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Transition from US-Led Foreign Military Presence to UN Peacekeeping in Afghanistan: Opportunities and Dangers

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Summary

The latest peace plan introduced by the government of Afghanistan proposes a change from United States (US) - led external peacekeeping to United Nations (UN) - led peacekeeping (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2021). Considering that the prospect of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan has been looming since the US - Taliban Agreement of 29 February 2020, with the US current deadline to withdraw from Afghanistan set to 11 September 2021, this seems realistic. Especially in light of two recently leaked documents; a letter from the US Secretary of State to Afghanistan's President (Blinken, 2021), and a US proposal for a peace agreement (Khalilzad, 2021) which revealed that the US is aiming to complete a hasty withdrawal of its current military role in Afghanistan. This despite NATO suggesting a more measured approach (NATO, 2020).

The US's plan to start its withdrawal on 1 May 2021, and to finish it by 11 September 2021 was made public in President Biden's announcement on 15 April 2021 (Biden, 2021). Nonetheless, many experts continue to suggest that an external force is needed to enable a negotiated solution to the conflict, and to prevent the temptation of a military solution. Indeed, the presence of external troops could keep the conflicting parties from attempting a military solution, enable dialogue, monitoring and compliance, and a negotiated solution to the current situation. Whether or not this is the case constitutes the question which this paper seeks to address: Can UN peacekeeping be a solution? If so, how can we transit from the US to a UN role?



Introduction

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This paper will utilise existing comparative data on the track records and experiences of all post-Cold War peacekeeping and humanitarian interventions by the UN and the US. It uses deductive logic based on data of US and UN track records to examine whether a UN presence can produce more or less violence in Afghanistan. What cannot be estimated here is whether or not the Taliban can agree to the presence of US forces under the UN umbrella, and what will happen if they do not. There is plenty of data that can be used for the comparison of US and UN roles in support of peace in fragile violent states like Afghanistan. This data can help us understand whether there are UN or US intervention-based problems that can be assumed to emerge in Afghanistan. There is, however, much less data on processes of transition from a unilateral to a UN role in peacekeeping. Therefore, we know much less about the potential risks that a change from one intervention to another could trigger. As such, I will begin with analysing the former data, which gives much optimism to our thinking of the developments in Afghanistan, and then the latter which suggests that there are also many risks that needs consideration.

¹ The agreement commits the US to such withdrawal by the end of April 2021 ("Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" & United States of America, 2020; United Nations Security Council, 2020).

Comparative Evidence

Since UN has not yet had a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan and the US has not ceased its mission there, no evidence exists as to what could happen when this transition transpires. Hence, only by looking at other violent fragile states can we get an idea of whether a transition from US to UN will be useful. Taking this approach is unproblematic when looking at whether Afghanistan is better off with the US or with the UN. Thus, my assessment will be based two datasets; one on unilateral, outlining US-led humanitarian interventions in violent fragile states like Afghanistan (Kivimäki, 2019b), and the latest on UN peacekeeping in similar conditions (Kivimäki, 2021a). Both datasets are freely available at the University of Bath Research Data Archive (doi: 10.15125/BATH-00535 and DOI: 10.15125/BATH-00783).

The data used illustrates what happens to the number of fatalities of organized violence and state fragility when unilateral powers, such as the US, UK, France and Russia conduct humanitarian interventions, and when the UN conducts peacekeeping operations to tackle the problem of organized violence. Additionally, the data demonstrates the connection between the US's and UN's different approaches and their consequent conflict outcomes. It follows development of UN and US approaches by coding US presidential texts and UN Security Council resolutions by means of computer assisted textual analysis. This also enabled the production of data on how various approaches developed over time across different operations and countries.

Furthermore, the data on approaches is also correlated with data on fatalities and state fragility to allow for conclusions with regards to the number of lives saved by the UN or US during specific years or in specific operations, if a specific approach has been used.² As a result, it is possible to say not just whether the US or UN has failed or succeeded, but also what kind of US and UN approach have been associated with decline or increase in fatalities of organized violence or state fragility. Accordingly, the data reveals what works and what does not work for peace. In this paper, I will use this information to examine potentially useful approaches to bring peace to Afghanistan.

While the evidence of track records of the UN and the US is abundant and systematic, evidence on the dangers and opportunities related to a transition from unilateral to UN peacekeeping is scarce. Few cases exist where US-led operations have been transformed into a UN peacekeeping. A rare example can be given by the UN operation in Haiti in the 1990s, where a rapid reaction of the US made it possible to deploy the necessary forces before the UN was able to establish a presence. This was needed as the UN was unable to launch its peacekeeping operations hastily before the automatic mechanism for the funding of such operations was created in 2001 through UN general Assembly resolution 55/235 (United Nations General Assembly, 2001).

