

## **Why was a Political Settlement not Achieved in Afghanistan?**

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### **Introduction**

The failure of the peace process in Afghanistan was not as abrupt or surprising as the eventual military take-over by the Taliban. There were certain factors that contributed to the failure including the Taliban's constant avoidance of a stalemate and the lack of earnestness towards the process from the Taliban and the Republic alike. The persistent corruption in the Republic and the public's resulting indifference contributed to the failure as well. The urban and rural divide enabled the Taliban to amass military strength, which led to a further dwindling of interests in the process from the Taliban's side. The more recent factors that contributed to the failure of the process included the lack of unity of vision towards expectations from the process by the Republic, the obsession with inclusivity and a bad military strategy. The US and its allies played a major role in the failure in the last year by giving up all leverage to the Taliban by announcing withdrawal dates before negotiations had begun. They granted legitimacy to the Taliban by engaging directly with them whilst cutting out the Republic and creating self-fulfilling prophecies of a fall through intelligence reports. This essay studies all these factors in detail to understand the errors of the past in order to not repeat them.

It is important to start the study of the failure of a political settlement in Afghanistan with the persistent factors that produced it. William Zartman considers mutually hurting stalemates as contexts in which warring parties can be moved to the negotiating table. Such a stalemate is contingent on the assessment of parties and arrival at the conclusion that possible gains are overshadowed by likely costs. Islamist groups often have metaphysical measures by which they assess gains and cost, which produces an incongruence in the different calculation of stalemates between them and their opponents. Thomas Barfield highlighted how different societies have different views of rational choice, but the international community kept expecting the Taliban to assign the same cost to certain actions while ignoring the cultural and religious factors that complicated that rationality. Those could explain why the Taliban kept avoiding meaningful negotiations until they were sure an agreement with the United States would clear the path to a total military victory. The only time the Taliban might have gotten close to a mutually hurting stalemate was during the U.S. drone-strike campaign before the opening of the Qatar office

(roughly 2010-2012). Once the leadership's families were out of harm's way, the Taliban had little reason to feel the hurt. The inability of the United States to hurt major sponsor states such as Pakistan and Iran for their support of the Taliban also meant that they were not translating pain into pressure on the Taliban.

The Taliban were guilty of creating an indivisibility of disputed goods scenario which prevented settlement with the Afghan Republic.<sup>1</sup> The two major motives for their fighting were the ousting of foreign troops and the re-establishment of an Islamic Emirate. They seem to have realized that the first objective could be met by biding their time until the United States was left with little option but to withdraw militarily from Afghanistan. On the second front, despite having started workshops to train their fighters on the utility of peace processes and toning down their rhetorical demand for the return of the Islamic Emirate, the Taliban's lack of clarity about what they meant by an Islamic system and their constant labelling of the Republic as un-Islamic meant that a compromise would remain un-Islamic and unacceptable to their cadres. This change in messaging, which might or might not have been genuine, might have also informed President Ashraf Ghani's view of a political settlement as an existential threat. Ghani's refusal to share any real power with Dr Abdullah Abdullah throughout their National Unity Government, but then willingly ceding him the chairmanship of the High Council for National Reconciliation (ostensibly in charge of peace talks), showcased Ghani's lack of earnestness towards the process.

The perfect storm took hold in Afghanistan, which found itself stuck in a vicious cycle that led to the alienation and radicalization of the rural population. The cycle started with the US invasion and then, the Taliban insurgency, both of which? caused insecurity. They created grounds for corruption by the Republic which led to the failure to meet basic needs for the larger rural population. People with little prospect for a good life and reasons to hate the current regime were susceptible to the message of insurgency. The Taliban never really governed the areas they held; they mostly allowed the Republic to hold the district centers to avoid that burden. The Taliban knew that their success lay in disrupting the Republic's ability to govern.

While some have argued that the larger population was complicit in the Taliban's rise, I would contend that the Taliban did not win over the population; but they did enough to prevent the Republic from winning them over as well. The Taliban just had to wait long enough to swoop in and act as the saviors who brought an end to the active conflict. The Republic officials used the volatile security situation as a cover to build ghost projects such as schools, hospitals, roads and other infrastructure to amass riches. This lack of improvement in the quality of life of the common citizen despite promises made by the state and the visible levels of corruption also meant that, during the last blitzkrieg of the Taliban, tribal elders were willing to negotiate the surrender of the ANDSF forces rather than standing by them or asking for a peaceful resolution.

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<sup>1</sup> The "indivisibility of disputed goods" scenario is a concept also defined by Zartman. See "Common Elements in the Analysis of the Negotiation Process," *Negotiation Journal*, January 1998.

The aforementioned vicious cycle also meant that the progress made in the last two decades never managed to trickle down to the rural population. The improvements in the life of the urban population and stagnation in life for the rural population only exacerbated the divide between these two strata of society in Afghanistan. This meant that the rural population, among which the Taliban would find most of their recruits, had little sympathy for the life and dreams of the urban population. This polarization created grounds where both Afghan sides of the peace settlement process would face limited scorn, among their respective constituencies, when they displayed an obvious lack of earnestness towards the process. This also meant that the prospects of a reconciliation between these worlds was bleak.

