

# How the Doha Agreement Guaranteed US Failure in Afghanistan

LISA CURTIS

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## Introduction

The twenty-year US mission in Afghanistan ended in the worst imaginable way possible, with a poorly planned and executed withdrawal that saw the Taliban immediately roar back to power. Members of an al-Qaeda-linked terrorist organization were placed in charge of the country's security, while the United States conducted a rushed and chaotic evacuation that left behind thousands of Afghan allies and created a geopolitical vacuum that its rivals, namely Russia and China, are poised to fill. There will be countless policy and academic studies, books, college courses, and debates on how and why the United States failed so catastrophically in Afghanistan. This essay examines how the poorly negotiated and weak US-Taliban Doha agreement, concluded during the Trump administration, sealed the fate of a US mission that cost America tremendous blood and treasure in a country that, contrary to US president Joe Biden's assertions, continues to pose a threat to America's vital national security interests.

## Trump Starts Strong on Afghanistan

Despite his presidential campaign pledges to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan, then president Donald J. Trump initially took the advice of his top national security and defense advisors and in August 2017 adopted a new strategy toward Afghanistan aimed at reversing the deteriorating security situation and ultimately setting the stage for a peaceful settlement that would protect US interests and advance regional stability. The strategy included shifting from a time-based to a conditions-based approach to US troop deployments; expanding authorities for US troops on the ground to aggressively pursue the enemy; getting tougher on Pakistan for its support to the Taliban; and increasing troop numbers by around four thousand.<sup>1</sup>

In his 2017 speech unveiling the new Afghanistan strategy at the Fort Myer military base in Arlington, Virginia, the former president rightly acknowledged that

the consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable. 9/11, the worst terrorist attack in our history, was planned and directed from Afghanistan because that country was ruled by a government that gave comfort and shelter to terrorists. A hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum [that] terrorists, including ISIS and al-Qaeda, would instantly fill, just as happened before September 11.<sup>2</sup>



Little did anyone know then that this scenario would play out four years later under the Biden administration. However, the Trump administration's missteps on peace talks with the Taliban from 2018 to 2020 also contributed to the ease with which the Taliban retook the country in August 2021.

### **Shifts to Troop Withdrawal and Peace Track**

By the spring of 2018—less than a year after announcing the ambitious Afghanistan strategy—President Trump began to lose confidence in his own strategy and signaled his desire to start withdrawing US troops. Around the same time, US diplomats stepped up peace efforts, and in June of that year, the first-ever ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Taliban came into effect. It was short lived, however, lasting just a few days over the Eid al-Fitr holiday, which marks the end of the Muslim holy month of fasting. Although brief, the ceasefire demonstrated grassroots support for peace among the Afghan population as well as the Taliban rank and file. Building on this positive momentum, former senior US diplomat for South Asia Alice Wells held direct talks with Taliban leaders in Doha, Qatar, in July 2018. Two months later, in September 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo named former US ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad as the senior representative for Afghanistan reconciliation.

Ambassador Khalilzad brought impressive credentials to the job—regional expertise, language skills, and deep policy experience working in conflict zones. However, he proved too eager to close a deal with the Taliban, allowing his single-minded focus to cloud his judgment on the negative impact of his concessions to the Taliban on the future of the country and on US fundamental national security interests. It is true that Trump's repeated statements about wanting to withdraw US forces from the country undermined Khalilzad's leverage with the Taliban; however, instead of conceding almost everything the Taliban requested, the US negotiator should have considered whether no deal was better than a bad deal.

Trump's third national security advisor, John Bolton, recognized the dangers of signing a bad deal with the Taliban and sought to convince the president to back away from what was shaping up to be less of a "peace" agreement and more of a poorly masked surrender agreement. A suicide attack in downtown Kabul that killed a US service member and eleven others on September 5, 2019, led Trump to suspend peace talks with the Taliban two days later. His tweet announcing the talks' suspension revealed that he had intended to invite the Taliban and then Afghan president Ashraf Ghani to Camp David for peace talks. It is highly doubtful the Taliban would have agreed to meet with Ghani in the United States in any case—a fact that should have been apparent to the US negotiator.

### **Sowing Seeds of Surrender under Guise of Peace**

There has been repeated criticism of the US military for flawed strategies in Afghanistan, but the record of US diplomacy in Afghanistan—particularly peace efforts led by

former US negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad over the last three years—have so far escaped scrutiny. The so-called Afghanistan Papers—confidential documents published by the *Washington Post* in December 2019—show how US military leaders often provided rosy assessments of the military situation or told political leadership that the United States had “turned a corner” in the fight against the Taliban, when facts showed otherwise. In my time as National Security Council senior director for South and Central Asia, I also witnessed senior civilian officials and advisors relying on wishful thinking, rather than data and evidence, to form policy.

