

In This Volume

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# Assessing the Trump Team's Afghanistan Peace Plan

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## Summary

- The Trump administration's Afghanistan strategy repeats mistakes made by the Clinton and Obama administrations.
- The Taliban repeatedly fail to keep diplomatic commitments.
- Treating the Taliban as independent from Pakistani command-and-control will undercut the utility of any peace deal struck with the Taliban.
- Diplomatic outreach and Taliban empowerment are directly proportional.
- The Afghan perception of Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad is colored heavily by a personal history about which many in Washington, DC are unaware.

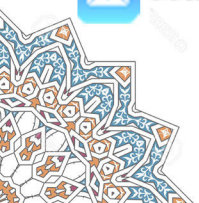
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Zalmay Khalilzad, President Trump's special envoy for Afghanistan, continues to pursue a diplomatic settlement with the Taliban framed mostly around the idea that the United States will withdraw from Afghanistan and, in exchange, the Taliban will forswear terrorism.<sup>1</sup>

Khalilzad's strategy will never work. Within the American political context, Khalilzad's diplomatic agreement with the Taliban is meant to provide cover for President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and nothing more. Just as President Barack Obama became so committed to a nuclear bargain with Iran that he embraced a bad deal rather than consider no deal, the Taliban today recognizes that Trump and Khalilzad will make any concession so long as Trump can promise peace in our time. Khalilzad appears willing to undercut the elected and legitimate government in Kabul without

first demanding the group demonstrate its popular support at the ballot box. This approach places too much faith in the false notion that the Taliban have changed while simultaneously empowering them.

There are three main reasons why Khalilzad's strategy cannot work: First, Khalilzad breaks no new ground but rather resurrects a deal which the Clinton administration struck with the Taliban in 1998, after al-Qaeda terrorists attacked the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Second, without any international agreement with regard to a definition for terrorism, the Taliban can argue that it upholds its side of the bargain while allowing terrorism to continue apace.

Lastly, Khalilzad treats Afghanistan policy as if it were in a vacuum, ignoring the role Pakistan plays in sponsoring and sustaining the Taliban.

## The 1990s: Talking to the Taliban

Two misconceptions continue to distort the Western narrative about Afghanistan. The first is that the United States created or supported the Taliban, and the second is that U.S. diplomacy with the Taliban began only during the Obama administration.

The myth that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) created or supported the Taliban is false.

To believe the United States supported the Taliban is anachronistic. It conflates both the Mujahedeen and legitimate Afghan resistance with the Taliban. Furthermore,



the Taliban did not exist as a coherent entity until 1994 and most were toddlers when the United States aided anti-Soviet forces. The Mujahedeen, which did receive U.S. support, meanwhile, formed the basis of the pre-2001 Northern Alliance and its alumni heavily populated the elected Afghan governments.

The Taliban arose as vigilantes against the backdrop of a vacuum of governance and the factional infighting that characterized the country after the fall of the Najibullah regime. In spring 2004, Afghans from a small village near Kandahar approached Omar, a local mullah, to request assistance rescuing two schoolchildren kidnapped by a local warlord. Mullah Omar gathered his students (in Pashtun, Taliban), rescued the girls and killed the perpetrators.

This brand of vigilante justice was popular and soon Afghans flocked to the group not only for the concrete action the group promised but also for what it delivered.

That same year, the Taliban seized Qandahar. The following year—despite promises not to expand past their Pashtun base—they captured Herat. In 1996, after agreeing to negotiate a unity government rather than impose themselves unilaterally, they seized Kabul, killing or sending into flight opposition leaders. By 1998, they controlled 90 percent of Afghanistan.

The State Department has sought to engage the Taliban diplomatically, almost from the time of its inception, regardless of its many heinous actions. Both of President Bill Clinton's Secretaries of State, Warren Christopher and Madeline Albright, ignored the Taliban's reign of terror against women, minorities, and children out of belief for the necessity of continued diplomacy. Career diplomats justified this in many ways. The first was the assertion that the Taliban was the first group to bring

