



Briefing Note

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# What Will Happen if the U.S. Military Pulls Out of Afghanistan Without a Peace Deal?

*This is the first in a series of three Briefing Notes that discuss and analyse the nascent peace process in Afghanistan while focusing on frequently raised questions.’*

The U.S. stated in a 29 February agreement with the Taliban, signed in Doha, Qatar, that it would immediately begin a fourteen-month phased military withdrawal. The agreement made the withdrawal contingent on Taliban compliance with anti-terrorism commitments but not explicitly contingent on a successful Afghan peace process. The agreement commits the Taliban to starting peace talks with other Afghans but does not speak to scenarios in which talks might fail to begin or to generate momentum, or in which they fail to proceed for practical reasons such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 23 March statement by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo strongly criticising the Afghan leadership for failing to come together and prepare for peace talks, and announcing that Washington will cut assistance to Kabul by \$1 billion this year if they do not do so, makes prospects of an early, unilateral U.S. military withdrawal if not likely, at least more plausible if the process stalls at any point.

This note explores what might happen if the U.S. were to go beyond its partial military drawdown in Afghanistan, already in progress, and implement a full withdrawal in a context in which intra-Afghan negotiations do not reach a political settlement or fail to commence.

## **What Would Happen to the Peace Process?**

It is unlikely that the U.S.-steered negotiations would proceed in the event of a full U.S. military withdrawal implemented before talks at least built substantial momentum. The Afghan government would have comparatively little leverage to attract or compel the Taliban to remain at the bargaining table, while the Taliban would have less incentive to negotiate if they feel they have already achieved their primary objective – expelling foreign forces from Afghanistan. The Afghan government might be able to keep the Taliban at the table should it be willing to offer highly concessionary terms, but at present such an offer seems unrealistic.

U.S. military disengagement probably would be accompanied by at least a diminution in, if not a complete end to diplomatic activity aimed at pushing the peace process forward. Moreover, Afghan government and regional perceptions of Washington’s abandonment of Afghanistan would make it far more difficult for the U.S. to exercise political leverage. Other regional states or international organisations might attempt to step in to mediate, but they would have difficulties if the U.S. were executing a policy of disengagement. Afghan parties would question the neutrality of neighbouring states were they to seek a leading diplomatic role. Other states further abroad – in Europe, for instance – would likely lack sufficient influence over parties to the conflict to mount such

an initiative on their own. The UN Secretary-General could in principle authorise some form of mediation, but it would be hard for him to achieve broad consensus. Although the UN Security Council's five permanent members formally supported the U.S.-Taliban agreement, a sharp pivot from that framework almost certainly would complicate further UN action.

### **Why the U.S. Would Withdraw before a Peace Settlement?**

U.S. domestic political considerations would likely play some part in any sudden decision to withdraw. The Trump administration has a track record of abrupt, if incomplete, foreign policy and military reversals, ranging from the announcement of a withdrawal from north-eastern Syria and the targeted killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani to the 2019 [halt in talks with the Taliban](#), suggesting that a politically driven decision regarding the withdrawal timetable is not out of the question. A growing number of U.S. voices, both Republican and Democrat, have voiced opposition to so-called endless wars, focusing in particular on the intervention in Afghanistan – the longest war in American history. Most of the Democratic presidential candidates [expressed support](#) for withdrawal during their campaigns. There have also been mounting expressions of dissatisfaction with the U.S. agreement with the Taliban, with some voicing a preference for a unilateral withdrawal as opposed to one tied to what some consider a “bad deal”. In a U.S. presidential election year, it is difficult to know whether the security risks of a rapid withdrawal would outweigh President Donald Trump's long-expressed political preference for bringing U.S. troops home or vice versa.

U.S. policymakers may also decide to pull the plug on their country's military engagement if they come to believe that staying will not improve prospects of a political settlement. Already, several challenges have surfaced since the 29 February signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement that – if they persist or if similar

issues arise later – could give Washington pause.

The intended starting date for intra-Afghan negotiations, 10 March, was delayed and no new date has been set so far. The delay is largely tied to domestic political turbulence in Kabul. President Ashraf Ghani's chief rival in last year's election, Abdullah Abdullah, continues to contest the results – to the point of holding a rival inauguration ceremony and declaring a “parallel government”. At the same time, Ghani has been slow to name a negotiating team for peace talks that represents the full range of Afghan power-brokers whose consent will be needed to negotiate from a position of consensus and strength. That issue appeared to have been resolved on 25 March, although it remains to be seen how effectively the team will function. The U.S. special representative for Afghanistan peace and reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, shuttled between different factions of the Afghan political elite for weeks in an attempt to help form a compromise government and negotiating team. A surprise 23 March visit by Secretary of State Pompeo was designed to break the logjam but both sides held firm. That same day, Pompeo [released his statement](#) harshly reprimanding both Ghani and Abdullah for failing to reach a compromise and thereby impeding intra-Afghan talks, and declaring the U.S. would cut aid to Afghanistan by \$1 billion this year and potentially by more in the future. Even if the aid cut decision is reversed, the announcement shows the extent to which U.S. patience is wearing thin.

