



Before Doha 7: Afghanistan peace efforts recovering from a lull?

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The seventh round of United States-Taleban talks in Doha is imminent. But US-Taleban negotiations in Doha for a negotiated solution to the Afghan war have been stalling in recent rounds, after some initial progress. So far they also still exclude the third key actor, the Afghan government. Parties in the so-called intra-Afghan dialogue have also been treading water; so far they have been hosted by the Russian government but should now continue in Doha, too. AAN's Thomas Ruttig looks at what has been achieved so far, the obstacles, including significant gaps between the US and Taleban positions, that still stand in the way of a comprehensive peace agreement and latest US attempts to insert a new dynamic into the Doha talks.

The US-Taleban Doha talks have seen six rounds between October 2018 and May 2019. After parts of an agreement were reached upon “in principle“ in January 2019, as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [described](#) it during his short visit to Afghanistan on 25 June 2019, the parties did not make much more progress in the last two rounds, held from 25 February to 12 March, and 1 to 9 May 2019, however. US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad explained that this was normal, as now “the nitty-gritty“ was being debated and “[t]he devil is always in the details.” He conceded, though, that “the current pace of talks isn't sufficient” and “we need more and faster progress.” He pointed to the need “for all sides to reduce violence” (quoted [here](#)) – a hint at the Taleban's rejection of a new ceasefire. Meanwhile, the Taleban



complained that the US has not yet agreed to a concrete timetable for their troop [withdrawal](#). The seventh round is planned to begin on Saturday, 29 June 2019.

The Taliban are more upbeat about what the talks have achieved so far. But they refer more to process than substance. After the previous, sixth round, their spokesman called them “positive and constructive,” claiming there had been “some progress” and that “[b]oth sides listened to each other with care and patience.” He added that before the next round, both parties would consult their respective leaders and “discuss the remaining points in the next round of talks.”

This is not surprising. The Taliban are enjoying their growing international attention and new-found status as a recognised negotiating partner with the US and with other governments. Most recently, Taliban delegations visited [China](#) and possibly Iran [again](#).

Somewhat similarly to Doha, the most recent intra-Afghan dialogue meeting in Moscow in late May 2019 brought no progress, at least for those Afghan participants attending from Kabul. They were disappointed by the Taliban’s rejection of a proposed ceasefire over the three days of Eid al-Fitr in early June (media report [here](#)).

However, there seems to have been an undeclared ceasefire by the Taliban in most parts of the country over those three days. AAN received reports from Ghazni province, for example, that the Taliban leadership had instructed their fighters to halt attacks for that time, and indeed no attacks from their side were observed countrywide during the holidays. This was in stark contrast to the spike of violence and civilian harm over the holy month of Ramadan, as [reported](#) by the United Nations, during which the Taliban rejected calls for a cessation of attacks. As an unannounced ceasefire, it did not have the encouraging impact of the 2018 Eid ceasefire that was announced and observed by all sides (see our reporting on it [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

(1)

The failure to include more women and other representatives of civil society in the intra-Afghan dialogue (AAN analysis [here](#)) has been another source of disappointment. The large groups from Kabul that attended the last two Moscow meetings in February and May 2019 had only two women each time (ex-MP Fauzia Kufi, both times, Hawa Alam Nuristani, now head of the Independent Election Commission, during the first meeting, and former deputy women’s affairs minister Tajwar Kakar during the second one; an earlier AAN analysis [here](#)). Participants attending from Kabul, mainly leading male politicians, were invited on an individual basis, but it seems they did not insist on increasing the women’s share.

The Taliban did not include women in their delegation, despite a Reuters report claiming this would [happen](#). A Taliban spokesman later clarified over Twitter: “There will not be any women [present](#) in our team at intra-Afghan conference” as it was “not necessary”.

Doha: Some goal posts set...

In contrast to the Taliban’s statement that the next round would just discuss some “remaining



points,” there are still more points of discord than agreement. In the US-Taliban talks in Doha, four issues have been on the agenda from the beginning, as confirmed by US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad. He said they would come together in “a comprehensive peace agreement (...) made up of four inter-connected parts” (see his tweet [here](#)):

- *counter-terrorism assurances* [by the Taliban]
- *troop withdrawal* [by the US]
- *intra-Afghan negotiations that lead to a political settlement*
- *a comprehensive & permanent ceasefire*

Khalilzad reiterated that he had “said on numerous occasions [that] nothing [of the above] is agreed until everything is agreed.” In other words, there will be no separate official agreements on any of the four individual issues, but, if all goes well, finalised drafts on several points will later be part of a final, comprehensive agreement.

