Competing Interests and Priorities – Why Political Settlement Failed in Afghanistan

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Introduction

A negotiated settlement could have ended the decades-long conflict in Afghanistan and helped stabilize the troubled region. However, the complexity of the conflict was the main obstacle to negotiations. The key intricacy of the Afghan conflict was the involvement of various national and transnational state and non-state actors that needed to come together to make a settlement possible. A robust political settlement requires buy-in from all parties to the conflict. Implementing inclusive talks while attempting to balance the conflicting interests and viewpoints of the parties involved in the Afghan conflict grew increasingly challenging.

Although political settlement and an end to the conflict were in the interest of all stakeholders in the long term, it was, at best, a second priority to narrower individual interests. The lack of unity and the complex network of relationships among the actors made it difficult to align interests. The U.S., a major party to the conflict, was unwilling to negotiate with the Taliban until it became evident that there was no military solution. By that time, space for negotiations had significantly narrowed. The Taliban had regrouped and strengthened their position on the battlefield. The government in Kabul was weak and divided, unable to take a clear stance on hotly contested issues. The region lacked a coherent policy toward the conflict and its settlement. Pakistan and Iran wanted a weak and friendly government in Kabul and used the conflict to advance their national interests. The region and the West found it increasingly difficult to negotiate their differences and long-standing rivalries to end the conflict.

For the three most important actors in the conflict, the willingness to negotiate was also never aligned.[1] Following the American invasion, the Taliban were interested in negotiations, but Washington and Kabul were not. A decade later, Kabul and Washington wanted to negotiate, but not the Taliban. In the aftermath of the Doha deal, neither Kabul nor the Taliban was interested in

[1] Steve Brooking in his USIP paper *Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan* uses William Zartman's theory of ripeness to explain the opportunities for conflict resolution with actual negotiations, concluding that those opportunities were missed in Afghanistan in three separate cases.

negotiating. The inability to align commitment to negotiate at the same time and with the same intensity, in the end, proved detrimental.

Competing Priorities

The Afghan conflict suffered from the direct involvement of a multitude of internal and external actors. The failure of the Taliban, the Afghan government, and wider regional and international entities to coordinate and balance their interests proved detrimental to the emergence of a peace accord.

The U.S.

Since 2001, the U.S. had taken the lead in defining the policies for stabilizing Afghanistan, including with respect to the possibility of political settlement. As the years passed, it became evident that the shortcomings of the Bush Administration's "war on terror" policies were preventing the U.S. from achieving its envisioned outcomes of defeating terrorism and reshaping the fragile region. Having acknowledged that a military victory was likely not possible, the Obama administration begrudgingly adopted a position of reconciliation with the Taliban. [1] The reconciliation policy was complimented by military and civilian surge that sought to force the Taliban to the negotiating table from a position of strength on the battlefield. However, by then the conflict had taken a new form and had increased in complexity. Space for negotiations had significantly narrowed.

By 2009, Afghanistan was reeling from internal crises. Attempts to create a centralized government after 2001 had failed to achieve nationwide legitimacy. A predatory government had emerged, deeply divided along longstanding factional and ethnic lines. The Karzai government could not provide elementary services such as security and a reliable public administration. Relations between Washington and Kabul were at their lowest point, especially after the fraught 2009 Afghan presidential elections. The Taliban were exploiting public grievances against the government while challenging coalition forces on the battlefield. It was against this backdrop of mistrust, soured relations, and disenchantment with the war efforts that the American and Afghan governments started negotiating with the Taliban.

From the start, the priorities of the U.S. and Afghan governments diverged significantly. For the U.S., the peace process was always subordinate to the greater goal of withdrawal. Despite adopting a military surge strategy to translate battlefield victories into leverage on talks, the Obama administration undercut both efforts by setting a strict timetable on reconciliation and withdrawal. All three presidential contenders – from Obama to Trump to Biden – had campaigned on ending forever wars. More emphasis was placed on withdrawal than creating the necessary conditions for successful negotiations. Stripping itself and the Afghan government of the leverage of the presence of international forces, the U.S. simply allowed the Taliban to wait them out instead of engaging in earnest. The priority on withdrawal was always at odds with the reality on the ground.

In addition to recognizing the need for talks, the Obama administration also recognized the role of regional actors. It was the first administration to develop a policy of engaging the neighboring powers and encouraging them to help Afghanistan reach a political settlement. The region was instrumental in early war efforts to topple the Taliban and install a democratic political system. However, American relations with important actors, particularly Iran and Russia, had soured, giving way to deep-seated historical rivalries. The inability to resolve differences between Pakistan and India lent an additional factor of complexity to the problem. Each regional power used the Afghan conflict to advance its interests that were often at odds or even destructive to the overarching goal of settlement.

A party to the conflict, the U.S. was unable to take the lead in bringing the region together and balancing competing priorities. Frustrated with its inability to bring all parties together, the U.S. excluded everyone, including the Afghan government, when it engaged and concluded direct talks with the Taliban in 2020. The U.S. succeeded in achieving its goal. But its exclusionary policy on talks ultimately doomed peaceful settlement.

Afghan Government

A key weakness of Afghanistan's fragile new state was the exclusion of the militarily-defeated Taliban in the Bonn power-sharing agreement. But Bonn had brought together a broad range of Afghan actors with varied backgrounds, ideologies, and interests into government. They couldn't take a clear stand on the hotly contested issues. Any peace settlement required buy-in from all stakeholders in the Afghan society. These figures disagreed on many issues and exercised a practical veto concerning any peace agreement. The government, moreover, was unable to take an active and assertive role without American consent.

