials as well as other Afghan stakeholders to explore contingency plans to prepare for the worst. After denying the possibility for much of the past year, the Afghan government's top figures now openly warn that full withdrawal could bring about state fracture and civil war; this rhetoric, framed in line with U.S. national security interests, appears aimed at allies in Washington.³⁵ President Ghani has appointed First Vice President Amrullah Saleh to head an unprecedented task

began to level accusations at President Ghani along lines highly similar to the refrains from Afghan opposition figures. See "Kabul administration should avoid further delay and excuses!", Voice of Jihad, 18 July 2020.

³¹ One Western official who works closely with senior government officials and meets with Ghani on a regular basis told Crisis Group that the president is confident that the Afghan people reject, and will continue to reject, the Taliban's political vision – but has also expressed worry that division and disunity among the country's stakeholders can weaken and damage the political order, perhaps especially in the new period of uncertainty unfolding with the peace process. Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2020.

³² On Ghani's vision, see George Packer, "Afghanistan's theorist-in-chief", *The New Yorker*, 27 June 2016.

³³ Donors collectively decreased their funding by 13 per cent, while the U.S. made a 25 per cent cut. Perhaps more revealingly, the U.S. and UK both shortened the term of their funding commitments to a single year, to be reviewed annually. While the funding shortfall may have been due in part to extraordinary political and economic events in 2020 – the COVID-19 pandemic and its global impact chief among them – Washington's repeated diplomatic signalling of dissatisfaction correlates with its attitude toward Geneva. See Charlotte Greenfield and Rupam Jain, "Exclusive: International donors likely to pledge less for Afghanistan – sources", Reuters, 3 November 2020. For a detailed breakdown of the conference's results, William Byrd, "Afghanistan Aid Conference Yields Mixed Results", U.S. Institute of Peace, 2 December 2020.

³⁴ See just one reflection of crime levels, historically very difficult to measure, in Zahra Rahimi, "Crime remains high in Kabul city; ex-police official killed", TOLO News, 21 October 2020.

³⁵ See National Security Adviser Mohib's comments in "Taliban conflict: Afghan fears rise as US ends its longest war", op. cit.

force to tackle the many security threats facing the government, which seems inclined to dramatically expand policing and surveillance powers.³⁶ Around the country, militias only loosely controlled by Kabul (some of which are directly supported by the U.S.) have ramped up operations, a trend that historically has driven up civilian casualties and fed cycles of revenge.³⁷ Reports indicate that several mujahedin-era figures are securing funds and equipment from sources other than Kabul, to bolster private militias with no government oversight.³⁸

Regional states and their engagement with Afghan elites who are not part of the government could also pose a challenge for Kabul. Pakistan has hosted several Afghan political opposition figures since October, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former insurgent leader who reconciled with Kabul in 2017. Hekmatyar, who flew to Doha to meet Taliban officials in November, recently announced his willingness to partner with the Taliban in rejection of the political order.³⁹ While he is the only prominent figure to say so openly, sources close to a number of other Afghan leaders tell Crisis Group that back-channel communication with the Taliban has been expanding.⁴⁰ Other neighbouring states, including Russia and Iran, have long prioritised the security of border regions, even at the expense of the authority of a centralised Afghan state.⁴¹ Should they decide to encourage or support Afghan opposition figures to pursue arrangements separate from official negotiations, it could prove destabilising to both the peace process and the government in Kabul.

Amid accusations of stalling talks in which the Taliban insist on establishing a “pure Islamic system”, the Afghan government has attempted to demonstrate its own religious credentials.⁴² This posturing is not entirely new; Kabul began stepping up

³⁶ See, for instance, Patricia Gossman, “Afghan Police Take Page from Taliban Playbook”, Human Rights Watch, 29 October 2020.

³⁷ See Andrew Quilty, “The CIA’s Afghan death squads”, *The Intercept*, 18 December 2020; as well as Emran Feroz, “Atrocities pile up for CIA-backed Afghan paramilitary forces”, *Foreign Policy*, 16 November 2020.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Afghan analysts, journalists and officials, July, August and October 2020. This phenomenon was explored at length in Sune Engel Rasmussen and Ehsanullah Amiri, “Afghanistan braces for worst as U.S. troop withdrawal accelerates”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2020; and referred to in Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Fatima Faizi, “In proud corners of Afghanistan, new calls for autonomy”, *The New York Times*, 28 September 2020.

