

Fight and talk: Washington's new strategy for Afghanistan

[Content preview – Subscribe to **Jane's Defence Weekly** for full article]

After almost 18 years of fighting in Afghanistan, Washington's focus has turned to reaching an agreement that would end the conflict and allow for a US troop withdrawal. To achieve this the United States is banking on a 'fight and talk' strategy, but little evidence has emerged that this approach is working, as *Gabriel Dominguez* reports

The US Department of State announced in late May that US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad would embark on a diplomatic tour from 31 May to 16 June to Afghanistan, Belgium, Germany, Pakistan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates as part of an effort to rally support to facilitate a peace process to end the conflict in Afghanistan and ensure the sustainability of any peace settlement.

Following his latest diplomatic push Khalilzad, who has held six rounds of talks with Taliban representatives in Qatar, said in an 18 June tweet that Washington is seeking a “comprehensive peace agreement, not a withdrawal agreement”.



A view of old bunkers at Bagram Airfield, taken on 22 February this year. While US and Taliban representatives continue holding negotiations in Qatar aimed at ending the almost 18-year-old conflict in Afghanistan, the fighting continues, with Afghan forces suffering a high number of casualties. (US Army/Sgt James Dansie)

1745567

He pointed out that such an agreement would be made up of what he described as “four inter-connected parts”: counter-terrorism assurances; troop withdrawal; intra-Afghan

negotiations that lead to a political settlement; and a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire. He added that “this is a framework which the Taliban accept”, but emphasised that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”.

The statements came after US negotiators and Afghan Taliban representatives had reached an ‘agreement in draft’ on a framework for peace during six-day-long talks held in January in Qatar’s capital, Doha. Under the draft agreement the Taliban would deny safe havens to “terrorist groups” in Afghanistan while the United States and the international community would withdraw armed forces from the country, although no timeline for the latter was specified, according to the Pentagon.

This ‘agreement in draft’ can be viewed as an important step in the peace negotiation process, which plays a crucial role in Washington’s ‘South Asia Strategy’. Given the difficulties in breaking what top Pentagon officials have described as a “stalemate” in the almost 18-year-long Afghan conflict, the current US approach is designed to apply military and diplomatic pressure to compel the Taliban militant group to enter peace negotiations for a political settlement with the Afghan government.

That said, the challenges ahead are daunting, given that the next steps in the process – an intra-Afghan dialogue and a comprehensive ceasefire – will be more difficult to achieve, stated Glenn Fine, the principal deputy inspector general performing the duties of Lead Inspector General at the Pentagon for the US Operation ‘Freedom’s Sentinel’, in a quarterly report published on 17 May.

One key difficulty is that throughout the six rounds of peace talks held since October 2018 the Taliban have refused to meet with the Afghan government, which the militant group has described as a “puppet” government “trying to sabotage dialogue between the Islamic Emirate and Afghan political figures by seeking prominence”.

Another key issue is that, as negotiations continue, so does the conflict, with the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) suffering 31% more casualties between 1 December 2018 and 28 February 2019 than during the same period the previous year, according to a 30 April report issued by John Sopko, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

Almost half of these casualties were inflicted during checkpoint security operations, said Sopko. He added that the number of ANDSF casualties incurred from defensive operations had increased by 45%, while those from offensive operations rose by 21% during that period.

In his report the SIGAR stated that these ANDSF casualty figures, combined with a rise in enemy-initiated attacks and other security-related incidents, showed that Afghanistan “experienced heightened insecurity over the winter months”.

No rush

It seems unlikely that the Afghan Taliban will call a ceasefire anytime soon, as the group's leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, indicated in a statement issued on 1 June ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

"Friends and foes must understand that we do not believe in two-faced diplomacy in our political interactions, neither [do we] appreciate buying time, plotting behind scenes and duplicitous behaviour under the guise of negotiations, nor deem it a path towards success. No-one should expect us to pour cold water on the heated battlefronts of Jihad or forget our 40-year sacrifices before reaching our objectives," said Akhundzada.

Michael Kugelman, the deputy director of the Asia Program at the Washington-based Wilson Center, told *Jane's* that the main hurdle for the US regarding the talks is that the Taliban have almost all the leverage.

"While the US is in a hurry to get a deal, the Taliban is in no rush. It can happily back out of talks if it does not like what is on offer and return to the battlefield. This is why, so far, the talks have gone exactly how the Taliban want them to go, with most of the discussions having focused on a US troop withdrawal and the Afghan government not being allowed to participate in these talks," said Kugelman.

In fact, Suhail Shaheen, a spokesperson for the Taliban's Qatar office, was quoted by Afghan news channel TOLONews as saying on 17 June that the Taliban would set the timeline for the foreign troop withdrawal as a precondition for engaging in intra-Afghan talks.

In this context Kugelman pointed out that Washington simply does not have the leverage to compel the Taliban to negotiate on its terms. If a deal on troop withdrawal were to be reached, the Taliban's incentive to keep talking would likely decrease, given that the next likely items on the agenda – an intra-Afghan dialogue and talks about a political settlement with Kabul – would be of less interest to the insurgents, he said.

[Continued in full version...]

(896 of 5229 words)

For the full version and more content:

Jane's Defence Industry and Markets Intelligence Centre

This analysis is taken from [Jane's Defence Industry & Markets Intelligence Centre](#), which provides world-leading analysis of commercial, industrial and technological defence developments, budget and programme forecasts, and insight into new and emerging defence markets around the world.

*Jane's defence industry and markets news and analysis is also available within **Jane's Defence Weekly**. To learn more and to subscribe to **Jane's Defence Weekly** online, offline or print visit <http://magazines.ihs.com/>*

For advertising solutions visit [Jane's Advertising](#)