stability to Afghanistan in over 15 years. Wishful thinking convinced others that diplomacy might moderate the Taliban's worst excesses. The double-standard argument was also frequently voiced behind closed doors: The Taliban might be repressive and promote religious extremism, but in that they were little different from Saudi Arabia, a regime which had become a critical U.S. partner.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the flaws in Khalilzad's current negotiations, it is crucial to recognize lessons from previous diplomacy. In February 1995, American diplomats stationed in Pakistan met with seven high-ranking Taliban members in Kandahar. From the very start, wishful thinking permeated the American side. The U.S. Embassy in Islamabad reported back that the Taliban "appeared well-disposed toward the United States."<sup>3</sup> This was nonsense but, within the corridors of the State Department, the goal became to keep channels alive rather than substantively change Taliban behavior. Not surprisingly, the Taliban played the State Department like a fiddle. The State Department congratulated itself when an American diplomat met "a Taliban insider" who told him that the Taliban liked the United States, distrusted Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and had no problem holding elections in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> After a year of meetings, it was clear that the Taliban was less concerned with counterterrorism, and much more in depicting themselves as moderate to the international and aid-giving community.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, while they talked to Americans, the Taliban continued their Khmer Rouge-like efforts to remake society according to their own narrow ideology. American diplomats could point to no evidence that the Taliban eased their abuse of women and minorities in areas under their control.

Nor was there any evidence that the Taliban would uphold promises made to negotiators. On September 27, 1996, the group seized Kabul despite repeated promises that they would not. Despite their mistaken understanding of the situation, the State Department declared “We wish to engage the new Taliban ‘interim government’ at an early stage” and asked embassy officials to inform the Taliban accordingly.”<sup>6</sup> Talks continued irrespective of Taliban veracity. Simply put, the desire to reach a deal supplanted any desire to hold the Taliban to its terms. When Thomas W. Simons, Jr., the American ambassador to Pakistan met with the Taliban’s acting Foreign Minister Mullah Ghaus, just six weeks after the group broke its pledge not to move on Kabul, Ghaus again lied outright about Osama Bin Laden’s presence in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

Also clouding the U.S. dialogue with the Taliban was its multiple simultaneous strands which the Taliban could exploit to send mixed messages. As American diplomats in Pakistan met with Taliban officials, the State Department simultaneously passed messages through Hamid Karzai, at the time a Taliban-supporter at the United Nations.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the State Department was trying to cover all its bases, but by reaching out to every Taliban official it could, American diplomats signaled that they had no idea how the Taliban worked while making themselves vulnerable to Taliban good cop-bad cop negotiating strategies.

The Clinton-era dialogue with the Taliban exposed another problem that persists to the present day: The Taliban may have begun as a grassroots movement, but by the time they were on the outskirts of Kabul, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had co-opted and transformed them into

their proxy. The Taliban admitted that they received Pakistani money, supplies, and advisors, while the Pakistani Foreign Ministry even drafted some of the Taliban letters which the group sent to foreign diplomats.<sup>9</sup> Then as now, however, American officials engaged Taliban representatives as if they were legitimate, indigenous representatives of the areas they controlled.

When the Taliban refused to budge and continued to deceive about their relationship with Bin Laden, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright responded by augmenting the rank of American participants seeking dialogue. She dispatched first Robin Raphel, an assistant secretary, and later Bill Richardson, a cabinet-level ambassador to the United Nations to meetings with high-level Taliban officials<sup>10</sup> While they reported respectively that they had secured deals from the Taliban to close terror camps and end the civil war, every Taliban commitment was ephemeral. But, despite the chain of broken promises, the Taliban suffered no diplomatic consequences: they knew how to string Americans along.

While it seems preposterous that Khalilzad today believes in Taliban diplomatic sincerity, two decades ago, his diplomatic counterparts did. More than a year into the U.S.-Taliban dialogue, Thomas W. Simons, Jr., the U.S. ambassador in Pakistan, wrote, “There is little evidence to suggest that Mullah Omar is an Islamic radical with an anti-Western agenda.”<sup>11</sup> John Holzman, the number two diplomat at the U.S. embassy in Pakistan, explained that the Taliban would be more dangerous if isolated than if brought into the wider world.<sup>12</sup> The fallacy of this logic became apparent both with the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings and the September 11,

2001 attacks on Washington, DC, and New York.

Within the United States, certain energy interests also sought normalization with the Taliban. In 1997, Khalilzad worked with the California-based oil company UNOCAL (which merged into Chevron in 2005) to bring Taliban officials to the United States and arranged senior meetings with both diplomats and businessmen.<sup>13</sup> During the visit, the Taliban dismissed criticism of misogyny by citing Afghan culture. No one in the American audience publicly challenged the Taliban delegation on their conflation of backwoods and Pakistani-influenced Pashtun culture with broader and more tolerant Afghan and Afghan Pashtun culture. Today, the willingness to ascribe the worst of Taliban behavior continues to characterize American negotiators.