³⁹ See Islamuddin Sajid, “Hekmatyar announces separate talks with Taliban”, Anadolu Agency News, 21 October 2020.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Afghan political analysts, May-July and September 2020.

⁴¹ Discussed briefly in episode 20 of Crisis Group’s *War & Peace* podcast, “How COVID-19 Makes Afghanistan’s War Still More Deadly”, 1 June 2020. Russia’s historical approach to Afghanistan since 2001 is covered by Sharan and Watkins, “Meeting in the Middle?”, *op. cit.* On Iranian attempts to exert influence in western Afghanistan, see Scott Peterson, “How much influence will Iran have in post-US Afghanistan?”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 August 2013.

⁴² The most overt gesture is the insistence on referring to the government by its formal name, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, intended to contrast with the name of the Taliban’s erstwhile government from the 1990s (and the title by which the group still refers to itself): the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. See Gibbons-Neff, “Afghan leader digs in on peace talks despite progress, officials say”, *op. cit.* President Ghani has been explicit in ramping up his assertions of the government’s religious legitimacy (in contrast with what he and his officials argue are the Taliban’s illegitimate claims to such authority). See, for instance, his speech on the holiday Milad un-Nabi (the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday): “Our main problem is that we are unaware of the deep roots of our culture, civilization and religion. ... The nature of our system is Islamic, and the security and defence forces

outreach years ago to various councils of religious scholars around the world, in an attempt to delegitimise the Taliban's use of religious interpretations to justify their fight against an "un-Islamic" government.⁴³ Some recent proposals, including a comprehensive revamping of Afghanistan's family law and a suggestion to house primary schools in mosques in the most remote rural areas, have not been well received by Western embassies, rights groups and civil society.⁴⁴ In spite of the government's efforts, the Taliban have shown no sign of accepting its narrative about the Islamic nature of the constitutional order.⁴⁵ This is a preview of the challenges that Kabul and the West will face as they balance the need to reach a genuine power-sharing agreement with the Taliban with the desire to protect gains in rights and governance made over the last two decades.

As talks resume, the Afghan government has little reason to compromise on the agenda, much less dive into debate over substantive issues, before assessing the new White House's stance on the Afghan peace process. Yet Kabul's precarious grip on the country's security situation, the manoeuvring and dissent of opposition politicians, and the pressure of international donors will all weigh just as heavily in a few months' time. Kabul cannot sidestep these challenges. The government's most politically difficult path forward, to proceed with talks even as the U.S. winds down its involvement and support, may nevertheless be the least bad of several poor options, especially in terms of the long-term impact on the Afghan people. Although Afghan officials now warn that a peace deal giving the Taliban too much power will result in wider civil war, progressing toward a political settlement remains the only option that holds out even the possibility of ending the country's staggering toll of violence.

share Islamic beliefs". See summary in Shubham Bose, "Afghan President Ghani urges Taliban to make Quran, Islamic sharia basis of peace talks", *Republic World*, 30 October 2020.

⁴³ The Afghan government's campaign (along with the diplomatic efforts of a number of its international supporters) has resulted in ulema councils around the world issuing declarations calling for the Taliban to end their insurgency. See, for instance, "OIC General Secretariat Calls for Shunning Violence, Urging Dialogue as Way Forward towards Peace and Reconciliation in Afghanistan", *Organisation of Islamic Cooperation*, 27 October 2020.

⁴⁴ See Massoud Ansar, "MoE suggests moving primary school classes to mosques", *TOLO News*, 6 December 2020. On Western concerns, see Scott Peterson, "Why Afghan government is pushing more Taliban-style policies", *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 August 2020; and Heather Barr, "Afghan Children Need Full Access to Education: Government Proposal for Mosque-Based Primary Schools Raises Concerns", *Human Rights Watch*, 7 December 2020.

⁴⁵ Indeed, the Taliban have consistently rejected statements issued by Kabul and the Islamic bodies abroad that have engaged with the Afghan government. See for instance "Afghan Taliban urge religious scholars to boycott peace conference", *Reuters*, 10 March 2018.

