

# The Pitfalls of a Shady Peace in Afghanistan

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Even before he entered the White House Donald Trump insisted that, as president, he would avoid the policies that led to some of his predecessor Barack Obama’s glaring foreign policy failures. And, yet, he now seems set to pursue one of those failed policies with gusto by embarking on what could lead to a premature disengagement from Afghanistan.

Always enamored of the term “deal”, Trump has dubbed the policy “a peace deal” with the Taliban or a bunch of shady characters

presenting themselves as leaders of the outfit that once dominated Afghanistan.

Under the “deal” the US undertakes to withdraw its remaining troops in Afghanistan within 135 days in exchange for a promise by the Taliban to fight terrorist groups that might threaten America’s interests or national security.

There are several fundamental problems with the “deal” touted by the administration as a ticket to peace in a land torn by war since the 1970s.

To start with it is not at all certain that the cast of characters that negotiated the “deal” actually do represent the Taliban. In fact, we have had a dozen statements, often on social media, by other shady characters who claim the “dealmakers” do not speak for the movement.

More importantly, perhaps, it is possible that what is known as Taliban, in shorthand, may no longer exist as a coherent

organization, provided it ever did. Even in the 1990s, when Pakistani military intelligence created the outfit as a means of influencing politics in post-Soviet Afghanistan, Taliban was more of a brand name than an actual organization. Like the Mafia in Italy it included a large number of “families” who came together when one branch, led by “seconded” Pakistani officers and NCOs, captured Kabul to set up an “Islamic emirate.”

After being flushed out of Kabul thanks to US military intervention in 2001, the movement once again fragmented. Today, we could identify a dozen groups of different sizes claiming the brand.

One group, known as the Quetta Council is located in Pakistani Baluchistan and could be regarded as an arm of Islamabad’s regional policy. Another, known as Dost-Muhammad Elders is located in Iranian territory on the Afghan border and, one must assume, coordinates policy with Tehran. A third group, largely based on the so-called Haqqani Network has a sort of embassy in Doha, Qatar. Then there are purely Pakistani Talibans, hailing from South Waziristan and the Swat Valley who see the capture of Kabul as a step towards seizing power in Islamabad.

In addition to the above groups that bear a political/religious varnish there are numerous other gangs focused on black market operations, drug deals; kidnapping for ransom and money laundering. Several groups specialize in smuggling foreign currency to Iran where a cash-flow problem has led to an unquenchable thirst for greenbacks.

Then there are a number of terrorist groups, notably Khorasan, al-Qaeda, and ISIS on the peripheries that identify with the Taliban on some occasions and oppose them at others.

The only thing that unites the cartel members is a common dream to recapture Kabul and restore the “emirate” that allowed them to rule their patches of territory as they pleased.

The “deal” itself is a model of dangerous naiveté. It aims at exchanging something tangible and easily verifiable, that is to say the withdrawal of American troops, against something intangible and not easily verifiable in the form of a promise to prevent terrorist acts against American interests. More importantly, there is no mechanism for making the Taliban dealmakers pay for failure to honor it.

Once the US has concluded its military presence, the Taliban side would be able to do whatever it likes with the “deal”, certain that selling the idea of a second invasion of Afghanistan to a war-weary American public is unthinkable for a long time to come. Thanks to Obama’s policies that led to the loss of US military “facilities” in Central Asia, coming back would be difficult even in logistical terms.

The dream of a “deal” with the Taliban was first formed under President Bill Clinton who sent his National Security adviser Bill Richardson to Kabul for a “fruitful session” with Mullah Muhammad Omar, who welcomed American money and made the noises needed to please the two Bills but looked the other way as al-Qaeda prepared the 9/11 attacks. Just weeks before 9/11, we were informed by credible sources that, having adopted Clinton’s policy in Afghanistan, the George W. Bush administration was ready to recognize the Taliban regime and exchange ambassadors with them.

Fast forward to Obama’s tenure when a number of peace conferences, backed by the US, were held in Fontainebleau in

France and London and a \$200 million trust fund, dubbed the “Taliban Trust” was set up to persuade the terror cartel to transform itself into a political party and share power in Kabul. In the end, however, the leopard didn’t even shed its spots. US officials, among them Gen. Stanley McCrystal, who didn’t endorse the gamble saw their careers curtailed.

Two points must be made clear.

First, the spectrum of groups under the Taliban label do have a constituency but by no means represent the Afghan nation. Any peace deal should be aimed at finding a place for them within the new Afghanistan, not the other way around, that is to say reshaping this new Afghanistan the way the mullahs want. They should disarm, accept the constitutional frame and seek a share of power through the ballot box.

Next, despite zigzags, the new Afghanistan, though cumbersome, corrupt and chaotic is stumbling forward on the right path; it is far better, or less bad, than anything the Taliban could or would offer.

The US won the war and the Taliban lost. The only way to peace, since the start of history, has been for those who lost to submit to the will of those who won.