IdPS Interdisciplinary Political Studies
Number 11 Issue 1/ July 2025
ISSN 2039-8573 online
DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v11n1p239
Published by
University of Salento
Department of Human and Social Sciences

RESEARCH ARTICLE

U.S.-Taliban negotiations and the Doha Agreement (2001–2020)

Marco *PANFILI*

Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza"

Abstract

The article analyzes the negotiation process and the final agreement that ended the U.S. war in Afghanistan. While general attention was dedicated to the dramatic withdrawal and the Taliban takeover, less focus was directed towards the negotiations and the agreement between the U.S. and the insurgent group, signed in Doha on the 29th of February 2020. The paper underscores two pivotal observations. Firstly, despite the agreement's emphasis on peace, its primary objective is a strategic advantage for both parties. Secondly, the events of August 2021 were not unforeseen but were rooted in the negotiation process and the specific provisions outlined in the finalized agreement. Methodologically, the chronological proximity of these events necessitated the use of debates within the U.S. Congress, reports, and existing literature.

Keywords: Afghanistan; United States; Taliban; Doha Agreement; Negotiations

Introduction

The war in Afghanistan began as a response to the 9/11 attacks and the Taliban's decision to shelter Al-Qaeda in the country. The Taliban were swiftly defeated, and new democratic institutions were established. Ten years after the intervention, Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda's leader, was killed in Pakistan. In the meantime, and until 2021, foreign and national individuals remained targets of the Taliban insurgency.

Following a prolonged and opaque negotiation process, the United States and the Taliban reached an agreement in February 2020. On the 30th of August 2021, the departure of the last U.S. aircraft from Kabul marked the end of nearly two decades of American presence in Afghanistan.

The paper analyzes the U.S. decision to deal with the Taliban, the objectives of the contracting parties, and the negotiation's development. Was peace the true objective, or was it disengagement? The negotiating process involved multiple actors with different perspectives on the events. Years have passed since the agreement, making it essential to reflect on the complex realities that shaped Afghanistan's path.

To address these questions, the paper first traces the development of the U.S. approach to negotiations and the diplomatic process itself. Second, it provides an in-depth analysis of the provisions of the Doha Agreement. The research draws on debates within the U.S. Congress, official reports, and existing literature.

The Road to Doha: from Bush to Trump

From the outset of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, discussions on a potential withdrawal were notably absent during George W. Bush's presidency. This absence can be attributed to three primary factors. First, the traumatic impact of the 9/11 attacks remained deeply ingrained in the national consciousness, making the prospect of withdrawal less

CONTACT Marco Panfili, marco.panfili@uniroma1.it, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", Italy

feasible in the early years of the conflict. Second, the swift expulsion of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan within weeks of the intervention fostered a perception of rapid victory, prompting the U.S. to expand its focus toward increasingly ambitious state-building efforts. Third, the commitment to Afghanistan was initially limited to military operations. However, as the Taliban insurgency escalated between 2005 and 2006, it became increasingly evident that sustained engagement in Afghanistan's stabilization and reconstruction was necessary, rendering any discussion of withdrawal premature.

The Bush administration largely refrained from diplomatic engagement with the Taliban (Dobbins & Malkasian, 2012, pp. 53-54). A clear example of this approach was the group's exclusion from the Bonn Conference. The above factors help clarify the absence of withdrawal plans and the United States' reluctance to pursue diplomatic solutions. However, a crucial factor was the prevailing sentiment in the United States following 9/11, characterized by a firm demand for total victory rather than negotiations, as noted by Steve Brooking (2022, p. 6). Consequently, the U.S. administration not only avoided engagement with the Taliban but also pressured Afghan President Hamid Karzai to adopt a similar stance.

During the Bush administration, there was a prevailing belief that victory could be easily achieved. However, the Taliban insurgency forced Obama to undertake significant efforts to address the evolving situation. This required a strong commitment to stabilizing the country, which led to a surge in troop deployments. Those in the U.S. administration who supported this approach were Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. Conversely, other representatives, including Vice President Joseph Biden, advocated for a more limited surge of 5,000-10,000 troops, arguing that this strategy would better support counterterrorism missions (Marsh, 2014, pp. 270-274).

On the 1st of December 2009, in a speech at West Point Academy, Obama announced a surge of 30,000 troops, accompanied by a gradual withdrawal plan set to begin in the second half of 2011 (Obama, 2009). By August 2010, U.S. troops in Afghanistan had exceeded 100,000. At the same time, a reassessment of U.S. obligations took place, aimed at disengagement from Afghanistan. In 2011, the withdrawal timeline was declared, starting with an initial reduction of 10,000 troops by the end of the year, followed by an additional 23,000 in 2012, and the gradual drawdown of the remaining 67,000 until 2014. By the end of that year, security and combat operations would transition to the Afghan government, while the United States would assume a residual support role (Obama, 2011). On the 20th of November 2010, during the Lisbon Summit, attended by President Karzai, NATO Allies endorsed the same transition strategy (NATO, 2010). In 2014, with 32,000 American troops still deployed, Obama reaffirmed his objective of transferring all combat missions to the Afghan government – by the end of the year – and reducing the U.S. military presence primarily to the American embassy by 2017 (Obama, 2014). However, toward the end of his presidency, conflicts in Afghanistan persisted, and terrorist groups remained active. To avoid leaving his successor in a precarious position, Obama retained 8,400 troops in the country (Obama, 2016).

Under the Obama administration, the United States demonstrated a growing willingness to explore the possibility of diplomatic engagement with the insurgent group. Brookings noted a pivotal development during this period: 'Obama formally lifted the Bush-era ban on talking to the Taliban, as suggested by Karzai. In June 2010, Karzai convened a meeting of over 1,600 delegates to discuss peace. This led to the formation of the High Peace Council, tasked with talking to the Taliban and reaching a political solution' (Brooking, 2022, p. 9). In line with this approach, discussions between U.S. representatives and the Taliban began between 2010 and 2011 (Dobbins & Malkasian, 2012, p. 56). However, the United States sustained that any agreement should involve the insurgents and the Afghan government. Despite these efforts, intra-Afghan negotiations failed to achieve meaningful progress. In

2011, the Taliban assassinated Burhanuddin Rabbani, President of the High Peace Council, in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government. The insurgents showed little interest in engaging in dialogue with Karzai, a stance that negatively impacted the initial interactions with the United States. Various countries sponsored diplomatic initiatives; however, Karzai remained deeply suspicious of any negotiation that did not include his government as an active participant. He was particularly wary of talks that could legitimize the Taliban and, in doing so, weaken his administration.