III. Picking up the Pieces ... of Peace

For the Trump administration, the timeline for deal-making has run out, but that should not prompt further last-minute unilateral action. Though the prospect of full withdrawal appears to have lessened under military and congressional pressure, any sudden drawdown below the planned level of 2,500 troops could have severe negative effects well beyond the strictly military impact.⁴⁶ The best course of action in the remaining days of Trump's term is to nudge both sides to continue discussions until Biden is sworn in and as his team settles in. Even if the discussions show a lack of measurable progress, the upshot will be positive, as the potential for the process to stall rises during breaks between rounds of talks. Dialogue can and should also continue with regional actors and donors to the Afghan government – all efforts that the incoming administration should intensify. In other words, the primary objective through the end of January should be to keep the process alive.

Once in office, the Biden administration will be obliged to direct its attention to Afghanistan sooner than it might otherwise wish, given the demands of other policy priorities at home and abroad. The Doha agreement's deadline for the foreign troop presence to reach zero, beginning in May 2021, can likely be pushed back somewhat but cannot be ignored, especially if the administration hopes to sustain any chance of achieving a political settlement.

Washington should signal early on that it intends to pursue the peace process as established thus far: that it will not tear up the Doha agreement with the Taliban, but that it will also almost certainly require an extension of the deadline for total troop withdrawal while the talks move into more substantive territory. There is likely some latitude for the U.S. to make arguments for an extension by insisting that the deal's various commitments are in some cases mutually conditional, and pointing in particular to the Taliban's lack of measurable actions on terrorism concerns.⁴⁷ Washington could also point out that the parties have missed all deadlines specified in the agreement thus far, and therefore would benefit from flexibility in the interest of peace – but the centrality of the removal of foreign troops to the Taliban's objectives could render this line of argument unpersuasive.⁴⁸

There are additional incentives the U.S. could offer the Taliban in place of a strict observance of the May 2021 deadline, including more prisoner releases, progress

⁴⁶ The loss of external support could shift the political calculus of a number of Afghan stakeholders, perhaps destabilising the government's fragile authority. For a recent exploration of these tense dynamics and the potential for deterioration in centre-periphery relations between Kabul and opposition Afghan political figures, see Andrew Watkins, "Afghanistan on the edge? Elections, elites and ethnic tensions", *War on the Rocks*, 31 October 2019.

⁴⁷ See fn 3 for the relevant text outlining just a few of the Taliban's commitments on terrorist groups; the Taliban have made no public demonstration or assertion that they have acted on commitments to prevent their membership from interacting with or hosting al-Qaeda figures – a number of whom have been killed in airstrikes and raids in the company of Taliban fighters since the agreement in February. See one instance in "Key al-Qaeda leader killed in Afghanistan", Associated Press, 25 October 2020. For background to the relationship between elements of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, see Susannah George, "Behind the Taliban's ties to al-Qaeda: A shared ideology and decades of battlefield support", *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2020.

⁴⁸ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°311, *Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace*, 11 August 2020.

toward the sanctions relief promised by February's Doha agreement, or even changes to the extent of U.S. support still provided to Afghan forces.⁴⁹ Critics have argued that the U.S. has given the Taliban too much already, emboldening the group and thereby souring the atmosphere for talks.⁵⁰ Indeed, the terms and conditions of the U.S.-Taliban agreement have benefitted the insurgent group by bolstering its international legitimacy and internal morale. Although it is difficult to predict how the Taliban may react to the postponement of their chief aim, and the group is not likely to accept what it considers a renegotiation of the deal's terms without some form of give-and-take, if the Taliban were to reject a short-term extension of the deadline it would reveal a weakness of commitment to peaceful conclusion of the war.⁵¹

Regardless of how the U.S. approaches the withdrawal date, any incentives offered to the Taliban should be explicitly tied to a comprehensive, immediately implemented framework for reducing their use of violence. Several senior U.S. officials have engaged with the Taliban's political office, ostensibly in order to persuade the group that it must de-escalate the insurgency for the talks to succeed.⁵² These petitions have not been fruitful; nor have efforts led by European diplomats to shame the Taliban into a total ceasefire. The most successful episodes of violence reduction have occurred under specific conditions: a week prior to the 29 February agreement signing ceremony and two three-day ceasefires during the Eid holidays. The U.S. and its allies should now propose limited, clearly defined parameters for multiple periods of violence reduction.⁵³ Optimally, such a framework would create a direct channel between the Taliban and Afghan security forces. The two sides might erect this mechanism within the framework of their Doha negotiators' working groups or build on the progress made during talks on prisoner release.⁵⁴

