



## What If the Afghan Peace Process Fails?

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### Abstract

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Prospects for a lasting, comprehensive agreement to end the Afghan conflict, never very bright, seem increasingly dim. Only after many months of wrangling over preliminary issues are the opposing delegations in Doha now at the point of addressing the multitude of tough decisions required to shape a new political order. It augurs badly for negotiations that the Taliban, whether out of confidence in its strong bargaining position or from core convictions, has thus far shown no inclination to compromise on any issues of real substance. Against a background of mounting violence, the Taliban in refusing to entertain a ceasefire has also shown itself in no hurry to end the nation's bloodletting. Most disconcerting, the talks have confirmed the wide gap between the opposing sides in their visions of a future Afghan state and society. The Taliban's participation in peace talks in Doha seems not so much intended to chart Afghanistan's future as aimed at keeping the U.S. in the February 2020 agreement that committed it to removing all troops from Afghanistan by the end of this April. With American as well as allied foreign forces gone, the Taliban could well be on a path to political ascendance, if not by bullying at a negotiating table then on the battlefield.

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## Analysis

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While mindful of the looming obstacles, most Afghans along with much of the international community continue to place their faith in the eventual success of the current peace process. Understanding military victory over the Taliban to be unachievable and repelled by the idea of unending warfare, they have placed their faith in diplomacy. The hope is that the Taliban, conscious of the difficulties in achieving an outright military victory, will be ready to sign a political deal once it has extracted enough concessions. Ultimately, the Taliban is conceived of as a transactional actor. That ideology rather than pragmatism might dominate Taliban thinking is conveniently dismissed.

Hardly surprisingly, then, little attention is given to what might follow should the current peace talks prove fruitless. Negotiations could very well drag on unproductively for many more months, even extend to years, and at any point in time collapse entirely. Despite the agonizingly slow progress, both sides for their separate reasons appear for now hesitant to quit the negotiations. But Taliban reluctance could quickly vanish should a Biden administration declare its intention to retain a residual counterterrorism troop presence in the country beyond April. A Taliban spokesman has publicly stated that anything less than a full U.S. withdrawal is a deal breaker. And with the level of violence in the country continuing to rise, the Kabul government may soon find it politically too costly to remain in the talks. For whatever reason the negotiations might break down, the reactions among a disillusioned Afghan public, a disunited political elite, and sorely disappointed international community could well determine the future of the Ashraf Ghani government and of Afghanistan's Islamic Republic.

In the wake of failed peace negotiations, the government can be expected to express its confidence in the country's ability to soldier on. It would insist on the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) being capable of defending the state, even in face of almost certain increased Taliban attacks of greater scope and intensity. Afghan forces have for some time conducted ground operations independently and have slowly grown an air force instrumental in keeping major population centers out of the hands of the militants. But even with uninterrupted American financial assistance to the ANDSF, the departure of most or all foreign troops and private contractors, and especially the loss of U.S. tactical air support will test the Afghan military's mettle and morale. It could serve as a strong accelerant to an already high rate of military desertions that leads to an unraveling of the Afghan security forces. The transfer by deserters of their equipment and training to various militias countrywide could ignite a messy, more destructive civil war.

The collapse of peace talks may result in furthering disunity among Afghan political elites. Divided along ethnic and regional lines, they have had their separate ideas on how and toward what end peace talks should be conducted. Several of the leading militia-wielding power brokers can be expected to renew threats to mount their own military offensives against the Taliban. Among opposition politicians, many will assign blame for the breakdown of negotiations on obstructions deliberately created by the president and his political allies. The uneasy truce between President Ghani and his veteran rival Dr. Abdullah is likely to dissolve. Some politicians may follow the lead of former insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in reaching out to the Taliban to explore how their interests could be protected under an interim government or restored emirate.

Grassroots pressure on Kabul to continue to press for peace will probably mount. As happened in the 1990s, large numbers of war-weary Afghans, faced with the prospect of an unending conflict, may be prepared to settle for almost any outcome promising to bring an end to fighting. Other Afghans, fearing expanding violence and the looming possibility of Taliban rule, will lay plans to flee the country. A rapidly deteriorating or collapsed



economy as in the 1990s could mean that millions of employed Afghans would lose their ability to earn a living. Without a modern economy, the most skilled and educated would be among the first wave of refugees. Foreign aid donors and international aid agencies and NGOs would find it increasingly difficult to maintain their programs and in leaving add to the severity of an economic contraction and people's hardships.

In an Afghanistan under Taliban sway, respect for popular will as expressed through democratic institutions would have no place. The republic's elected officials and representative institutions would be replaced by a righteous leader and a council of clerics seeking guidance exclusively from Islamic principles. Tolerance of media and other freedoms of expression would similarly disappear, as is presaged by the recent targeted killings of many journalists and public figures. Predictably, the strict cultural prohibitions enforced during the 1990s would be reinstated. Women's educational rights and other impressive achievements marking the last 19 years, could be enjoyed only at the sufferance of local mullahs and their interpretation of Sharia law. The Taliban's often repeated promises to create an inclusive Islamic society may suggest a new openness but only to those willing to accept its terms.

With the prospect of a Taliban-dominated regime in Kabul, groups and individuals having ties to the republican government would have reason to fear for their personal safety. The Taliban has made known its intention to hold accountable those who have helped sustain the Ghani government. Shiite Hazaras and other minority communities, remembering the ethnic cleansing in the 1990s, are particularly apprehensive. Hazara as well as many Tajik and Uzbek commanders could be expected to block Taliban advances into areas under their control, making difficult any future Taliban attempts to consolidate power nationally. A chaotic Afghanistan filled with contested and ungoverned space could become hospitable ground for the operations of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State-Khorasan, or regional groups including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

A near consensus among regional states on the desirability of a political solution for Afghanistan can be expected to dissolve together with faded peace prospects. The neighboring countries are likely to move toward reviving the hedging strategies that in the 1990s embroiled them in the Afghan conflict through their proxies. Pakistan's involvement with its favored Taliban factions may become more transparent. Some like Russia and Iran, anxious to block the export of Taliban influence beyond Afghanistan's borders, may look to strengthen ties to past ethnic proxies or try to buy off the Taliban with promises of assistance. With foreign troops exited and a Kabul government hard-pressed, India may be less hesitant to provide military assistance. Worsening Sino-Indian relations and the strengthening of the China-Pakistan nexus could turn Afghanistan into a battleground where India is pitted against China and Pakistan.

Most Afghans will have difficulty recovering from a failed peace process in which they and their government have invested so much hope. Faced with escalating insurgent violence, the future of the Islamic republic may hang in doubt unless the government can start rebuilding confidence in its ability to deliver basic security and improved governance. Recognizing the critical juncture for the country, its politically powerful figures must also begin to put aside their differences. Additionally, Afghans need reason to believe that there exist alternatives to negotiating a grand bargain with the Taliban, such as provided by creating the material incentives for a gradual process of politically reintegrating Taliban field commanders and fighters with the state. Even then, Afghanistan cannot expect to succeed without regional and international powers recommitting to the country's stability. As unpromising as these developments presently appear, they may be all that stands in the way of the profound social, economic and political consequences of a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan or a more disastrous civil war.



**Remarks:** The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors. This analysis first appeared in *THE DIPLOMAT* on January 8, 2021. <https://thedi diplomat.com/2021/01/what-if-the-afghan-peace-process-fails/>

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