Up to round four of the Doha talks that ended in late January 2019, both parties had set some goal posts, as Khalilzad then told the New York Times: “We have a draft of the framework that has to be fleshed out before it becomes an agreement” (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Most progress has been made on getting counter-terrorism assurances from the Taliban, and on the withdrawal of the foreign forces. The US have made clear they are ready to do so, pending agreement on a ceasefire and intra-Afghan negotiations. Pompeo now stated that those negotiations “will allow Afghans to fashion a political settlement and determine the future for their country.” It still does not explicitly say that those negotiations would have to be successfully concluded before a final agreement with the Taliban.

Until very recently, the US had also never stated officially that they would pull out all their forces. Instead, this came from the Taliban, as their negotiating team spokesman, Suhail Shahin, [said](#) in mid-June: “America has agreed during the negotiations that they will withdraw all their troops.” Pompeo now also confirmed that the US was ready for a full withdrawal: “We’ve made clear to the Taliban that we’re prepared to remove our forces.” He said that was condition-based, a hint at the necessary sequencing between all four ‘interconnected’ components under discussion in Doha.

... *but also gaps remain*

1. *a) The agenda*

Khalilzad has also recently claimed that the four points and the “nothing is agreed...” formula was “the framework which the Taliban accept.” However, the Taliban had complained as early as mid-January 2019 (their statement quoted [here](#)) that the US was “backing away from the agenda,” which, according to them, consisted of only two issues: “the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan and preventing Afghanistan from being used against other countries.” They accused the US of “unilaterally adding new subjects.” This seems to refer to reported US



demands for a six-month ceasefire made in a side meeting held in Abu Dhabi in mid-December 2018 (media report [here](#)). Such a truce would have covered the entire spring when the Taliban usually announce their annual ('spring') offensive and intensify operations. The Taliban were apparently not ready to dispense with this means of exerting military pressure while negotiating. There was also a heated [exchange](#) when, in May 2019, Khalilzad asked the Taliban "to lay down their arms." Taliban leader Hebatullah Akhunzada repeated in his recent Eid message that "no one should expect us to pour cold water on the heated battlefronts of Jihad" (quoted [here](#)).

The March 2019 round was followed by mutual accusations exchanged over Twitter that the other side was acting "against peace" (see media report [here](#)).

More recently, a few days before the seventh round in Doha, "Taliban sources" – although not their spokesmen – were [quoted](#) by Reuters that "A ceasefire and intra-Afghan talks will not be discussed during the seventh round." But this can also be political sniping by spoilers.

1. *b) withdrawal*

While Pompeo now confirmed the US' readiness for a withdrawal, he also clarified that there is no agreed withdrawal timeframe or sequencing yet, just an agreement that there has to be a timeframe. He said, "I want to be clear, we've not yet agreed on a timeline to do so." This will be one subject of the coming Doha [round](#).

Some ideas about the timeframe have transpired. For example, the Brookings Institute [reported](#) that both sides' ideas differ widely, from a "few months as the Taliban wants [... to] between 16 to 24 months as the United States seeks." The New York Times even reported in February 2019 that the US was envisaging a five year [period](#). Khalilzad and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg confirmed in early June that the sequencing would happen jointly with NATO and other [allies](#).

The Taliban, in contrast, demand that the US announce a timeline first and start their withdrawal while negotiations about the remaining issues are on-going. Reuters [quoted](#) Shahin saying on 24 June 2019:

Once the timetable for foreign force withdrawal is announced, then talks will automatically enter the next stage. We don't need to wait for the completion of the withdrawal, both withdrawal and talks can move forward simultaneously.

1. *c) Anti-terrorism guarantees*

The 25 April 2019 US-Chinese-Russian statement quoted above also reflected what kind of guarantees the Taliban have given the US:

The three sides (...) take note of the Afghan Taliban's commitment to: fight ISIS and cut ties



with Al-Qaeda, [the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement], and other international terrorist groups; ensure the areas they control will not be used to threaten any other country; and call on them to prevent terrorist recruiting, training, and fundraising, and expel any known terrorists.

US Secretary of State Pompeo [added](#), when in Kabul on 25 June 2019, that the Taliban would “join fellow Afghans” in this effort.

A further question is whether the Taliban, in the US view, would need to distance themselves explicitly and publicly from those and the others among the “20 terrorist groups” that, according to the Afghan [government](#), operate on Afghan soil. (2) In general, there should be no problem with the local IS branch, called the Islamic State – Khorasan Province, which the Taliban consider an unwanted competitor in Afghanistan. They have been – relatively successfully – fighting the group from its first appearance in the country in 2014 (background [here](#)); see also their current anti-ISKP offensive in Kunar province that has been on-going [since](#) April 2019.

