

The Afghan Peace Talks, China, and the Afghan Elections

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GRANT FARR, DEC 23 2019

After more than a year of negotiations it appeared in the fall of 2019 that an agreement had been reached between the United States and the Afghan Taliban. Yet before the agreement could be formally signed, the United States backed away from the agreement citing the death of an American serviceman as a result of a Taliban bomb. The negotiations are now officially on hold, although Zalmay Khalilzad, the United States Special Representative, continues to talk to the Taliban through other channels. The failure, at least so far, of an agreement between the United States and Taliban has numerous consequences, including the chaotic Afghan elections, the continuation of the fighting, the halt to the release of prisoners, and the dramatic increase in civilian deaths. In addition, China has shown that it would like to be a player in Afghanistan. With the peace talks between the United States and the Taliban on hold, China, which has economic and political interests in Afghanistan, is attempting to inject itself into the Afghan peace process by offering to hold the next round of negotiations in Beijing. The failure of the peace talks has also affected the Afghan presidential election, which had been long postponed. The election finally took place on September 28, 2019, but not without considerable controversy and conflict. The election might not have taken place at all had the peace agreement been ratified. While just holding the election can be seen as an accomplishment, the election was so flawed that that the results, should they ever be announced, may cause more conflict than had the elections not been held.

The Peace Talks

After over a year of negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, in September 2019 President Trump suddenly withdrew the United States from the talks, citing the death of an American soldier from a Taliban bombing. President Trump also reportedly wanted to hold the signing ceremony at Camp David, a proposal that the Taliban and many members of the United States Congress opposed.[i] Ironically, both the American and Taliban negotiators had reportedly reached a deal and the parties, including the Taliban, had initialed it, assuming that the deal was done. While the details of the agreement between the United States and the Taliban have not been made public, it appears that the basic agreement was that the United States would remove, or begin removing, troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban would agree not to allow Islamic terrorists to operate on Afghan soil. However, there were a number of other issues being negotiated, some of which may or may not be in the now stalled agreement. These include a prisoner swap, a ceasefire, an understanding that the Taliban would begin talking with the Afghan government, and various other important issues, such as women's rights, the formation of an interim government, and a new Islamic based constitution for Afghanistan.

After testifying to the U.S. Congress on September 19, 2019, Zalmay Khalilzad, the United States Special Representative, returned to the region, first going to Islamabad, and, with the assistance of the Pakistani government, resumed talks with the Taliban. There he met with Taliban chief negotiator and Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. What the talks are about is not clear, but apparently the prisoner swap is back on the table. While the details of the prisoner swap are not known, it is understood that the peace deal the Taliban hammered out with Khalilzad was to include the release of over 5,000 Taliban prisoners held in Afghan jails in exchange for prisoners being held by the Taliban.[ii] Separate negotiations were also taking place with the Taliban for the release of two Western professors from the American University in Kabul, American Kevin King and Australian

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Timothy Weeks who were arrested by the Taliban at gunpoint in Kabul in 2016. The Taliban had offered to release them in exchange for 11 important Taliban prisoners. Kevin King was apparently seriously ill and in need of medical treatment.[iii] These Taliban prisoners held by the Afghan government included Anas Haqqani, the son of the late Jamaluddin Haqqani as well as his uncle. The Afghan government had remained adamant that Anas Haqqani not be released, but despite their objections, on November 19, 2019 a limited prisoner exchange took place; the two professors were released in exchange for Anas Haqqani and several other Taliban officials.[iv] Anas Haqqani was released in Qatar and has joined the Taliban negotiating team. In addition, it has been reported that a group of 11 key Taliban prisoners have been released from the joint Afghan-U.S. Bagram detention facility in Afghanistan in exchange for three Indian nationals who have been held hostage by the Taliban.[v]

Also according to Taliban spokesperson, Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban had agreed to announce a cease-fire upon the signing of the peace agreement, but only against NATO and U.S troops. A cease-fire with Afghan security forces was to be the first order of business at the intra-Afghan talks which were to take place on September 23, should the agreement be signed.[vi] Since no agreement was reached the cease fire did not occur. This potential agreement to a partial cease fire was put into some controversy when United States President Trump mentioned a cease fire during his short visit to Afghanistan on Thanksgiving day.[vii]

