



# Briefing Paper No.71

30 March 2020

Contact: Dr. Ian Davis  
Email: [idavis@natowatch.org](mailto:idavis@natowatch.org)  
[www.natowatch.org](http://www.natowatch.org)

## Political turmoil in Afghanistan threatens US-Taliban peace deal

By Dr. Ian Davis and Joe Malmkvist

The Taliban's [refusal to begin talks](#) with the Afghan government's new 21-member negotiating team on the 28 March is the latest setback in the US-brokered peace process for this 18-year-old conflict. Progress on moving to intra-Afghan talks has already been delayed by a power struggle between Afghan politicians and disagreements between the Taliban and the government over prisoner releases and a possible ceasefire. This briefing reviews the current state of play in the Afghan peace process and the implications for the NATO Resolute Support Mission, which still maintains up to 16,000 ground troops in Afghanistan (of which 8,000 are American) for advising, assisting and training the Afghan security forces. The United States has an additional 5,000 troops deployed to carry out counter-terrorism missions and provide air and ground support to Afghan forces when requested.

### The February peace deal

On Feb. 29, Zalmay Khalilzad, America's Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation at the US State Department, and Abdul Ghani Baradar, a representative of the Taliban, signed the [Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan](#) in Doha, Qatar. This agreement followed a temporary ceasefire and was expected to be a stepping-stone to a 14-month phased US military withdrawal and intra-Afghan negotiations. In a statement in early

March, the US military [confirmed](#) that it was moving ahead with plans to cut the number of forces in the country from about 13,000 to 8,600 over the next four and a half months, and that hundreds of US troops had already begun leaving Afghanistan.

According to the [New York Times](#), there were two secret military implementation documents related to the US-Taliban peace agreement. These reportedly used different language in agreements with the Taliban and the Afghan government. While the US-Taliban deal says the Afghan government will free up to 5,000 Taliban detainees by 10 March, the US-Afghan declaration only commits Kabul to participating in US-brokered talks on the feasibility of such a release. Members of Congress and the Taliban have both read these two classified annexes to the Afghan peace accord that set the criteria for US force withdrawal, but the Trump administration insists that the documents must remain secret.

NATO, which is expected to make parallel reductions in its mission, welcomed the deal in a [statement](#). The United States is also seeking UN Security Council backing for the deal.

The US withdrawal appears to be contingent on Taliban compliance with anti-terrorism commitments, but is

apparently not explicitly contingent on a successful Afghan peace process. Confidence in such a process also appears to be low among some parts of the US military-intelligence establishment. It was [reported, for example](#), that some US intelligence officials believe that the Taliban do not intend to honour the peace deal. In other words, although the agreement commits the Taliban to starting peace talks with other Afghans, it does not address situations in which talks might either fail to start or to generate progress, or in which they fail to proceed.

### Impact of COVID-19

One of the practical reasons that the talks may not proceed is the [COVID-19 outbreak](#). The Afghan authorities have already imposed a [lockdown in western Herat province](#) on the border with Iran—the country hardest-hit in the region by COVID-19. Afghanistan has so far recorded [90 cases](#) and four deaths, but tens of thousands of returnees from Iran are thought to have dispersed throughout the country since the start of the year without being tested or having their locations recorded. Afghanistan's health care system has been devastated by decades of war and would be overwhelmed by a major outbreak.

The coronavirus is also [complicating](#) the drawdown of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan. The US commander in Afghanistan has reportedly stopped US and allied troops from entering Afghanistan and is also preventing some troops from leaving. Despite the political turmoil in Afghanistan and the outbreak of the coronavirus, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [indicated](#) on 19 March that NATO would continue the drawdown of its own troops from Afghanistan from 16,000 to 12,000 through the summer period. Four NATO service members in Afghanistan

tested positive for coronavirus shortly after entering the country, the first confirmed cases in the mission, NATO said in a [statement](#) on 24 March. On the 27 March the Afghan government ordered a three-week lock-down for Kabul to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