Distancing themselves from al-Qaeda might be more complicated for the Taliban. Some of those who later set up this group, particularly Osama bin Laden, fought on the same side as the later Taliban leaders (then still in the ranks of various mujahedin groups) against the 1980s Soviet occupation, and some in the Taliban still appreciate them for that role. This was also the reason why the late Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar refused to extradite bin Laden even after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. To distance themselves from al-Qaeda might also not look good in the eyes of some Taliban’s non-state sponsors. On the other hand, the relation between the ‘Islamist-nationalist’, Hanafi Sunni Taliban and ‘Islamist-internationalist’, Salafi al-Qaeda was always strained, particularly after al-Qaeda carried out the 9/11 attacks triggering the US-led reaction that ended their rule in Afghanistan. (Alex Strick van Linschoten & Felix Kuehn’s seminal 2011 book *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban–Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970–2010* has all the detail.) Any kind of post-agreement cooperation with al-Qaeda or similar groups would hamper their strategic political aim of regaining power in the country, as it would draw renewed outside attention to Afghanistan – an attention that would otherwise wane after a peace agreement, giving the Taliban freedom of action to implement their domestic aims with much less scrutiny than currently exists. The Taliban are also no longer financially or militarily dependent on the much-reduced al-Qaeda.

The Taliban can be much less concerned about groups that operate under their umbrella as do some remnants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) or Jundullah (see in these AAN analyses, [here](#) and [here](#)). With regard to the fighters of those groups, numbering some hundreds at best in all cases and largely incapable of operating without Taliban support or green light, the Taliban have a number of options. They could let them quietly slip across some border. But this would alarm Russia and the Central Asian republics, China and Pakistan, and create new, unwanted regional tensions. To detain or even hand over fellow Muslims to the US or their countries of origin, and even more so on behalf of the former arch-enemy, would not look good either in the eyes of donors and possibly even their own fighters. It would be easier for the Taliban if these groups could be included in a general Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration process which has to take place anyway after an agreement, and would likely also



include decommissioned Taliban fighters and members of Afghan government forces, including pro-government militias. This would allow them to be absorbed into Afghan society, with guarantees that they do not return to the battlefield. (Of course, there would need to be a reliable mechanism to monitor them.) It is known that a number of Arabs and Central Asians, particularly those who have been in Afghanistan for a long time, have integrated and even married into local communities.

More difficult for the Taliban will be dealing with the Pakistani groups that – similar to ISKP – use staging areas in eastern Afghanistan but are mainly focussed on operations in their home country. Those areas are neither fully controlled by the Afghan government nor the Taliban. Here, cooperation with Pakistan would be key.

There is also the issue of foreign security detainees in Afghan jails the number of which is unknown. When the US handed over their detention facilities to the Afghan authorities in 2014, there were only a handful left (see AAN analysis [here](#)). But new ones have been captured; there are frequent reports about mainly Pakistani fighters being detained (see for example [here](#) and [here](#)). When a pro-IS group in Darzab district (Jawzjan) was defeated by the Taliban in July and August 2018, their Central Asian members chose to surrender to the government (AAN reporting [here](#)); according to local sources, however, they were not detained, but integrated into local anti-Taliban uprising [forces](#). This is another danger for the post-agreement period, that demobilised fighters (of any stripe or nationality) join militia forces.

Future anti-terrorism cooperation?

The US has repeatedly offered to continue supporting Afghanistan in what it calls ‘counter-terrorism efforts’. There are a number of ideas that have transpired from statements of US government and military officials as well as from think tanks papers. This could include an agreement to give access to Afghan military bases; continued training and information sharing and; an idea of a “residual force” (made in [2014](#)), which as Brookings wryly observed would nominally “protect the U.S. embassy, which—wink, wink, with the Taliban’s permission—will have the capacity to conduct limited counterterrorism strikes.”

There are no reports of whether any of this has been discussed with the Taliban. Their position is clear: they do not want a single foreign soldier to remain on Afghan soil. This has been repeatedly stated, for example by the head of their delegation in the February 2019 Moscow [meeting](#): “This war will continue until and unless foreign soldiers [do not] exist in Afghanistan” and by their former chief negotiator Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanakzai in a media [interview](#) at the same occasion: “We will not tolerate a single American soldier in our country.” This could also be interpreted as a ‘no’ to any future US bases in Afghanistan. This would require the nullification of the 2014 Security and Defence Cooperation Agreement with the US (formerly known as the Bilateral Security Agreement or BSA) that regulates the current status of the US troops in Afghanistan. It is unclear whether the Taliban would agree to any future limited usage rights of Afghan bases for US troops in the context of counter-terrorism cooperation in the process of the negotiations. It could help that, as can be assumed, a future agreement might not



be fully public but include secret annexes.

Despite the hurdles lined up under a) to c) and the lack of progress on issues number three and four of Khalilzad's agenda – a ceasefire and the involvement of the Afghan government in the peace talks–, Secretary Pompeo introduced a new, two months timeline during his recent short stay in Kabul: "I hope we have a peace deal before Sept. 1, that's certainly our mission set." This would be still before the Afghan elections later that month.