In 2013, the relationship between Obama and Karzai grew tense. By the 2009 Afghanistan presidential election, Karzai was already convinced that the U.S. administration favored other candidates over him (Rashid 2010, p. 75; Coll, 2018, pp. 348, 349, 354). Although Karzai ultimately won the election, the rift with the United States remained unresolved. As previously noted, 2014 marked the beginning of the support mission, and in the same year, Obama sought a legal framework to justify the continued American presence for counterterrorism operations. From a U.S. perspective, securing an agreement with Karzai was crucial to presenting the withdrawal as a mutual decision. However, Karzai faced significant challenges, including his reluctance to appear as if he were capitulating to foreign powers in exchange for minimal guarantees (Nordland, 2013). In the end, the Bilateral Security Agreement was signed in 2014 by Ashraf Ghani, the newly elected president, following another turbulent election (Coll, 2018, pp. 583-588).

In 2013, the Taliban Political Office was established in Doha within this tense framework. This initiative emerged from the limited contact between the United States and the insurgent group, which had been initiated early in Obama's presidency. However, the Taliban leveraged the opportunity by raising the movement's official flag and installing a plaque bearing the name 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' on the office's opening day, giving the appearance of an official embassy. This provoked strong opposition from Karzai, leading to the formal closure of the office. Despite this shutdown, the location of the Taliban's diplomatic representation became widely known. Over the following years, negotiations saw little progress (Dobbins & Malkasian, 2012, pp. 53-54; Brooking, 2022, pp. 10-12).[1]

By 2014, the operational dynamics had evolved, with the beginning of the Resolute Support Mission.[2] As the Afghan government continued its battle against the Taliban with limited American support, the insurgents increased their influence in the country. These shifts altered the Taliban's potential negotiating position and subsequently shaped the future decisions of the incoming U.S. administration.

Since assuming office on the 20th of January 2017, Donald J. Trump became the second American president to inherit the Afghan conflict. His presidency represented a significant moment in U.S. policy on Afghanistan, even though the conflict ultimately concluded under his successor.

During his populist-driven electoral campaign, the war in Afghanistan became a central point of criticism. Trump targeted Obama's failure to disengage and follow the withdrawal timelines he had set. He emphasized the need to prioritize the American people, who

[1] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 13-14.

[2] It 'was a NATO-led, non-combat mission (...) It focused primarily on training, advice, and assistance activities at the security-related ministries, in the country's security institutions, and among the senior ranks of the army and police. It worked closely with different elements of the Afghan army, police, and air force. Key functions included: supporting planning, programming and budgeting; assuring transparency, accountability and oversight; supporting the adherence to the principles of rule of law and good governance; supporting the establishment and sustainment of such processes as force generation, recruiting, training, managing and development of personnel.' (NATO, 2022).

struggled to understand the purpose of the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan. Through social media announcements and discussions with his advisors, Trump consistently advocated for withdrawal, portraying the war as a significant drain on public funds and American lives (Bolton, 2020, p. 214; Pramuk, 2017).

At that time, the United States and its allies had been engaged in Afghanistan for sixteen years. However, despite the lengthy engagement, the central government and regular army made limited progress in consolidating their position. Trump was not the first president to advocate for the end of American intervention; Obama's strategy can be interpreted similarly. The surge of U.S. troops was never intended as an indefinite commitment. It aimed to bolster the Afghan army in achieving operational advantages, enabling Afghans to regain control and confidence in managing their country independently. The final objective was the shift toward a mission focused on exclusive support rather than direct combat. In fact, alongside the surge, Obama also announced a plan for gradual withdrawal.

Trump's advisors cautioned him about the persistent terrorist threat and the potentially severe consequences of a rapid withdrawal. Beyond the Taliban, ISIS-K and Al-Qaeda could exploit the vacuum after the U.S. withdrawal. Recognizing the ongoing security concerns, Trump approved a new strategy for Afghanistan, which included an increase of approximately 4,000 American troops. While the primary factor justifying U.S. presence in the country was the terrorist threat, Trump's intention to withdraw was openly acknowledged. In a speech delivered at Fort Myer on the 21st of August 2017, Trump presented the new strategy and stated: 'Someday, after an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban and Afghanistan, but nobody knows if or when that will ever happen' (Trump, 2017). Afghanistan thus became an unpredictable variable within Trump's political agenda, influencing the negotiation process. In his Fort Myer address, Trump publicly acknowledged his initial inclination to withdraw, remarking, 'My original instinct was to pull out – and, historically, I like following my instincts' (Trump, 2017). However, he rejected immediate withdrawal due to the risk of disastrous consequences and emphasized the need to increase pressure on Pakistan in the fight against terrorism. Unlike Obama, who attempted to set specific timelines regarding future withdrawal, Trump adopted a conditions-based approach, deliberately avoiding rigid deadlines. This strategy was designed to prevent criticism over unmet commitments but introduced uncertainty, as U.S. policy in Afghanistan could seemingly change at any moment, sometimes through a single tweet.

In 2017 and 2018, there was a notable escalation in U.S. airstrikes against the Taliban, marking a clear departure from the constraints imposed by the Obama administration. This shift in strategy, aimed at impeding and reversing the Taliban's advancements, became possible through the successful containment of ISIS in Syria, which allowed for a reallocation of military resources to Afghanistan. Despite these intensified efforts, the security situation remained highly unstable, particularly in northern regions, where the Taliban continued to achieve significant gains, especially in the Kunduz province. In 2018, the Taliban took over numerous districts and provincial capitals, such as Farah and Ghazni, and the situation deteriorated in Kandahar, where the local police chief, Abdul Raziq, was killed. During the same attack, General Miller, the commanding officer of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, also risked his life.

While the Taliban's campaign was advancing, the Islamic State branch, ISIS-K, which operated across Afghanistan and Iran, was being dismantled in the country, mirroring the fate of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Recognizing the prior expansion of the Islamic State in the Middle East, both the Afghan government and the United States prioritized the fight against ISIS-K. The province of Nangarhar was particularly targeted, as it housed the group's primary training camps. Afghan military operations, conducted in coordination with U.S.

special operations forces, were effective in reducing ISIS-K influence by eliminating its key leaders. Nevertheless, terrorist attacks continued to occur, expanding to major cities such as Kabul and Jalalabad. Between 2017 and 2018, ISIS-K's responsibility for civilian casualties in Afghanistan increased from 10% to 20%, resulting in over two thousand casualties (UNAMA, 2018; UNAMA, 2019).

