Knowledge, power and the failure of US peacemaking in Afghanistan 2018–21

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On 15 August 2021, the internationally backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed as Taliban forces overran the country weeks before the 11 September deadline for the full withdrawal of all US troops. While leaders of many nations expressed shock at the Afghan state's swift disintegration, they quickly began to point the finger: US President Joe Biden, among others, blamed the Afghan military. 'We gave them every chance to determine their own future', he explained in a speech on 16 August, adding: 'What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future.'[1] Biden then criticized the 'nation-building' project, repeating tropes of Afghan culture as incompatible to democracy and modern statehood, and announced a new approach to counterterrorism, citing the development by the United States of 'over-the-horizon' capability. While conventional wisdom tends to emphasize domestic factors for the collapse, few observers point to the bilateral 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan' that was negotiated with the Taliban by the administration of Biden's predecessor, Donald J. Trump, or the US peacemaking and mediation effort which led to the agreement's conclusion in the Qatari capital of Doha in February 2020.[2] Scholars William Maley and Ahmad Shuja Jamal describe it as a 'diplomacy of disaster' that generated destructive dynamics within Afghanistan.[3] While many scholars and policy-makers see the Afghan 'peace process' as a withdrawal strategy, they tend to minimize how the notion of withdrawal took hold and became the framework through which peace was pursued.

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[1] The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan', 16 Aug. 2021, speech, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 24 March 2023.)

[2] 'Agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan between Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America', 29 Feb. 2020, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf.

[3] William Maley and Ahmad Shuja Jamal, 'Diplomacy of disaster: the Afghanistan 'peace process' and the Taliban occupation of Kabul', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 17: 1, 2022, pp. 32–63, https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-bja10089.

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Conventional explanations leave unanswered many questions concerning deeper changes in US foreign policy and how the Afghan 'peace process' reshaped interests and behaviour. How did US policy shift so radically that it pursued a bilateral agreement with the Taliban, excluding the Afghan state and its western partners? How did the framing of 'withdrawal-as-peace' become so dominant in US policy circles that it not only foreclosed alternative approaches, but effectively undid any prospects for Afghan–Taliban peace? What role did new narratives and 'epistemic communities' play in shaping a coercive US mediation approach?[4] How did the framing of peace give rise to a discourse around the negotiations that effectively shut down critics and shifted dynamics on the ground to predetermine the outcomes? What are the implications for policy and peacemaking in the future?

The signing of the US–Taliban Doha agreement in February 2020 constituted a critical juncture in US foreign policy that exposes the powerful relationship between discourse, knowledge and policy-making in a changing peacemaking and geopolitical landscape. This paper examines US diplomatic strategy between 2018 and 2021 and argues that the United States underwent dramatic political change during this period, producing new narratives through a procession of knowledge and norm entrepreneurs that led it to completely reframe its approach to the conflict and to reject established practices and norms. That process involved new epistemic foreign policy coalitions between the neo-isolationist right and the progressive, anti-imperialist left which came together to push for a unilateral US withdrawal under the guise of a peace process. This new discourse, which shaped and legitimated a coercive US approach to mediation, was itself mediated by western knowledge and media, even as the approach produced violent impacts on the ground.

How did this happen? In this article I employ constructivist analyses that look at how narratives, expertise and knowledge interact with policy-making to shape outcomes. In particular, the study looks at the critical role played by discourse and epistemic communities in constructing and deconstructing narratives to define issues and problems, create actors authorized to speak, silence and exclude alternative forms of action, and construct and endorse a certain kind of widely accepted common sense.[5] While not novel in IR theory or foreign policy analyses, constructivism in international peacemaking and mediation remains underexplored.[6] In the case of US mediation in Afghanistan, constructivist analyses prove useful in tracing how new knowledge production, drawing from traditional, isolationist strains in US foreign policy, manufactured a new narrative: the need to rein in

[4] Peter Haas refers to 'epistemic communities' as networks of knowledge-based professionals: Peter Haas, 'Introduction: epistemic communities and international policy coordination', *International Organization* 46: 1, 1992, pp. 1–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300001442. I use the term broadly to include all expert entrepreneurs engaged across multiple sectors to shape ideas around particular practices or issues.

[5] Jennifer Milliken, 'The study of discourse in International Relations: a critique of research and methods', *European Journal of International Relations* 5: 2, 1999, pp. 225–54 at p. 227, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066199005002003.

[6] Richard Jackson, 'Constructivism and conflict resolution', in Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk and I. William Zartman, eds, *Sage handbook of conflict resolution* (London: Sage, 2009).

military adventurism and 'end forever wars'. This narrative would guide the design and conduct of negotiations, reframing Afghan allies as spoilers and the Taliban as peacemakers. The logic that followed was one that cast multilateral peacemaking approaches as a continuation of failed liberal, imperialist policies and required the exclusion of alternative voices—Afghan and others.

By drawing on insights from the literature on the role of discourse and knowledge production in IR, this paper fills a critical gap in the international peacemaking literature that employs rationalist bargaining perspectives to explain the actions and strategies of actors. While realist accounts emphasize how interests and material considerations determine these strategies, they often fail to examine the 'process through which vested interests and material constraints have been constructed'.[7] A constructivist-inspired analysis draws attention to the range of ideational and material factors frequently missing from analyses on peacemaking and mediation by examining the co-constitutive relationship between discourse and knowledge production, a changing context, and mediation ideas and practices. In doing so, it also contributes to the growing norms literature in mediation and broader debates on knowledge production in International Relations.

The article draws on documentary analysis, in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations from my own engagement in the 'peace' process with Afghan civil society and international and domestic stakeholders. The first section situates the US approach in the literature on mediation, highlighting important features of context, mediator strategies, and the role of strategic knowledge and narratives. The second section provides a snapshot of past political settlements in Afghanistan. The third and fourth sections trace the peace process, from its emergence to its collapse, before the conclusion draws out the main implications.

Understanding US approaches: context, mediation, power and knowledge

A changing conflict and peacemaking landscape

There is a contingent relation between context, mediator strategies and outcomes. Contemporary civil wars are no longer fought between two cohesive sides. Instead, they involve numerous state and non-state actors, multiple axes of power, extremist and identity politics, and local–global dynamics.[8] They fuel a regionalized war economy, creating incentives for continued violence.[9] Scholarship characterizes them as a complex system of nested conflicts: local, national and geopolitical.[10] Yet, there remains a tendency to view these multi-layered conflicts as locally bounded phenomena in the literature, often positioning external actors outside the frame of analysis and overlooking how local–global dynamics interact

[7] Severine Autesserre, 'Constructing peace: collective understandings of peace, peacemaking, and peacebuilding', *Critique Internationale*, vol. 51, 2011, pp. 153–67, https://doi.org/10.7916/D81V5QJQ.
[8] Mary Kaldor, *New and old wars: organized violence in a global era* (London: Polity, 2012).
[9] David Keen, *Complex emergencies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008).
[10] Máire A. Dugan, 'A nested theory of conflict', *A Leadership Journal: Women in Leadership—Sharing the Vision* 1: 1, 1996, pp. 9–20, https://emu.edu/cjp/docs/Dugan_Maire_Nested-Model-Original.pdf.

to shape and sustain conflict.[11] Subsequently, the literature rarely considers how domestic dynamics in the intervening country influence peacemaking strategies and outcomes, neglecting issues of cost, legitimacy, and domestic politics.

