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A Deal with the Devil? Terms, Implications, and Risks of the US-Taliban Accord

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The [peace agreement](#) signed by the United States and the Taliban on February 29, 2020 in Doha, Qatar is intended to end the nearly two-decade war between the Taliban and US-led forces in Afghanistan. In the broader strategic picture, the failure of the US to achieve a decisive victory over the Taliban in Afghanistan in the course of 19 years of fighting highlights the limitations of military power. Iran in particular could seemingly benefit from the US withdrawal (notwithstanding possible cross-border destabilizing ramifications), as one of its primary foreign policy aims has been the expulsion of US forces from its proximity. Additionally, this development supports the Iranian assessment that President Trump seeks to avoid military conflict in the Middle East. Especially relevant for Israel is the administration's readiness to strike a deal with a long-time adversary (behind the back of an ally, the government of Afghanistan), but related concerns could be mitigated by the assessment that this deal may ease pressure from the White House to strike additional agreements quickly in order to demonstrate foreign policy success in advance of the 2020 elections.

The United States faced a difficult decision in determining how to conclude the unpopular, stalemated, and costly war in Afghanistan at an acceptable price: it could either do so through unilateral withdrawal, or by an agreement with the Taliban, which might yield Washington some guarantees in return. Having long resisted both options – the former deemed a retreat and the latter as unenforceable – the US administration finally agreed with the Taliban on an accord to be implemented gradually over a 14-month span. The agreement, negotiated between US Special Representative to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad and Chief Taliban negotiator Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, has six key components.

The four US commitments to the Taliban include:

- a. Reduction of troops from 12,000-14,000 to 8,600 within 135 days, and then to zero by late April 2021.
- b. Removal of UN sanctions against the Taliban by May 29, 2020, followed by removal of US sanctions against the Taliban by August 27, 2020.

- c. Work toward a prisoner exchange of 5,000 Taliban prisoners for 1,000 of “the other side,” to be completed by March 10, 2020.
- d. A pledge not to violate the sovereignty of Afghanistan with the threat of force, the use of force, or intervention in domestic Afghan affairs.

In return, there are two commitments to the US:

- a. The Taliban will act to prevent threats to the security of the US and its allies, including but not limited to al-Qaeda, from emerging on Afghan soil or with Afghan support.
- b. The Taliban will engage in intra-Afghan negotiations beginning on March 10, 2020 to reach a settlement between domestic stakeholders to end the conflict and outline the configuration for a new, unified system of governance.

The US-Taliban agreement was reached at this particular moment due to the convergence of key factors regarding US domestic politics and global developments as perceived in Washington. First, with the approaching presidential elections, President Trump is motivated to fulfill a promise from his 2016 campaign by ending an unpopular “endless” war, which he hopes would appeal both to his voter base and to a broader cross-section of the population. Second, following the defeat of the territorial caliphate and [significant achievements against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula \(AQAP\)](#), perhaps the parent organization’s most dangerous franchise, Washington’s interest in continuing the global war on terror is waning. Great Power competition now eclipses the perceived threat of radical Islamic terrorism, which is now considered better and more cheaply managed through “[outsourcing](#)” or drone strikes rather than extended and costly occupations.

The terms of the agreement reflect these trends, with the US committed to take concrete steps while the Taliban are assigned the more nebulous role of the US counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan; [in Trump’s words](#), “it’s time for somebody else to do that work, and that’ll be the Taliban.” Such terms, seemingly imbalanced in the Taliban’s favor and difficult to enforce, would only be considered by a US administration prepared to opt for unilateral withdrawal in the absence of an agreement.

At the same time, at least in Washington, the Republican Party appears divided about the US-Taliban agreement. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says the agreement “will ensure that Afghanistan never again serves as a base for international terrorists.” But over 20 Republican members of Congress called for assurances that the administration “will not place the security of the American people into the hands of the Taliban.” Other Republican leaders have raised concerns about the agreement undermining the government of Afghanistan, a US partner, and have called for leaving a residual US counterterrorism force in the country.

