

## Peace at Any cost? Implications of the US-Taliban Deal in Afghanistan

In September 2019, President Donald Trump decided to suspend talks with the Taliban due to alleged violent actions against Western troops and Afghan citizens. It was clear, however, that the move of the US president was an element of a political game and his negotiation tactics. Perhaps Trump's cabinet realised that the continuation of the peace negotiations with the Taliban would lead to a conference with their representatives at the White House, which was scheduled to take place in September 2019, on the 18th anniversary of 9/11 attacks. Shortly afterwards, it became clear that Trump's decision to postpone the talks was a tactical move. US news agencies reported that the American administration held secret talks with the Taliban. Furthermore, during a surprise trip to Afghanistan in November 2019, Trump himself announced that the US administration reopened the talks with the Taliban to end the war. Ultimately, in December 2019, the US administration resumed the negotiations and President Trump confirmed the agreement that was reached in Islamabad and Doha. Based on the accord, the rebel forces were supposed to respect a seven-day partial truce, or 'reduction in violence'.

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Apparently, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan complied with the American conditions given that both sides signed a peace treaty in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020. The deal was quickly portrayed as the end of war in Afghanistan; however, only time will tell whether the treaty was a success or a total failure. Nonetheless, it remains unclear what has changed that nearly two decades after the beginning of the military campaign in

Afghanistan—and the US-led war against Islamic extremism—Washington decided to seek a truce with the enemy whose chief strategic and ideological objective is to wipe out Western civilization.

### **War of missed opportunities**

On September 11, 2001, two passenger airliners, which had been hijacked by Islamic terrorists, crashed into the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Shortly afterwards, another group of terrorists flew the third airliner into the Pentagon. The hijackers of the fourth aircraft failed to reach their target, which is believed to have been the Capitol, thanks to the heroic efforts of the passengers. The terrorist attacks resulted in almost 3,000 deaths, most of whom were civilians. 9/11 was a greater disaster than the Japanese military strike on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in December 1941 given the estimated death toll of both attacks. In 2001, the United States was attacked on its own territory by the enemy known only to a few experts and intelligence analysts—al-Qaeda, a transnational organisation of Islamic extremists whose ideology is based on Islamic religious fundamentalism and political revisionism, and whose members are motivated by hatred toward the West and the United States as a symbol and the leader of the Occidental world. Al-Qaeda found a safe haven and favourable conditions for development in Afghanistan which had been controlled by the radical Islamic Taliban movement since the mid-1990s. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan established a symbiotic relationship which laid the foundation of conspiracies and terrorist attacks carried out across the world, such as 9/11. This mutually beneficial arrangement between the Taliban and al-Qaeda still exists and affects the situation not only in South Asia but also other regions. It seems unlikely that the peace treaty with the United States will change the current state of affairs.

Operation 'Enduring Freedom', which was launched in the autumn of 2001 to wipe out the Taliban regime and the leadership of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, was supposed to be a short and easy military campaign. Contrary to all expectations, the strategic position of the United States has deteriorated over the years. It is worth noting that the US-led fight against the Islamic extremism has lasted four times longer than the US involvement in WW2, and two times longer than the American campaign in Vietnam. Yet there seems little prospect that this 'long war' will be over soon despite that the generation of young Americans born in 2001 – when the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed –

have reached adulthood. Many young people joined the military and were deployed to the 'frontlines' – such as Afghanistan – that emerged during more than 18 years of war on terror. Furthermore, the US-led coalition has failed to accomplish the strategic objectives of the 'strange war'. Although Osama bin Laden was eliminated in 2011 after a decade-long search, the structure of al-Qaeda has not been destroyed, in particular in Afghanistan and Pakistan which have been turned to one of the global centres of the Sunni Jihadism. Despite years of efforts to undermine the ideological attractiveness of the movement, the radical Islam has been thriving throughout the world which eventually led to the emergence of the next-generation of Islamic fanatics from the Islamic State that proclaimed the Caliphate over six years ago. The United States and its allies – especially NATO members that participated in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission – perceived the military campaign in Afghanistan as a necessary evil, which required their involvement to a certain extent but without real attempts to achieve the final success of the operation. Therefore, for most states involved in the war in Afghanistan, the participation in the mission was more about window dressing and maintaining good relations with the United States. Today, the consequences of this approach are obvious. According to conservative estimates, the Taliban is in full control of 74 districts (approximately 18 per cent of districts in Afghanistan) as 190 districts, which officially remain under government control, have been effectively paralysed by military operations carried out by the rebel groups. As far as training and operational capability is concerned, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have not made much progress since the early 2010s when they started operating independently, without foreign assistance. The ANSF is still facing the same issues – mass desertions (over 30 per cent of personnel a year), corruption and nepotism, rebel infiltration, as well as ethnic and religious conflicts which move the Taliban closer to goal of regaining control over Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, the Taliban will continue their attempts to achieve this objective even after the peace treaty with the United States.

In their efforts, the Taliban receive considerable support from al-Qaeda which is still present in the entire region, including Afghanistan. Despite official claims made by all American presidents in the last 18 years (George W. Bush in 2002, Barack Obama in 2011, and Donald Trump in 2018), neither al-Qaeda nor the Islamic State were ultimately defeated. Al-Qaeda's network supports the Taliban in fight against the government in

Kabul and its international allies, as well as Wilayat Khorasan, which is a province of the Islamic State and the main rival of al-Qaeda in the region. Currently, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) plays a prominent role in the aforementioned efforts as the youngest and the most active regional branch of the organisation. The strength and importance of the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban is undisputable given that commanders of al-Qaeda swore allegiance (*bayah*) to heads of the Afghan Taliban who assumed an Arabic title of *Amir al-Muminim* (Commander of the Faithful), traditionally used by the caliph, the head of Ummah (Islamic community). To comprehend the relations between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, it is essential to explain why both Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri decided to swear allegiance to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and not the other way round. Khorasan – a half-mythical region that comprised, *inter alia*, the present territory of Afghanistan – plays a special role in Islamic theology. According to Muhammad's prophecies recorded in *hadiths*, the faithful (Muslims) will march from Khorasan to successfully reclaim Jerusalem from the hands of 'infidels'.

### **Peace at any cost?**

After the end of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan in December 2014, it was obvious that the United States and its allies would not be able to defeat the Taliban, given that most countries participating in the operation avoided full-scale military involvement due to domestic political priorities and aversion of the public to the war. The Taliban, on the other hand, have become more powerful over the years – as Henry Kissinger once said 'the conventional army loses if it does not win. The guerrilla wins if he does not lose'. From the US point of view, the only way to break this stalemate was to look for political and diplomatic solutions.

Since the beginning of the US-Taliban talks in 2017, the agenda has been focused on four essential matters: 1) implementation of a permanent truce; 2) withdrawal of the US and NATO troops from Afghanistan; 3) Taliban guarantee that none of the terrorist groups would use the territory of Afghanistan as the base to conduct operations against the US and its allies; 4) initiation of an internal political dialogue in Afghanistan (including the discussion about women's rights in the country). According to the final agreement – which was signed in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020 – the United States and the members of the coalition are obliged to reduce and then withdraw all their forces from Afghanistan within 14 months. The Taliban are committed to respecting the ceasefire and not

supporting militant groups and organisations that jeopardise security of the United States and its allies. The deal also stipulates that both sides will facilitate the prisoner exchange. On March 10, 2020, the Afghan government in Kabul and the Taliban should commence negotiations in order to achieve a permanent truce and discuss major political and governance-related issues. In the next phase, the United States is expected to end sanctions against the leaders of the Taliban movement and the organisation as a whole.