Historically, international mediation efforts favoured dyadic negotiations between largely cohesive groups focused on reaching national-level political settlements that redistribute the balance of power and resources between conflict parties.[12] In the post-Cold War era, the growth in multilateral peacemaking operations reflected the failure of most elite deals to prevent conflict relapse.[13] Processes to conclude and sustain peace agreements required more complex engagement at multiple levels (local, national and regional), involving a mix of power-sharing and security arrangements.[14]

Today, however, international peacemaking associated with the liberal peace consensus is increasingly contested, as are its broader norms and practices. The observable insecurity and corruption that often follows international peace-and-security operations in contexts like Afghanistan and Iraq created widespread disillusionment and a 'failure discourse', in part due to a wide body of academic literature critiquing peacebuilding interventions.[15] This is reflected in changing global attitudes towards complex peacebuilding interventions and increasing fatigue with liberal statebuilding as hubristic, imperial overreach. This sentiment came to be shared across the discourse, from conservative realist thinkers to progressive academic critics of the liberal peace paradigm, who viewed the multilateralist approach to peacemaking after the end of the Cold War as a new form of neo-colonialism. The election of Trump to the US presidency in 2016 signalled a shift in the political landscape in the United States, creating opportunities for an emergent left–right policy coalition—advocating withdrawal rooted in realist, neo-isolationist and anti-imperialist attitudes—to upend the traditional bipartisan support that the Afghan mission had long enjoyed.[16]

Lastly, a changing global geopolitical landscape is reshaping international engagement in peace processes. This 'global marketplace of political change' is characterized by increased great power competition, a fragmented peacemaking landscape, norm contestation, and proxy interventions to shape political change.[17] A study on local agreements in Syria demonstrates how states now act simultane-

[11] Thomas Parks and William Cole, *Political settlements: implications for international development policy and practice*, Occasional Paper no. 2 (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2010).

[12] Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand and Patrick Meehan, *Synthesis paper: securing and sustaining elite bargains that reduce violent conflict* (London: UK Stabilisation Unit, 2018).

[13] World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: conflict, security, and development* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2011), https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/806531468161369474/world-development-report-2011-conflict-security-and-development-overview.

[14] Christine Bell, *On the law of peace: peace agreements and the Lex Pacificatoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Mary Kaldor, 'How peace agreements undermine the rule of law', *Global Policy* 7: 2, 2016, pp. 146–55, https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12312.

[15] Rajesh Venugopal, 'Ineptitude, ignorance, or intent: the social construction of failure in development', *World Development*, vol. 106, 2008, pp. 238–47, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.01.013.

[16] Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Theda Skocpol and Jason Sclar, 'When political mega-donors join forces: how the Koch network and the Democracy Alliance influence organized US politics on the right and left', *Studies in American Political Development* 32: 2, 2018, pp. 127–65, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X18000081.

[17] Thomas Carothers and Oren Samet-Marram, *The new global marketplace of political change* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

ously as conflict parties, mediators and negotiators, applying leverage on proxies or adversaries alike to reshape conflict and peacemaking towards their interests.[18] The infusion of new approaches to conflict management induced by more diverse actors has been captured in debates on liberal vs illiberal peacemakers, recent research on non-western peacemakers,[19] and new concepts like 'populist peacemaking'.[20]

Mediation, power and knowledge

Mediation is understood as 'a dynamic and reciprocal form of social interaction … affected by numerous factors and conditions' aimed at assisting conflict parties to reach a mutually acceptable agreement.[21] Understanding mediation as a dynamic, contingent social process emphasizes the importance of analysing relationships and power dynamics among parties and the mediator.

Mediators have been traditionally conceived as neutral actors, but recent literature has explored how mediator motivations and interests influence strategies and outcomes.[22] Mediator interests may involve reputation and personal motivations, in addition to the interests of the countries they represent. Recent studies have expounded mediators as norm entrepreneurs, who bring in their own ideas about the conflict and its potential solutions, inevitably projecting them onto the parties and affecting their relations accordingly.[23]

The dominant literature focuses predominantly on questions of timing and mediator strategies to explain success or failure in initiating and reaching top-down settlements. William Zartman's concepts of 'ripeness' and 'mutually hurting stalemates' are used to understand the conditions for initiating a negotiations process. Ripeness centres on both objective realities and the parties' perceptions of the balance of power between them.[24] Diplomats and mediators employ various strategies to 'ripen' a conflict and induce negotiations, by changing the perceived costs of not negotiating or tilting the military balance of power.[25] 'Mediation with muscle' strategies are coercive (if force is used), directive (if a particular solution

[18] Rim Turkmani, 'How local are local agreements? Shaping local agreements as a new form of third-party intervention in protracted conflicts', *Peacebuilding* 10: 2, 2022, pp. 189–203, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2032942.

[19] See, for example, research by the PeaceRep (Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform) research consortium led by the University of Edinburgh Law School: https://peacerep.org/research/.

[20] Dana M. Landau and Lior Lehrs, 'Populist peacemaking: Trump's peace initiatives in the Middle East and the Balkans', *International Affairs* 98: 6, 2022, pp. 2001–19, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac228.

[21] Jacob Bercovitch and Karl Derouen, Jr, 'Mediation in internationalized ethnic conflicts', *Armed Forces & Society* 30: 2, 2004, pp. 147–70 at p. 186, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X0403000202.

[22] I. William Zartman, 'Interest, leverage and public opinion in mediation', *International Negotiation* 14: 1, 2009, pp. 1–6, https://doi.org/10.1163/092902709X406462.

[23] Siniša Vuković, 'Peace mediators as norm entrepreneurs: EU's norm diffusion strategy in Montenegro's referendum on independence', *Swiss Political Science Review* 26: 4, 2020, pp. 449–67, https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12424.

[24] I. William Zartman, 'The timing of peace initiatives: hurting stalemates and ripe moments', in John Darby and Roger Mac Ginty, *Contemporary peacemaking: conflict, peace processes and post-war reconstruction*, 2nd edn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 22–35.

[25] Chester A. Crocker, Fen Hampson and Pamela Aall, *Taming intractable conflicts: mediation in the hardest cases* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2004).

is formulated) and/or manipulative (if inducements are used).[26] While quantitative studies find that such mediation produces faster agreements, others warn that heavy pressure can induce parties to exploit the process to continue fighting .[27]

The concept of power is central to analyses of negotiations and mediation. Most studies draw on realist bargaining theories and emphasize the 'leverage' mediators use to reshape the incentive structure of warring parties. Leverage is widely equated with resource and material power that underpin the 'carrots' (military or diplomatic concessions) and 'sticks' (economic sanctions, threat of force). However, it can involve other sources of power, including access to information, credibility, media diplomacy and strategic knowledge.[28] These seemingly less coercive tactics still alter the balance of power by reshaping the objective, subjective and normative environments, for example by conferring legitimacy or illegitimacy on one or another party.[29]

Yet, the way in which power is constructed is underexplored in peacemaking, especially the use of strategic communications and knowledge production. Studies in International Relations (IR) demonstrate how the power of narrative and expertise can shape and rationalize policy discourses and actions.[30] A recent study on the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings traces how western narratives rooted in orientalist discourses and mediated by western expertise informed policy responses in ways that silenced Arab voices while perpetuating neo-imperialist interests through *non-interventionist* policies.[31] Today's peacemaking landscapes involve complex information environments in which discursive battles and strategic communications alter the political and security realities in which international peacemaking policy is developed and implemented. Shaping international opinion can help generate the right levels of diplomatic, financial and security support across all phases of a peace process, as in Somalia and Colombia.[32] Equally, non-state armed actors deploy similar tools to shape public opinion and achieve legitimacy.[33]

These features were evident in the multi-faceted US approach to Afghanistan, first as party to the conflict, then as negotiator, and finally as unofficial mediator of the intra-Afghan talks, enabling it to shape the environment and calculations of different stakeholders. Unlike traditional mediation, which brings leverage to bear on both parties, the United States used coercive leverage against its own allies