The predilection to rely on mistaken beliefs, rather than facts on the ground, defined the peace talks with the Taliban and the resulting Doha agreement. The first mistake was excluding the Afghan government from peace talks. When the White House made the decision in July 2018 for the United States to pursue direct talks with the Taliban to jump-start a more comprehensive peace effort, the intention was to quickly bring the Afghan government into that process.<sup>3</sup> No US official at the time envisioned the United States signing a deal with the Taliban without the involvement of the Afghan government, which is precisely what happened nineteen months later.

By signing a deal with the Taliban that demanded few concessions, the US negotiator signaled to the Afghan authorities that the United States was ready to cut and run from the country and provide international legitimacy to the enemy while doing so. The deal committed the United States to a full withdrawal of forces within fourteen months in exchange for vague Taliban pledges to enter peace talks with Afghan authorities and prevent terrorists from threatening the United States and its allies. This essentially reversed Trump’s earlier commitment to a conditions-based approach to US troop deployments.

The second mistake was the failure of the US negotiator to calibrate the pace of the talks to the violence carried out by the Taliban. Trump was right to suspend talks when a US service member was killed in an attack in downtown Kabul in September 2019. However, when peace talks resumed three months later, the Taliban conducted a car bombing at Bagram Airfield on December 11, 2019, killing two Afghans and wounding eighty.<sup>4</sup> While no US service member was killed in the attack, it was a brazen assault on a US facility and merited another suspension of the talks. Instead, the US negotiator forged ahead with another round of talks with the Taliban two days later, this time with a request to the Taliban to merely pause violence for six days before the Doha deal would be signed.

Everything about the way in which the United States negotiated with the Taliban signaled US desperation for a deal that would cloak its troop withdrawal in the guise of a negotiated peace settlement. The fact that the United States moved ahead with signing the Doha deal one month after US citizen Mark Frerichs was taken hostage by militants in Kabul is further evidence of US desperation. The United States should have never signed a deal with a group holding an American hostage. It was the ultimate signal of US weakness and fecklessness.



The third mistake was providing the Taliban with practically everything they wanted without their having to concede much of anything. Consider the decision to force the Afghan government to release five thousand Taliban prisoners before the Taliban started talks with the Afghan government. It was clear the Taliban had no interest in a negotiated settlement but simply wanted their fighters freed, to help them achieve a military path back to power.

Among the Taliban prisoners released was an Afghan army sergeant named Hekmatullah, who in 2012 had murdered three Australian soldiers in cold blood while they rested at their base.<sup>56</sup> Australian prime minister Scott Morrison had pleaded with President Trump not to force President Ghani to release Hekmatullah.<sup>7</sup> It was unnecessary to release this hardened Taliban killer, especially when one of our most trusted allies was opposed to it. The Trump administration's hope that Hekmatullah's release would facilitate peace talks turned out to be wildly unfounded.

### **Flimsy Counterterrorism Commitments**

Despite Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and US negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad's repeated claims throughout 2020 that the Taliban agreed to break ties with al-Qaeda, all evidence points to the contrary. In a report released in early June 2021, the United Nations said that large numbers of al-Qaeda fighters and other terrorist elements aligned with the Taliban were located in various parts of Afghanistan and have celebrated the departure of US and NATO forces from the country as a victory for global radicalism.<sup>8</sup> While the Doha agreement states that the Taliban will instruct its members not to cooperate with groups that pose a threat to the United States and its allies, the UN coordinator for the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Taliban Monitoring Team, Edmund Fitton-Brown, said last October that shortly before the Doha agreement was signed, the Taliban promised al-Qaeda that the two groups would, in fact, remain allies.<sup>9</sup>

A careful reading of the Doha agreement shows that the Taliban never pledged to break ties to al-Qaeda or expel terrorists from the country. After countless hours of negotiations, the most the US negotiator could extract from the Taliban was a flimsy pledge to "not allow" al-Qaeda to "use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies." The language is weak and meaningless. For instance, what happens when al-Qaeda fails to ask the Taliban for permission to conduct a terrorist strike outside of Afghanistan? It is likely the Taliban would feign ignorance, arguing they were unaware of the plotting and training, as they did with the 9/11 attacks. Instead of locking the Taliban into breaking ties with terrorist groups, the Doha agreement provides the Taliban with plausible deniability in the event terrorists conduct a strike against the United States from their haven in Afghanistan. To this day, the Taliban refuses to acknowledge that al-Qaeda carried out the attacks of 9/11.