No significant progress was achieved on the diplomatic front between 2013 and 2017 (Brooking, 2022, p. 13). However, in 2018, both the United States and the Taliban publicly expressed interest in engaging in a meaningful dialogue. The United States sought to extricate itself from a prolonged and resource-draining involvement while preserving its reputation, thus facilitating the redirection of funds and personnel to other strategic areas. Meanwhile, the insurgents kept taking over districts and expressing their interest in the disengagement of U.S. and NATO forces from the region. Despite the Afghan government's attempts to participate, the Taliban insisted on negotiating exclusively with the United States, considering President Ghani and other Afghan officials as mere puppets lacking real decision-making authority. The Taliban upheld this stance throughout the negotiations to undermine the legitimacy of the democratic government.

The first public sign of a shift towards dialogue occurred on the 14th of February 2018, when the Taliban sent a letter to the American people, inviting them to engage in discussions with their leaders to reassess the failures of the Afghan campaign and advocate for the withdrawal of U.S. troops (Barker & Borger, 2018). About two weeks later, Ghani sought to participate in the peace process by offering political concessions to the Taliban. He suggested constitutional revisions and a prisoner exchange. Despite these efforts, the insurgents maintained their stance and did not respond to Ghani's proposals. Although these events may not have been particularly ground-breaking or could be considered propaganda tactics, they occurred within a highly tense context. On the 27th of January, in Kabul, an ambulance packed with explosives managed to bypass security checks before detonating in a crowded area of the city. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, which resulted in more than 100 fatalities.

One of the few moments of relative peace, which raised hopes among various national and foreign actors, occurred during the ceasefire observed from 16 to 18 June during the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr. This marked the first nationwide cessation of violence since 2001. Ghani unilaterally declared an eight-day ceasefire for government forces, while Taliban Supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada said that it was inappropriate to kill Muslims during Eid al-Fitr. As a result, he instructed his fighters to refrain from attacking government forces for three days. However, hostilities resumed shortly after this brief period of peace.

On the 5th of September 2018, the appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad as U.S. Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation marked a pivotal moment in the negotiation process. Born in Mazar-i-Sharif and former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Khalilzad was widely regarded as an expert on the region. The U.S. administration considered him an ideal candidate to facilitate conditions for American disengagement and a peace plan. A key element of Khalilzad's approach was prioritizing intra-Afghan negotiations to forge a political agreement that could accommodate all factions within the country. He believed that if the Taliban and democratic forces could reach a mutually acceptable agreement and establish an inclusive government – whether aligned with American interests or not – the need to maintain U.S. troops in the country to combat terrorism would be significantly reduced. Thus, he prioritized intra-Afghan negotiation over direct U.S.-Taliban talks.

Khalilzad had to work on key U.S. objectives such as 'an end to violence, an Afghan political settlement, Taliban renunciation of Al-Qaeda, and the long-term presence of intelligence assets and special operations forces in Afghanistan for counterterrorism operations' (Malkasian, 2021, p. 425). However, his real objective was the complete and secure

withdrawal of American troops.[3] Initially, Khalilzad did not agree with this decision. As he stated, 'I had thought that we should – we should prevail in Afghanistan, was what I had recommended. And – and I had been very unhappy, but, I mean, I had been in favor of adjusting policy rather than total withdrawal'.[4] Despite his reservations, Khalilzad accepted the assignment, motivated by a profound sense of duty to the United States and confidence in his ability to lead negotiations.[5] According to him, his appointment and the decision to pursue the withdrawal represented the administration's disillusionment with the strategy announced by Trump in 2017.[6] In Khalilzad's view, ensuring a secure withdrawal was crucial to minimizing American casualties and maximizing concession from the Taliban. To achieve this, he emphasized the importance of avoiding statements – such as announcing an imminent or unconditional withdrawal – that could weaken his negotiating position.[7]

The U.S. withdrawal was also a key priority on the Taliban's agenda. As stated before, they prioritized direct negotiations with the United States, refusing to recognize the Afghan government. Throughout the talks, the Taliban consistently reaffirmed this position. Ultimately, yielding to the Taliban's demands, as eventually happened, risked discrediting the government and granting the Taliban a significant political victory.

By the time Khalilzad assumed his role, the U.S. administration had already agreed to dialogue with the Taliban. Even though previous U.S. administrations had set preconditions for reconciliation – such as accepting the constitution, renouncing violence, and severing ties with the terrorists – these requirements were gradually abandoned over the years to advance the negotiations.[8] The U.S. had consistently preferred an Afghan-led solution; however, despite Khalilzad's appointment, the shift in priorities toward direct negotiation appeared inevitable.

---

[3] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 15-16, 40, 51-54.

[4] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) p. 49.

[5] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 49-51.

[6] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 62-64.

[7] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 105, 107-108, 114, 167-168, 172-173.

[8] According to Khalilzad, the U.S. posture regarding the negotiations with the Taliban evolved in the following way: 'our position on negotiating with the Taliban changed over time. Initially, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack and the overthrow of the Taliban, we were very angry, and my mission – then I had the Presidential Envoy mission – from the President of the United States, from the administration, that we want to bring them to justice. We were in a strong position. They wanted to enjoin and support the government in exchange for a kind of amnesty. Then we said, okay, we'll meet with you if you accept the constitution, if you renounce violence, if you break with terrorists. Preconditions. This is 6, 7 months after. Then comes the Obama administration, and I'm not saying this in a partisan way. Secretary of State Clinton, as the situation becomes more difficult militarily on the scene, says, those preconditions will become in-conditions of any agreement that includes the Taliban. Move forward, we allow the Taliban to open an office in Doha to negotiate with. And we agree, as during the subsequent years, to, okay, first, an agreement between the Talibs – because the Talibs were refusing our earlier approaches. And then Afghan-Afghan meeting occurs'. Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 97-98, 111.

Preliminary meetings between U.S. representatives and the Taliban reportedly took place in Doha in July 2018 (Donati, 2018). Before formal negotiations began, Khalilzad had to secure the support of the Pakistanis, who were essential for addressing the issue of the Taliban sanctuaries.[9] Subsequently, contacts between the parties intensified over the following months, culminating in a series of meetings between Khalilzad's team and Taliban representatives in Doha from October to December 2018. During the process, the U.S. identified Mullah Baradar as Khalilzad's counterpart in these talks.[10] A key figure within the Taliban and a former deputy to Mullah Omar, Baradar had been actively involved in resisting foreign forces until his capture in Pakistan in 2010. Widely respected among Taliban leaders and fighters, his involvement facilitated the group's acceptance of decisions made in Doha. In 2018, detention measures against Baradar were lifted, allowing him to participate in the negotiations.