[26] Zartman, 'Interest, leverage and public opinion'.
[27] Timothy D. Sisk, *International mediation in civil wars: bargaining with bullets* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
[28] Peter J. Carnevale, 'Mediating from strength', in Jacob Bercovitch, ed., *Studies in international mediation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 25–40.
[29] Melanie C. Greenberg, John H. Barton and Margaret E. McGuinness, *Words over war: mediation and arbitration to prevent deadly conflict* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).
[30] Daniel W. Drezner and Amrita Narlikar, 'International relations: the 'how not to' guide', *International Affairs* 98: 5, 2022, pp. 1499–513, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac190.
[31] Jasmine K. Gani, 'From discourse to practice: Orientalism, western policy and the Arab uprisings', *International Affairs* 98: 1, 2022, pp. 45–65, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab229.
[32] Paul D. Williams, 'Strategic communications for peace operations: the African Union's information war against al-Shabaab', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 7: 1, 2018, pp. 1–17, https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.606.
[33] Clifford Bob, *The marketing of rebellion: insurgents, media, and international activism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to design and time the intra-Afghan talks, preventing those allies from asserting their interests in case it spoiled the US agreement with the Taliban. This sequencing put the US and the Afghan government at odds regarding 'what peace' to make, maintained by a US belief that it held sway with the Taliban.

Legacies of previous peacemaking processes

While past peacemaking efforts can provide lessons for mediators, their legacies also shape competing conceptions of peace. The 2020 Doha agreement and subsequent intra-Afghan process followed a succession of failed top-down peacebrokering in Afghanistan. Doha mediators variously dismissed lessons while selectively adopting elements that fitted their model.[34]

The Doha process shared striking similarities with the 1986 Geneva Accords which facilitated Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan without ending conflict. That UN-convened process subordinated intra-Afghan peace to the interests of the Soviet Union, the US and Pakistan. Foreshadowing the US–Taliban agreement, the Accords included a compressed timeline for Soviet withdrawal and promises of non-interference by external parties, but deferred questions of Afghan governance to the future.[35] After the Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s, President Mohammad Najibullah's government defied predictions of collapse and survived several years with Soviet assistance. His security forces unravelled when the USSR disintegrated and ceased its funding. The resignation of Najibullah in 1992, under UN pressure and guarantees of safe passage, was intended to make way for a UN-proposed interim government, but militias allied to the government rejected the proposal, resumed hostilities and blocked the president's departure.[36]

As Afghanistan descended into chaos and its geopolitical importance waned, the US and UN disengaged, ceding responsibility to Pakistan to convene the 1992 Peshawar Accord. Its power-sharing formula carved up political appointments between Peshawar-based *mujahideen* leaders while excluding military commanders in Afghanistan and civil society.[37] The interim agreement failed spectacularly and deteriorated into civil war, leading to the Taliban's rise and the execution of Najibullah.

Following the 2001 US invasion that toppled the Taliban regime, the UN-convened Bonn agreement was another exclusive, elite settlement—involving primarily US-allied militias while excluding the Taliban and local civil society. Unlike Peshawar, the Bonn agreement included an ambitious process to expand

[34] Maley and Jamal, 'Diplomacy of disaster'.

[35] Odd Arne Westad, *The global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 377.

[36] Dipali Mukhopadhyay, 'The slide from withdrawal to war: the UN Secretary General's failed effort in Afghanistan, 1992', *International Negotiation* 17: 3, 2012, pp. 485–517, https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-12341240.

[37] Michael Semple, 'Internationalisation and inclusiveness in Afghan peace processes', in Andy Carl, ed., *Navigating inclusion in peace processes*, part of the series *Accord: an International Review of Peace Initiatives*, no. 28 (London: Conciliation Resources, 2019).

popular participation through *loya jirgas* (grand assemblies) and elections.[38] Importantly, it included international security guarantees, establishing a NATO-led peacekeeping force under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter,[39] and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).[40]

The legacies of Geneva and Peshawar featured heavily in Afghan debates around Doha, intensifying elite and public anxieties. For many Afghans, the spectre of an 'interim government' conjured memory of their violent failures. For external actors, the lesson they drew was of Taliban exclusion at Bonn, which, while important, overlooked conflict drivers and the key elements that sustained the fragile settlement, including international guarantees to support popular buy-in and state survival that enabled significant, although uneven, political and social development.

Whose process is this anyway? The emergence of competing approaches, 2018–19

By 2018, the US-led international mission in Afghanistan had decreased significantly, from a peak of 110,000 troops in 2011 to under 10,000. International forces had largely ended combat operations, transferring front-line fighting to Afghan soldiers, while providing training, materiel and air support. The Afghan government, mired in corruption and infighting, was increasingly viewed as an example of the broader failures of liberal statebuilding, despite the importance of its fragile institutions in providing essential services in education and health, especially for women. Meanwhile, US counterterrorism tactics inflicted heavy civilian casualties, undermining the legitimacy of the Afghan government.

At this time, many Afghans became cautiously optimistic that countrywide grassroots mobilizations for peace aligned with a desire for talks between the government and Taliban. A non-violent, ethnically diverse grassroots movement mobilized in early 2018 (beginning in the provinces worst affected by fighting), creating an opening for peace unseen in a generation.[41]

While they were largely ignored by the West, the calls of this movement seemed to bear fruit in June 2018 when the Taliban independently echoed President Ashraf Ghani's unilateral call for a ceasefire by issuing a similar call to their fighters for the duration of the Eid-al-Fitr religious holiday—the country's first ever nationwide ceasefire. It followed an earlier offer made by the president to the Taliban for talks that included recognition as a political party, amnesty for fighters and constitutional revision.[42] For the presidency, a senior Afghan official explained, 'after the ceasefire, it was no longer about defeating the Taliban, but how to convince them

[38] Such as the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga and the 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga.
[39] UN Security Council Resolution 1386 (2001), S/RES/1386 (2001), 20 Dec. 2001.
[40] UN Security Council Resolution 1401 (2002), S/RES/1401 (2002), 28 March 2002.
[41] Interview, Afghan activist, Jan. 2019. This and all subsequent interviews cited in this article were held over Signal, Zoom or WhatsApp.
[42] Jelena Bjelica and Thomas Ruttig, 'Who shall cease the fire first? Afghanistan's peace offer to the Taleban', Afghanistan Analyst Network, 1 March 2018, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/who-shall-cease-the-fire-first-afghanistans-peace-offer-to-the-taleban/.

to sit at the table with us'.[43] Former international officials interviewed believed a 'mutually hurting stalemate' had emerged.

Within the Trump administration, the peace moment provided the opportunity to abandon its earlier South Asia strategy and reduce US military involvement. Trump's positions, however, continually shifted. He promised to end the US's 'endless wars',[44] while also criticizing his predecessor, former president Barack Obama, for his precipitous withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011. Initially agreeing with the US military on the adoption of the South Asia Strategy in 2017, Trump later shifted responsibility for US Afghan policy from the Department of Defense (DoD) to the State Department, seeking faster results. In September 2018, he appointed Afghan-American diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad as US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. Khalilzad possessed 'credibility leverage' due to his deep knowledge of the country and familiarity with Afghan stakeholders.[45] This allowed him to manipulate elites within Afghanistan's republic, promising positions in a new interim government to reshape power dynamics in favour of the US process. His secretive approach excluded Afghan officials, international allies and the US Congress, which angered US legislators.

The US's investment in a new political settlement provoked intense competition over control of peacemaking policy and design among domestic and international stakeholders. International players offered competing venues for intra-Afghan dialogues. Experts, analysts and peace practitioners convened numerous workshops and Track II diplomatic processes that brought together westerners, Taliban negotiators and Afghan non-state elites.[46] The cascade of internationals seeking to meet the Taliban to identify their vision of governance empowered the group and its narratives, even as Taliban fighters continued to attack civilians.