Furthermore, the Doha agreement lacks clarity on the issue of foreign terrorist fighters and their ability to reconverge on Afghanistan. The agreement says the Taliban will deal with

those “seeking asylum or residence in Afghanistan according to international migration law . . . so that such persons do not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.” However, the next clause presents a major loophole, saying the Taliban will not provide official documentation to those seeking to enter the country who pose a threat to the United States. In other words, the Taliban can simply turn a blind eye to the arrival of foreign terrorist fighters into Afghanistan and still be within the letter of the Doha agreement.

While it is too early to determine precisely how the Taliban victory in Afghanistan will impact terrorism trends in the region, the initial indicators are worrisome. The Taliban have appointed a hardline interim government headed by Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, who served as foreign minister and then deputy prime minister during Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001. Akhund also played a critical role in the Quetta Shura and in driving the Taliban’s military strategy from its safe haven in Pakistan. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the subject of an FBI Rewards for Justice program that offers \$5 million for information leading to his arrest due to his role in terrorist attacks that killed US citizens, was named interior minister. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who spent eight years in a Pakistani jail before the US negotiator requested his release to participate in peace talks, is known to be more moderate in his approach and was part of a group of insurgents who engaged with Hamid Karzai when he was Afghan president back in 2009. Baradar’s relegation to deputy prime minister appears to be a sign that harder-line factions of the Taliban currently have the upper hand in decision making.

### **Weakening the Afghan State**

Both the Trump and Biden administrations underestimated the degree to which the Doha agreement had weakened the Afghan state and divided the Afghan political elite. The way in which the United States handled peace talks in Doha directly contributed to undermining President Ghani and the Afghan institutions under his charge. The US undercut Ghani by simultaneously forcing him to make concessions to the Taliban while the Taliban continued to press ahead with its military campaign to take the country by force. The Taliban used peace talks to divide Afghan leaders, while at the same time assassinating Afghan civilians and attacking the Afghan security forces to weaken their will to keep fighting. It was a recipe for disaster.

In a recent interview, former CIA counterterrorism chief Douglas London explained how the United States played into the Taliban strategy, which was to increase the level of violence “while undercutting the Afghan government’s cohesion by negotiating with and paying off regional opponents.” London concluded that under these circumstances, it should have been obvious to US observers that the Afghan government could collapse “within days to weeks.”<sup>10</sup>

The United States would have been better off negotiating its withdrawal directly with the Ghani government, something Ghani had proposed in early 2019. In this way, the



United States would have avoided demoralizing its Afghan partners even as it pulled back its support to the Afghan security forces. Instead, the combination of withdrawing US forces and military support at the same time we were making a political deal with the enemy of the government meant we ended up handing the country to the Taliban like a birthday cake. In the words of former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, US actions in Afghanistan “culminated in what amounts to unconditional American withdrawal by the Biden administration.”<sup>11</sup>

Afghan political leaders and regional power brokers do not get a pass, however. They allowed themselves to be divided. The only possible way they could have fended off Taliban military advances would have been to unify their ranks and fight together against the Taliban. Several Afghans and Americans blame President Ghani and his leadership style that eschews consensus building for this failure. However, former president Hamid Karzai and former chief executive Abdullah also miscalculated badly by naively believing the Taliban would make them part of an interim government.

### **Biden Administration Perpetuated Misguided Afghan Policy**

The Biden administration had an opportunity to change course on peace talks with the Taliban when it assumed power in January 2021. President Biden instead chose to stick with the poorly negotiated Doha agreement and retain its architect, Ambassador Khalilzad. Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s letter to President Ghani in March 2021 implicitly laid blame on Ghani for the failure of peace talks, even as Taliban violence and assassinations of Afghan civil society leaders continued apace.<sup>12</sup> As former national security advisor General H. R. McMaster explained in an op-ed in March, “Secretary of State [Antony] Blinken’s leaked letter to President Ghani made clear the new administration has not ended the grand self-delusion meant to justify an incompetent and unethical policy: that the Taliban has become less murderous and is disconnected from other terrorist organizations.”<sup>13</sup>

