

# Selling Out the Afghans

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As presidential candidates, both Barack Obama and Donald Trump promised to end the forever war in Afghanistan. Whereas Obama failed, Trump believes he has succeeded. On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed what Washington dubbed a peace deal. To get to this point, the United States sidelined the government in Kabul, which knew that Trump would sacrifice the Afghans to end the 19-year war.

The conflict has cost the United States more than \$2 trillion and the lives of some 2,400 military personnel, as well as those of thousands of civilian contractors. This is in addition to the deaths of more than 1,200 NATO troops, over 64,000 Afghan armed forces personnel, and hundreds of thousands of Afghan civilians.

Although much is uncertain about this agreement, one thing is clear: it is meant to allow the Americans to withdraw with some semblance of dignity. But it will not bring peace to the Afghans, many of whom feel that they have been thrown under the bus—or worse, sold to Pakistan. Their concerns are justified. Before the ink had dried, the Taliban violated the promised cease-fire.

## DOUBLE DEALING

The war began on October 7, 2001, when the United States invaded Afghanistan in retaliation for al-Qaeda's September 11 attacks. In the days that followed the attacks, Washington had reached out to General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military dictator. This gave Musharraf an opportunity to rehabilitate both his personal image and that of his country, which had been harboring and deploying Islamist militants as tools of foreign policy since 1973.

In 1999, Musharraf had become an international pariah by dispatching troops disguised as mujahideen fighters deep into the Indian-controlled part of the disputed region of Kashmir. The ensu-

ing Kargil War was the first conflict between the two countries since they conducted reciprocal nuclear tests in May 1998. Earlier, Musharraf had brought international sanctions down on Pakistan when he led a coup to oust Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in October 1999. Those sanctions added pain to a previously imposed set related to Pakistan's nuclear weapons program.

At Washington's request, Musharraf dispatched a delegation led by General Mahmud Ahmed, his intelligence chief, to meet the Taliban. Ahmed, a well-known Taliban sympathizer, was tasked with persuading the group to hand over Osama bin Laden in order to avoid US military intervention. Instead, Ahmed told the Taliban to wait out the storm. Musharraf ousted him, but the impatient Bush administration rejected another diplomatic effort and opted for war.

The logistics would not be easy: Afghanistan is landlocked. Its two neighbors with access to deep warm-water seaports are Iran, a traditional US foe, and Pakistan, a US ally with a long history of double-crossing Washington. Although Iran was hostile to both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and President Mohammad Khatami offered support to the United States, the Bush administration turned to Pakistan instead.

The Americans sent in a small number of special operations troops to rendezvous with the Afghan anti-Taliban forces of the Northern Alliance. Two days before the September 11 attacks, al-Qaeda had assassinated the Northern Alliance leader, Ahmad Shah Masood. By killing Masood, bin Laden hoped to earn renewed support from the Taliban, which faced heavy pressure to give him up. Masood led the only remaining armed resistance to the Taliban and would be the most likely US combat ally in the country.

As the Americans advanced from the north with the Northern Alliance, support for the Taliban melted away. The Taliban leaders and their al-Qaeda associates fled south and east into Pakistan's Pashtun areas. Their escape was facilitated by a December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament conducted by a Taliban ally, the Pakistan-

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backed and -based Islamist terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad. As India mobilized for a potential war, Pakistan moved its forces from the west—where they were purportedly assisting the US-led intervention in Afghanistan—to its eastern border.

As a condition for aiding the Americans, Musharraf wanted reassurances that the Northern Alliance would not take Kabul. For years, India had been providing military and political support to the Northern Alliance to counter the Taliban—which trained terrorists, at Pakistan's behest, for operations in India. But given the small footprint of the US special operations teams, Washington could not restrain its Afghan allies. From Musharraf's point of view, the Americans had handed India the keys to Kabul.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency rehabilitated the Taliban and enabled them to launch an insurgency in 2005. Scholars debate the degree to which the Pakistani state aided and abetted bin Laden. The Americans eventually located him in his spartan redoubt in Abbottabad, a short distance from the Pakistan Military Academy, and killed him in a helicopter raid in May 2011. The Pakistani government has never explained how bin Laden was able to reside there undetected for years.

All along, Washington refused to understand the yawning gap between US and Pakistani interests. The United States wanted a stable Afghanistan that would no longer play host to terrorists; the Pakistanis sought exactly the opposite. Pakistan was also discomfited by the US pursuit of closer relations with India. By 2005, the Bush administration was offering New Delhi a bomb-friendly nuclear agreement, viewing a well-armed India as the best partner in the region for managing China's rise.

By 2007, US and NATO losses were mounting as they faced an increasingly competent Taliban. In 2009, US generals recommended a surge of more forces into Afghanistan, arguing that this would give them the necessary firepower to defeat the Taliban and end the war on favorable terms. They disregarded a basic truth: they were losing the war due to Pakistan's support for its client, the Taliban.

But the United States was unable to put pressure on Pakistan because it needed access to Pakistani territory and airspace to supply its forces. An alternative northern distribution route through other countries was not a viable substitute because

of its length, the need to negotiate numerous bilateral agreements, and Russia's refusal to allow the transit of lethal goods through its territory. So the surge made the United States more reliant on Pakistan than ever.

Pakistan received tens of billions of dollars in aid for ostensibly supporting the war effort while doing everything possible to undermine it. At the same time, Islamabad was pursuing battlefield nuclear weapons (unwittingly subsidized by US taxpayers), which would enable it to act with even greater impunity once Washington no longer required its help.