Despite these efforts, the initial months of negotiations failed to yield tangible results. Within the U.S. administration, concerns persisted over the continued expenditure of funds for the war in Afghanistan, the declining domestic support, and mounting anxiety over the upcoming November midterms. In response, the president increased pressure on negotiators, giving Khalilzad nine months to achieve a diplomatic resolution; otherwise, troop withdrawals to the United States would begin (Malkasian, 2021, p. 429). Internal discord within the administration persisted, exacerbated by the constant threat of sudden changes in the strategy and the possibility of an immediate and destabilizing troop withdrawal.[11] The crisis reached a tipping point on 19th December 2018, when President Trump announced the complete removal of all U.S. troops from Syria, causing the resignation of Secretary of Defense James Mattis.

Following these internal changes, Michael Pompeo, the newly appointed Secretary of State, assumed a central role in shaping Afghan developments, particularly by bridging the gap between Trump and Khalilzad (McHugh, 2023, pp. 587-589). While Pompeo advocated for redirecting U.S. foreign policy toward new strategic objectives, he continued to support Khalilzad's efforts to secure an agreement aligned with U.S. interests. However, Trump's unpredictable nature continued to pose significant challenges, emphasizing the urgency of reaching an agreement. Within the administration, division persisted, with some officials opposing the negotiations altogether or favoring a unilateral withdrawal without an agreement (Bolton, 2020, pp. 423-424).[12]

In light of this urgency, Khalilzad's initial priorities were overshadowed during the official negotiations. The intra-Afghan dialogue was officially relegated to a secondary role, while the withdrawal of U.S. troops became the central issue of discussion with the Taliban (Malkasian, 2021, pp. 430-431). This shift in priorities inevitably bolstered the morale of the

[9] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp.92-93.

[10] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) p.93.

[11] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) p.57; John Bolton described in his memoirs as National Security Advisor the level of tension in the meetings between him, Trump, the Generals and other American representative on the topic of Afghanistan. Bolton, J. (2020). *The room where it happened: A White House memoir*. Simon and Schuster, pp. 214-221.

[12] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 131-132.

insurgent group, which now found itself engaged in a dialogue with one of the world's major powers, including deliberations on the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country.[13] This development was remarkable, especially considering past assertions claiming that the Taliban were on the brink of defeat.

Negotiations resumed in January 2019, demonstrating visible progress. The planned American withdrawal and the absence of foreign contingents — even for special counterterrorism operations — were balanced by the Taliban's assurance to manage the terrorist threat (Constable et al., 2019). They pledged to prevent a recurrence of scenarios similar to September 2001. However, several issues remained unresolved, particularly concerning the establishment of a lasting ceasefire and the beginning of negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

In the following months, negotiations continued in Doha, characterized by occasional tensions alongside progress. Both parties sought to extract further concessions while adhering to minor commitments. From the American perspective, the enduring connection between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban remained a primary concern.[14] This tie, established in 1996, had persisted over the years, facilitated by the porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This issue deeply troubled the U.S. administration, as the sole condition justifying military withdrawal was the elimination of the terrorist threat. The U.S. delegation asserted that tangible progress could not be achieved without active Taliban cooperation. A formal commitment from the Taliban to sever ties with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations was deemed essential, not only to provide concrete evidence of its adherence but also to reassure the American people that the war on terrorism had been won. However, even with such a commitment formally in place, the risk of non-compliance remained significant. On the Taliban's side, the withdrawal needed a specific timeline to hold the United States accountable for any failure to meet its commitments. After two decades of conflict, mutual trust between the warring factions was understandably limited.[15]

Trump's pressure persisted in internal meetings, driven by his desire for a swift withdrawal from Afghanistan, preferably before the presidential elections, to leverage this achievement in his electoral campaign.[16] Influenced by these circumstances and the possibility of an unconditional withdrawal, Khalilzad made a significant proposal to Baradar in June 2019

[13] According to U.S. Congressman Kinzinger: 'Since he has been in office repeatedly declaring his desire to get out of Afghanistan, calling this, basically, a dumb war—whatever he has used, which, by the way, is brand new—this used to be a very bipartisan agreement on this fight—is only emboldening the Taliban in the discussion. When you see the man making the call claiming he wants to leave, it is hard to give up a lot when you know that that is the end goal'. Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy', 19 September 2019, (https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg37846/CHRG-116hhrg37846.pdf) p. 29.

[14] Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy', 19 September 2019, (https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg37846/CHRG-116hhrg37846.pdf) pp. 32-33.

[15] From an International Relations perspective, this issue is framed as the commitment problem, a concept widely explored in the literature (see Reiter 2010, pp. 22-50). Reiter highlights the challenges of engaging in negotiations when trust between parties is absent, noting that 'If a wartime belligerent fears its adversary might break a war-ending agreement and reattack after war ends, one possible solution to this non compliance problem is the imposition of an absolute war outcome' (p. 25). A historical approach to conflicts can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the commitment problem by offering in-depth analysis on how peace negotiations unfold in specific contexts, and by reconstructing each party's expectations and perceptions of the other's behaviour. Shedding light on these dynamics provides concrete cases through which the analytical value and limitations of the category can be assessed.

[16] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) p. 57.

(Malkasian, 2021, pp. 437-439). He suggested announcing the agreement between the United States and the Taliban on the 14th of July, with the intra-Afghan dialogue beginning on the 22nd of July. Additionally, Khalilzad proposed resolving all major disputes between the U.S. and the Taliban by early September, after which the insurgents and the Afghan government would collaborate to reach a political settlement. However, Mullah Baradar expressed concern over the absence of a precise withdrawal timeline. Ultimately, Khalilzad and Baradar agreed to initiate the withdrawal of all foreign soldiers approximately fourteen months after the public approval of the deal. The possibility of reversing course if the Taliban failed to fulfill its obligations remained primarily a rhetorical threat.

In September, a surge in violence led to a suspension of the negotiations. During the early days of the month, U.S. soldiers were targeted and killed in Kabul, prompting Trump to unilaterally withdraw the United States from the talks. He wanted to assert full control over both the situation and the negotiation process. Trump announced via Twitter that a planned secret meeting with Taliban leaders at Camp David would not take place, that there would be no immediate troop withdrawal, and that dialogue would resume only if the Taliban demonstrated a genuine commitment and an effective reduction in violence (Doucet, 2019; Bolton, 2020, pp. 438-443).[17]

The Afghan presidential election took place on the 28th of September amidst the stalemate negotiations. Ghani emerged victorious; however, tensions escalated with Dr. Abdullah, a prominent candidate who had previously contested the 2009 and 2014 elections without success. His past electoral defeats had led to significant political instability. The solution was reached the following year when Ghani retained the presidency, while Abdullah was appointed Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, responsible for engaging with the Taliban.