Latest developments in Afghanistan – prior to the deal with the US – indicated that none of the aforementioned provisions was respected by the Taliban. The rebels continued attacks against the international forces even though the US resumed the negotiations in December 2019 (five American soldiers were killed in Afghanistan from December 2019 to mid-February 2020). Furthermore, the Taliban has re-established the pre-2001 order across its territories, including the implementation of the strict Sharia law and the oppression of women, adherents of other religions (Shiites in particular) as well as supporters of the government in Kabul. According to the US sources, the cooperation between al-Qaeda and the Taliban is thriving, to the extent that the former established new training centres in Afghanistan.

The US-Taliban talks resemble peace negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam that were held in Paris in 1972. Henry Kissinger, who was back then the US secretary of state, played a key role in those negotiations. Kissinger, who was deeply irritated by constant assaults of Viet Cong on the US forces in South Vietnam, asked his North Vietnamese counterpart when the North would start respecting the truce that had been previously approved by both sides and whether Viet Cong would deescalate the fighting. The US diplomat was told that wars are not fought to declare a ceasefire but to achieve a victory and that Viet Cong does not fight to reduce the scale of combat operations. Contrary to the current US administration, it seems that the Taliban thoroughly studied the history of the US-Viet Cong talks and drew conclusions about their course.

The US administration is in desperate need of political or propaganda achievement to cover up their strategic defeat in Afghanistan, just as they did in Indochina 50 year ago. Unfortunately, history repeats itself and it is very likely that the US-Taliban deal will be a short-term solution. The Viet Cong's forces conquered South Vietnam roughly three years after the peace talks in Paris which brought an end to the US presence in the country.

Horrifying pictures showing the dramatic evacuation of the US embassy in Saigon in April 1975 have become one of the icons of that era. Nonetheless, the question is, how much time will it take the Taliban to seize Kabul once the peace deal is concluded. It is also worth considering who will enforce the provisions of the treaty, such as those related to the political dialogue with the government in Kabul, respecting rights of women and minorities, and putting an end to the cooperation with al-Qaeda.

### Summary and Conclusions

1. The peace deal, which was negotiated between the United States and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, is intended to meet expectations of the public and act as a salve for the conscience of America's political elites. Once again, the actions of the US administration (regardless of political affiliation of the president) are shaped based on public opinion surveys and preferences of most Americans even if they do not serve the interests of the United States.
2. President Trump's erratic stance on Afghanistan has proved that the US administration has no coherent strategy as far as foreign affairs are concerned. It seems that short-term, tactical interests related to the current political issues and the election calendar are considered to be a priority. In November 2020, US citizens will decide whether the incumbent president will be able to hold the office for the second term. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan can determine the outcome of the election given that Trump had pledged to end the war before he became US president.
3. The agreement accepts the political legitimacy of the Taliban and provides them with the *de facto* (although not *de jure*) recognition by the US administration. This move is obviously in direct contradiction to the "no negotiation with terrorists" policy which used to be portrayed as one of the major moral principles of the United States and the West. According to some experts, the deal with the Taliban is a dangerous precedent and evidence that the current international order lacks moral foundations.
4. Political dialogue between the United States and the Taliban, which was initiated over three years ago, has ultimately led to the peace treaty; however, the United States is not emerging victorious but as the side that has failed to impose its will upon the enemy using either diplomatic or military measures. Furthermore, the peace process will not contribute to the successful realisation of the preliminary objectives of the operation in Afghanistan and the fight against the Islamic extremism. The process has been limited to a number of

conditions that the United States is supposed to follow to end the war, withdraw the US soldiers from the Afghan soil, and abandon the country. The process of negotiations was therefore a clear sign of the US capitulation to the Taliban given the existing strategic reality of the conflict and the conditions that the US has accepted.

5. The peace treaty seems to prove that the war in Afghanistan has been lost despite the hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties; 3,500 coalition soldiers (including approximately 40 Poles); as well as billions of dollars spent on modernisation and reconstruction of the country. Only time will tell whether the war on terror will end in failure as a result of the US defeat in Afghanistan.

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