Moscow: Disappointments

Before the latest Moscow Afghan dialogue meeting in May 2019, Russia's special envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, had left its exact format open. He [told](#) TASS agency, it was unclear whether it "will be negotiations or just a discussion on how to establish peace in Afghanistan." He added "We invited both the Taliban and Afghan politicians to attend a solemn meeting dedicated to 100 years of diplomatic relations. They have the right and desire to communicate after that, and they will have such an opportunity." (3) This drew a line between day one, the Russian-organised meeting, when Taleban and Afghan government representatives sat in the same room and the Taleban presented a statement that did touch upon the peace issue, and the meeting on day two. The Afghan government representatives (head of the High Peace Council Abdul Karim Khalili and the Afghan ambassador) were excluded on the insistence of the [Taleban](#) and the rest of the Kabul delegates decided to meet the Taleban anyway.

The joint communiqué worked out by the Taleban and the 'delegation from Kabul' (minus the government representatives) was relatively bland, reflecting the Kabulis' disappointment about the Taleban rejection of an Eid ceasefire. It [said](#) the meeting had been "productive and constructive" and further:

Both sides discussed the continuation of intra-Afghan talks, ceasefire, the release of prisoners, protection of civilians, foreign troop withdrawal, end of the "foreigners' interference" [quotation marks in the original], the perseverance of national sovereignty, and women rights...

But there were some much more positive reactions. Din Muhammad Hanif from the Taleban delegation and a member of the movement's Leadership Council said he was [satisfied](#) and that all participants "had consensus on bringing peace, foreigner forces withdrawal, and consolidation of Islamic system in Afghanistan." Ex-president Hamed Karzai even enthusiastically [talked](#) of a "very nice, very very positive meeting," saying "[w]e are leaving very very happy" with "some progress, some spectacular progress on some issues." He even used the Taleban's terminology, speaking about "put[ting] an end to the current occupation." Neither the Taleban nor Karzai, though, referred to the meeting on day one with the government representatives present.

In the eyes of one of the Kabul delegates, former deputy Chief Executive of the Afghan government, Muhammad Mohaqeq, (4) the three-day meetings did not constitute negotiations yet. He said (quoted [here](#)), "Our position is that the Taliban must engage in intra-Afghan talks.



So far, we did not have negotiations; it was only an intra-Afghan dialogue.”

Mohaqeq’s position echoed that of the Afghan government after its officials were edged out of these meetings. See the joint US-Afghan statement after Ghani met Khalilzad in Kabul in June 2019 which [said](#) that they agreed that “preparations for intra-Afghan negotiations” – as opposed to an intra-Afghan dialogue – “now [are] essential.”

The Afghan government worries are not surprising. After years of assurances by their international allies that peace talks would be “Afghan-owned and Afghan-led,” understood to mean by the government in Kabul, the fact that the Taliban are meeting non-government, Kabul-based politicians in international fora has created deep frustration in the presidential palace. In addition to being excluded from the Doha talks, the Russian government did not invite representatives of the government in Kabul to the November 2018 Afghanistan conference in Moscow (a media report [here](#)) and treated them as ‘one faction among many’ during the February and May 2019 meetings. An attempt to bring the two sides to one table in Doha failed in April 2019; as the UN Special Representative to Afghanistan put it in his recent [report](#) to the Security Council: it “unravelling amid disputes over the list of participants.”

A duel over legitimacy

The so-far unbroken Taliban insistence on keeping the Afghan government out of the Doha negotiations and the intra-Afghan dialogue, as well as the government’s attempts to get access to both, are a struggle for legitimacy. Both sides claim to represent the entire Afghan nation and deny that the other one does.

In this duel, the Taliban have clearly been allowed to make gains at Kabul’s expenses and do now appear to enjoy an equal relationship in negotiations with the US, who they see as their main adversary. This has been bolstered by their clever use of the media. In the November 2018 meeting in Moscow, they appeared in front of international TV cameras for the first time since the ‘peace process’ began (there had been interviews on Afghan media earlier), and in May 2019 they brought their deputy Mullah Baradar, recently freed after ten years in Pakistani custody (Baradar was a close confidant of Taliban founding father, the late Mullah Muhammad Omar), AAN analyses [here](#) and [here](#)). That again secured them the limelight.

Beyond public relations issues, the Taliban’s approach is to deny the Afghan government legitimacy, including that gained through the ballot box. The Taliban delegation’s spokesman, for example, stated after the latest Moscow [meeting](#): “We oppose the [planned presidential] election, because a real, transparent election cannot be held under occupation. (...) We want our country first to be liberated and then the Afghan people will decide its future.”