### STAYING POWER

To paraphrase the popular television series *Homeland*, which often has a better grasp of Pakistan than US officials do, the United States and the Taliban were both strong enough that they could not be defeated, but neither was strong enough to achieve an outright victory. While Trump has a political watch ticking as the 2020 presidential election approaches, the Taliban—backed by Pakistan's staying power—have unlimited time. Since the United States could not impose its will militarily, there was never any option but to sue for peace on Pakistan's terms.

But it did not have to be this way. In January 2020, the United States assassinated Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani, an act for which the Trump administration offered an array of evolving justifications, from his alleged responsibility for thousands of US casualties to tendentious claims that he was planning imminent attacks on US forces in the region. By this logic, every ISI chief should have been a target: Pakistan has been responsible for the deaths of thousands of Americans as well as tens of thousands of allied personnel and hundreds of thousands of Afghans. Yet even while the United States has spent decades seeking to thwart Iran's nuclear program, it has abetted Pakistan's program since 1982, when the Reagan administration reversed sanctions imposed by President Jimmy Carter in 1979.

In the current season of *Homeland*, the scriptwriters fictionalize the US-Taliban peace process with chilling accuracy. Unfortunately, they penned a better deal than the real-life US negotiators, who hid key details in classified annexes and sought to undermine the civilian Afghan government—

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which understood that the deal would bring peace to the Americans but not to the Afghans, unless real constraints were placed on the Pakistanis.

Throughout the summer of 2019, the Trump administration pressured Ghani to postpone or even cancel the September elections, as the Taliban wished. He refused. The elections went forward as planned, but only 19 percent of registered voters cast a ballot, according to the official results. Given the security environment, even this meager turnout was awe-inspiring.

There is considerable evidence that the election results were manipulated. Ghani's erstwhile partner in the previous national unity government, Abdullah Abdullah, believes he was cheated of a victory in 2014 and has refused to concede defeat again. Each man has declared himself the victor, and they held simultaneous inaugurations on March 9. This power struggle does not augur well for the country at a time when the Americans have made it clear that they are leaving. What the Afghans need now more than ever is unified, credible civilian governance.

## **MONEY TROUBLE**

Everyone knows that the Taliban have no intention of seeking peace. But the biggest problem remains unspoken: money.

Afghanistan entered the international system as a rentier state, patronized first by the British and then by the Russians. On February 15, 1989, the last Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan. As long as Moscow continued paying the bills, President Mohammad Najibullah was able to withstand Pakistan's efforts to oust him. But as soon the Soviet Union collapsed and the successor Russian state could no longer write those checks, his government fell to Pakistan-backed mujahideen forces. (And Najibullah was stronger and more competent than either Ghani or Abdullah.)

The next patron, the United States, insisted on building the largest state ever seen in Afghanistan. Much of the funding for this behemoth flowed to US contractors, who pocketed lucrative fees. The late US envoy Richard Holbrooke once said in congressional testimony that 90 cents of every dollar spent in Afghanistan returned to the United States.

While the questions of how many US troops will stay, for how long, and with what mission have drawn close attention, there has been virtually no discussion about the fiscal sustainability of the state. The Afghan government is almost entirely dependent on foreign aid. Without funding

to pay for the national defense forces, it will fall. But with all the corruption in the US-built system, accurately calculating the cost of maintaining the state is nearly impossible. Reducing its size will be problematic as long as there is an active insurgency: many who are dismissed will simply join the insurgents, who have vast resources thanks to narcotics, timber, and gem trafficking, as well as ISI's deep pockets.

Trump has made it even less likely that Afghanistan can survive on its own. The Obama administration recognized that Iran would be critical to Afghanistan's economic future. By negotiating the 2015 nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, it cleared the way for more investment in Chabahar, an Iranian deep-sea port built with Indian assistance. This would provide Afghanistan with an alternative to relying on Pakistani ports.

In October 2018, I visited Zaranj in the Afghan province of Nimruz, on the border with Iran. The Indians have built an important road that links Zaranj to the city of Delaram and a major highway network, the Ring Road. These links allow goods to be carried from Chabahar to Zaranj and onward throughout Afghanistan. Despite inadequate infrastructure that kept trucks waiting in line for days to cross the border, the town was doing booming business when I was there.

Yet Trump has done his best to eviscerate the JCPOA, just as he has done with each of Obama's major accomplishments. Despite the reinstatement of sanctions on Iran, India has been allowed to continue limited development work in Chabahar under a waiver provision that permits investment if it advances Afghan reconstruction. But the waivers are not permanent and must be continually reissued, creating uncertainty. For Chabahar to serve as a genuine lifeline for Afghanistan, it needs more investment to become a viable deep-sea transit hub.

## **BACK TO THE FUTURE**

After Najibullah's demise in 1992, Afghanistan fell prey to warring factions. Kabul was decimated by the dueling rockets of the mujahideen who were once hailed for liberating the Afghans from the Soviets. A return to this scenario is no longer implausible. Now the country has rival presidents and no obvious way to pay for the state, whoever runs it—not to mention a predatory neighbor that is more skillful at orchestrating chaos than the Americans have been at preventing it.

Afghans have reason to worry—and they have more at stake than ever before. Most Afghans were born after the Taliban fell. Women and girls began to have new expectations and hopes. Although many Afghans are unhappy with the flawed democratic structure foisted on them by the Americans, there is no appetite among young people to give up on democracy—they want more of it.

But the Taliban have been clear: they want uncontested power, they plan to do away with elections, and they intend to roll back the gains in the rights of women and children. After spending so much blood and treasure, both the United States and Afghanistan deserve a process that will bring peace to the country at last, rather than delivering it in pieces to Pakistan. ■