

AFGHANISTAN

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ISSUES

- The future of intra-Afghan peace talks looks very much in doubt. Following months of wrestling over procedural issues, the delegations in Doha have still to address the difficult substantive issues that divide them. In the negotiations, the Afghan Taliban has shown little interest in the compromises necessary to create a power-sharing agreement. Even as new efforts may be made to recast the peace process, overcoming the starkly contrasting visions of a preferred Afghan end-state will remain the principle challenge.
- The Taliban continues to increase its grip on much of the Afghan country outside of the population centers. In the absence of a comprehensive, sustained cease-fire, the ability of the Afghan security forces to withstand the Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan Province insurgencies will continue to be severely tested, especially if U.S. and coalition forces are fully withdrawn.
- Disunity among Afghanistan's political elites continues and is likely to grow as the prospects of a peace agreement fade. The danger exists that in the face of a mounting insurgency, powerful politicians will increase their efforts to unseat the Ashraf Ghani government and may explore striking separate deals with the Taliban. With increased violence across the country and feeling deserted by the international community, the current flow of Afghan refugees could turn into a flood.

US INTERESTS

- Although determined to have a small footprint in Afghanistan, the U.S. has to feel reasonably confident that Afghanistan will not once again become a launching ground for globally focused terrorist groups to attack the U.S. or our Western allies. It is of paramount importance that conflict in Afghanistan does not contribute to regional instability and radicalization that would increase the danger of nuclear proliferation.

Disengagement could also undermine U.S. geostrategic interests in a region that encompasses Iran, Russia, and China.

- The U.S. has a stake in seeing a strengthened Afghan government, one that can restore the confidence of the Afghan people in their elected leadership. It has a 19-year investment in the survival of a popularly elected, liberal constitutional government, and an obligation to continue to provide generous nonmilitary assistance.
- It remains in the American interest that there be a political solution to the Afghan conflict, one that does not sacrifice those social and economic gains that have been achieved in nearly two decades in Afghanistan.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Any further reduction of U.S. forces should be conditioned on the Taliban's adherence to the commitments it made in the Doha agreement last February. In the absence of a verifiable cease-fire and progress in intra-Afghan talks, it is imperative that a small counterterrorism force remain in the country.
- The U.S. government along with other donors should live up to its commitments to support the Kabul government, but should insist on greater accountability and provide evidence of progress in curbing corruption. The U.S. should strengthen its partnership with the Kabul government, but also be careful not to become embroiled in Afghanistan's divisive politics.
- The U.S. should always be open to all opportunities to further political reconciliation between an inclusively representative Afghan government and the Taliban. It must also continue to work with regional powers to encourage a peaceful resolution of the conflict. But the U.S. has to recognize that however great the leverage of external actors, the determination of peace in Afghanistan ultimately rests with the Afghans themselves. In the same vein, the U.S. should avoid trying to commandeer the peace process.