Following a prisoner exchange, U.S.-Taliban talks resumed in December 2019.[18] Concerned that Trump might once again withdraw from the negotiating team and determined to secure the American withdrawal, the Taliban declared a serious commitment to the negotiations (Zucchino & Goldman, 2019). The agreement was finalized between late 2019 and early 2020.

On the 22nd of February 2020, the Taliban and the United States agreed to a week-long reduction in violence across Afghanistan. One week later, they signed the Doha Agreement, marking the beginning of the end for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

The Doha Agreement: content and criticality

In February 2020, as the world braced for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the historic agreement failed to receive the attention it deserved despite its profound significance.

Signed on the 29th of February 2020 at the Sheraton Hotel in Doha, the agreement carried crucial implications for Afghanistan's future. The key figures behind the negotiations were reflected in the signatories: U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan Khalilzad and Mullah Baradar, under the oversight of U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo. While the primary stakeholders led

[17] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp.132-133, 180-181.
Regarding the negative reaction of Congress to the potential meeting between Trump and the Taliban, particularly close to the anniversary of 9/11: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy', 19 September 2019, (https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg37846/CHRG-116hhrg37846.pdf) pp. 4, 25-27, 30.

[18] Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 182-183.

the process, representatives from various international organizations and countries – including Pakistan, Germany, Russia, and the United Nations – were also present. Although these entities did not directly participate in the finalizing of the agreement, they welcomed it as a potential catalyst for regional peace.[19]

The Afghan government was conspicuously excluded from the negotiations and the agreement. Instead, a joint declaration between the United States and Afghanistan was issued to create the impression that the Ghani administration aligned with the principles outlined in Doha.[20]

The text signed in Doha is titled: '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'.[21] The reference to the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', the name used by the Taliban for the country from 1996 to 2001 before the American-led invasion, is particularly significant. Although the U.S. rejected this terminology, its inclusion in the title could be misleading, as it evokes a sense of continuity between Afghanistan's past and its envisioned future.

In the introductory section of the agreement, the parties outline four pivotal points deemed essential for facilitating a comprehensive peace settlement. The first defines the Taliban's primary obligation: to provide guarantees and enforcement mechanisms to prevent Afghan territory from being used to threaten the security of the United States and its allies. The second establishes the corresponding responsibility of the U.S. to ensure the full withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan, accompanied by a detailed roadmap specifying the timeline. Notably, these initial two points are regarded as prerequisites for addressing the subsequent provisions. The third point highlights the launch of the intra-Afghan dialogue on the 10th of March 2020, while the final point reaffirms the commitment to establishing a permanent ceasefire within this framework. Consequently, the U.S. and Taliban defer discussions on ending hostilities and formulating a comprehensive political roadmap for Afghanistan to the intra-Afghan dialogue, emphasizing the crucial role of Afghan actors in shaping the country's future.

The introduction concludes with a statement carrying significant implications: 'The obligations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban in this agreement apply in areas under their control until the formation of the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations.'[22]. This reference implicitly conveys hope or expectation for a future government that would include diverse factions within the country, including members of the Taliban. This point aligns with Khalilzad's argument regarding the centrality of the intra-Afghan dialogue, suggesting that prioritizing this process could create the necessary conditions for peace in Afghanistan. However, the intra-Afghan dialogue was relegated to a subordinate role. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this was a direct consequence of Trump's pressure to expedite the withdrawal

[19] Security Council Resolution 2513, 10 May 2020 (https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3855892?ln=en).
[20] Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, 29 February 2020. (https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf.); Khalilzad recognized that the Ghani government was excluded from direct negotiations, but it was always informed about the contents of the talks. Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 124-129.
[21] 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, Doha Agreement, 29 February 2020, (https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf) p. 1.
[22] Doha Agreement 2020, p.1.

of troops and the Taliban's persistent reluctance to engage with Afghanistan's official authorities. The reference to a post-settlement Afghan government implicitly undermines the legitimacy of Ghani's administration, suggesting that his government would inevitably have to step aside to accommodate their historical adversaries within a new political structure. While the formation of an inclusive government may be a desirable outcome, it should ideally emerge through future negotiations and the collective will of the Afghan people. Framing the establishment of a new government as inevitable could be seen as U.S. interference in Afghanistan's domestic politics. Alternatively, it might suggest that the United States expected a Taliban takeover.

The Doha Agreement is structured into three sections that outline the parties' commitments. Section 1 defines the United States' responsibilities and obligations within the agreement's framework. Section 2 details the duties and assurances required of the Taliban as part of the negotiated terms. Finally, Section 3 addresses the anticipated relationship between the United States and the government emerging from the intra-Afghan dialogue, offering a forward-looking perspective on the potential evolution of bilateral relations beyond the agreement's immediate scope.

The first section of the text outlines the U.S. primary obligation: the withdrawal of military forces. This plan, detailed within the agreement, establishes a 14-month timeline for the gradual withdrawal of troops, including public and private sector personnel. Notably, these commitments apply to coalition forces, raising concerns among allies who were not directly involved in the negotiations but remained dependent on American support. A closer examination of this section reveals a structured plan. Within 135 days, the United States would reduce its troop presence to 8,600, with allied forces making proportional reductions. Five military bases would be completely abandoned, while the remaining troops and bases would be withdrawn over the following nine and a half months.

An ambiguous aspect of this section concerns point C of the plan, which stipulates an exchange of up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners for 1,000 'of the other side' on the day intra-Afghan negotiations commence. Additionally, the Taliban is required to refrain from using these released fighters to threaten U.S. military interests. However, the text does not address the possibility of their use against the national army. While the numerical imbalance raises concerns, the more complex issue lies in the U.S. authority over prisoner negotiations, a responsibility traditionally falling under the jurisdiction of Kabul. Previous exchanges proposed by the Afghan government aimed to mitigate tensions, yet the direct involvement of the United States likely undermined national sovereignty.[23]

The final points of this section, which depend on the commencement of intra-Afghan negotiations, address the revision of sanctions imposed on specific Taliban individuals. This commitment applies to U.S. sanctions and requires American efforts to lift UN sanctions. The final American obligation is to reduce both the threat and the use of force in Afghanistan.