President Biden claims he had only two choices on Afghanistan: either stick with the terms of the Doha agreement, which included US withdrawal by May 1, 2021, or deploy more US forces to Afghanistan. This is simply not true. He could have retained the approximately 3,500 US troops, which would have been supplemented by around 7,500 NATO troops, to maintain support for the Afghan security forces and to protect US counterterrorism interests. This would have required resources and potential risks to US forces, but full withdrawal also entails risks and requires continued resources for over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations. Another option would have been to follow through on troop withdrawal, not according to the Doha agreement but on Biden’s own terms. Such a withdrawal could have involved pulling out contractor support at a more gradual pace, coordinating more closely with NATO allies, and continuing robust air support for the Afghan security forces over a longer period. This may have prevented Afghan morale from plummeting so rapidly and allowed the Afghan security forces time to regroup.

## Work with Friends, Not Foes

Another mistake of US Afghanistan policy over the last two years has been the diplomatic focus on working with Russia and China at the expense of coordinating closely with our UK and European allies. The US negotiator was heavily invested in coordinating the peace effort with Russia and China over the last two years, despite their lack of interest in promoting human rights and civil liberties and their ill will toward the United States. Russian and Chinese officials have recently excoriated the United States for the current chaos in Afghanistan. European leaders, for their part, are quietly seething about the United States' failure to consult them over the last two years on both the peace process and the troop withdrawal.<sup>14</sup>

The United States must shift its diplomatic attention to working closely with like-minded democratic partners, such as the United Kingdom, Europe, and India, which share similar objectives regarding regional security and counterterrorism, and recognize the importance of advancing civil liberties and women's rights to counter the rise of Islamist extremist ideologies. The US bungling of the situation in Afghanistan has contributed to a significant decline in goodwill among these nations toward the United States and a loss of faith in US competence as a global leader. It will take a wholesale shift in US diplomacy from desperately negotiating and catering to terrorist supporters toward focusing on policies based on principles of human rights and counterterrorism and implemented from a position of strength and conviction.

The US negotiator's decision to work hand in glove with Pakistan must also be questioned. As the Taliban entered Kabul on August 15, 2021 (India's Independence Day anniversary and perhaps not by coincidence), Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan said the Taliban "had broken the shackles of slavery," while his special assistant tweeted that "the contraption that the US had pieced together for Afghanistan has crumbled like the proverbial house of cards."<sup>15</sup>

No US administration in the last twenty years has been able to convince Pakistan to crack down on the Taliban located inside its territory. So long as the Taliban could rely on Pakistan for refuge and could fall back there to regroup and get medical attention and move unhindered back and forth across the border, the Taliban were never going to lose their stamina to fight. Trump, for his part, had suspended US military assistance to Pakistan in January 2018, with his national security advisor, H. R. McMaster, explaining, "The relationship can no longer bear the weight of the contradictions in Pakistan's terrorism policies." The aid suspension impacted nearly \$2 billion of previously obligated security assistance for Pakistan. Before the aid suspension, the US had given Pakistan six months to take decisive action against Taliban and Haqqani Network leaders who had refused to participate in peace talks. The US had also asked Pakistan to disrupt the operational activity of these groups, including the plotting of attacks, financial transactions, and cross-border flows of weapons and fighters—none of which Islamabad did. Even though the aid suspension



failed to substantively change Pakistani behavior toward the Taliban, it ensured that US taxpayer money would no longer fund a foreign military supporting a group linked to those responsible for 9/11 and continuing to kill US soldiers in Afghanistan.

It's too late to penalize Pakistan for its support of the Taliban, but US officials should also learn from their experience of twenty years of Pakistani obstinance and lack of support for US objectives in Afghanistan. US officials must maintain low expectations of Pakistan on the counterterrorism front moving forward. It is possible that the United States could cooperate with Pakistan in targeting the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, a group that is responsible for killing tens of thousands of Pakistanis in terrorist attacks over the last twelve years. Washington and Islamabad may also find it mutually beneficial to cooperate against ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan), which poses a threat to both countries. However, Pakistan's intelligence service views the Haqqani Network as an asset in Afghanistan and will never turn on the group. Neither should the US expect Pakistan to help in targeting al-Qaeda leaders. While Islamabad helped the United States arrest al-Qaeda leaders in the early years following the 9/11 attacks, that assistance has long since dried up.

While the Taliban are not puppets of Pakistan, the Pakistanis have become adept at gaining indirect control over them through manipulation. As a member of the US delegation in peace talks with the Taliban in 2019 and 2020, I witnessed instances of Taliban leaders' frustration with Pakistan. Now that the Taliban have taken control of Afghanistan and are no longer dependent on their Pakistani sanctuary, the Pakistanis may lose some of their influence over the group.