NATO also had an active independent role in Bosnia, although this operation was never handed over to the UN, but rather, the two worked side by side, sometimes sabotaging each other's initiatives. Thus, while we know what works and what doesn't in general for a 'stable' peacekeeping operation, little evidence exists with regards to the dynamics of transitions. In light of this, I will look at some of the data on the recipes for success, and pitfalls of UN and US operations to investigate which measures should be utilised or avoided during an Afghan

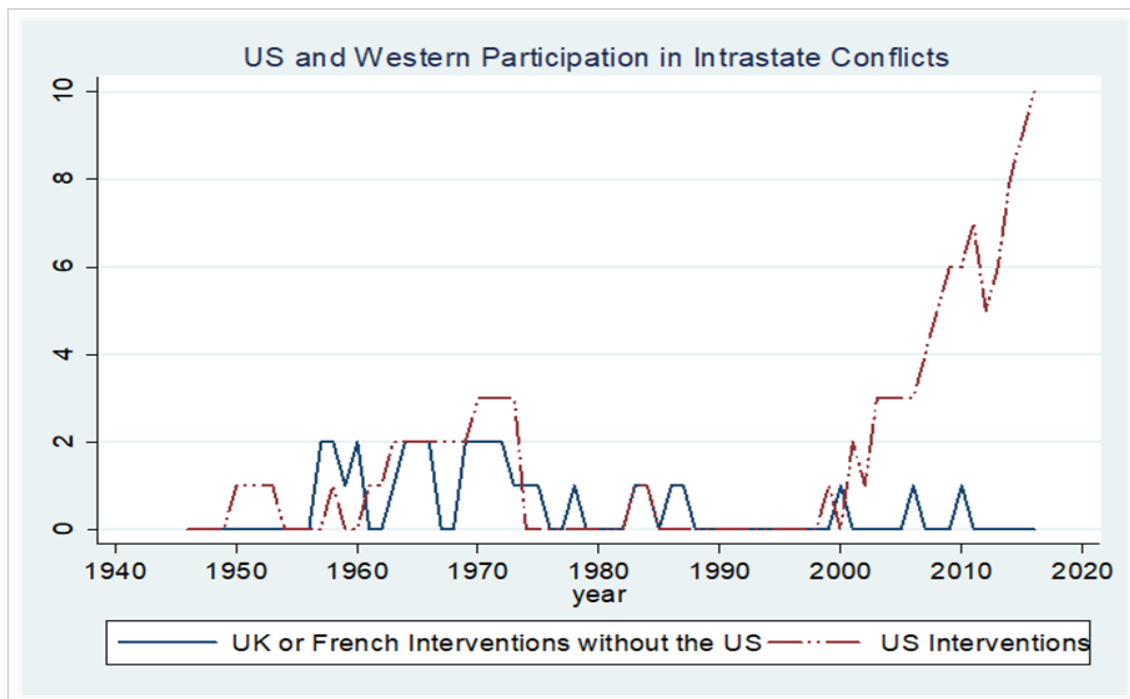
² For the full analysis, see (Kivimäki, 2019a, 2021c).

transition. In addition, I will also consider qualitative evidence from other peace processes, such as trust-building, transformation of adversary identities into cooperative ones, and mechanisms of enforcement and verification in peace processes.

UN has a better track record than the US and other great powers in preventing organised violence

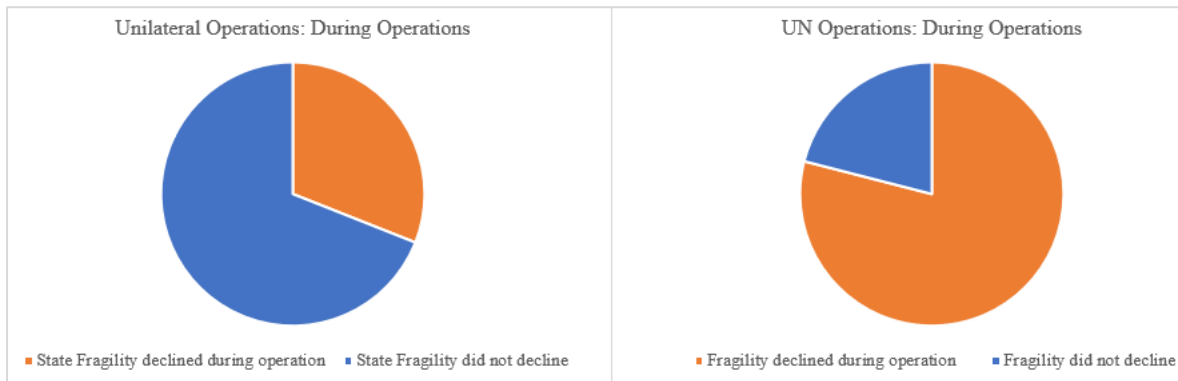
Looking at the problem of political violence in the world, there was a lot of optimism about the UN's potential to tackle the remaining problems of international peace and conflict in the early 1990s. However, with the organisation showing a lacking capacity to freeze the military situations of Rwanda and Bosnia to secure negotiations, this confidence likely declined. Namely, following the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, Western powers started to take leadership of humanitarian interventions and working in the name of humanity, despite the fact that they only represented a small fraction of it. The rise of unilateral Western interventionism can be seen in Graph 1:

Graph 1: US and Western participation in intrastate conflicts



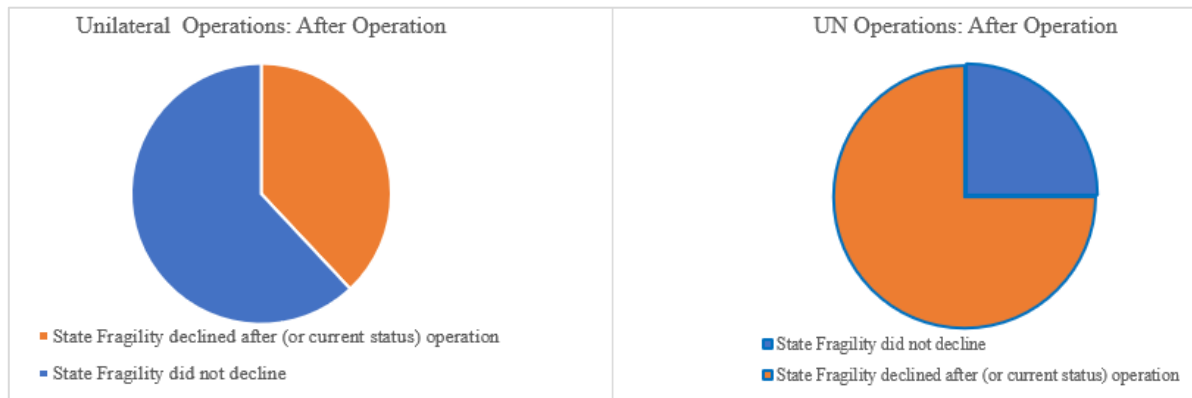
Looking at countries where unilateral and UN interventions have occurred, we can compare conflict fatalities and state fragility before, during and after the operation. This allows us to observe the proportion of interventions which managed to reduce fatalities and state fragility during the operation, and how many operations managed to leave the targeted country better than before. Although crude, this comparison clearly illustrates that the UN has been able to reduce the number of fatalities in conflicts, while US and other unilateral powers have often been more focused on punishing those they consider as perpetrators of atrocities and criminals. Thus, operations of the latter kind have not been focused on reducing the loss of human life. Comparing records on protection of lives as per Graph 2, the UN has clearly managed to be more efficient:

Graph 2: Reduction of fatalities during operations



As indicated by the Graph 2; only a small minority of unilateral operations managed to reduce fatalities during the operation itself (compared to the time before the operation), while a large majority of UN operations manage to do so. Graph 3 reveals that the same is true for a comparison of fatalities before and after operations: only a small minority of unilateral operations managed to leave the country better off after the humanitarian intervention, while UN peacekeeping operations left a great majority of countries better off after compared to before the operation.

Graph 3: Do external operations leave countries better off?



If we look at complete failures, i.e., operations that increased fatalities during the operation and left countries worse off than they were before the operation, the same pattern can be observed (Graph 4). For the UN, only four out of 35 operations were unsuccessful this way, while for unilateral powers, the majority of operations increased fatalities as they transpired, and then left the host country worse off than before the operation.

Graph 4: Failures of external powers



Examining the features of state fragility, the same pattern emerges: the UN does a better job than unilateral powers. The majority of unilateral operations have supported a moral conflicting party and demonised its enemy. The marginalization of and denial of political participation from the non-violent elements of the Taliban is an example of this mistake. The demonization of the enemy has made it very difficult eventually to negotiate with the Taliban, and yet, the only way to peace is to negotiate with one's enemies. For instance, the Taliban were not invited to the Bonn negotiations, which's main purpose was to set up an interim government in Afghanistan following the US regime change in the country; when the country was preparing for its first elections in late 2004, and in 2005, any group that had political objectives close to those of the Taliban, was discouraged to contest in the elections.