[23] After the signing of the agreement, the Taliban pushed to reach the maximum number of prisoners. According to Khalilzad: 'The Afghan Government was not opposed to the principle; they were opposed to the number, that the number was too high. It should be equal numbers. And you have the disputes in other places; even you see it in Israel, Palestine, and so forth. So, yes they were a part of my agreement, and the reason for it was that we wanted to get to intra-Afghan negotiations, which was a big concession – the achievement that the Talibs would sit with the government that they had refused to sit, to get into that process – while we were still there. We believed it's in the interest of the government to enter serious negotiation while the U.S. was there, that the time doesn't run out, and that then the conditionality might, even if we wanted to exercise it, would not be operational'. Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 259-261.

The United States made commitments to a group of insurgents who undeniably contributed to instability but operated within the borders of a sovereign state. However, the full implications of these commitments can only be fully grasped by analyzing the Taliban's obligations.

The second part of the agreement focuses on the Taliban's commitment to preventing individuals or groups, including Al-Qaeda, from using Afghan territory to threaten the security of the United States and its allies. This section underscores the Taliban's pledge to prohibit terrorist activities, including hosting, cooperating with, and facilitating the recruitment, training, and financial support of such groups. While these points focus on these military assurances, the last two extend beyond security commitments into administrative and state-like responsibilities:

> 4. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban is committed to deal with those seeking asylum or residence in Afghanistan according to international migration law and the commitments of this agreement, so that such persons do not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.
> 5. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not provide visas, passports, travel permits, or other legal documents to those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies to enter Afghanistan.[24]

Unlike counterterrorism measures, which the Taliban's territorial control could justify, these provisions recognize the insurgents' authority over immigration and legal documents, functions typically reserved for sovereign states. Moreover, they further undermine the legitimacy of Ghani's government. The rationale behind these points may lie in the desire to present a symbolic victory over terrorism within the U.S. context, potentially strengthening domestic support for the Trump Administration.

The question of assurances against terrorist threats raises three key concerns. First, robust mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing control over terrorist organizations are absent.[25] Including such provisions could have strengthened the agreement's credibility by providing a framework for accountability, potentially justifying the imposition of sanctions or other punitive measures in cases of non-compliance. Second, there is skepticism regarding the Taliban's genuine commitment to severing ties with terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network. These groups maintain deep-rooted connections with the Taliban, reinforced by familial ties and mutual support in insurgency efforts (Jones, 2010, pp. 104-107). Particularly significant is the integration of the Haqqani Network within the Taliban's structure, further complicating perceptions of the insurgents' willingness to disengage from terrorist affiliations. Third, the expectation that the Taliban could exert control over all terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, particularly ISIS-K, appears unrealistic.

Relations between ISIS and the Taliban have been tense since the establishment of the caliphate. In 2015, al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, criticized Mullah Omar's limited education, arguing that it rendered him unfit to hold the title of Amir (a position Omar had assumed in

[24] Doha Agreement 2020, p. 3.
[25] According to Khalilzad, in the agreement there were secret provisions to oversee the Taliban's compliance regarding the assurances on terrorism. Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 40, 134-135.

1996), or commander of all the faithful. The rivalry over leadership among Muslims, particularly in Afghanistan, further strained relations between Mullah Omar and al-Baghdadi. The global aspirations of ISIS conflicted with the Taliban's localized objectives, creating additional tensions. In early 2015, in the absence of a response from Mullah Omar to ISIS's criticism, individuals with a Salafist background, former members of the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban, and Al-Qaeda established ISIS's Afghanistan branch with al-Baghdadi's approval. This group adopted the name ISIS-K, referencing the historical region of Khorasan. As previously noted, the U.S.-led coalition conducted airstrikes against ISIS-K in Afghanistan. Additionally, due to their ongoing rivalry, the Taliban engaged in direct clashes against ISIS-K.

The final section of the accord outlines three main points. First, the United States aims to secure recognition and support for the Doha Agreement from the United Nations Security Council. Second, it highlights a shared commitment between the United States and the Taliban to foster positive future relations. The 'new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government' is cited again, stating that the two parties expect its relationship with the U.S. to be positive. Third, the United States will seek economic cooperation for reconstruction with the future Afghan government.[26]

An analysis of the Doha Agreement reveals a clear disparity in the obligations assumed by the United States and the Taliban. While the United States committed to a detailed plan for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban's assurances regarding the inviolability of U.S. territory lacked specificity and a clear implementation roadmap. Although the United States effectively fulfilled a key demand of the Taliban, assessing whether the agreement aligned with U.S. interests is more complex. This ambiguity stems from the assertion that the sole objective of the United States in Afghanistan was the eradication of the terrorist threat. While some policymakers may have sustained this perspective, the extensive investments in reconstruction, institution-building, and socioeconomic development over the past two decades suggest that U.S. objectives were far broader. Even accepting that the sole American objective was the fight against terrorism, doubts about a true diplomatic victory remain. As discussed in the section on the Taliban's obligations, these concerns revolve around the absence of effective control mechanisms, the enduring ties with Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network, and the Taliban's limited ability to counter ISIS-K.

The negotiation process reveals the divergent objectives of Khalilzad and President Trump. Throughout the talks, Khalilzad emphasized the importance of prioritizing intra-Afghan dialogues. However, the final text of the agreement establishes the priorities of the peace process in the following order: counterterrorism, withdrawal, and internal dialogue. This sequencing reflects the pressure exerted on Khalilzad by the U.S. president throughout the negotiation period. As previously noted, the envoy advocated for an inclusive peace process involving the Afghan people, government, and Taliban. In contrast, Trump sought to expedite the conclusion of American involvement in the conflict, aiming to leverage this achievement for electoral gains in the upcoming presidential election.

While Trump was undeniably committed to achieving the objectives set in Doha, the resulting agreement does not necessarily constitute a comprehensive peace accord for the Afghan people. Rather, it functions as a pact primarily designed to fulfill American strategic objectives, namely the disengagement from Afghanistan. Trump's pressure was instrumental in securing this agreement, but this was achieved by making immediate concessions on key issues — such as the complete withdrawal of troops — and by exerting pressure on the U.S. negotiators, during meetings or through social networks. Recognizing

[26] Doha Agreement 2020, pp. 3-4.

Trump's unwavering determination to end U.S. presence in Afghanistan, Khalilzad found himself in a precarious position, indirectly allowing the Taliban to avoid significant concessions beyond nominal commitments on paper. Nevertheless, the insurgents deserve recognition for maintaining a hardline stance for nearly two decades, ultimately securing substantial gains in Doha.