Negotiations continued sporadically through the remainder of the Clinton

presidency. The only time the Taliban showed any seriousness of diplomatic purpose was after Clinton ordered an airstrike on a Taliban intelligence office in Kabul following the Al Qaeda bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Mullah Omar telephoned State Department official Michael Malinkowski but lied once again: Omar denied that Bin Laden had planned any terrorism while on Afghan soil and urged more dialogue.<sup>14</sup> The willingness to lie outright was a common Taliban strategy. Abdul Hakim Mujahid, the Taliban's unofficial representative at the United Nations, told Americans that 80 percent of the Taliban leadership also opposed Bin Laden's presence and pledged that the Taliban would protect the famous Buddhas of Bamiyan.<sup>15</sup> When the pressure alleviated, of course, the Taliban dynamited the UNESCO world heritage site which had survived 15 centuries, many under Muslim rule.

## The 2000s: Taliban as Pariah

George W. Bush promised during his campaign that his presidency would focus on domestic issues; he had little interest in Afghanistan and even less in engaging the Taliban. But even after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks showed the fallacy of Taliban promises to close terror training camps and quarantine Bin Laden, this did not stop those committed to diplomacy from seeking to continue dialogue. Secretary of State Colin Powell famously suggested reaching out to 'moderate' Taliban.<sup>16</sup> What 'moderate' meant, however, was unclear to either Westerners or Afghans. After all, in 2001 as is the case now, the ISI controlled all significant Taliban decision-making from personnel to tactics to broader strategy.

Proponents of talk with the Taliban also ignore how Al Qaeda and other extremists view such dialogue. Ayman al-Zawahiri, while still Bin Laden's deputy, called Afghan attempts to engage the Taliban "a sign of the government weakness."<sup>17</sup> Simply put, the more Western diplomats engage the Taliban, the more the Taliban and Al Qaeda believe they are on the verge of victory. This adrenalin shot for the Taliban campaign increases their aggression to which Western diplomats respond with further dialogue. It is a deadly, accelerating cycle readily reflected on the "areas of Taliban control" maps which the Pentagon and international forces in Afghanistan privately maintain.

By the end of the Bush administration, Powell's proposal to find moderates among the Taliban with which to negotiate became more mainstream. In 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates floated a trial balloon

when he remarked, "There has to be ultimately—and I'll underscore ultimately—a reconciliation as part of a political outcome" to end the conflict in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

## Obama Legitimizes the Taliban: 2009 – 2017

During his campaign, Barack Obama argued dialogue with the Taliban "should be explored" and, upon his election, his team made rapprochement with the Taliban a priority.<sup>19</sup> "We will support efforts by the Afghan Government to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens," he declared.<sup>20</sup> "You don't make peace with your friends," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explained. "You have to be willing to engage with your enemies if you expect to create a situation that ends an insurgency."<sup>21</sup>

Taliban leaders were overjoyed with the new Obama administration approach. Hasan Rahmani, a close aide to Mullah Omar, remarked, "Today the Taliban are successful and the Americans and the NATO forces are in a state of defeat. The enemy wants to engage the Taliban and deviate their minds. Sometimes they offer talks, sometimes they offer other fake issues. The Taliban never ever tried for such talks, neither do we want these talks to be held."<sup>22</sup>

The website of Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a fierce Islamist allied with Pakistan, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda, described Obama's offer to negotiate with moderate Taliban as a sign of U.S. defeat.<sup>23</sup>

While public officials would pay lip service to a peace with honor and protection of Afghanistan proper, a 2010 episode in which NATO paid tens of thousands of

dollars to an imposter claiming to be a Taliban leader showed U.S. desperation.<sup>24</sup> The Taliban called it a "stigma on the forehead of the Americans and her allies."<sup>25</sup>

Even as evidence grew that the Taliban interpreted U.S. willingness to negotiate as a sign of weakness and as a sign that its terrorism worked, U.S. diplomats repeatedly encouraged Afghan authorities to talk to the Taliban.<sup>26</sup> Perceptions of weakness matter: Afghans never lose wars; they simply defect to the winning side.<sup>27</sup> American officials also repeatedly downplayed the importance of ideology to the Taliban. Before a major January 2010 reconciliation conference, Rahimullah Yusufzai, a prominent Pakistani expert on the Taliban, ridiculed the Western belief that money rather than religious sentiment motivated the Taliban rank-and-file.<sup>28</sup>

Obama inherited a tenuous military situation in Afghanistan, but his embrace of talks with the Taliban proceeded to worsen it. There were two reasons: A belief that diplomacy would change Taliban behavior and an embrace of a timeline for withdrawal not rooted in military victory.