Afghan elections can indeed be said to have been marred and not only by massive fraud and irregularities and regular delays; their inclusiveness has also been hampered by threats from the Taliban. Even so, the participation of voters is still high when they can get to the polls, often braving security threats. This suggests that elections are important to Afghans. Moreover,



election results (even if externally mediated as in the 2014 presidential election) are accepted internationally and – even if often grudgingly – domestically. Moreover, in contrast to the government, the Taliban have never put themselves to any form of vote; their rule in areas they control seems rather to be based on a combination of military power and coercion and some local consent (see AAN’s “One Land, Two Rules” series, latest part [here](#)). It is also worth mentioning that, although their Moscow statement might sound as if the Taliban are not against elections in principle, there has been no sign in any of their statements, or from practical policy, to indicate that they consider elections an acceptable way of choosing a government (see an AAN analysis of this issue [here](#)).

A second-term won through the ballot box by the Ghani administration would reinforce its standing and belief that it is the only legitimate representative of the Afghan people and should be leading any talks with the Taliban. The same would be the case should another candidate win. Although the Taliban have shown themselves willing to sit with government officials and opposition politicians there ‘as individuals’ around one table in the Moscow meetings, this might change after the September 2019 election which will have been, in their view, held under an ‘occupation’ meaning any winners will be tainted in their view.

US-Afghan bilateral relations crisis...

US-Afghan relations have suffered considerable strains over the period from late 2018 to early 2019. This was first due to US officials, among them Khalilzad, stating in meetings with diplomats in Kabul, that the government in Kabul, and not the Taliban, was the “biggest obstacle for peace.” Those quotes quickly made the rounds in Kabul and angered the government. It was picked up by president Ghani’s opponents such as his former national security advisor Hanif Atmar, who will run in the upcoming presidential election, who was quoted as calling the government “not only illegitimate (...) but also an enemy of peace” as [recently](#) as on 25 June.

Adding to the anger was pressure from Washington to further delay the Afghan presidential elections, in an attempt to give envoy Khalilzad a “bigger window to seek a deal” with the [Taliban](#) while the government has been hoping to bolster its standing by successful elections *before* peace talks. The idea of the delay was, as US officials [told](#) the Wall Street Journal, “raised by U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in talks with various stakeholders and intermediaries.” Also, a number of Afghan politicians opposed to President Ghani called peace ‘more important’ than the election, for example, former president [Karzai](#) and former finance minister [Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi](#).

In the end, the election, originally scheduled for April 2019, was [postponed](#), in late December 2018, to 20 July 2019 – and then once more to 28 September 2019. The first delay already handed the opposition a means to attack the incumbent as would be, in their view, illegally staying in power after his term ran out in May 2019 (AAN analysis [here](#) and [here](#)).

Reuters reported on 27 March “current and former U.S. officials tell Reuters they believe Ghani



is positioning himself to perhaps be a spoiler in still-fragile negotiations, angry that the Afghan government has been kept out of talks and worried about the implications for his presidency.” As a result, the Afghan government assumed that the pressure and the accusations had been a reason why it remained excluded from the negotiations in Doha (and also largely from the Moscow meetings).

Tensions between Kabul and Washington developed in an atmosphere where many Afghans – in government and outside of it – feared that the US was mainly interested in pulling its troops out quickly rather than in a genuine peace agreement (see for example this article by the Chairman of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission [Nader Naderi](#)) or that the withdrawal could happen before there was a clear agreement on how Afghanistan’s post-withdrawal political system would be organised. Without such an agreement, they fear, the doors would be open for a Taliban takeover; they would just be waiting for all foreign troops to have left.

This again is mainly based on US President Donald Trump’s well-known antipathy to the US involvement in Afghanistan in general (AAN analysis [here](#)) and his tendency to take decisions without consulting even close advisors. Trump had only given Khalilzad, it was understood (see AAN analysis [here](#)), a short window to come to an agreement with the Taliban. It is also assumed that Trump does not let Khalilzad know what his thinking is on Afghanistan; James Dobbins, the former US envoy to Afghanistan who led the US delegation at the 2001 Bonn conference, [wrote](#) earlier this year: “I don’t think [Khalilzad] knows what Trump’s going to do.” Trump reiterated his position in a recent [interview](#) with Time magazine, saying about the ‘Middle East’ in general (in which he seemed to include Afghanistan) that, “We should have never been there, and I’d like to get out.” But apart from that, there have been at least no obvious signs of imminent impatience about Afghanistan or Khalilzad’s efforts.

The US pressure and accusations played into both the Taliban and Ghani’s domestic competitors’ hands as it presented the government as the main scapegoat for the lack of a final agreement.