At this time, new US policy coalitions began building support for withdrawal from Afghanistan. Given the US population's ambivalence to the war in Afghanistan, they worked to manufacture the image of domestic US demand for an 'end to the forever wars' through media, expert pieces, lobbying and advertising campaigns. They created an alternative US bipartisan agenda that allied the right-wing Tea Party movement with anti-war progressive coalitions. The libertarian Koch family foundation generously funded libertarian think tanks, veterans groups and programmes across American universities to advocate for a restrained US foreign policy.[47] In an unlikely alliance with the left-leaning Open Society

[43] Interview, April 2022.

[44] 'Remarks by President Trump at the 2020 United States Military Academy at West Point graduation ceremony', 13 June 2020, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-2020-united-states-military-academy-west-point-graduation-ceremony/.

[45] Lindsay Reid, 'Finding a peace that lasts: mediator leverage and the durable resolution of civil wars', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61: 7, 2017, pp.1401–31, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715611231.

[46] This followed a trend starting in 2014/2015, with the Pugwash and Chantilly Track II conferences bringing together Taliban with western experts. Track I refers to mediation efforts at official levels; Track II to processes at non-official levels of influence linked to decision-makers; and Track III to grassroots and civil society. For more on 'tracks' in mediation, see: Federal Foreign Office of Germany, *Basics of mediation: concepts and definitions* (Berlin, Jan. 2017), https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Basics%20of%20Mediation.pdf.

[47] Hertel-Fernandez et al., 'When political mega-donors join forces'.

Foundation, Koch jointly funded the isolationist Quincy Institute, a major advocate for US withdrawal from Afghanistan.[48]

Pro-withdrawal advocates, however, lacked a defence against the argument 'that a US withdrawal [would] be devastating for the progress made by Afghans over the past two decades, especially for women'.[49] Their convergence with experts and western researchers on the Taliban, who distrusted the US military and had long advocated for an elite settlement, helped lay the intellectual foundation for a coercive diplomatic approach to peacemaking in Afghanistan.[50] Many of these experts, with close relationships to policy-makers, traversed the policy, think tank and media landscapes. Some occupied important positions in 'authoritative knowledge-producing institutions', such as the International Crisis Group (ICG) and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), where they provided analysis, ran Track IIs, penned opinion pieces and/or provided expert testimony to the US Congress.[51]

The US's announcement of bilateral talks with the Taliban in January 2019 made clear that Washington would determine the timing and shape of the intra-Afghan process. According to former international officials, Khalilzad's ability to link the Afghan peace process to US withdrawal was made possible after the publication of a widely read *New York Times* report of a potential Trump withdrawal,[52] which shifted policy discourses from questions of peace and cost-reduction to 'ending the forever war'.[53] That month, Khalilzad claimed the US had reached 'an agreement in principle' with the Taliban, while reassuring sceptics that 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'. That 'everything' included four interrelated elements: intra-Afghan talks; a ceasefire; Taliban counterterrorism guarantees; and a withdrawal timetable for international forces. Weeks later, Khalilzad reiterated this formulation at the USIP, explaining that he 'was directed by President Trump and Secretary [of State Mike] Pompeo not to seek a withdrawal agreement but a peace agreement, because a peace agreement can allow withdrawal'. He went on to state: 'It will be better for Afghanistan if we could get a peace agreement before the [Afghan] election' scheduled for later that year.[54]

[48] Nahal Toosi, 'Koch showers millions on think tanks to push a restrained foreign policy', *Politico*, 13 Feb. 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/13/charles-koch-grants-foreign-policy-think-tanks-114898; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'Misplaced restraint: the Quincy coalition versus liberal internationalism', *Survival* 63: 4, 2021, pp. 7–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1956187.

[49] Dan Spinelli, 'How a Koch-backed navy vet teamed up with the antiwar left to urge Biden to leave Afghanistan', *Mother Jones*, 18 March 2021, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/03/will-ruger-afghanistan-joe-biden-koch/.

[50] For discussion on key experts who play a role in shaping peacemaking policy on Afghanistan, see Thomas Waldman, 'Reconciliation and research in Afghanistan: an analytical narrative', *International Affairs* 90: 5, 2014, pp. 1049–68, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12156.

[51] Studies examining the influence of the International Crisis Group (ICG) and USIP in producing politically relevant analysis find they tend to justify dominant western policy preferences. See, for example, Sreeram Chaulia, 'One step forward, two steps backward: the United States Institute of Peace', *International Journal of Peace Studies* 14: 1, 2009, pp. 61–81. A special issue of *Third World Quarterly* (35: 4, 2014) is devoted to analysing the ICG's role as the most authoritative, widely referenced knowledge-producing institution on conflict.

[52] Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, 'US to withdraw about 7,000 troops from Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 20 Dec. 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/us/politics/afghanistan-troop-withdrawal.html.

[53] Interviews, Aug.–Sept. 2020.

[54] United States Institute of Peace, 'Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad on the prospects for peace in Afghanistan' (video), 8 Feb. 2019, https://www.usip.org/events/special-representative-zalmay-khalilzad-

Alternative narratives and counter-strategies

The competing agendas of the US, the Afghan republic and the Taliban generated perverse incentives and disorientation within their own constituencies. In Afghanistan, stories of a potential interim government proliferated on social media and Afghan networks—made plausible by Khalilzad's statement prioritizing a settlement over elections. Highly publicized competing forums in Moscow in February and May 2019 convening warlords, older elites and Taliban negotiators, while excluding government officials, deepened mistrust in Afghanistan. In response to the Khalilzad's announcement of bilateral talks with the Taliban in January 2019, the same Afghan groups who mobilized for peace were now marshalling against US–Taliban talks. Afghan female activists penned pieces in major western newspapers, senior Afghan officials publicly accused the US envoy of duplicity,[55] and protests arose in different provinces.[56] Nearly all warned against a quick agreement between warlords and the Taliban that traded away basic rights and democratic institutions.

Excluded by the US and portrayed as a puppet by the Taliban, the Afghan president's counter-strategies rested on weaving together his weak electoral legitimacy with traditional tactics, primarily the use of *jirgas* to build public support. To address threats to women's rights, the First Lady, together with leading women's rights groups, convened an unprecedented all-women's *jirga* in February 2019, building on year-long consultations with over 15,000 women. President Ghani followed the women's *jirga* by convening a consultative *loya jirga* of 3,200 representatives from across Afghanistan to legitimate an Afghan-led process. The gathering produced a 23-point framework for negotiations with the Taliban, including a ceasefire, direct Afghan government talks, preservation of rights and a timeline for a 'responsible' withdrawal of foreign forces.[57]

The demands of the *jirgas* and independent civil society were supported by other research, including the Asia Foundation's largest ever survey of the Afghan people in 2019, indicating that democracy, rights and constitutionalism topped the list of priorities that both urban and rural populations wanted to protect in any negotiations. The survey found that 85 per cent of respondents had no sympathy for the Taliban.[58]

External narratives on Afghan preferences, however, discounted Afghan demands. Instead, they selectively drew on western research to reduce the conflict's complexities into problematic binaries, often framed *in the interests of the*

prospects-peace-afghanistan.

[55] 'Afghan official accuses US envoy of undermining Taliban peace talks', PBS News Hour, 14 March 2019, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/afghan-official-accuses-u-s-envoy-of-undermining-taliban-peace-talks.

[56] Mariam Safi and Muqaddesa Yourish, 'What is wrong with Afghanistan's peace process', *New York Times*, 20 Feb. 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/opinion/afghanistan-peace-talks.html.