On December 1, 2009, Obama outlined his Afghanistan strategy in a speech at West Point. He announced a small troop surge to help rid Afghanistan of Al Qaeda, but also a timeline for their withdrawal. "These additional American and international troops will allow us ... to begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July of

2011,” he declared. While he subsequently bumped the withdrawal date to 2014 and then further, the political timeline to end America’s involvement in Afghanistan bolstered Taliban confidence and increased desperation to reach a diplomatic deal with the Taliban. U.S. Marine Commander James Conway observed that Obama’s deadline “is probably giving our enemy sustenance... In fact, we’ve intercepted communications that say, ‘Hey, you know, we only need to hold out for so long.’”<sup>29</sup>

While Powell had once sought outreach only to “moderate Taliban,” the Obama team went further. Pakistan’s Express Tribune reported contact between American officials and Taliban leader Mullah Omar through a former Taliban spokesman.<sup>30</sup> After Holbrooke’s death, talks continued. Vice President Joe Biden went so far as to declare, “The Taliban per se is not our enemy.”<sup>31</sup>

Every time the Obama administration sought to jump start diplomacy, it eased requirements that the Taliban cease terrorist behavior. For example, as Obama and Clinton sought to bring the radical group to the table, they scrapped preconditions that the Taliban lay down their arms, accept Afghanistan’s constitution, or break from Al Qaeda.<sup>32</sup> Even before negotiations began, the Obama administration also agreed to release Mullah Mohammed Fazl,

a Taliban master terrorist, responsible for a massacre of over one thousand Afghan Shi’ites, from Guantanamo Bay.

Next was The Obama administration’s acquiescence to the Taliban’s desire to open an office in Qatar. But while the Taliban told Western diplomats they needed the Doha office to facilitate diplomacy, they used it more to solicit and launder money. Meanwhile, the Taliban raised their version of Afghanistan’s flag over their ‘embassy’ in a move which symbolically undercut the sovereignty of Afghanistan’s legitimate government. Rather than be a political party office, the Taliban sought to transform their presence in Qatar into a parallel embassy. The Taliban underlined its disdain for negotiations when it assassinated former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, the elected Afghan government’s point man for reconciliation. Some of the groups with which U.S. diplomats talked turned around and attacked American civilians.<sup>33</sup> As the clock ran out on the Obama administration, the result of its outreach to the Taliban was clear: The idea that the United States could exploit factional divisions among the Taliban proved false. So-called moderate Taliban did not separate from more militant factions. Nor did diplomatic outreach enhance peace. Quite the contrary: areas in which NATO and Afghan Security Forces could operate safely shrank as talks progressed.

## Trump Rehabilitates the Taliban, 2017 – present

One irony of President Donald Trump’s administration is that while Trump prides himself on disrupting politics and policy as usual, his approach to Afghanistan essentially replicates that of both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

On September 4, 2018, Trump appointed Khalilzad to be the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. While Trump may have seen Khalilzad as a perfect fit given his Afghan heritage, the opposite was true: Even if Khalilzad had acted over the decades with indisputable honor, Afghans



would question whether he had abandoned the tribal interests and biases which infuse Afghan politics.

Three additional factors breed Afghan cynicism toward Khalilzad. The first is that in Afghanistan (and Iraq), he often leveraged diplomacy toward personal business interests and the second is that he sought to profit off the Taliban as they disenfranchised women, repressed sectarian and ethnic minorities, and generally abused human rights. Lastly, many Afghans dislike the manner in which Khalilzad has sought to promote himself within Afghan politics and society. They still resent Khalilzad for his efforts to marginalize the last king of Afghanistan. Zahir Shah did not demand the restoration of the monarchy, but he represented to most Afghans the last link to a golden age before their country descended into chaos. But his broad popularity across ethnic and sectarian groups seems to have posed a challenge to Khalilzad's own ambition and so, behind the scenes, Khalilzad sought to marginalize Zahir Shah and to deny him any meaningful reconciliation role. Many Afghans also remain suspicious that Khalilzad seeks to become a viceroy if not president of Afghanistan. That such rumors persist—and that National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib's comments struck such a nerve—reflect persistent distrust about Khalilzad's behavior and motives.