In a sharp reaction, Afghan National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Moheb, [slammed](#) Khalilzad in mid-March 2019 for “delegitimizing the Afghan government and weakening it” and probably even planning to become the “viceroy” (a nickname Khalilzad carries since his first post-2001 stint in Afghanistan, see [here](#)) in a “caretaker government,” a reference to a scheme promoted by some Afghan politicians including former president Karzai. (There had been earlier accusations in 2009 of Khalilzad, who is Afghan-American, wanting himself to become Afghan president after a pro-Khalilzad campaign was organised in Afghanistan, with offices opened in his name and meetings held by supporters – read for example [here](#); it was denied by Khalilzad.) (5) The State Department in Washington ordered US officials to have no further contact with Moheb, and the US delegation walked out the next day of a meeting in the presidential palace where Ghani and Moheb were both present. This order still seems to be intact.

... and attempts to mend the fence



Both the US and the Afghan governments have taken steps to overcome the bilateral tensions and tone down their controversy. The atmosphere has improved again, at least in public.

Foreign Secretary Pompeo, on his recent stop-over in Kabul, underscored Khalilzad's strategy in the talks on the interconnectedness of the four issues discussed. The objective of intra-Afghan *negotiations* which should "begin as soon as possible" (ie they are different from the intra-Afghan *dialogue* in Moscow), he [said](#), was "for Afghans to agree on a timeline and a political roadmap for reaching a comprehensive peace agreement." This makes clear that the US sees such an intra-Afghan agreement as a prerequisite for the conclusion of the comprehensive final agreement. He also said "the government but also representatives from opposition parties, civil society, including women and youth" must be part of the "large table" of the intra-Afghan negotiations.

Pompeo underlined "we hold detailed discussions with the Government of Afghanistan in parallel with our talks with the Taliban" and that the US work "diligently to ensure that we are fully aligned in our approach. (...) We are not and will not negotiate with the Taliban on behalf of the government or people of Afghanistan."

A few days before, Khalilzad had already addressed Afghan fears about a quick fix with a series of tweets on 18 June that received broad attention in [media](#): "we seek a comprehensive peace agreement, NOT a withdrawal agreement" (capitalisation in the original). Alice G Wells, Senior Bureau Official for South and Central Asian Affairs, [said](#) before a US Congress subcommittee on 13 June 2019 that the US, other donors and the World Bank were working "to develop a post-settlement economic action plan that will help Afghanistan navigate what could be a difficult economic period." Khalilzad told an Afghan media [outlet](#): "There is a need for help, we are ready to continue our support to Afghanistan."

President Ghani before emphasised the good coordination with Washington. He [said](#) at the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's summit in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek on 14 June 2019: "We consider the US commitment to a political solution to be credible." A few days earlier he [stated](#) that there was a "regular and continuous information sharing process" between the US and Afghanistan. And Khalilzad, during his June tour through the region, made sure he talked with Ghani, other leading Afghan politicians and civil society representatives.

What next?

Apart from the imminent new Doha round, a new round of intra-Afghan dialogue is scheduled for 6-7 July 2019 in [Doha](#). Participation of government officials appeared to be confirmed at a recent UN Security Council [meeting](#) about Afghanistan in New York, when the US representative explicitly welcomed those efforts and added that the US "also is laying the ground for intra-Afghan talks to begin for agreeing on a timeline and political road map for a peace agreement."

However, it is not clear whether the Taleban have accepted the participation of government



representatives. There seemed to have been agreement on that before the April meeting in Doha (which then broke down over the excessive size of the 120-member delegation from Kabul.) Afghanistan's Second Vice President Sarwar Danesh, however, stated on 19 June, the same day as the UN meeting, that the Taliban have not given any green light yet for the intra-Afghan [dialogue](#).

Conclusion

That the attempts to end the Afghan war are hitting obstacles on the way should surprise no one. Diplomacy, as a German politician once said, "is drilling slowly through thick planks of wood." The obstacles spring from a complex political and diplomatic environment, with multiple Afghan, regional and global interests, and domestic policy issues in Afghanistan and the US.

First of all, no one knows what President Trump might decide to do at any point in time. This is what the Taliban, with their blocking of any Afghan government involvement in Doha, seem to hope for, that the US president pulls troops and funding, and the country falls back into their hands, as a financially-deprived government in Kabul disintegrates. History has an example for that: Then Russian President Boris Yeltsin's stop of financial, economic and military aid for then President Najibullah's government in 1992 led to government collapse and – by the way – major realignments inside Afghanistan. That history repeats itself in such a way is possible, but should also not be taken for granted, as conditions have changed. This includes the hardening of enmities between many of Afghanistan's political and military factions, based on a lot of more spilled blood, and that the country is more militarised than ever before. Significant Afghan anti-Taliban military-political forces might be able and willing to fight it out. However, a new round of factional war would be catastrophic for the Afghan population.