[57] Thomas Ruttig, Ali Yawar Adili and Obaid Ali, 'Doors opened for direct talks with the Taleban: the results of the Loya Jirga on prisoners and peace', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 12 Aug. 2020, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/kabul-opens-door-for-peace-talks-the-results-of-the-loya-jirga-on-prisoners-and-peace/.

[58] Tabasum Akseer and John Rieger, eds, *A survey of the Afghan people: Afghanistan in 2019* (San Francisco: Asia Foundation, 2019).

Afghan public. The first narrative juxtaposed a corrupt republic associated with urban elites (including female activists) unfairly benefiting from international aid versus a rural community preferring Taliban rule. The other supported the idea of a changed Taliban with moderate views on women's rights—a narrative exploited by Taliban public diplomacy.

The interests of Afghan women became a key fault-line for western experts. A report from the US-based Brookings Institution argued that 'the preferences of … rural women lean much more heavily toward a desire for peace even if it means sacrificing some formal women's rights', on the basis of 'several interviews'.[59] In contrast, the Kabul-based Afghan Analysts Network, drawing on interviews across 19 districts, found that women's attitudes 'challenge the idea that women in rural areas are satisfied by what is often portrayed as "normal" by the Taliban or other Afghan conservatives'. It explained: 'Almost every woman we spoke to, regardless of her political stance and level of conservatism, expressed a longing for greater freedom of movement [and] education for her children.'[60]

The effort to blunt the pushback against the growing US narrative about Afghan women reached its zenith when in June 2019 the *New York Times* published the piece 'I met the Taliban. Women were the first to speak' by a US political analyst of Afghan origin, provoking anger from women activists inside Afghanistan.[61] Another piece authored by the US academic Cheryl Benard (who is married to Khalilzad) in the conservative magazine *National Interest*, reproached Afghan feminists for writing in western outlets, stating: 'Emancipation and equality aren't the product of pity or guilt, and you aren't owed them by someone else's army …'.[62]

Competition had already extended to academic and policy circles by June. The renowned expert Barnett Rubin, for example, countered the growing backlash by Afghans against Khalilzad's process, writing in March 2019 in *Foreign Affairs* that negotiations 'provide the only path to stability after the inevitable withdrawal'.[63] Donors established policy-relevant study groups within prominent western think tanks, including the Afghanistan Peace Process Study Group (ASG) at the USIP and Lessons4Peace at the UK-based Overseas Development Institute. Throughout the talks, western experts and analysts used their positionality, credibility and access to shape policy, through op-eds, expert analysis, media appearances and policy-maker briefings. Many Afghans criticized the privileging of western experts over Afghan knowledge, on the grounds that it ignored historical precedents in Afghanistan and the important progress that Afghans had achieved. Some suggested it appropri-

[59] John R. Allen and Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'The fate of women's rights in Afghanistan', The Brookings Gender Equality Series (Washington DC: Brookings, 2020), https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-fate-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/.

[60] Martine van Bijlert, *Between hope and fear: rural Afghan women talk about peace and war*, Special Report (Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network, 2021), https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/07/2021-Rural-women-peace-and-war-FINAL-website.pdf.

[61] Masuda Sultan, 'I met the Taliban. Women were the first to speak', *New York Times*, 4 June 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/opinion/afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks.html.

[62] Cheryl Benard, 'Afghan women are in charge of their own fate', *National Interest*, 17 Feb. 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/afghan-women-are-charge-their-own-fate-45777.

[63] Barnett R. Rubin, 'Negotiations are the best way to end war in Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, 1 March 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/afghanistan/negotiations-are-best-way-end-war-afghanistan.

ated and distorted their lived experiences and their previous research—that had decried state corruption and an aggressive US counterterrorism effort, but that did not negate their desire for a democratic state, security and inclusive peace. Others complained that western experts dominated knowledge on Afghanistan, pointing to a written intra-Afghan agreement published by the RAND Corporation, a US think tank, and co-authored by the then-ICG's Asia Director.[64]

Legitimizing the Taliban

As US–Taliban negotiations continued, Qatar and Germany co-sponsored the first informal pre-dialogue between the Taliban and 40 Afghan citizens in Doha in July 2019 with the support of Khalilzad. Sponsors accepted Taliban demands that Afghan officials could only participate in their personal capacities.[65] Interference in the composition of their counterparts' negotiating team became a common tactic of the Taliban, fragmenting elite coalitions and weakening civil society voices. This left many Afghan participants demoralized, increasingly convinced that the Taliban sought victory, not peace.[66]

The status and leverage gained by the Taliban was further established in September 2019 when President Trump issued a direct invitation to the Taliban and Afghan government to talks at his Camp David retreat—even though the invitation was subsequently cancelled by Trump. Former international officials suggested it had privately angered US officials, who suspected the Ghani administration had pushed its allies in Congress and the US military to lobby Trump to end the Doha process.[67] Attempting to shift uneven power dynamics, in October the Afghan government proposed its own roadmap, the 'Seven-Point Peace Plan', which outlined a multi-level approach that included political negotiations with the Taliban, an agreement with Pakistan and desired local reforms.[68] US media and policy elites ignored it, and dismissed it as a delaying tactic.

Meanwhile, the Taliban pursued a strategy of talking and fighting, adeptly using the process to boost legitimacy. Over the years, the group had developed a sophisticated—and impressive—communications apparatus.[69] While they effectively exploited grievances and local survival strategies, their expansion required brute force and support from Pakistan. They offered a rhetorical alternative to the Islamic Republic by providing harsh but predictable dispute resolution mechanisms, in contrast to corrupt state courts.[70] Aside from justice, however, their parallel governance system consisted largely in grafting onto government institu-

[64] Laurel E. Miller and Jonathan S. Blake, *Envisioning a comprehensive peace agreement for Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2937.html.
[65] Thomas Ruttig, 'AAN Q&A: What came out of the Doha intra-Afghan conference?', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 11 July 2019, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/aan-qa-what-came-out-of-the-doha-intra-afghan-conference/.
[66] Interviews, dialogue participant, Aug.–Sept. 2020.
[67] Interview, formal international official, May 2022.
[68] 'Steps toward stability in Afghanistan', Tolo News, Oct. 2019, https://tolonews.com/Peace-converted.pdf.
[69] Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban narratives: the use and power of stories in the Afghanistan conflict* (London: Hurst, 2018).
[70] Antonio Giustozzi and Adam Baczko, 'The politics of the Taliban's shadow judiciary', *Central Asian Affairs* 1: 2, 2014, pp. 199–24, https://doi.org/10.1163/22142290-00102003.

tions and delivery systems for health and education in areas they controlled.[71] International actors would later point to Taliban governance as evidence of their desire to rule more moderately. According to an ICG report published in 2020: 'As the Taliban have grappled over the last decade with the imperative to govern and provide services to civilians … they have gradually adjusted some of their harshest stances on education, modern technology and media consumption'.[72] An earlier USIP report in 2019 explained how the Taliban 'regularly met … with UN officials to discuss measures to mitigate civilian harm and broaden humanitarian efforts', implying their concern for civilians and improved governance.[73]

The many invitations to the Taliban for conferences, meetings and photo opportunities reified their legitimacy. Taliban communications focused on convincing internal and external audiences of their desire to govern inclusively and moderately.[74] In media interviews, they explained: 'Women should not worry … they can go to school [and] universities, they can work.'[75] They presented their intentions as peace-seeking, telling the BBC that they did not want to seize 'the whole country by power'.[76] A well-timed *New York Times* opinion piece written in February 2020 by Sirajuddin Haqqani—of the Haqqani network, which was designated in 2012 as a 'foreign terrorist organization' by the US government—marked the culmination of this process of legitimation only days before the signing of the US–Taliban agreement.[77] Weeks later, in May 2020, the Haqqani network would be linked to a deadly attack at a maternity ward of a hospital in a Hazara Shia neighbourhood of the Afghan capital Kabul.[78]

In jihadist and local platforms, the Taliban adopted a different narrative, positioning themselves as victors over the US and its international partners. A May 2021 assessment of the peace process wrote: 'The Taliban deliberately propagated the notion that the talks with the US offered a route to power'; it represented talks as the US 'admit[-ting] its defeat' and focused on granting defeated US forces 'safe passage'.[79]

[71] Ashley Jackson, *Life under the Taliban shadow government* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2018), https://odi.org/en/publications/life-under-the-taliban-shadow-government/.