The factions that would stand to lose the most did not share optimism about a peace process. Former warlords and local strongmen had accrued immense influence and resources after American intervention and enjoyed close ties with regional and international patrons. Given how many powerful actors in the government benefited from the status quo, many acted as spoilers to the peace process. Settling with the Taliban would decrease their share in a fixed pie of resources, they assumed.

Leaders of ethnic, sectarian, and gender minorities who endured brutality under the Taliban rule were suspicious of negotiations.[2] Civil society groups that supported ideals of freedom and human rights protection and sought to expand the role of women in society were also positioned against peace talks with the group that threatened their interests.[3] These groups had made significant gains with support from international partners. They feared the price of settling with the Taliban would be the loss of major achievements gained from the American engagement.

The leadership in the government had its own fears of marginalization from a power-sharing settlement.[4] Deeply divided, the Afghan government was unable to settle competing interests and

address valid fears. Forced into direct negotiations after the Doha deal, the government stalled talks to negotiate better terms. It did not ultimately have the necessary leverage to improve its negotiating power without the backing of American forces in the face of a final withdrawal.

Taliban

The Taliban were initially interested in a settlement with the American and Afghan governments. In two instances in late 2001 and again in 2002, the Taliban were willing to lay down arms in return for immunity. The U.S. ban on talks was lifted only after the Taliban had regrouped and resurged and were challenging coalition forces on the battlefield. Together with a lackluster outcome of the nearly a decade-long engagement, the U.S. and the Afghan government had significantly lower leverage in talks.

Recognizing this, the Taliban leadership adopted the policy of waiting the Americans out. Although the Taliban eventually engaged in talks starting in 2013, it remained cognizant of an ever-nearing withdrawal. With the withdrawal commitment locked in as part of the Doha deal, the group was no longer interested in a political settlement that did not meet most, if not all, of its demands.

Pakistan

Following the U.S.-led intervention, Pakistan continued to its longstanding policy of strategically and tactically supporting the Taliban's advance of their joint interests. Islamabad was a core party to the Afghan conflict; there would be no successful negotiation without its participation.[5]

Throughout the two-decade-long international engagement in Afghanistan, Pakistan's priorities remained the same. Fearing risks of encirclement by rivals in India and Afghanistan, Islamabad's principal objective was to ensure a friendly regime in Kabul and limit Indian influence over it. Pakistan continued to play an outsized role in the conflict, supporting the Afghan insurgency even as it was fighting the Pakistani Taliban at home. And to assert its role, Pakistan always advocated its interests in talks with the Taliban, while remaining confident that its Afghan proxies were on their way to victory. Pakistani vetoed direct talks that did not include them.[6] Pakistan saw a politically weak Afghanistan as its best insurance.

Iran

In the early days of the American intervention, Tehran cooperated with Washington in removing the Taliban from power, providing the US forces and Northern Alliance critical support. It also helped broker an agreement with the Northern Alliance that supported Karzai as head of the interim government. However, cooperation between Tehran and Washington ceased in the lead-up to the Iraq war when Bush categorized Iran as part of the 'Axis of Evil.' Tehran adopted a confrontational line on the U.S. presence in Afghanistan thereafter, while acting as a spoiler in the Iraq war. The Obama administration sought Iranian cooperation on regional efforts to

stabilize Afghanistan. But deteriorated relations had put the U.S. and Iranian interests at odds with one another, hurting the prospects for Iranian role on talks.

Like Pakistan, Iran wanted a weak and friendly regime in Kabul that was not a threat to its security and interests. And Tehran recognized the futility of the military campaign to bring peace to Afghanistan. The deterioration of its relations with Washington prompted Tehran to adopt a hedging strategy concerning a post-2014 Afghanistan. To assert its role, Iran increased its support for the Taliban, while trying to broker peace talks between the Kabul government, the Taliban, and the region.[7] At the end of the day, if Tehran came to believe that negotiations could imperil its security objectives and regional power aspirations, it could derail the process by using its influence with the Afghan parties.

India

The historical India-Pakistan conflict in Kashmir was a major factor in the Afghan conflict. Suspicious of nefarious Pakistani intent, New Delhi also sought a friendly partner in Kabul. Even as India had little influence on the negotiations, it took a conciliatory tone on the talks with Pakistan's proxies. India adopted a hedging strategy to protect its interests in anticipation of the departure of coalition forces when it signed a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan in 2011.[8]

The New Delhi leadership was dubious about the success of the Afghan peace negotiations in which Pakistan would hold a dominant role. Nevertheless, they wanted to be included, should any talks ever take place. India had long supported the Northern Alliance in its fight against the Taliban and maintained close ties with many of the group's top figures in both the Kabul government and the opposition whom New Delhi wanted to be a counterweight to its rival's proxy – the Taliban.

Russia

Like Iran, Russia's relations with the U.S. had deteriorated by the time Obama adopted a negotiations policy. The wars in Iraq, Georgia, and subsequent annexation of Crimea had brought relations between Washington and Moscow to low levels not seen since Soviet times.

Moscow's approach towards Afghanistan would not help to end the war or bring stability to the region; rather, Russia regarded its own, relatively minimal role in the country as a foil to U.S. & NATO forces. A resurgent Russia prioritized bolstering its geopolitical position. Russia also adopted a hedging strategy and opened direct relations with the Taliban, another parallel to Iran's approach.[9] Moscow also enjoyed close ties to the Karzai regime and Northern Alliance leadership. Moscow was vigilant about any talks that did not address its priorities.

Conclusion

The Afghan conflict included various state and non-state stakeholders who failed to come together to create the opportunities for a successful political settlement. The conflict's regional context was characterized by deep-seated mistrust, security fears, geopolitical rivalries, and competing motives, while internally, the Afghanistan government was too weak to make a united and coordinated stance. Divisive politics and missed opportunities, in the end, made efforts to navigate an inclusive negotiation process very difficult.