References to the intra-Afghan process gradually lost the prominence the U.S. administrations had assigned them at the outset of the negotiations. Instead, they reflect the envoy's efforts to persuade the Taliban to dialogue with the Ghani government. However, these references lack binding force, as evidenced by the text of the Doha Agreement, which underscores their marginal role.

These factors help explain why the agreement was drafted with numerous ambiguities, reflecting aspirations for effective peace, the urgency to disengage, and steadfastness. Combined, these elements complicate the assessment of the agreement's effectiveness in achieving its stated objective of bringing peace to Afghanistan.

The most conspicuously absent party from the Doha Agreement is the Afghan government. From the assurances granted to the Taliban and the decision to limit the use of force to the treatment of the Taliban as a quasi-state entity and the references to a post-intra-Afghan dialogue government, it is evident that the Ghani government emerged politically and militarily weakened from the accord.[27] The joint U.S.-Afghanistan statement proved ineffective in altering this dynamic. From the outset of the negotiations, the Taliban refused to engage with the Afghan government. Ultimately, they negotiated directly with the United States, bypassing Afghanistan's democratic institutions. The inclusion of the intra-Afghan dialogue in the Doha Agreement appears more as a concession from the Taliban to the United States than as a serious commitment.

Similarly, despite its longstanding involvement in Afghanistan, the NATO alliance was marginalized during the negotiation process. Member states, many of which maintained smaller contingents, were frequently excluded and left uninformed of the progress of the talks. Khalilzad's commitments on their behalf further compounded this marginalization, as the agreement stipulates the withdrawal of 'all foreign forces', rather than exclusively U.S. troops. While NATO members were operationally dependent on the United States in Afghanistan, the lack of consultation could further strain relations within the Atlantic alliance.

From a public perspective, while the Taliban's formal disassociation from Al-Qaeda can be framed as a diplomatic victory for the U.S. — considering all the concerns previously mentioned — it is difficult to characterize the Doha Agreement as a genuine peace accord. The exclusion of key stakeholders and the ambiguity surrounding the Taliban's commitments cast doubt on the agreement's ability to secure lasting peace in Afghanistan. In this regard, Stefano Pontecorvo, the last NATO Senior Civilian Representative for Afghanistan, remarked:

> The political assessment of the Doha Agreement, whose importance in the Afghan situation is often underestimated, is dramatically simple and cannot ignore the result it produced. Obtaining conditions to allow the withdrawal of (U.S.) troops in relative safety and guarantees on the terrorism front is legitimate and indeed a duty

[27] According to Khalilzad the U.S. did not delegitimize the Afghan government through the Doha Agreement. Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad', 8 November 2023, (https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf) pp. 100, 136-139.

> for responsible political leadership. Doing so in the way it was done, even knowing the effect it would have on institutions and security forces, still raises doubts. And not correcting the shot when the repercussions of one's decisions are clear is equally reprehensible. Giving hope for a negotiated peace was illusory, but a good part of the population, albeit made cynical by forty years of conflict, had initially believed in it. (Pontecorvo 2022, 108, translated by the paper's author).

Conclusion

Despite President Trump's intentions, the withdrawal of U.S. troops was not fully carried out during his tenure, leaving approximately 2,500 soldiers in the country (McHugh, 2023, pp. 594-597). The decision was driven by concerns within his security team, which recognized the potential political and strategic risks of a complete withdrawal.

The Doha Agreement marked the beginning of the intra-Afghan dialogue. However, the negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban representatives progressed slowly and failed to yield significant results (Ibrahimi, 2022, pp. 176-178). Despite Biden's election, the United States and its partners decided to withdraw from Afghanistan in August 2021. During the withdrawal, the Taliban swiftly seized control of nearly all provinces, achieving its objective in the following months. The Afghan army failed to resist the Taliban offensive.

This paper demonstrates that the Doha Agreement did not primarily aim to pursue peace and highlights how the negotiations between the Taliban and the U.S. have shaped Afghanistan's future trajectory.

Although the Doha Agreement references key elements necessary for achieving peace — such as the Ghani government and intra-Afghan dialogue — two critical issues undermine its stated aim. The first is the exclusion of the Afghan government from the negotiations, reinforcing its perceived subordination to the United States. According to this interpretation, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan lost its legitimacy as its principal supporter — or its 'founder' according to the Taliban — decided to negotiate with the group established by Mullah Omar. The second issue is the Taliban's unwavering intransigence. Its objectives and ideology have remained unchanged over the years. The insurgents have always considered themselves the sole legitimate force capable of stabilizing Afghanistan, adhering strictly to policies and doctrinal precepts they deemed non-negotiable. This rigidity has made any prospect of compromise extremely unlikely.

Two key conclusions emerge from the text of the agreement. First, despite its title, 'Agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan,' the true objective was not peace[28]. A close examination of the document reveals that the only point of convergence between the two contracting parties was the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces. However, it is difficult to regard this shared objective as the decisive factor in fostering a genuine process of stabilization and peace. Thus, the first conclusion is that disengagement — not peace — was the primary objective of the Doha negotiations. According to Laurel E. Miller, former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan:

> In terms of what a peace agreement could actually look like, the preliminary agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban is only setting the stage for a potential

[28] This conclusion was also shared by U.S. Congressman Malinowski on different occasions. Hearing before the Subcommittee on National Security of the Committee on Oversight and Reform, 'Examining the Trump administration's Afghanistan strategy, part 2', 22 September 2020 (https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg41957/CHRG-116hhrg41957.pdf) p.31; Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy', 19 September 2019, (https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg37846/CHRG-116hhrg37846.pdf) p. 47.

> peace agreement and a peace process. An actual peace agreement among the Afghan parties is going to have to address a wide range of issues including political arrangements for Afghanistan, security arrangements for Afghanistan, implementation measures, verification measures. And so it will be complex and it will take time to negotiate that. And, frankly, the U.S.-Taliban agreement is only useful insofar as you actually get to that second stage. It does not, as I said, bring peace to Afghanistan.[29]

In terms of fostering peace, the Doha Agreement remains hollow without subsequent negotiations.

The second conclusion concerns the agreement's destabilizing impact on the Afghan government, a process that had already begun with its exclusion from negotiations. The text of the agreement undermined Afghanistan's democratic institutions through several key provisions: the delegation of state powers to the Taliban and the unilateral U.S. decisions to reduce the use of force — thereby limiting support for Afghan military operations — and to bypass Kabul's authority in matters related to prisoner exchanges. The most critical issue, however, is the absence of an effective mechanism to ensure that the intra-Afghan negotiations would serve as a necessary and functional step toward reconciliation.