On the Afghan side, the government's problems with its legitimacy has undermined its position in the three-parties constellation with the Taliban and the US. The lack of a united 'national' strategy for negotiations and of a unified negotiating team has allowed the Taliban to look united and well-organised in comparison. Government and opposition politicians have not rallied round in the face of the Taliban and US negotiating their country's future. Nor has the government been able to insist on its right to be in the lead on negotiations with the Taliban. Ghani's attempt to bolster his legitimacy before the election by holding the Consultative Peace Loya Jirga and achieving a national consensus about peace talks in May 2019 were undermined by an opposition boycott. As AAN [wrote](#) it was "difficult to see how this Jirga will strengthen the hand of the Palace vis-à-vis the United States or of Afghans supporting the 2001 settlement against the insurgents."

Yet it is still the Taliban's refusal to negotiate with the Afghan government that makes the Taliban the biggest current obstacle to peace. This also stands in the way of further progress in their negotiations with the US. This is also an unsustainable position in the eyes of many Afghans who, particularly as voters, are tired of war and still see the current political set-up more favourable than a regime that includes the Taliban. The Taliban's refusal to talk to the government also defeats their attempts to present themselves as the 'real voice' of the Afghan



people.

This refusal also conceals conceptual shortages on their part. There has been little detail emerging over the years on how the Taliban imagine a future political system in Afghanistan – only a desire for vaguely-formulated ‘reforms’ of the current constitution, claims that they do not [aim](#) at a “monopoly of power”, and that they [want](#) “that all Afghans shall genuinely see themselves represented in the government.” Their conceptual shortcomings are particularly egregious when it comes to the ‘how’ of their project. Their statements in Moscow and elsewhere seem to indicate that they envisage the power-sharing that would be the likely outcome of a peace agreement purely as an ‘inter-factional’ deal, or as government figures joining an Emirate government. The Taliban have also given no signs that they would agree to any post-agreement political system in Afghanistan being legitimised by a general election. As an earlier AAN [analysis](#) of their statements has shown, their thinking rather seems to point to a *shura-ye hal o aqd*, an Islamic form of representation through selection, not election, as a means of gauging public opinion. (6) This would be a major retreat from the current political reality in Afghanistan, despite all its shortcomings.

At the same time, the Afghan government and the US have not come forward with ideas about how the Taliban would become part of the future political set-up, especially given the little inclination shown by the Taliban to become just another political party standing for a popular vote. The government has signalled that it is ready to discuss a revision of the current constitution. This is the cause for widespread fears in Afghanistan that a peace deal might end with compromising basic political rights.

In this situation, it is positive that Washington and Kabul are trying to repair their relationship and have started consulting each other again. It is also positive that Washington is sending signals that Doha is about a *peace* agreement and not only about *withdrawal*, and that there are efforts to set up a ‘post-peace agreement’ plan (the financing and implementing of which will be difficult enough, also given the experience of the incomplete post-2001 DDR/DIAG process) (an AAN report [here](#)).

It is key that the US stick to the ‘nothing is agreed until everything is agreed’ formula; anything else would result in a deal over the heads of the Afghan government and population. Given the Taliban-created obstacles, it remains to be seen which arguments – and possibly concessions – the US wants to use to inject a new dynamic into the seventh round of negotiations in Doha, now that it has made clear there will be no agreement without the Afghan government and other forces in the current Afghan political setup.

However, Pompeo’s latest timeline looks far too short for a comprehensive agreement being hammered out in all detail. It would already border on a miracle if the divergent Afghan groups – Afghan government, opposition, civil society and Taliban – could come to a full agreement over the future of their country within two months. This would be the case even if many of the groups and individuals concerned were actually talking to each other or were not set to election campaign mode.



Edited by Rachel Reid, Sayed Reza Kazemi and Kate Clark

(1) There had been rumours before Eid that the Taliban might observe an undeclared ceasefire over the Islamic holidays, reported for example by the head of the private 1TV channel, Abdullah Khenjani, on [social media](#). With regard to the Eid days, a spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Interior claimed that government forces had foiled 35 attacks in Kabul during [those](#) days “including a car bombing plot”. But those claims are difficult to verify, and it was also not clear whether, for example, this included plans by ISKP who did not follow the ceasefire of 2018.

(2) The article linked here provides a list (which does not include the Taliban but some groups that are part of this movement) and does not name all of them consistently:

The terrorist groups that fight in Afghanistan include:

- Haqqani Network: This group has bases in North Waziristan and according to security departments, the group has close relations with Pakistan military.
- Al-Qaeda Network: Reports indicate that this network has bases in Pakistan and have been carrying out terrorist activities in the eastern and south-eastern part of Afghanistan.
- Daesh [Islamic State Khorasan Province, ISKP]: Daesh, the newest group, is growing into a big threat against Afghanistan. It has carried out most of the deadly attacks in the country. Reports say Daesh training centers are located in Pakistan.
- Lashkar-e-Jhangvi: Training centers of this group are located in Waziristan in Pakistan. The group has carried out deadly attacks against Shia People in Afghanistan.
- Lashkar-e-Taiba: This terrorist group has been carrying out terrorist attacks in Afghanistan and India. The group has carried many deadly attacks in Afghanistan so far.
- Jaish-e-Mohammad: This terrorist group also has been carrying out terrorist attacks against Afghan people and Afghan people.
- Mujahidin United Council (Shura-i-Etehad Mujahidin): Bases and training center of this terrorist group also located in Waziristan in Pakistan.
- Maulvi Nazir Group: This terrorist group’s training centers are located in South Waziristan.
- Te[h]rik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP): TTP is the terrorist group that Pakistan claims the group



leadership is located in Afghanistan, but reports say the group's bases and training centers are located in South Waziristan.