Furthermore, the US government flatly rejected the suggestion of President Karzai negotiating with the Taliban and wanted to deal with the group as a military enemy. President Bush introduced the concept of *terrorist ideology*, as a political objective that somehow naturally led to terrorist means in politics. Instead of just containing violence, America started containing those objectives that Taliban, Al Qaeda, but also many non-violent groups aimed at. Just before the first elections in Afghanistan in October 2004, President Bush demonstrated his securitization, not of terrorist methods in politics, but Taliban ideology, values and political preferences: "There's a mighty ideological struggle taking place... this is a war against an ideology which stands exactly opposite of what we believe."(Bush, 2004, p. 1262). The unilateral support for the "moral" side has often changed the balance of power in ways that have not been sustainable. As a result, either peacekeeping operations never end (to be successful, they have to destroy the bad power structure altogether and the state institutions in the process), or they eventually leave the "moral" side at the mercy of the powerful enemies once the external intervention ends. Considering the definition of democracy 'the free competition of ideologies', however, confusing the means by which terrorists conduct battles with their political and ideological objectives, which are often seen as the "immoral" side, is risky. Particularly, denying groups in opposition – terrorists – participation in the free competition of ideologies, arguably limits democracy and excludes supporters of such ideologies outside non-violent political competition. This keeps them in the military mode. Meanwhile, the marginalization of the Taliban from political competition has made eventual power-sharing, along the lines the US suggestions difficult. If fighting the Taliban has become the purpose and identity of the Afghan defence force, it will be difficult to persuade the Taliban

of the potential of this force to be an instrument for the civilian leadership that will eventually include the Taliban.

Only four times, the UN has failed as miserably as unilateral powers have failed in the majority of their operations. These UN failures have taken place in Syria, Central African Republic, Mali, and, of course, Rwanda. Interestingly, three out of the four failures took place in countries where, in addition to UN peacekeeping forces, a unilateral power conducted operations (in Syria by Russia and the US, in CAR by France and in Mali by France and the US). Hence, with the exception of Rwanda, UN peacekeeping has failed only if the UN has not been allowed to operate in absence of interfering unilateral operations. The Rwanda exception, which has been referred to in defence of unilateral operations, is clearly an exception, not a rule: the UN is generally very successful, it failed only in Rwanda.

While the US operation in Afghanistan is often mentioned as an example of the problems with unilateral interventions, surprisingly, it does not count among the most failed US unilateral operations. The operation has not ruined the state capacity, quite on the contrary, state capacity has improved modestly. However, it has not improved beyond the extent to which state capacity tends to in conflict states, absent interventions. As a result, conflict fatalities did not increase from the beginning of the intervention. In this sense one can look at Afghanistan as one of the most successful cases yet. However, it is also likely that the conflict would have seen fewer fatalities of violence without a US/NATO intervention. Using the latest data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, it is possible to draw a graph to illustrate the development of fatalities of organized violence in the country. As shown by Graph 5; after the first four years of the conflict, US marginalization of the Taliban and the ideological battle that pushed some ideologies into military means while allowing only some to compete non-violently, led to an increase of fatalities soon after the first election in Afghanistan.

Graph 5: War in Afghanistan

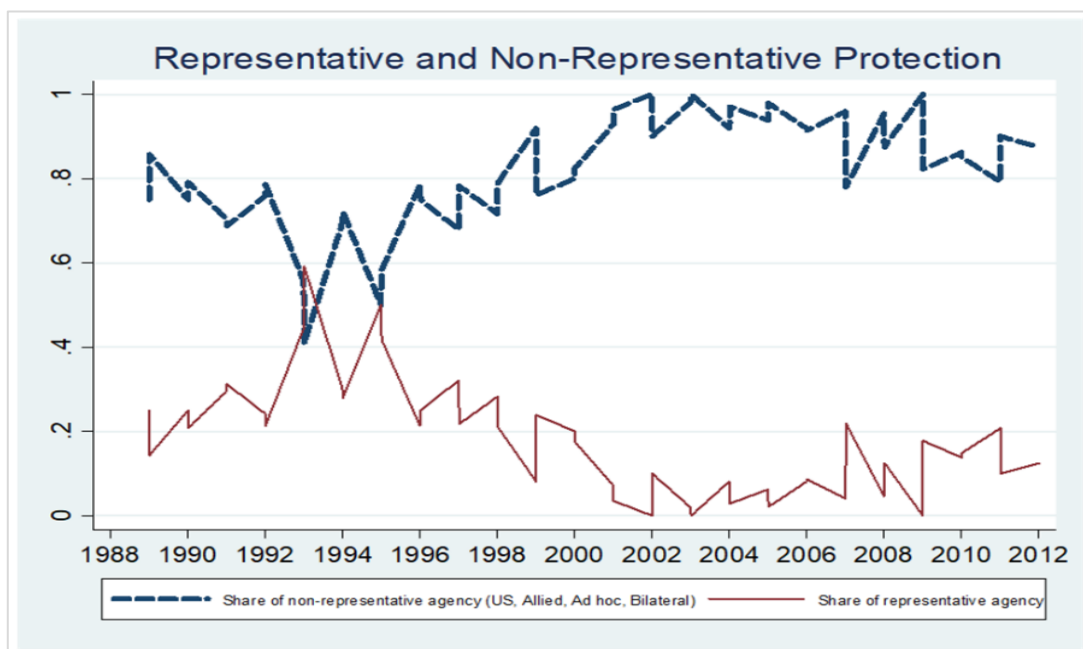


Recipes for success: Local ownership, dialogue and focus on poverty alleviation

Why is this? What is it with the UN approach to violence in fragile states that makes the UN so much more successful? To answer this, I will focus on three of the conclusions that emerged as I examined the data. These explain why the UN has been more successful in fragile states and why it could be more successful in Afghanistan. The first is related to local ownership. Often, when an intervention is not sensitive towards the people's right to own governance and peace processes, operations tend to escalate violence by making it easier to mobilise resistance.