Even those who do not suspect conflicts of interest in Khalilzad raise questions about his judgment. Khalilzad helped usher in the initial U.S. strategy which promoted a stronger presidency over a more decentralized model for the country. There were good reasons for this move: When Operation Enduring Freedom began, Afghanistan could not logistically accommodate a foreign force footprint similar to that which occupied Iraq. At the

same time, while numerous warlords dominated various regions of Afghanistan, a national force needed to be entirely rebuilt. Khalilzad favored a strong presidency so that the Kabul government could offer regional powerbrokers positions which would tempt them away from their powerbase and give time for the creation of a national military which could then confront any local resistance. The problem with such a strategy is the resentment it caused at the local level when the central government appointed corrupt or incompetent governors or ministers. This resentment, in turn, fueled local insurgencies. There may have been no other magic formula to buy time to build Afghan security forces and simultaneously avoid full-scale confrontation with regional warlords, but the current predicament and the clash between local interests and the central government remains very much a legacy of Khalilzad's initial strategy.

Rather than assume his new position with a blank slate, therefore, Khalilzad began his work as an envoy deeply distrusted by most Afghans, and especially those more educated and liberal in their outlook.

To then abandon both the elected central government and undercut legitimate local governance appears to be the worst possible outcome. That, of course, will be the net result of the Khalilzad's embrace of the Clinton-era proposal by which the Taliban would forswear terrorism in exchange for recognition.<sup>34</sup> Such a deal not only proved disastrous for peace and stability not only in Afghanistan two decades ago, but also for the United States.

That neither Khalilzad nor Trump have explained why they should trust the same Taliban officials who previously lied raises concerns about the viability of the deal. So too does Khalilzad's refusal to share its details with America's closest Afghan



allies as well as government's like India's, which would both be directly impacted and likely called upon to help guarantee it. Simply put, diplomats do not hide

successes; they obscure agreements only when they know they cannot address potent criticisms.

## Conclusion

Apocryphally, Albert Einstein defined insanity as doing the same thing repeatedly while expecting different results. That is essentially the American approach to the Taliban. For almost a quarter century, American diplomats have repeatedly reached out, hoping to resolve American concerns about terrorism, security, and human rights in Afghanistan.

The Taliban negotiating strategy has been consistent: String America along, demand concessions, but make no compromise. Rather than see diplomacy as defining a path toward resolving conflict, the Taliban interprets American outreach as evidence that the United States is weak and lacks resolve. The Clinton administration's Taliban outreach enabled Al Qaeda to maintain its safe-haven long enough to plan and strike at the United States on 9/11. The Obama administration's diplomatic approach cloaked a Taliban resurgence, and the Trump administration's desperation for a deal offers Taliban complete victory.

At no point, did the Clinton, Obama, or Trump administrations ask how culturally Afghan the Taliban really are, or assess whether Taliban leaders act independently from controllers in Pakistan's intelligence service. If the Taliban were truly Afghan nationalists, they would not subordinate their country's interests to those of their dysfunctional neighbor. Indeed, the Trump-Khalilzad deal appears to strike a bargain that may provide diplomatic legitimacy to Taliban officials in Quetta and elsewhere in Pakistan who have not stepped foot in Afghanistan in more than 15 years. As

Afghan analyst Davood Moradian, director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies noted, it is particularly simplistic and Eurocentric to see the Taliban in its entirety as an indigenous and authentic Afghan or Pashtun movement and phenomenon.”<sup>35</sup> Nor has the Trump administration explained what in Taliban behavior shows an ideological break with the theological exegesis which fueled Al Qaeda.

This is not to say the United States needs to remain in Afghanistan into perpetuity. From September 11, 2001 to the present, the problem for successive administrations in Washington has always been how to fill the vacuum in Afghanistan so that terrorists do not fill it. The question then becomes: What strategy does the Trump administration have to fill that vacuum? The Khalilzad plan bypasses that question and instead justifies withdrawal upon a mirage. As Clinton learned in the 1990s, however, and as Obama's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 subsequently demonstrated, no amount of spin can insure U.S. national security or post-withdrawal security as American forces exit. Rather, basing withdrawal on political spin betrays allies and ensures only the need for forces to return under circumstances far less favorable.



### About the Author

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