In the meantime, the United States has announced that it has begun pulling troops out of Afghanistan, deal or no deal. The goal, according to U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper, is to reduce the American military presence to around 8,600 from the present 12,000 by not replacing personnel who are rotating out of Afghanistan. Esper believes that a force of 8,600 soldiers will be enough to continue to combat al-Qaida and Islamic State forces.[viii] Esper went on to say that a further reduction of forces below 8,600 would be part of a peace deal which remains unsigned. Esper's claim that a smaller U.S. force would be enough to be successful in the fight against the Taliban and the Islamic State seems overly optimistic given the failure of a much larger force to accomplish that task.

So where do the peace talks now stand? In a recent interview on Fox News, President Trump commented that the peace talks are "back on track".[ix] But what that could mean is not clear, especially since a tentative agreement had already been reached. Talks between the Taliban and the United States began again in Doha, Qatar on December 7, 2019. However, the talks were again suspended after the Taliban attack on the Bagram Airbase on December 12th. [x] This attack took place only days after President Trump had visited the base. Although no Coalition troops were injured, the attack indicated the ability of the Taliban to penetrate secure American operations.

Growing Chinese Interest

China has announced that there will be new intra-Afghan talks in China, originally scheduled for October 28 and 29 in Beijing. These talks have now been temporarily postponed but are still expected to take place. The intra-Afghan talks in China will include both Taliban leaders and Afghan government officials. However since the Taliban refuses to talk to the Afghan government, Afghan government officials will be taking part in the talks as private citizens. A number of important Afghan officials have announced that they will take part, including past Afghan president Hamid Karzai and Veteran Afghan political and military leader Ismail Khan, former governor of Herat. They will be leading a delegation of 30 or so people which will include Afghan government officials.[xi]

It should not be surprising that China wants to participate in the Afghan peace process. China has a growing interest in Afghanistan for several reasons. China is interested in the abundant natural resources present in Afghanistan, and as a potential corridor to the Persian Gulf and an overland route to the oil fields of Iran. China's interest in Afghanistan is part of its One Belt One Road Initiative, referred to as the BRI, in which China is funding, and controlling, the development of countries that border on China, or otherwise provide overland or sea connections between China and Europe. By doing so China is attempting to recreate the silk road that connected China with the West from the 2nd century BCE to the 18th Century. China and Afghanistan share a common border, albeit only 47 miles long at the altitude of over 16,000 feet in the high and remote Wakhan Corridor.

Although China has largely stayed out of the political turmoil in Afghanistan, it has made a number of investments in Afghanistan. China's investments in Afghanistan include building a base for the Afghan Armed Forces in the northern

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province of Badakhshan and training Afghan air force pilots in China. In addition, China has made large investments in copper mining in areas outside of Kabul. China is Afghanistan's largest foreign investor.[xii] Because of the fighting and instability in Afghanistan, Afghanistan to date has been largely excluded from the China's One Belt and One Road Initiative. However with the possibility of a peace deal in the works, China has now become more interested in this area. In 2016 China and Afghanistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding in which China pledged at least \$100 million in funding. While this is a tiny amount, considering the \$60 billion investment in Pakistan, it nonetheless indicates that China believes there is potential in Afghanistan.[xiii] Also, in September 2016, the first direct freight train traveled from China to the Afghan border, (Afghanistan itself has no railway system), and an air corridor linking Kabul with the Chinese city of Urumqi was launched.[xiv]

In addition to the BRI project, Beijing is concerned about the threat posed by Uighur and other non-Chinese Islamic ethnic groups that are growing more militant and could use Afghanistan as a base for attacks on the Chinese mainland. As a result China has increased security on its border with Afghanistan, engaging in joint patrols with Afghan forces and building a base in Badakhshan Province.[xv]