[72] International Crisis Group, *Taking stock of Taliban perspectives on peace*, Asia Report No. 311 (Brussels: ICG, 2020), https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/311-taking-stock-talibans-perspectives-peace.

[73] Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri, *Insurgent bureaucracy: how the taliban make policy* (Washington DC: USIP, 2019), https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/11/insurgent-bureaucracy-how-taliban-makes-policy.

[74] William Maley, 'The public relations of the Taliban: then and now', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 17 Sept. 2021, https://www.icct.nl/publication/public-relations-taliban-then-and-now.

[75] Secunder Kermani and Sami Yousafzai, 'Taliban "not seeking to seize all of Afghanistan"', BBC News, 6 Feb. 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-47139908.

[76] Kermani and Yousafzai, 'Taliban "not seeking to seize all of Afghanistan"'.

[77] Sirajuddin Haqqani, 'What we, the Taliban, want', *New York Times*, 20 Feb. 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html.

[78] The perpetrator of the attack remains contested, with the US and many others placing responsibility on Islamic State (ISIS). Afghan officials and civil society, however, believed it linked to the Haqqani network and their collusion with ISIS. Other researchers also suggest the Haqqanis had a role: see e.g. Sajjan Gohel and David Winston, 'A complex tapestry of collusion and cooperation: Afghanistan and Pakistan's terrorism networks', *London School of Economics Blog*, 5 June 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2020/06/05/long-read-a-complex-tapestry-of-collusion-and-cooperation-afghanistan-and-pakistans-terrorism-networks/.

[79] Michael Semple, Robin L. Raphel and Shams Rasikh, *An independent assessment of the Afghanistan peace process June 2018–May 2021* (Edinburgh: Political Settlements Research Programme, 2021), p. 18, available at https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/An-independent-assessment-of-the-Afghanistan-peace-process.pdf.

Trump's cancellation of the proposed talks at Camp David in September 2019 intensified discursive battles around US–Taliban negotiations. Pro-withdrawal advocates, many financed by the Koch network, increased domestic pressure through expensive advertising campaigns, spending millions on TV and digital ads to 'end endless wars'.[80] The media became an important conduit through which expertise sought to shape policy and public opinion. Realist scholars such as Stephen Walt opined in *Foreign Policy* that the US had 'accomplished precisely nothing' in 18 years and should 'get over' losing the war.[81] Those invested in a peace settlement, such as ASG members Stephen Hadley and Michèle Flournoy, urged the US to restart US–Taliban negotiations in a *Washington Post* opinion piece entitled 'Don't leave the Afghan peace talks for dead', framing the Doha process as the only route to peace.[82]

In November, Secretary of State Pompeo revived US–Taliban negotiations by pressuring the Afghan government to release two high-level Taliban prisoners, including a leader of the Haqqani network, in exchange for two *western* hostages. This 'confidence-building' measure, reportedly achieved through US threats of security assistance cuts to Afghan forces, exacted 'enormous domestic cost' to the Afghan government.[83]

The peace games 2020–21

Key features of the 'Doha Deal' and its political signals

The February 2020 Doha agreement between the US and the Taliban effectively traded a US withdrawal timetable for vague counterterrorism guarantees: the final agreement required the Taliban to prevent actors from using the 'soil of Afghanistan' to threaten US and international security, but not to renounce its affiliation to Al-Qaeda.[84] The document contained few obligations on the Taliban for reaching an Afghan peace settlement, relegating the promised ceasefire to future talks. It abandoned Khalilzad's initial formula of 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'. Nor did it address Pakistan's long-standing provision of sanctuary and military support to the Taliban. Instead, the US made a major concession to the Taliban: the mass release of Taliban prisoners as a precondition to initiate the intra-Afghan dialogue *within 10 days*. This provision was inserted into the agreement at the insistence of the Taliban, despite promises to the contrary by Khalilzad and Pompeo to Afghan officials and members of the US Congress.[85]

In Afghanistan, the Doha agreement created destructive political, security and psychological effects. It removed critical leverage from the Afghan republic and

[80] Philip Elliot, 'Koch-backed groups launch campaign to end war in Afghanistan', *Time*, 8 Sept. 2019, https://time.com/5679784/koch-end-war-afghanistan/.
[81] Stephen M. Walt, 'We lost the war in Afghanistan. Get over it', *Foreign Policy*, 11 Sept. 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/11/we-lost-the-war-in-afghanistan-get-over-it/.
[82] Stephen Hadley and Michèle Flournoy, 'Don't leave the Afghan peace talks for dead', *Washington Post*, 25 Sept. 2019.
[83] Interview, senior Afghan official, April 2021.
[84] 'Agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan'.
[85] Maley and Jamal, 'Diplomacy of disaster'.

granted the Taliban's objective of US withdrawal, while delivering them massive battlefield reinforcements through prisoner releases. It also contained a series of 'secret annexes' hidden from the Afghan government and US congressional oversight, reportedly including a US–Taliban counterterrorism arrangement, a renunciation of global terrorism and a joint US–Taliban military deconfliction channel to monitor commitments.[86] Requests by President Ghani to involve the Afghan state in this channel were rejected. US officials reassured Afghans and international allies by issuing a 'Joint Declaration', but it contained no binding provisions.[87] It also contradicted two previous bilateral state agreements, the 2012 US–Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement and the 2014 US–Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement. While Afghans and Europeans raised concerns about contradictions, experts called discrepancies part of the 'creative ambiguity' required to create flexibility for US negotiators pressuring parties.[88]

On the ground, the agreement ended Taliban attacks against international forces, but not against Afghan citizens and security forces. It limited US military action to *in extremis* support of Afghan forces, resulting in the near-cessation of air support with little warning to Afghan forces already suffering heavy losses. With an army dependent on US support, the psychological impact on Afghan soldiers was immediate. A former Afghan security official explained, 'Afghans interpreted [the Doha agreement] as a strategic shift of dumping the [Afghan National Defence and Security Forces] and partnering with the Taliban in mid-fight'.[89]

The implementation of the Doha Deal and its deficiencies as a peace framework

The Doha Deal effectively separated the conflict's security dimension from its 'political issues', further limiting the scope of policy discussion. Despite the agreement's obvious deficiencies as the framework for intra-Afghan peace, it swiftly became 'the only game in town', roping in even those critics who were desperate to salvage some form of commitment from the Taliban to negotiate in good faith. For their part, the US's European and NATO partners focused on maintaining alliances rather than planning a withdrawal that maintained the Afghan state or army, largely because of Brexit and Trump's vocal antagonism towards NATO.[90]

The US approach to inducing intra-Afghan talks required significant coercion. It framed Afghanistan's President Ghani as the spoiler if he refused to implement any part of the Doha agreement. Let us consider the prisoner release: the US, eager to initiate talks, accepted the Taliban's interpretation of 'up to 5,000 prisoners' to

[86] Kimberly Dozier, 'Secret annexes, backroom deals: can Zalmay Khalilzad deliver Afghan peace for Trump?', *Time*, 15 Feb. 2020, https://time.com/5784103/secret-annexes-backroom-deals-can-zalmay-khalilzad-deliver-afghan-peace-for-trump/; interviews with international and Afghan officials, 2022.