Meanwhile, just days after their signing ceremony with the U.S. in Qatar, the Taliban resumed offensive operations against Afghan security forces. Although not specifically prohibited by the agreement, the fresh attacks inevitably damaged the good-will established during February's seven-day “reduction in violence” that preceded the signing. This in turn led some U.S. officials to claim publicly that the Taliban was not abiding by the deal and soured the mood in Kabul, according to civil

society activists who spoke to Crisis Group. The two sides have also been deadlocked over the issue of a prisoner exchange, which is spelled out in the U.S.-Taliban agreement but does not appear to have the Afghan government's full buy-in; in the wake of the renewed violence, the Taliban and Afghan government traded hard-line rhetoric on this matter. Both the resurging violence and prisoners issue reinforced pre-existing scepticism in Kabul about the Taliban's good faith and commitment to prioritising a negotiated political settlement over attempts to achieve military victory, despite their stated willingness to discuss the issue of a ceasefire once intra-Afghan negotiations actually begin.

Finally, the global COVID-19 pandemic and its potential to wreak havoc on Afghanistan's population, health services and economy could prompt decision-makers in Washington to rethink the U.S. troop presence in the country. Afghanistan shares a long, porous border with Iran, one of COVID-19's global epicentres. The Afghan government has yet to shut down or restrict access through this border; tens of thousands of people have transited in both directions even as the virus spread across Iran. Afghanistan's weak national health infrastructure means there is a dearth of testing and lack of reliable indicators, but observers fear that COVID-19 could cripple the country. Even dramatic steps by Kabul could prove insufficient to achieve social distancing fast enough; moreover, the country suffers from an acute shortage of medical facilities and equipment that cannot be adequately remedied in the short term. Under such conditions, the U.S. military might decide to redeploy soldiers out of Afghanistan, at least gradually, for health reasons, especially as the U.S. grapples with its own response to the virus.

### **The Afghan Government's Chances of Survival Should the U.S. Withdraw Absent a Peace Deal**

In late January, [President Ghani said](#) decreasing the number of U.S. troops based in Afghanistan would have “no material impact” on the

country's “ability and willingness to move forward” in improving the security situation. In late 2019, his national security adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, [told a Council on Foreign Relations audience](#) that he believed military victory was attainable for the Afghan government, even should U.S. troops withdraw.

There are a number of reasons to question these assessments. Currently, the U.S. and other donors fund around 90 per cent of the Afghan security forces' annual budget, with [Washington alone providing](#) more than \$4 billion this year. Whether or not the Afghan security forces could weather a U.S. withdrawal likely depends at least in part on how much financial assistance would be provided in its wake. It is highly improbable that the U.S. would maintain this level of spending on Afghan security forces – significantly higher than U.S. military aid to any other country in the world – if the U.S. military disengages, certainly not for an extended period of time.

Furthermore, Afghan forces remain reliant on back-up, including air support, from the U.S. military in fending off major Taliban offensives. U.S.-provided [contractors also deliver critical services and technical support](#) for the Afghan air force, special operations units and more. The 29 February agreement between the U.S. and Taliban specifies that all foreign contractors would be included in a full withdrawal as defined by the deal; in any event, it is unlikely that such contractors could safely remain behind in the wake of a U.S. pullout.

The impact of a U.S. military withdrawal on the Afghan government would extend beyond its security forces' fate; any negative shift in the country's already tenuous security situation could prompt an end not only to civilian and humanitarian assistance but also to vital foreign commercial investments. Some Afghan political analysts have told Crisis Group that they fear this scenario and worry that too many of their fellow citizens ignore it as a real possibility: “Those who say the fight can continue are thinking about the conflict today, not what it might become”.

None of the above necessarily means that a U.S. withdrawal would precipitate the total collapse of the Afghan state or a Taliban takeover of Kabul. A Taliban push to take the capital and other urban centres would surely encounter strong resistance, even if anti-Taliban political forces fragment – an entirely possible scenario. While commentators have noted superficial historical similarities between today’s Islamic Republic and the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic that fell apart shortly after the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, substantive structural and institutional differences exist: for instance, the country’s current constitutional system enjoys wide support, notably in urban areas, and today’s security forces do not suffer desertion rates akin to those in the 1980s.

But even in the most optimistic scenario in which the Afghan government were to survive, the withdrawal of U.S. forces and end to

any peace effort would likely see the country’s conflict remain high on the list of the world’s deadliest wars. Even partial erosion of government control and functionality could deprive millions of essential services, humanitarian aid and disaster relief. The loss of feasible options for a peaceful settlement to the conflict might well send into overdrive regional states seeking to hedge their bets by backing various factions and armed groups, further exacerbating domestic political fragmentation. For a country where 10,000 civilians – along with tens of thousands of combatants on both sides – have been killed or injured annually for the past several years, such a U.S. withdrawal would probably ensure a continued enormous, and tragic, human cost.