Looking at the development of unilateralism in the US presidential discourse through examining the actor (subject) in sentences with the word “protect” we can see that following Rwanda and Bosnia, the US concluded that representative agents cannot be the primary providers of protection. These agents include, the conflicting parties themselves, the state of the country where violence takes place or regional organisations that the country is a member of, or the UN and so on. Instead, US-led outsiders must bring protection to fragile states. Graph 6 illustrates the development very clearly.

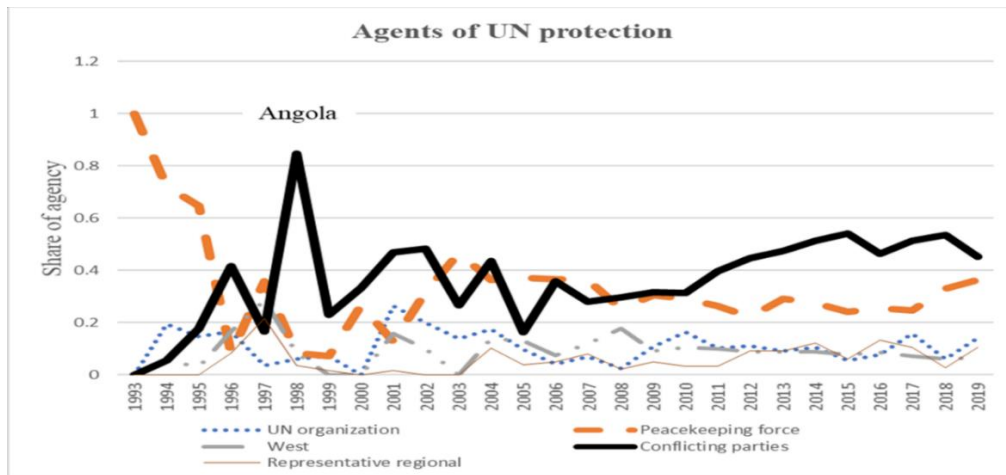
Graph 5: Agency in US concept of protection of people



This unilateral approach, again, does not help tamp down the perceived justification for violence of terrorists, rebels or dictators and their followers (Kivimäki, 2019a, Chapter 5). People tend to want to rule their own countries, and Afghanistan is no exception. Examining the UN approach in the same way as the US's³ (above), the results indicate that the UN discourse, with only a few exceptions allows ownership of the protection of people to the conflicting parties. In fact, the conflicting parties are considered the main agents for protection of people in their own areas. Graph 7 illustrates this very clearly:

³ Looking at the subject of the sentences with the word “protect” in UN Security Council resolutions.

Graph 7: United Nations and the concept of agency in protection



The UN general approach to peacekeeping has been aimed at freezing the security situation and separating parties to make space for indigenous negotiations and solutions. The language of local ownership is associated with increasing success in the reduction of fatalities in countries where UN operates (Kivimäki, 2021c, Chapter 5).

While the US approach to peace in Afghanistan has been constructive, there are several factors that suggests the it lacks appreciation of the importance of the Afghans taking ownership of the process. For example, the design of the US’s agreement with the Taliban which also makes concessions on behalf of the Afghan government, and the fact that US Secretary of State is sending “updates on the next steps in the Afghan peace process” (Blinken, 2021, p. 1) to the President of Afghanistan. Moreover, the US special representative sending a full solution to the interim and permanent principles of governance of Afghanistan, allowing some cosmetic choices to the conflict parties (Khalilzad, 2021), further suggests that local ownership of the peace process is not high in the agenda of the US. Madeleine Albright explains this approach in her memoirs by saying that diplomacy is to persuade solutions, and for that, one needs a robust military as a bargaining leverage (Albright, 2005, Chapter 12). However, insisting on solutions, rather than facilitating for an indigenous search for solutions is arguably a worse strategy, both in Afghanistan and elsewhere. President Biden admitted this in his speech about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan when he said that only Afghans “have the right and responsibility to lead their country” and that “Our diplomacy does not hinge on having boots in harm’s way, US boots on the ground. We have to change that thinking.” (Biden, 2021).