One negotiating strategy that the U.S. might adopt would be to assert a stiffer interpretation of the ambiguous conditionality elements of the agreement writ large; in

⁴⁹ In terms of sanctions relief, the 29 February agreement spelled out in detail the actions the U.S. and its allies would take to petition the UN to lift sanctions against members of the Taliban's leadership (and the timeline in which to do so, which passed in mid-December). While the U.S. military has significantly reduced its aerial bombardment of the Taliban, to what its officials claim are purely defensive strikes carried out only when the Taliban threaten Afghan security forces, it is far from clear if covert U.S. support for pro-government militias has ceased. Taliban interlocutors have repeatedly raised the complaint that U.S. support for Afghan security forces' most effective capabilities (namely, airpower and special operations) should be considered a violation, or contributing to a series of violations, of the Doha agreement (which specified a cessation of hostilities between the Taliban and U.S. forces). Crisis Group interviews, September 2020. See also Feroz, "Atrocities pile up for CIA-backed Afghan paramilitary forces", *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, several senior European diplomats, September and November 2020.

⁵¹ For one proposal for how such an extension could be approached, see Barnett Rubin, "Biden Can Bring the Troops Home from Afghanistan the Right Way", Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 11 January 2020.

⁵² On the latest visit to the Taliban's political office (and the first visit of U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley), see Robert Burns, "After years fighting them, Milley talks peace with Taliban", Associated Press, 17 December 2020.

⁵³ Crisis Group has previously suggested a few hypothetical iterations of such partial violence reduction. See Crisis Group Report, *Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ One senior Afghan official reported surprise at the degree of cordiality and cooperativeness in meetings to arrange the details of prisoner release (perhaps the first official public trip by Taliban representatives to Kabul since the U.S. intervention). Crisis Group interview, June 2020.

particular, its commitments to withdrawal and to financial support for Afghanistan's future government should be emphasised as contingent on the Taliban fulfilling its commitments – as both parties understand them, not as the Taliban unilaterally characterises them.⁵⁵ It will be extremely difficult to establish an effective monitoring mechanism for the Taliban's interactions with al-Qaeda and other foreign jihadist groups (beyond what may have been outlined in the secret annexes to the Doha agreement, which do not seem to have produced publicly measurable changes in the Taliban's posture toward such groups thus far).⁵⁶

The U.S. should also flex its diplomatic muscle with neighbouring states to establish a formal regional dialogue to support a political settlement. Such discussions are long overdue. In addition, it should consider adjusting its supporting role by advocating for a neutral third-party mediator to guide and assist the talks without the baggage that Washington carries as a function of its role in the conflict and relationship with Kabul.⁵⁷

On Kabul's part, it will be important to approach the Biden administration with realistic expectations. Because the new team will need time to settle into their roles and determine their policy, the Afghan government has gained a reprieve before the U.S. presses it again to comply with its desired approach to the peace process. Still, the transition in administrations is not likely to result in a full policy reset.

Washington almost certainly will remain focused on reducing its role in Afghanistan. The risks and trade-offs of straining its relationship with Kabul by engaging with the Taliban remain much the same as they did two years ago. The Biden team will need to prepare for the fundamental resistance of some senior Afghan officials to negotiating away the constitutional order over which they preside – a factor the Trump administration never seemed to account for in its approach. Given the perception of existential threat among some Afghan officials, the new administration's best bet for persuading Kabul to cooperate may lie in improved communication and coordination with NATO and other donors. For much of the past year, some EU and European officials have publicly raised concerns about the U.S. approach and have taken pains to distinguish their support for the Afghan government. Unified messaging from Kabul's backers would carry great weight.

The Taliban should likewise approach the incoming administration with prudence. Many officials in the new administration likely will have a great deal of scepticism about the deal Trump's team reached with the insurgent group. They will not necessarily be inclined to approach the Taliban in a similar fashion – even if their

⁵⁵ On these commitments, to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a terrorist sanctuary, to enter intra-Afghan negotiations, to lay out a political roadmap and to discuss a comprehensive ceasefire, see fn 3 and "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America", op. cit.

⁵⁶ See David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "A secret accord with the Taliban: when and how the U.S. would leave Afghanistan", *The New York Times*, 8 March 2020, as well as Secunder Kermani, "Al-Qaeda still 'heavily embedded' within Taliban in Afghanistan, UN official warns", BBC, 29 October 2020.