[87] *Joint declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for bringing peace to Afghanistan* (US Department of State, 2020), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf.

[88] Interviews, Sept. 2022.

[89] Interview, May 2022.

[90] Interviews, former international officials, Sept. 2021–May 2022.

mean the immediate release of all 5,000; it then exercised its leverage to force the Afghan state to accede to the Taliban's demand. In March 2020, the US cut desperately needed aid just as the country braced itself to address the twin threats of the COVID–19 pandemic and increased Taliban attacks. Pompeo, frustrated with President Ghani and his political rival Abdullah Abdullah, announced a $1 billion cut in US aid to Afghanistan, stating that '[the leaders'] failure has harmed US–Afghan relations … [and] poses a direct threat to US national interests', and emphasizing their 'failure … to take practical steps to facilitate prisoner releases'.[91]

With little room to manoeuvre, Ghani held another *loya jirga* to legitimize this unpopular decision and mitigate its impact by staggering prisoner releases over months. Although several countries, including France and Australia, voiced opposition to the mass releases (especially of those prisoners that had been convicted of killing their citizens), Ghani's decision was interpreted within international discourses as another example of the government's bad faith. In August 2020 the ICG framed the government's slow release of prisoners as one of 'two key impediments to negotiations' alongside 'high levels of violence, *including* Taliban operations'.[92] This language reified the view that the Afghan government bore equal, if not greater, responsibility for the delays in implementation. At home, President Ghani was pilloried for releasing perpetrators of mass attacks and failing to protect Afghan interests and lives. Absent any mechanism to monitor prisoner releases, many returned to the battlefield and played a significant role in overrunning the country.[93]

Within a few months, the Doha agreement and its implementation shifted the balance of power so significantly that it precluded the possibility of any meaningful intra-Afghan peace process. In addition to UN and NATO assessments, the US Department of Defense Inspector General's quarterly reports throughout 2020 and 2021 continually warned that the Taliban was violating its commitments on terrorism and ending 'high-profile attacks' in cities.[94] However, the centre of gravity of US policy-making had shifted from the Department of Defense to the State Department, and poor civil–military relations prevented the emergence of an integrated peace-and-security framework.

Biden: from hope to collapse

The year after the signing of the Doha agreement became one of Afghanistan's bloodiest. Data published by UNAMA shows civilian deaths, including targeted killings, by the Taliban reached record-high numbers in the first six months of 2021 as they ramped up their military offensive.[95] In contrast, not one US soldier

[91] US Embassy in Afghanistan, 'US disappointed in Afghan leaders', 24 March 2020, https://af.usembassy.gov/u-s-disappointed-in-afghan-leaders/.

[92] International Crisis Group, *Taking stock of Taliban perspectives on peace*. (Emphasis added.)

[93] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, Interim Report (Washington DC: SIGAR, 2022), https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-22-22-IP.pdf.

[94] The reports are available at: https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/.

[95] UNAMA, *Afghanistan. Protection of civilians in armed conflict. Midyear update: 1 January to 30 June 2021*, https://

was killed in the year after the signing of the agreement, a statistic repeated by US advocates as evidence of the deal's effectiveness (although later contested by analysts).[96] By February 2021, US troop levels had been reduced by 90 per cent, while allied NATO troops outnumbered them, with Afghan forces fighting on multiple fronts. European and NATO officials consistently pushed for a conditions-based withdrawal, and some tried to raise the question of future peacekeeping provision. But NATO forces, much like Afghan forces, could only operate with US logistics support, and would be forced to withdraw along with US troops.

For international and Afghan stakeholders, Biden's election to the US presidency six months before the May withdrawal deadline carried the hope of a return to alliance-driven policy-making. Congress, fearing a Trump decision to remove troops before Biden took office, moved to block withdrawals in Afghanistan through the National Defense Authorization Act of December 2021, overriding Trump's veto with an 81:3 vote—a remarkable display of bipartisan concern about the Doha agreement, despite a polarized political context.[97] The Taliban, meanwhile, refused to continue intra-Afghan talks and demanded the release of another 7,000 prisoners. They abducted grassroots peace activists, increased attacks against security forces and assassinated civil servants, activists, journalists, doctors and mullahs. While international and Afghan elites remained consumed with political dynamics between Washington and Kabul, the Taliban pursued their military strategy. They moved the war from their 'traditional heartlands' in the south to the north, severing contiguous territories to prevent the formation of any united resistance and cutting local deals for surrender with elders and militias.[98]

The incoming President Biden's announcement of a formal review of the Doha agreement sparked a storm of advocacy. Critics pressed the new administration to reinstate the deal's conditionality, shore up Afghan forces and develop an integrated peace-and-security framework that could support a properly designed peace process or, at least, a responsible withdrawal. Afghan civil society networks, now transnational, drafted public letters,[99] as did groups of retired US ambassadors, policy-makers and retired military.[100] The ASG released its report advocating a conditions-based withdrawal,[101] and US military leaders testified

unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2021_26_july.pdf.

[96] For example, Pompeo claimed it in a tweet: see Azal Gul, 'Pompeo defends Trump's Afghan peace plan, ensuing "incredible progress"', 2 Jan. 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_pompeo-defends-trumps-afghan-peace-plan-ensuing-incredible-progress/6200240.html.

[97] National Defense Authorization Act, available at: https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1605/text.

[98] Interview, former international official, June 2022.

[99] Coalitions between, for example, the Afghan Women's Network and the transnational 'Together Stronger' published dozens of letters, such as this one: 'Stand with us to protect women's rights in Afghanistan—A letter from the AWN', 30 June 2020, via Afghan Women's Support Forum, http://afghanwsf.co.uk/blog/stand-with-us-to-protect-womens-rights-in-afghanistan-an-letter-from-the-awn/.

[100] See e.g. James B. Cunningham, Hugo Llorens, Ronald E. Neumann, Richard Olson and Earl Anthony Wayne, 'The way forward in Afghanistan: how Biden can achieve sustainable peace and US security', *New Atlanticist*, 13 Jan. 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-way-forward-in-afghanistan-how-biden-can-achieve-sustainable-peace-and-us-security/.

[101] United States Institute of Peace, *Afghanistan Study Group final report* (Washington: USIP, 2021), https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/afghanistan_study_group_final_report_a_pathway_for_peace_in_afghanistan.pdf.

before Congress,[102] while NATO and European leaders called for withdrawal to be conditioned on the outcome of intra-Afghan talks. Research also questioned the validity of polling that cited US public demand for withdrawal.[103]

Proponents pressed several arguments. Realist scholars advocating unconditional withdrawal based on shifting US security priorities dismissed the global terrorist threats raised by the Pentagon, NATO and the UN as overblown, arguing that the US could address new threats through 'over-the-horizon' counterterrorist operations such as long-range airstrikes.[104] A second group, including dissenting experts within the ASG, placed a premium on achieving a US-brokered political settlement, but one that recognized 'Taliban ascendancy', rejected the vision of inclusive peacemaking and delinked withdrawal.[105] Some proposed delaying withdrawal by six months: one expert argued that the US retained the leverage of sanctions removal to negotiate an extension *and* 'demand change in the [Taliban] policies and behaviours that prompted sanctions in the first place'.[106]

To accommodate critics, Biden proposed fast-tracking a political agreement weeks before the withdrawal deadline in late February 2021. He invited Taliban leaders and senior Afghan government leaders to Istanbul, disregarding the republic's more inclusive negotiation team. Once again, coercion was used to force the hand of the Afghan state. Biden's new Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, delivered a sharply worded letter to President Ghani to 'accelerate' reaching an agreement with the Taliban, intoning that the US–Afghan relationship was breaking down. The letter attached a ready-written agreement, despite stating 'we do not intend to dictate terms to the parties'.[107] It also included a proposal for a parallel UN-convened regional foreign ministers meeting, without involving the UN or international allies in developing the plan. Biden's promise of a return to multilateralism failed to materialize, while the Taliban refused the invitation to Istanbul.