The ‘standard US approach’ also ‘equipped’ the Taliban with a justification for mobilising fighters against NATO forces as they insisted that Afghan future is for the Afghans to decide, not foreign forces. The Taliban chief peace negotiator even called the day of US withdrawal Afghanistan’s independence day (Al-Haj Mullah Baradar Akhund, 2020). The Taliban has repeatedly emphasised that if the US does not interfere in Afghan affairs, they have nothing to fear from Taliban or Afghanistan either. But if not, Taliban is prepared to return to the targeting of Americans (See for example, "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", 2020). It seems clear that this sensitivity to local ownership is shared also by the government. In a statement by the High Council for National Reconciliation in December 2020 the core message that was made the title of the statement was that “People of Afghanistan have the ownership of the peace process.”

(Abdullah, 2020) This suggests that the UN approach of seeking locally owned solutions, which is associated with success in general, could contribute to success also in Afghanistan.

The next important difference in the approaches of the US and the UN is related to the method of reduction of violence. One of the core principles of the UN is to minimise the use of force. The UN approach is generally focused on dialogue on humanitarian norms, while US approach is to deter violence and deny impunity from violators of “humanitarian law”. While the UN assumes that the norms and their implementation and interpretation is a matter of dialogue and negotiation, unilateral operations often consider them as something that are already unanimously accepted. “Humanitarian law” simply needs to be enforced.

During the years UN Security Council resolutions discusses “humanitarian law” less than average, it saves almost 28,000 more lives annually during its operations, and almost 27,000 lives more during and after its operations (Kivimäki, 2021c, Chapter 5). While operations whose authorising resolutions never use the word “deter” have had a 71% chance of success at leaving the country better off in terms of fatalities both within the operation and after it, compared to the time before the operation, the same percentage is just 55 in operations that operate within the discourse on deterrence (Kivimäki, 2021c, Chapter 5). The same can be seen if we associate the variation of US discourse with variation in conflict fatalities in US wars. Power-bias in US Presidential Papers is statistically significantly associated with the increase of fatalities of political violence (Kivimäki, 2019a, Chapter 8).

Developments in Afghanistan demonstrate the problems of militaristic, power-biased approach to the problem of violence in fragile states. The Taliban movement has used what it calls “US militarism” extensively as a justification for violence. The Taliban website updates readers on a monthly basis of the “War crimes of brutal foreign invaders and their internal mercenary forces” and never fails to link these “brutalities” to the justification of Taliban’s struggle (“Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” 2020a).⁴ Finally, the UN and US approach also differ in their interpretation of what threatens human security in fragile states. While the US focuses on what they call “atrocious crimes” in political competition, the UN is more focused on threats that are not simply caused by the intentional harm. The willingness to side-line issues of economic security is much more prominent in other US military operations, while in Afghanistan, there is a fair amount of US focus on poverty and other issues of economic security. In this way the US acts in Afghanistan more like the UN acts everywhere, and this may be the very reason why the US is more successful in its security operation in Afghanistan than most other areas.

However, there is a systematic economic development-focus in the UN discourse. Such a focus is also significantly associated (statistically) with improved ability to save lives from violence (both in time and between operations). The UN saves in excess of an additional 30,000 lives in its peacekeeping operations (counted together) during years when the development discourse is more prominent than average, compared to years when it is less prominent than average. The UN saves almost 6700 more lives in operations where the environmental question has been dealt with (Kivimäki, 2021c, Chapter 5). If we look at the prominence of environmental focus in protection in US Presidential Papers, it is strongly correlated with improved ability to save lives there too (Kivimäki, 2019a, Chapter 8).

⁴ This practice ended after the signing of the US-Taliban agreement in February 2020.

In Afghanistan, economic development has not been among the main topics the Taliban has used for its mobilisation of resistance and violence. However, the limited focus on the real problems of Afghans, and the greater focus on the use of force, has undoubtedly affected the appeal of anti-US forces in the country. Furthermore, in Central and South Asia, problems with governance of economic and social development predict conflict better than elsewhere (this can be easily calculated from the dataset on the grievance, state fragility and conflict dataset, Kivimäki, 2021b). While in the Middle East, for example, variation in the political elements of state fragility explains a large share of political violence, child mortality and corruption are the main predictors of conflict fatalities in the South and Central Asia human development index. Thus, focusing on politics rather than economics will not bring success in the peace process of Afghanistan. This is likely why the UN approach, focused on poverty and economic insecurity, works better.

Thus, based on this comparative evidence it seems that a situation in which the UN would have the main security supporting role rather than the US/NATO would be beneficial for peace in Afghanistan. An Afghan peace process would benefit from an approach that respects commitments made in peace agreements. It does not require the robust military commitment by actors that do not have legal representative authority in charge of Afghan security. Rather, it requires indigenous Afghan leadership and agency in the peace process as well as a dialogue on the norms of future co-existence between Afghan groups, rather than the imposition of justice from outside Afghanistan. Finally, an Afghan peace process would require a focus on the real problems related to poverty and lack of environmentally sound economic development.

