



US-Taliban Doha Agreement:

One-Year Review

March 2021

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On 29 February 2020, in what was assessed to be a historic and hopeful step towards bringing peace to Afghanistan after over 18 years of conflict, the US government under President Donald Trump and the Taliban signed the 'Doha Agreement'. The core points of the agreement included the US commitment to gradually reduce troop numbers in the country until completing a full military withdrawal by May 2021, and to start diplomatic discussions with the United Nations (UN) to remove the Taliban from the sanctions list. Meanwhile, the Taliban pledged to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a base to threaten the security of the US and its allies, in other words, to prevent al-Qaeda or any other extremist groups from operating in areas under Taliban control. The agreement also aimed at setting the stage for subsequent talks between Kabul and the insurgent group, meanwhile providing the framework for a prisoner swap on 10 March 2020 that would mark the beginning of the dialogue.

Though the agreement was born out of Trump's determination to make concrete steps towards a peace process and bring home American troops, it was flawed from the outset. The main issue was the alienation of one of the parties to the conflict, the Afghan government, whose representatives were not included in the talks despite their reported insistence on taking part. While the Afghan government publicly committed to the peace talks, it was not without resentment and distrust, as the deal was interpreted to have given the Taliban the upper hand in the negotiations. In particular, the Afghan government refused to follow to the letter what was established in the agreement regarding the prisoner exchange, setting the mood for future intra-Afghan negotiations, which were thus delayed. Equally important, while it is said that the Taliban unofficially agreed to limiting mass-casualty attacks and the targeting of foreign troops, they never committed publicly to a ceasefire.

Indeed, the Trump administration was so heavily invested in bringing the Afghan peace process to fruition that it forced Kabul's hand by threatening major cuts in US aid funds. The US later even reportedly considered the release of Afghan drug lord and Taliban financier Haji Bashir Noorzai, currently held in a US federal prison, following a demand made by the group in July to release Noorzai along with every Taliban member still detained in Guantanamo Bay in June 2020, citing the commitments made in Doha.

It has also been reported that in order to expedite the signing of the Doha Agreement, the Trump administration did not raise the issue of the release of American citizen Mark Frerichs during negotiations in Doha. This, despite one of Trump's most emblematic policies being 'Bringing Americans Home'. Mr Frerichs, a U.S. Navy veteran who had spent ten years living and working as an independent engineering contractor in Afghanistan, was abducted near his Kabul home on 31 January 2020, a month before the agreement was signed. It is believed that Frerichs is currently being held by the Haqqani Network, a listed terrorist organisation, whose leader serves as the deputy leader of the Afghan Taliban. The Haqqani Network is also suspected to be behind the 2014 disappearance of another American, Paul Overby, whose fate has so far not been ascertained.

One year on from the signing of the 'Doha Agreement', the intra-Afghan talks have not been successful, with the country still experiencing high levels of violence. While violence against US and allied troops has ceased, and overall victim numbers have reduced due to a decline in complex attacks, unclaimed targeted assaults have increased. Such attacks have typically targeted members of the security forces, politicians, government employees, journalists, activists and public individuals who have voiced anti-Taliban sentiments. This shift from high-profile, mass-casualty attacks to assassinations is assessed to be the result of the Taliban changing their terror tactics, now subduing populations through surgical strikes which can be denied. According to a UN report published on 23 February 2021, a "disturbing spike" of about 45% in Afghan civilian casualties was noted after

the intra-Afghan negotiations finally began in September 2020, showing a Taliban emboldened by the announced departure of foreign troops.

It is in this context that President Joe Biden has announced he will be reviewing the Doha deal. Not only will the withdrawal of the remaining 2,500 American soldiers and allied forces by May be reconsidered, but there will be an overall assessment of the Taliban's compliance with the agreement. This also presents an opportunity to rectify some of the shortcomings of the deal, possibly including the addition of Mr Frerichs' release within the potential revision. This recommendation has been earnestly voiced by his family and supporters, who have made calls on President Biden to prioritise the release of Mark Frerichs and resolve the disappearance of Paul Overby in future negotiations with the Taliban, making further troop reductions conditional on these goals. Adherence to the Trump agreement would certainly and dangerously diminish the chances for resolution in these cases, as any negotiating leverage would be lost.

Meanwhile, the Taliban, fearing a setback to their current seemingly advantageous position, have warned that any changes to the current schedule "is doomed to failure" and that they will also conduct their own reassessment, accusing the US of not fulfilling their part of the deal. Moreover, it is reported that in response, and in a search for leverage, the group have been seeking international support among US adversaries, including Russia, Iran and China.

Indeed, President Biden is faced with a 'Catch-22' situation. While a few believe that there could be a peaceful renegotiation, it is likely that the Taliban would see such a request as a violation of the Doha deal and a justification to return to full-out war. The threat of possible additional foreign interference should also be carefully considered, as it could further complicate an already complex situation. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that remaining on the current path will actually lead the country to the desired peace. Even if the parties were to eventually come to an agreement, the Taliban are not a unified structure, and thus there is no assurance that their many warlords and tribal leaders will abide by what is agreed in Doha. Additionally, the security gap created by the complete departure of foreign forces will likely be taken advantage of by extremist groups to again entrench themselves in the country, especially when it is not clear that they ever left.

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