Our policy toward India has, likewise, been wrongheaded. In deference to Pakistan, the United States has avoided working closely with India, and in the end this achieved nothing for America's regional objectives. It is long past time to turn that policy around and recognize that the United States has far more to gain by coordinating with like-minded democracies that fight terrorists than by focusing its attention on regimes that rely on terrorist proxies to undermine their neighbors. India shepherded a strong resolution on Afghanistan when it held the United Nations Security Council presidency in August 2021. It is currently serving a two-year term as a nonpermanent member of the Security Council, which rotates the presidency among its fifteen members every month.<sup>16</sup> In the 1990s, India worked closely with Russia and Iran in support of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Now that Russia and Iran have forged closer ties with the Taliban, primarily to counter the rise of ISIS-K, India finds itself more isolated in the region.

### **Judge Taliban's Actions, Not Words**

Moving forward, President Biden should entrust his Afghanistan policy to those who will report the facts and not project them through rose-colored glasses. During the Trump years, diplomats tended to see the Taliban they wanted to see, rather than taking the measure



of their actions. For instance, there was little attention given to the UN reports previously mentioned on continued Taliban–al-Qaeda linkages, even though the US negotiator told Congress the United States was monitoring and verifying the Taliban’s actions toward terrorist groups.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of assuming the Taliban’s desire for international assistance and legitimacy will help moderate its behavior in the future, the Biden team should wait to see whether the Taliban take concrete actions to prove they have changed. Such actions would include refraining from revenge killings, opening schools for girls, allowing women to work outside the home, and taking steps to curb terrorist activities.

During their first week back in power, Taliban leaders went to great lengths to try to show the world their movement had evolved on issues of governance, terrorism, and women’s rights since they ruled the country twenty years ago. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid gave a press conference in Kabul in which he offered amnesty to those who worked for the government of President Ashraf Ghani, vowing there would be no reprisal killings. He said women would be allowed to work and study and could participate in society “within the bounds of Islamic law.”<sup>18</sup>

Contrary to Mujahid’s early statements, women were later told to stay in their homes until the Taliban rank and file were instructed how to treat women properly. The United Nations also reported that the Taliban apparently had lists of people it sought to question and punish, mostly former police and military officials, and there are numerous accounts of the Taliban knocking on doors and threatening people.<sup>19</sup> There have been other reports of the Taliban banning girls from attending school beyond the primary level and threatening female police officers.

There’s good reason to be suspicious of the Taliban claims of amnesty. One week before the Taliban took over Kabul, they assassinated the state media chief of the Afghan government as part of a systematic campaign to assassinate government officials, civil society leaders, human rights activists, and journalists. Furthermore, the Taliban leadership’s claims of amnesty mean little unless the Taliban rank and file are held to account and punished if they carry out such killings.

## Conclusion

The United States cannot simply wash its hands of Afghanistan or wish away the terrorist threat that still exists and is likely to grow with the Taliban’s ascendance to power. The critical issue moving forward is the way in which America engages with a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Such engagement should be based on a commitment to the principles of freedom and human dignity and with eyes wide open to the continuing terrorist threats in the region. The United States must continue to provide humanitarian assistance for the



basic needs of the Afghan people while avoiding rewarding the Taliban with diplomatic recognition and economic development assistance before they have earned it.

While the Biden administration's poor handling of the withdrawal has temporarily strained relations with allies and partners who also invested heavily in the Afghanistan mission, these nations are unlikely to make sweeping conclusions about the overall reliability of the United States over the longer term. Since taking office nine months ago, the Biden administration has invested a great deal in repairing and rejuvenating partnerships and alliances in Europe and Asia. The mishandling of the situation in Afghanistan also spans several US administrations—Republican and Democrat alike—and reflects how Americans across the political spectrum had grown weary of the war. The most effective way to redeem the botched Afghanistan withdrawal and rebuild trust with US partners is for the Biden administration to deal with the Taliban from a position of strength and seek to shape its behavior in close coordination with other like-minded nations.

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## About the Author



Center for a New American Security

### LISA CURTIS

Lisa Curtis is senior fellow and director of the Indo-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security. She is a foreign policy and national security expert with over twenty years of service in the US government, including most recently (2017–21) as deputy assistant to the president and National Security Council senior director for South and Central Asia.

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