- Amre Ba Maroof and Momin group are other groups that have been launching terrorist attacks against Afghanistan.

There are other Pakistani [sic] terrorist groups, such as Jamat ud Dawah, Lashkar-e-Islam, Ansarul Islam and Islamic Jihad Movement that have been carrying out attacks against Afghanistan.

Chechens, Uighur terrorist group, Tajiks, Tehrik-[i] Islami-ye] Uzbekistan [IMU] and Arabs are the Middle East terrorist groups that have been active against Afghan government for many years.

Another list of terrorist organisations allegedly active in Afghanistan based on information by the US military in the country can be found in: Anthony H Cordesman, [A War in Crisis! Afghanistan in Mid-2019](#), June 2019, p 65:

Estimates of Terrorist Group Force Size

Terrorist Group Estimated – Number of Fighters:

ISIS-K – 3,000-5,000

Haqqani Network – 3,000-5,000

Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan – 3,000-5,000

Islamic Emirate High Council [Taliban splinter in western Afghanistan] – 1,000

al Qaeda – 300

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – 300

Lashkar-e Tayyiba – 300

Tariq Qidar Group – 100-300

Jamaat ul-Ahrar – 200

Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement – 100

Islamic Jihad Union – 25

Jamaat Dawa Quran – 25

No Credible Information Available for the Following Terrorist Groups:

Iranian Revolutionary Guard-Quds Force

Hizbul Mujahidin

Commander Nazir Group



Jundullah

Harakat-ul Jihad Islami/Bangladesh Lashkar-I Jhangvi

Harakat-ul Mujahidin

Jaish-e- Mohammad

Source: USFOR-A

(3) The participants were: for the Taleban, a 14-strong delegation attended led by the head of their Political Commission and one of the three deputy heads of the movement, Mullah Abdul Ghani Achund, better known as Mullah Baradar (all names [here](#)). From Kabul, 20 politicians attended (see [here](#) and [here](#)), including former president Hamed Karzai; ex-provincial governor and leader Atta Mohammad Nur; former national security advisor and presidential candidate Hanif Atmar; former foreign minister Zalmay Rassul, also a presidential candidate for 2019; Yunos Qanuni, another leading Jamiati and Atmar's vice presidential running mate; Muhammad Mohaqeq, Atmar's other running mate; Rangin Dadfar Spanta, another former foreign minister; the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan and former finance minister Omar Zakhilwal; former deputy foreign minister and think tank head Hekmat Khalil Karzai; a deputy leader of the Jombesh party, Abdullah Qarluq; former mujahedin leader Hamed Gailani; and two women, Fawzia Kufi and Tajwar Kakar. Furthermore, Muhammad Karim Khalili, the head of the Afghanistan's High Peace Council (HPC) was invited; the HPC is not recognised – because its members are appointed by the government' – by the Taleban; at the same time, Khalili has joined the opposition against President Ghani. Also, the Afghan ambassador to Moscow, Latif Bahand, attended the meeting on the first day.

(4) Mohaqeq has fallen out with President Ashraf Ghani who sacked him from his [position](#) in January 2019 after he joined an 'opposition' ticket for the September 2019 presidential election.

(5) Khalilzad had denied this personally, see quoted in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz (18 March 2009):

When asked about rumors that he may run for a president of Afghanistan, Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad bursts into laughter. (...) "I thought that the previous rumors were of me becoming an Emperor of Iraq," he says, sitting in his new office at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), where he holds position as counselor.

"This idea keeps popping up. I have a soft spot for Afghanistan, because I was born there and spent my childhood there, but I'm not running for president of Afghanistan.

(not online; in the author's archive).

(6) See also this quote of a former Taleban minister currently involved in the negotiation effort, from the Borhan Osman and Anand Gopal 2017 paper, [Taliban Views on a Future State](#):



Stating that “The Emirate is based on the election by handpicked figures, such as the ulama and tribal elders,” and that “Obviously, the laymen cannot make a perfect choice” in elections, the former minister suggests a “middle way” between the current “presidential republic system [...] based on the election by an individual electorate on a grass-roots level” and the Emirate:

The middle way will be to go for a system based on an election in which the ordinary people elect their district councils which will, in turn, elect a parliament, which will elect the leader for the country.