⁵⁷ On the importance of a mediator, see the speech by Laurel Miller, "Afghanistan's Peace Process Will Be Long, Incremental and in Need of a Mediator", op. cit., as well as Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°160, *Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work*, 2 March 2020.

ultimate goal with respect to disengagement from Afghanistan proves to be broadly the same as the prior administration's. If the Taliban hopes to preserve the Doha agreement and the commitment to U.S. withdrawal sooner rather than later, it will need to show the U.S., through verifiable and measurable activity, that it takes its terrorism-related commitments seriously. Moreover, if the Taliban intends to genuinely pursue a resolution to the country's conflict, it will need to demonstrate that it is prepared to engage in the serious compromise – and the gradual transition into a non-violent political entity – that any lasting settlement to the war will require.

Kabul/Washington/Brussels, 13 January 2021

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Ireland, Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Principality of Liechtenstein Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Nations Development Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations and organizations: Adelphi Research, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Facebook, Ford Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Global Challenges Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Stiftung Mercator.

January 2021

Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2018

Special Reports and Briefings

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

North East Asia

The Korean Peninsula Crisis (I): In the Line of Fire and Fury, Asia Report N°293, 23 January 2018 (also available in Chinese).

The Korean Peninsula Crisis (II): From Fire and Fury to Freeze-for-Freeze, Asia Report N°294, 23 January 2018 (also available in Chinese).

The Case for Kaesong: Fostering Korean Peace through Economic Ties, Asia Report N°300, 24 June 2019.

South Asia

Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh, Asia Report N°295, 28 February 2018.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks, Asia Report N°297, 29 June 2018 (also available in Chinese).

Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire, Asia Report N°298, 19 July 2018 (also available in Dari and Pashto).

Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan's Tribal Areas, Asia Briefing N°150, 20 August 2018.

Sri Lanka: Stepping Back from a Constitutional Crisis, Asia Briefing N°152, 31 October 2018.

After Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Reducing Risks of Future Violence, Asia Report N°302, 27 September 2019.

Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track, Asia Briefing N°159, 2 October 2019.

Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work, Asia Briefing N°160, 2 March 2020.

Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir, Asia Report N°310, 5 August 2020.

Pakistan's COVID-19 Crisis, Asia Briefing N°162, 7 August 2020.

Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace, Asia Report N°311, 11 August 2020.

South East Asia

The Long Haul Ahead for Myanmar's Rohingya Refugee Crisis, Asia Report N°296, 16 May 2018 (also available in Burmese).

Myanmar's Stalled Transition, Asia Briefing N°151, 28 August 2018 (also available in Burmese).

Bangladesh-Myanmar: The Danger of Forced Rohingya Repatriation, Asia Briefing N°153, 12 November 2018.

Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State, Asia Report N°299, 8 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Asia Briefing N°154, 24 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh, Asia Briefing N°155, 25 April 2019.

An Opening for Internally Displaced Person Returns in Northern Myanmar, Asia Briefing N°156, 28 May 2019 (also available in Burmese).

The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro, Asia Report N°301, 27 June 2019.

Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar, Asia Briefing N°157, 6 August 2019.

Myanmar: A Violent Push to Shake Up Cease-fire Negotiations, Asia Briefing N°158, 24 September 2019.

A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh, Asia Report N°303, 27 December 2019.

Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: Giving Substance to Form, Asia Report N°304, 21 January 2020 (also available in Malay and Thai).

Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship, Asia Report N°305, 30 March 2020.

Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro, Asia Report N°306, 14 April 2020.

Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar, Asia Briefing N°161, 19 May 2020.

An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Asia Report N°307, 9 June 2020.

Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process, Asia Report N°308, 19 June 2020.

COVID-19 and a Possible Political Reckoning in Thailand, Asia Report N°309, 4 August 2020.

Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar, Asia Report N°312, 28 August 2020.

Majority Rules in Myanmar's Second Democratic Election, Asia Briefing N°163, 22 October 2020 (also available in Burmese).

From Elections to Ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Asia Briefing N°164, 23 December 2020.



International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 235, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

Regional Offices and Field Representation

Crisis Group also operates out of over 25 locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.

See www.crisisgroup.org for details

PREVENTING WAR. SHAPING PEACE.