The study of the more recent contributors to the failure of the peace settlement has to start with the failure of the United States, which set the stage for the rapid domino-like errors that followed. The United States always negotiated with the Taliban from a position of weakness. This was less about strategy but more about the wish for expediency from respective U.S. administrations. The fact that US administrations broadcasted the end of the Afghan conflict and withdrawal of U.S. troops as a political win meant that the Taliban could sense their urgency and leverage it in their favor. President Donald Trump's 2018 tweet announcing a withdrawal just before formal talks between the United States and the Taliban were to begin in Qatar is one prime example. The wording of the US-Taliban agreement and the mention of the Islamic Emirate by name is another. A third, the announcement of a date of withdrawal before the Afghan Republic and the Taliban had even approached a negotiated settlement, reinforced the belief within the Taliban that the country was ripe for the taking through a military campaign.

It must also be noted that the United States choice to directly negotiate with the Taliban transformed it from an insurgent group to a government in waiting. This legitimization on the Americans' part came at the cost of the Afghan Republic's legitimacy. The US-Taliban deal was perceived as a victory by the Taliban and it boosted their confidence in their strength and ability to sideline the Republic. This sense of victory manifested itself in the high morale of their fighters as they pushed to take the country by military force. In turn, the fighters in the ANDSF felt that there was little hope to win the fight now that the United States had conceded to their enemy.

Media reports of U.S. intelligence assessments further fed the frantic sense of impending military victory. There is much that has been written on the implications of the US-Taliban agreement on American military support to the Republic, but the truth is that the publicity around these intelligence reports, predicting a military victory of the Taliban, were creating self-fulfilling prophecies that not only added to the panic of the Afghan decision-makers but also drained the ANDSF of the will to fight for a lost cause. The Taliban's psychological operations also rode the momentum these reports generated in their favor, enabling the group to conquer most of the country's territory without a fight. These facts do not negate the horrendous management of the war by the Republic following the agreement but bear reflection.

Prior to considering the Republic's failure, it is also important to recognize the effect of the American legacy of buying off potentially dissident powerful Afghans by granting them political office and benefit. This legacy was carried on by the Republic. This led to the creation of too many stakeholders in the peace process, which in turn created too many possible spoilers. Strife between different power brokers within the Afghan political order would be starkest in the tensions over delegation makeup and the absence of any unified vision for the peace process.

For months after the US-Taliban agreement, the Afghan Republic failed to produce a single proposal for the peace settlement. The President's office and his close aides, the High Council for National Reconciliation, the Ministry of Peace and the peace delegation were all acting as parallel structures that produced little in the form of a roadmap for the peace process. The Afghan parliament was kept out of the discussion regarding agendas and expectations from the process as well. Other international stakeholders would visit the country and offer paths forward in engagement with the Taliban. There was an acute incongruity of visions, which led to inaction on all fronts.

Most negotiation sessions were either delayed or never took place due to an obsession among leaders of the Republic and the international community on inclusivity. The lists of delegations would start with five to seven names and then would expand to almost twenty, with every side pushing for more loyalists to represent them. This persisted till August 15<sup>th</sup> 2021; even hours before Ashraf Ghani flew out of Kabul, the delegation that was supposed to sign an eventual agreement with the Taliban included almost all of the political elite. Two of Ashraf Ghani's closest aides supposedly wondered whether it was a good idea to leave the President alone in the palace as they flew out for the signing, only to hear that the President had flown out of the country.

The Afghan Republic, having lost much of its legitimacy to the Taliban through the US-Taliban deal, needed to make a military stand to prove itself a worthy opponent. The Ghani administration botched the military strategy as badly as it had botched the peace process. Rampant corruption led to many in the ANDSF going without salaries for months at a time when they were required to sacrifice the most. The lack of financial incentive and the low morale made the option of surrender offered to them by the Taliban tempting. The Republic threw away any military advantage and played to the strengths of its opponents when it opted to retreat from the rural areas and garrison in urban centers. Some claimed that the Republic wanted the Taliban to make rapid gains as part of an argument to plead with President Biden to retract his decision to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan. Whatever the truth of this claim, what remains certain is that corruption, ghost soldiers, low morale and bad military strategies all led to the Republic's collapse in less than two weeks.

Any political settlement of the two-decade-long conflict was always going to be asymmetric in the Taliban's favour: with the United States, this was based on their greater leverage in terms of time, and compared to the Republic's elites, in terms of de-legitimization among the Afghan people. That said, a settlement would have set some norms in place and left some political

counterweight to the Taliban within the new order. The failure of the Afghan Republic and the United States to achieve such a settlement resulted in the military takeover and unleashed the storm of issues that the common Afghan and the world now face with a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.