Whether the Taliban can be trusted to fulfill commitments to the US depends not only on its intentions but also its capabilities. It is true that the Taliban may be negotiating in bad faith in order to advance their goal of re-taking the entirety of Afghanistan. But even if their senior leadership seeks to deliver on pledges to the US, there is good reason to doubt whether it can, as many experts assess that operational Taliban decision making is highly decentralized. Presumably the “reduction in violence” that began in the week prior to the agreement’s signing can be expected to continue throughout its implementation. Indeed, this is not a “ceasefire” to end all fighting, but is intended to halt major attacks or offensives. The Taliban are likely aware that the death of US citizens could result in derailing the current process, as it did in September when President Trump scuttled US-Taliban peace talks after a [US soldier was killed in Kabul](#) by a Taliban attack, but they may test the boundaries in any event.

Strategic Implications

In the broader strategic picture, the failure of the US to achieve a decisive victory against the Taliban in Afghanistan over the course of 19 years of fighting highlights the limitations of military power: even the most advanced weapon systems are of limited efficacy to achieve overly ambitious or ambiguous aims. Yet the implications of this agreement for the US are to be determined, and they will depend largely on whether it functions as a fig leaf for withdrawal of American forces under fire or the deal’s terms are upheld by both parties. If the former, it may contribute to the perception among US allies and enemies alike that America is in retreat from global engagement and responsibilities. If the latter holds true, it may provide an achievement for what President Trump has termed his “realist” approach to foreign policy, which employs a more limited definition of defending the US homeland.

As for the government of Afghanistan, because it is unlikely that the US will condition its withdrawal on the success of the intra-Afghan negotiations, Kabul will be under a great deal of time pressure to leverage its current position to reach an agreement with the Taliban and other parties. Whatever the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks, the Taliban’s overall influence in Afghanistan is likely to increase as US forces withdraw. Given the Taliban’s hostile orientation toward human rights – particularly women’s rights – and democracy, the significance and actual manifestations of these values, which the US sought to advance during its occupation of Afghanistan, are expected to decline.

Overall, Iran is perceived to benefit from the US withdrawal, as one of its primary foreign policy aims has been the expulsion of US forces from its proximity. In addition, the accord supports the Iranian assessment that President Trump seeks to avoid another military conflict in the Middle East. However, if the result of the deal’s implementation is

a destabilizing jockeying for power in the post-US Afghanistan, then Iran could be faced with a number of challenges, including threats to national security by the rise of extremist Sunni organizations hostile to Iran, and the influx of Afghan refugees fleeing instability (in addition to the three million already living in Iran). While these challenges are manageable, they would come at a time when Tehran already faces a number of severe crises, including uncontrolled spread of the coronavirus, a major economic recession following the 2018 re-imposition of US nuclear sanctions, and declining public support for the regime, evident from the low voter turnout in recent parliamentary elections.

Finally, Israel would do well to consider how developments resulting from the US-Taliban agreement could impact on its interests. First, if media reports about Israeli use of Afghanistan territory for collection of intelligence on Iran are correct, Jerusalem should prepare for that operating environment to change following the US departure. Second, in the context of the Iranian nuclear issue, the precedent set by Washington reaching an agreement with a US adversary that contains weak enforcement mechanisms and is negotiated behind the back of a US ally may be a cause for concern in Israel. However, the very signing of the US-Taliban agreement may ease pressure from the White House to strike additional deals quickly to demonstrate foreign policy success in advance of the 2020 elections. Third, and more broadly, ending the campaign in Afghanistan, which diverted vast amounts of resources from achievable goals, provides an opportunity to the US to improve the efficacy of its global strategy, and in light of the national security benefits that Israel derives from US global hegemony, that could yield significant dividends for Israel.