### Prisoner exchanges

The February peace deal calls for the release of 5,000 Taliban and 1,000 government personnel and Afghan troops held captive by the Taliban. The Afghan government initially [refused](#) to release any prisoners, but on 25 March [offered](#) to free 1,500 prisoners, or according to other reports, [said](#) it would free 100 Taliban detainees at the end of March. The Taliban has indicated that it would send four members to the US-led coalition base in Bagram, north of Kabul, to oversee the release of their prisoners. Since the Taliban have demanded that 5,000 detainees must be freed all at once as a pre-condition to peace talks, the stalled prisoner exchange raises uncertainties about the fate of the talks.

### The Afghanistan negotiating team

Ghani's 21-member [team](#) is led by the Masoom Stanikzai, former head of Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), and includes politicians, former officials and representatives of civil society. Five members are women. Stanikzai was forced to resign from the NDS last year after a [raid by a CIA-trained team](#) under his command was found to have killed four brothers they falsely accused of being Islamic State operatives.

### Political turmoil in Kabul

On 23 March, due to the failure of Afghanistan's leaders to form an inclusive government and enter into peace talks

with the Taliban, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [threatened](#) to cut US aid to the country by \$1 billion. The [lack of unity](#) between Afghanistan's two main political leaders Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah is largely due to a disputed 2019 presidential election. After five months of delayed results, Ghani was [declared the winner](#) in February 2020 with 50.64% of the votes, but Abdullah (with 39.52% of the votes) questioned the legitimacy of the election and forced a recount. Abdullah [declared](#) that he would set up his own parallel government. Both men held swearing-in ceremonies after weeks of failed mediation efforts led by Zalmay Khalilzad. Abdullah seeks a power-sharing deal with Ghani, something the Afghan president has so far rejected.

### Continuing violence and insecurity

Just days after signing the peace deal the US [launched an airstrike](#) against Taliban forces in Afghanistan and for its part, the Taliban [resumed attacks](#) against Afghan forces. On 10 March, the US military [said](#) that Taliban attacks against Afghan forces were "not consistent" with the peace deal. Civilian deaths have been rising in Afghanistan in recent years. According to a [UN report](#) in February 2020 more than 10,000 civilians were killed or injured in armed conflict in Afghanistan in 2019, and total casualties in the past decade had reached over 100,000.

An October 2019 Human Rights Watch [report](#) documented mounting atrocities by US-backed Afghan special forces and rising civilian deaths by both US and Afghan forces. In early March, the International Criminal Court (ICC) [ruled](#) that it could open an investigation into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Afghanistan committed by the US military, Afghan authorities and the Taliban. The decision is the first from the court involving

US forces, and on 5 March, Pompeo [rebuked](#) the ICC's ruling.

Afghanistan remains desperately poor: the poverty level (those who survive on \$1 or less a day) increased from 35% of the population in 2012 to more than 55% in 2019. Successive Afghan governments, including Ghani's, have been accused by international watchdogs of widespread corruption.

### Future outlook

Fighting has resumed between the Taliban and the Afghan security forces, and it is unclear if the impasse in the peace process makes prospects of an early, unilateral US military withdrawal more or less likely. Since the US-Taliban talks have not involved any Afghan government officials at any stage, it is feared that the US could prioritise a simple military withdrawal over a complex political settlement. Following the collapse of the previous peace talks in September 2019, the Taliban killed dozens of Afghan civilians in Kabul in suicide attacks and launched offensives on provincial capitals, as well as killed several US soldiers. In turn, Afghan and US forces attacked the Taliban with special forces raids and airstrikes. If talks breakdown again, increased violence and further conflict are likely.

### DONATE NOW PLEASE

NATO Watch is a small non-profit organisation that provides **independent oversight and analysis** of an ever-growing NATO. **If you share our vision for a transparent and accountable NATO** please donate whatever you can afford to help NATO Watch thrive. Click on the picture below to find out how you can make a donation.