Can the transition be non-violent?

Although the UN might be able to do a better job in Afghanistan than the US/NATO, a transition from US to UN-led operation could still mean increased levels of violence. The timing of the withdrawal is therefore an important factor here. The US's commitment, which has been endorsed by the UN Security Council, that all US and allied forces have to be out of the country by 1 May 2021, is likely to be honoured considering Biden's announcement of withdrawal 15 April 2021 (Biden, 2021). This means that the US will start its withdrawal on the day its troops were supposed to be out.

Some military analysts have suggested that the delay is due to the deteriorated situation in Afghanistan. However, as Graph 5 shows, the situation has been deteriorating almost continuously since the barring of Taliban views from the non-violent political competition at the end of 2004. If the Taliban interpret this breach of the agreement as a matter of humiliation rather than understanding that not keeping one's promises only compromises one's own honour, this may lead to a targeting US soldiers again. The US military may consider this as something that will further delay the process of US withdrawal. Even during the tenancy of President of Barack Obama, Biden and US army were in disagreement with regards to the objectives of the US policies in Afghanistan. A repetition of this scenario could risk Biden's leadership over the US military in Afghanistan. It could also risk another escalation of the conflict between the US and the Taliban. If, however, the Taliban does not see the delay in US withdrawal as an excuse for aggression, the question that remains is how (and not when) can the US withdrawal be managed.

It is tempting to assume that fewer changes in the transition process means that risks are reduced. If this is the case, the US maintaining strong role within an UN-led framework would immediately seem reasonable. However, this assumption contradicts with the evidence of stable US and UN roles. The US tends to assume that the UN works as a tool for US foreign policy rather than US servicing the UN policies. This was clearest during the operations in Iraq, where the US was explicitly demanding that the UN act as an instrument of US foreign policy. There and in Libya, the US expected the UN to offer international legitimacy for partisan US-led military operations. In both countries this led to the temporary destruction of the state.

The US also has a tendency of conducting independent operations on the side of the UN. In Bosnia, for example, NATO operations provoked the Serb party to challenge the UN militarily. Likewise, in Syria, UN efforts at pacifying the situation in 2012 were sabotaged by the US arming of the opposition of the Syrian government and the Russian arms sales to the government that targeted the US-supported side. This makes clear that the transitions from US to UN should not leave other great powers an independent role that could sabotage UN peacekeeping. Yet, NATO countries have a constructive role to play in support of the UN peacekeeping operation. There is a positive association between UN success and Western support of it (Kivimäki, 2021c, Chapter 7).

US operations often are often based on the protection of the weak against the strong” bad guys”. This is because instead of seeking invitation from all conflicting parties like in the case of the UN peacekeeping missions, US operations are based on a narrative of resisting atrocity crimes by one conflicting party. This creates difficulties for peace negotiations as the “bad guys” are being demonised, and the US does not negotiate with demons. Power-sharing is also difficult if the military instrument of the power-sharing government has an identity of a force that fights against one of the power sharers. It is difficult for the “bad guys” then to see the military as an instrument that genuinely enforces the policy of the power sharing government. As a result, interventions that were taken against the host government have been possible to end only in Kosovo, where the Serb state institutions in its province of Kosovo were destroyed, and Kosovo was left into a state of relative statelessness for a long time. Yet, even in Kosovo, while the US operation had ended, the UN peacekeeping mission is still there, 22 years after the unilateral operation. In none of the other US operations originally against the government or in disregard of the government in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, operations have not fully ended (Kivimäki, 2021c, Chapter 3).

In Iraq the US temporary withdrawal at the end of 2011 led to massive revenge operations against the US-protected populations, and the number of fatalities increased until the return of the US military in 2014 (Pettersson, 2020). This was a result of the “good guys, bad guys” framing of the conflict. Many experts fear that this could happened also in Afghanistan when the US leaves. With the ending of US deterrence, the Taliban could simply try to retake the country and take revenge against those who involved the US in their defence. The Taliban unwillingness to negotiate before the withdrawal of US troops suggests that this may be the case. This would be especially possible, if the Taliban did not feel secure that the new power structure would treat it fairly, if it could not participate in non-violent party politics, or it felt that the Afghan military will always treat it with hostility.

In many post-conflict situations peaceful negotiations have been incentivised by the conditionality of withdrawal of foreign troops. US withdrawal can happen most safely if it takes place after a ceasefire, and if there is a common understanding that external forces, either UN or US, can return if the Taliban is just waiting for the withdrawal of US forces to take over the country militarily. US military combat support is mainly needed for the support of Afghan troops from the air, and as such, the return of US air power will not take long. If there was a neutral UN presence with an invitation from both from the current Afghan government and the Taliban, and if the mandate was merely to make sure that neither party tries to resolve the conflict militarily, this could offer a space for successful intra-Afghan peace negotiations under the UN.