Ultimately, Biden's review only provided a short extension of the timeline to enable US forces to leave safely. On 14 April 2021, having rejected the advice of his secretaries of state and of defence, [108] Biden announced an unconditional withdrawal, asserting 'it is time to end the forever wars'.[109] By this point, it

[102] See e.g. 'Statement of LTG H. R. McMaster (US Army, retired), Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University before the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on global security challenges', 2 March 2021, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/McMaster--Statement%20for%20the%20Record_03-02-21.pdf.

[103] Sarah Krep and Douglas Kriner, 'In or out of Afghanistan is not a political choice', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 March 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-03-22/or-out-afghanistan-not-political-choice.

[104] Charles A. Kupchan and Douglas Lute, 'Biden should withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. Here's why', CNN, 18 March 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/18/opinions/afghanistan-us-troops-withdrawal-biden-kupchan-lute/index.html.

[105] United States Institute of Peace, *Afghanistan Study Group final report*, p. 68.

[106] Barnett Rubin, 'How to bargain with the Taliban', *War on the Rocks*, 19 Feb. 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/how-to-bargain-with-the-taliban/.

[107] The letter, which was leaked to Tolo News, is available at: https://tolonews.com/pdf/02.pdf, 28 Feb. 2022.

[108] Steve Coll and Adam Entous, 'The secret history of the US diplomatic failure in Afghanistan', *New Yorker,* 10 Dec. 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan.

[109] The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden on the way forward in Afghanistan', 14 April 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/.

should have been clear the Afghan state could not survive the Taliban's military offensive.

Ending military engagement had now become the lodestone of US Afghan policy. Any deviation, however small, was seen as capitulation to the military and hawkish internationalists. The Biden administration engaged in a flurry of official diplomatic activity to present an optimistic scenario, inviting an Afghan presidential delegation to the White House in June 2021 just as the US withdrew thousands of essential contractors from the country. Arguably, the US administration hoped for a 'decent interval', a chance perhaps for the Afghan government to stem the Taliban advance momentarily and provide cover for the US retreat. Last-ditch airstrikes were called in. But the Taliban overran population centres with stunning speed and as they closed in on Kabul, the US did not change policy.

In June 2021 the influential magazine *Foreign Affairs* surveyed experts on the wisdom of the withdrawal decision, revealing how the emergent narratives that coalesced to shape US policy became dominant. A majority of experts (32) agreed with the decision, framing their arguments on the basis of narrow US interests, the failures of liberal peacebuilding, and the belief that the US presence itself reduced prospects for peace. Most expressed near-absolute certainty in the decision's wisdom, and many were based in institutions funded by the Koch network. The minority disagreeing (23) represented the liberal establishment—retired military and diplomats, peace practitioners, regional historians and liberal scholars. Mirroring the exclusionary discourse, only two experts had Afghan heritage; both emphasized the humanitarian and security crises the decision would unleash on the Afghan people and region.[110]

For its part, the Afghan government, consumed by internal and external power politics, failed to plan for withdrawal and only began to do so in May, hopelessly seeking to find 'enablers' to sponsor it longer. The presidential palace's paranoia that the US sought to engineer a coup from within led it to reshuffle positions, appoint loyalists and gravely undermine Afghan institutions. The Afghan political elite also failed to unite and plan for a US withdrawal it did not believe would happen, instead competing continuously for power through an elite deal. The Taliban successfully 'gamed' negotiations for leverage, turning the US into its enforcer against the Islamic Republic while never demonstrating any interest in sharing power.

Conclusion

Constructivist analyses of peacemaking provide a more holistic, multi-dimensional understanding of these processes and their outcomes, generating insights that cannot be understood in purely rationalist or structurally based terms. Approaching the reality of conflict and peacemaking as socially constructed and drawing on empirical evidence of US diplomacy in Afghanistan between 2018 and

[110] *Foreign Affairs*, 'Is Washington right to leave Afghanistan?', 22 June 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2021-06-22/washington-right-leave-afghanistan.

2021, this article demonstrates how new western discourses and knowledge, and the ideas and practices of mediators interacted in a changing context to induce a significant shift in US policy, legitimate it and fundamentally reshape the conflict and peacemaking landscape. In this case, radical critiques of the liberal peace as imperialist combined with a populist neo-isolationist world-view to produce a discourse that prioritized US withdrawal over peace and human rights, reframed the Taliban in positive terms and excoriated the Afghan government and civil society, treating them either as 'backward' or primordial (in the Trumpian conception) or as western imperialist puppets (in the radical conception). Neither group seriously questioned the continuing 'war on terror'.

The study adds to the growing literature on normative dimensions of international mediation and peacemaking. Early studies, focused on instances of broader conflict resolution, problematized liberal peace and its assumptions, while recent ones exploring the role of the mediator as a norm entrepreneur tend to assume a more idealistic orientation of the mediator focused on the conflict space.[111] This article adds to the literature by integrating the domestic politics of the intervening country into the analysis and examining its relationship to mediators' discourse and practices as well as the resulting actions by conflict parties and international allies. It also contributes to the emergent concept of populist peacemaking by demonstrating how these discourses rejected established actors, norms and practices of the liberal peace. However, it adds to it by showing how expertise was not simply rejected; instead, it required the strategic and selective use of specialized western research and expertise not to only justify the mediator's approach but also to appropriate and distort local experiences and ideas to legitimate it, ostensibly in the name of the Afghan people.

In addition, the study contributes to the IR literature examining the nexus between narratives, knowledge and power to understand foreign policy shifts and material impacts on the ground. As a populist, President Trump was opportunistic, but withdrawal was not a predetermined choice. The introduction of a mediator who formulated the solution, and used reframing strategies to justify it, created an opportunity for the policy shift. But it required constant repetition for the new discourse to embed itself as the only logical course of action. Biden's continuation and reaffirmation of the policy, despite grim assessments by government and international agencies, speaks to how deeply the discourse had penetrated. Construction and dissemination of the new narrative, through epistemic communities, and through the media, manufactured the critical, popular consent it required.

The significance of shifting discourses and knowledge production on issues of war and peace also has implications for the broader, increasingly competitive conflict resolution field itself. The retreat from liberal conceptions of peacemaking frames statebuilding and complex peace-and-security operations as discredited approaches. To be sure, the liberal peace has many weaknesses, but peacebuilding

[111] Roland Paris, *At war's end: building peace after civil conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Sara Hellmüller, Jamie Pring and Oliver P. Richmond, 'How norms matter in mediation: an introduction', *Swiss Political Science Review* 26: 4, 2020, pp. 345–63, https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12425.

operations have reduced violence and slowly expanded spaces for civic society. Moreover, peacebuilding has been a learning process; the importance of involving civil society, ensuring the process is multi-level, or focusing on concrete issues like lifting sieges and local ceasefires, rather than long-term political solutions, were all available options being proposed in the Afghan case. Instead, the emerging alternative of coercive elite deals combined with international humanitarian assistance buttressed by over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations is likely to deepen a state of permanent emergency for local populations and make the conflict resolution space even more challenging.