Following the U.S. withdrawal, the terrorist threat to the United States from groups based in Afghanistan remains uncertain[30]. The absence of American targets within the country and its immediate neighbors has contributed to a reduction in immediate menaces. However, the U.S. departure has also limited the counterterrorism assessments, increasing uncertainty regarding the long-term security landscape. An unstable Afghanistan is likely to facilitate the proliferation of terrorist groups.

Since 2009, U.S. intentions to withdraw have been publicly articulated by both Democratic and Republican presidents. Although Obama and Trump adopted different approaches, both considered withdrawal necessary. The ambiguous diplomatic process that culminated in the Doha Agreement found its dramatic conclusion in August 2021. For this reason, the Taliban's return to Kabul, coinciding with the scheduled completion of Western withdrawal operations, should be tracked back to the negotiations' development and the Doha Agreement's final terms.

ORCID
Marco Panfili 0009-0003-7335-9313

Funding
The research received no grants from public, commercial or non-profit funding agency.

Transparency on the use of generative Artificial Intelligence
No AI tools have been used.

[29] Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy', 19 September 2019, (https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg37846/CHRG-116hhrg37846.pdf) p. 83.

[30] Some experts warn that the terrorist threat posed by groups operating in Afghanistan against the U.S. is rising. United States Institute of Peace, 'Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Final Report', May 2024, (https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ssg-final-report-counterterrorism-afghanistan-pakistan.pdf) pp.10,15,19, 25-26,49.

REFERENCES

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 (29 February 2020), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Bolton, J. (2020). *The room where it happened: A White House memoir*. Simon and Schuster.

Barker, M. & Borger, J. (2018). Taliban publish letter calling on US to start Afghan peace talks. *The Guardian* (14 February), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/14/taliban-publish-letter-calling-us-start-afghan-peace-talks, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Brooking, S. (2022). Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan? *Peaceworks* n.183.

Coll, S. (2018). *Directorate S: the CIA and America's secret wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Penguin.

Committee on Foreign Affairs. (2023). Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad (8 November), https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Interview-of-Zalmay-Khalilzad_Redacted_COMPILED.pdf, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Constable, P., Ryan, M., and Sonne, P. (2019). U.S., Taliban move closer to deal on American troop exit. *The Washington Post* (28 January), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghan-president-calls-for-direct-talks-with-taliban-us-tentatively-agrees-on-framework-that-could-lead-to-troop-withdrawal/2019/01/28/23ecbaba-22f9-11e9-81fd-b7b05d5bed90_story.html, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Donati, J. (2018). U.S. Envoy, Taliban Officials Meet to Discuss Afghan Peace Talks. *The Wall Street Journal* (25 July), https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-envoy-taliban-officials-meet-to-discuss-afghan-peace-talks-1532547118, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Dobbins, J., & Malkasian, C. (2015). Time to negotiate in Afghanistan. *Foreign Affairs*, 94 (4), 53-64.

Doucet, L. (2019). Trump cancels secret US meeting with Afghan Taliban. *BBC* (8 September), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49624132, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs. (2019). The State Department's Foreign Policy Strategy and FY20 Budget Request (27 March), https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg35589/CHRG-116hhrg35589.pdf, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs. (2019). The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy (19 September), https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg37846/CHRG-116hhrg37846.pdf, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Hearing before the Subcommittee on National Security of the Committee on Oversight and Reform. (2020). Examining the Trump administration's Afghanistan strategy, part 2 (22 September), https://www.congress.gov/116/chrg/CHRG-116hhrg41957/CHRG-116hhrg41957.pdf, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Ibrahimi, S. Y. (2022). False negotiations and the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban. *International Journal*, 77 (2), 168-187. https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020221135299

Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan (29 February 2020), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Jones, S. G. (2010). *In the graveyard of empires: America's war in Afghanistan*. WW Norton & Company.

Malkasian, C. (2021). *The American war in Afghanistan: A history*. Oxford University Press. Kindle.

Marsh, K. (2014). Obama's surge: a bureaucratic politics analysis of the decision to order a troop surge in the Afghanistan war. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *10* (3), 265-288. https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12000

McHugh, K. A. (2023). A Long War and a Short Temper: A Bureaucratic Politics Analysis of the Trump Administration's Policy in Afghanistan. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, *34* (3), 566-607. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2023.2239643

Nordland, R. (2013). Elders Back Security Pact That Karzai Won't Sign. *The New York Times* (24 November), https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/25/world/asia/afghan-council-approves-us-security-pact.html, last accessed 21 June 2025.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO. (2010). Opening statement by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at meeting on Afghanistan with Heads of State and Government. (20 November), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_68723.htm, last accessed 21 June 2025.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO. (2022). Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan (2015-2021) (30 May), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm, last accessed 21 June 2025

Obama, B. (2009). Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan (1 December), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Obama, B. (2011). Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan (22 June), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-Afghanistan, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Obama, B. (2014). Statement by the President on Afghanistan (27 May), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/27/statement-president-afghanistan, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Obama, B. (2016). Statement by the President on Afghanistan (6 July), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/06/statement-president-afghanistan, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Pontecorvo, S. (2022). *L'ultimo aereo da Kabul. Cronaca di una missione impossibile*. Piemme.

Pramuk, J. (2017). What Trump said about Afghanistan before he became president. *CNBC*. (21 August), https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/21/what-trump-said-about-afghanistan-before-he-became-president.html, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Rashid, A. (2010). How Obama Lost Karzai. *Foreign Policy*, *185*, 71–76.

Reiter, D. (2010). *How wars end*. Princeton University Press.

Security Council Resolution 2513 (10 May 2020), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3855892?ln=en, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Trump, D. (2017). Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia (21 August), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/, last accessed 21 June 2025.

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA. (2018). Protection of civilians in armed conflict. Annual Report 2017 (February), https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2017_final_150218.pdf, last accessed 21 June 2025.

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA. (2019). Protection of civilians in armed conflict. Annual Report 2018 (February), https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_annual_protection_of_civilians_report_2018_-_23_feb_2019_-_english.pdf, last accessed 21 June 2025.

United States Institute of Peace. (2024). Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Final Report (May), https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ssg-final-report-counterterrorism-afghanistan-pakistan.pdf, last accessed 21 June 2025.

Zucchino, D., & Goldman, A. (2019). Two Western Hostages Are Freed in Afghanistan in Deal With Taliban. *The New York Times* (19 November), https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/19/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-prisoner-exchange-peace-talks.html, last accessed 21 June 2025.