The Afghan Presidential Elections

The long postponed Afghan presidential elections finally took place on September 28, 2019. This election was originally scheduled for April 20, 2018. It had been expected that the election would not take place had a peace agreement been reached and an interim government formed instead. However, with no signed peace agreement the elections went forward. These elections were the fourth presidential election since the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001. There were 15 candidates for the presidency, including President Ghani and his main rival Abdullah Abdullah. To win, a candidate must receive over 50 percent of the vote. If no candidate receives 50 percent of the vote there is to be a second round between the two highest vote getters. As in previous elections in Afghanistan voting fraud and corruption were rife, including ballot stuffing, voting multiple times, and other forms of voting fraud. The Afghan Independent Election Committee, IEC, attempted to eliminate some of the ballot-stuffing that took place in previous elections by using biometric voter verification machines for the first time. These biometric devices took the fingerprint and picture of every voter before they voted to make sure each voter was properly registered and only voted once. These machines were purchased from a German company and depended on each polling station having an internet connection and electricity. While the results have not been announced, it appears that less than 2 million Afghans voted out of the 9.7 million registered voters. Despite the low turnout the election appeared to take place in relative calm, only three deaths and 37 injuries occurring due to small-scale Taliban activities. However, the voting did not take place in over 2500 polling stations, out of a possibility of 7,366, that did not open due to security concerns.[xvi]

The results have still not been announced several months since the elections. This is in part because of the continuing problems of how to count votes that were thought to be disqualified because of voting irregularities, largely because of ballot stuffing or mistakes at polling stations. Several hundred thousand votes were not conducted with the biometric devices and many more were the result of ballot stuffing. In addition, a number of the presidential candidates, whose future depends on the vote outcome, have threatened the IEC with violence should they lose. Abdullah Abdullah's team has threatened the IEC and has occupied a number of provincial election offices preventing the count to proceed. Without naming names, Hawa Alam Nuristani, the female head of the IEC, has stated, that "a number of observers are illegally disrupting the process of the elections." [xvii] While it was hoped that the election would provide legitimacy for the Afghan government and especially to the office of the presidency, the low turnout and voter fraud raise concerns and threaten the legitimacy of the election. People on the ground can be heard asking, "How can this election be legitimate when only about 30 percent voted." [xviii]

Conclusion

It is clear that the long American and coalition presence in Afghanistan is nearing an end. President Trump campaigned on ending the Afghan war and wants to use the bringing of American troops home as a part of his campaign for reelection in 2020. Yet while the end seems near, a final agreement, while within reach, has still not been signed. In the meantime, American and Afghan lives continue to be lost and the carnage to Afghan society goes

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on. However, it should not be assumed that a signing of a peace agreement with the Taliban will bring stability and calm to Afghanistan. In fact, the signing of a peace agreement with the Taliban will unleash series of pent up conflicts in Afghanistan involving ethnic and tribal rivalries, women's rights, the role of Islam in society and the rewriting of the constitution. In the meantime, neighboring nations, particularly China, are looking to play a role in the economic future of Afghanistan. China now realizes that it must also be a part of the political settlement. As the United States pulls back from international commitments, China is glad to step in. Also caught in the limbo of the unsigned peace agreement is the Afghan presidential election. The election did not go well, nor did it solve the problem of who is in charge in Afghanistan. As of this writing the election results have yet to be announced because of open conflict between the candidates and because of the evidence of massive voting fraud.

The recent election in Afghanistan exposes a more fundamental problem. While it is assumed in the Western world that democratic elections are the sign of a mature democracy, this may not be the case in a traditional and tribal society like Afghanistan. In a tribal society such as Afghanistan, the notion that political decisions are made by individual voting in an open electoral process does not work. Decisions, particularly political decisions, are made collectively through long established tribal processes. This process may strike Westerners as undemocratic, and it is, but this tribal based process worked in Afghanistan throughout its history.

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Grant Farr is a Professor Emeritus at Portland State University. He has lived and worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and has published several articles and books on those countries. He is currently working on a major research project on Afghan refugees.