However, military stability and deterrence of the Taliban is not the main thing. It would be tempting to say that this is the formula that has failed to bring peace for the past two decades. Stability based on deterrence often provokes more than it deters violence. Therefore, preventing the motive for violence is better than deterring the urge to commit it. There may be a need for the Taliban to see that the marginalization of the non-violent, political Taliban ends. The US peace plan suggests principles for the transition that would put the Taliban on par with the current government. This is what the US thinks is necessary for convincing the Taliban that the military route will not be as beneficial as a negotiated solution. In some processes where a rebel movement that has been marginalized from politics due to their armed struggle, such integration has been done by making unilateral, yet often symbolically important compromises.

For example, in the Aceh Peace Talks in Indonesia, a process mediated by Finland's former President, Martti Ahtisaari,⁵ this was done by allowing the separatist rebels an institution that in their language meant "head of state" to their province, even though the province was to stay as part of Indonesia. This institution of "Wali Nangroe" or head of state, was symbolic and cultural, rather than political, and as such, it was not a very costly political concession from the Indonesian government, yet one that allowed the rebels to feel that they could end their armed struggle: after all they had already managed to get a recognition from the Indonesian government for their head of state, who was to be the leader of the rebel organization, Tengku Hasan di Tiro. Perhaps something similar could be done in Afghanistan.

The Taliban has criticised the 2004 constitution for a language that copies Western constitutions (Roggio, 2012). For the Taliban it is important that state institutions can get names and forms that are indigenous rather than borrowed from, let alone imposed by Westerners. Historical dialogue mechanisms and their names can be used to get rid of the impression that intra-Afghan negotiations are predestined to follow foreign guidelines. Choosing such forms of state institutions can be appealing not just for the Taliban, but also for the current government. It could be possible for the government to suggest constitutional or transitional principles that were fundamentally different from the Western tradition, and perhaps it could endorse building the constitution in a democratic manner, but using some genuinely Afghan traditional representative institutions as building blocks. The government should consider whether it is ready to compromise even the name of the state between the current one and the one that the Taliban are suggesting. Making it easy for the Taliban negotiators to pacify their constituencies and their fighters is what is needed to avoid a relapse to violence.

⁵ The author of this policy paper was President Ahtisaari's advisor in this peace process (ed.).

In Indonesia, in Aceh, the Indonesian military managed to get over an identity of being a force against the rebel movement with which the government needed to share power, by creating joint units with rebel soldiers for operations where the two had clearly common objectives. The Taliban has committed itself to a principle of not allowing the country and its territory to be used for international terrorism and in some areas, it has already actually fought some international terrorist organizations. Perhaps it would be possible to establish joint units that could monitor against the infiltration of international terrorist organizations in some areas. If this was possible it could reframe the image of the Afghan defence force so that it would no longer be an anti-Taliban force but rather a force that serves a power-sharing government with Taliban participation. Perhaps, such joint units could be created as soon as there is a ceasefire and a horizon for a transition that allows power-sharing. Such a horizon could also be used to make the ceasefire more attractive.

In addition to joint military units, the civilian bureaucracy and political security bureaucracy could be hastily transformed into mixed, joint units wherever such is possible. East Asia has taught our West-centric understanding of peace-building that solving problems and focusing on things that divide is not the only way. Often, it is easier to start by focusing on things that unite. For example, Afghanistan needs poverty alleviation and on that the Taliban and the government are perhaps more unanimous. Why not establish joint government units to plan and implement strategies of poverty alleviation in Afghanistan, and start, after the two decades of division and marginalization, the creation of a more inclusive state in issue areas that unite the Taliban and the current government. Only then one could focus on the remaining issues of division. After the two decades of foreign impact, there might also be cultural and religious issues in which the conflicting parties are in agreement, even though, obviously, there are also issues that divide. It would be possible to collaborate on such aspects of Islamic rule that the government and the Taliban agree upon: The current government is, after all, working for an Islamic Republic, and thus after the withdrawal of Western forces, there would be opportunities for more inclusive dialogue and development of the religious moral guidance in the development of Afghanistan. It could be useful not just start by resolving differences, but rather by focusing on issues that unite the conflict parties.

After all these general suggestions and abstract research results, it would be possible to end this policy paper by suggesting something that was more concrete. This paper has used the example of Aceh peace talks as an example of best practices to overcome several process-related hurdles. This is because, according to conflict fatality statistics, it is the most successful East Asian peace process in more than 40 years. If there was a team of a joint government-Taliban administrators or soldiers who would like to make a virtual or an actual study tour to Aceh, and learn from the main peacemakers there, such possibility should be possible to organise. My Acehnese and Indonesian friends have done this to many delegations from conflict countries, and most of such study tours have been very productive: learning together from another successful peace process is often a good way to facilitate thinking out of the box in one's own peace process.

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