



**START**

# **Bargaining On and Off the Battlefield: The Bargaining Model of War and Negotiations with the Afghan Taliban**

August 2019

National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism  
*A Department of Homeland Security Emeritus Center of Excellence  
Led by the University of Maryland*

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## About This Report

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## About START

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## Citations

To cite this report, please use this format:

Gabriel, Rachel A., Max Erdemandi and Barnett S. Koven. 2019. "The Bargaining Model of War and Negotiations with the Afghan Taliban." *START* (August).

**Contents**

Executive Summary..... 4

Introduction ..... 6

Data and Methodology ..... 8

The Bargaining Model of War and Other Theoretical Considerations ..... 8

    Bargaining as a Continuation of War ..... 8

    The Bargaining Model in Irregular Warfare ..... 12

        Challenges of Bargaining with Insurgents ..... 12

        Third Party Involvement and Transnationality..... 14

        Implications for Afghanistan ..... 15

Comparative Case Studies..... 16

    Colombia (1964-2016)..... 17

    Sri Lanka (1983-2009)..... 21

    Northern Ireland (1969-1998) ..... 23

    Key Takeaways for Afghanistan ..... 25

Key Actors and Interests ..... 26

    The United States of America..... 27

    The Russian Federation ..... 28

    The People’s Republic of China ..... 30

    India..... 32

    Pakistan..... 33

    Iran..... 34

    Tribal and other Non-State Afghan Elites ..... 34

Battlefield Considerations ..... 35

Off Battlefield Considerations ..... 39

    Political and Ideological Considerations ..... 39

    Financial Considerations ..... 42

Potential Pathways to a Durable Peace Agreement..... 43

Conclusion..... 49

References..... 51

## Executive Summary

This report is intended to provide an analysis of when and under what conditions the Taliban might be willing to come to the negotiating table with the serious intention of reaching a peace agreement with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA). Drawing upon the academic literature on the bargaining model of war and lessons learned from comparisons to other peace negotiations between state and non-state actors, it seeks to establish principles for evaluating if and when the Taliban could be incentivized to engage in serious negotiations. Noting the influential role of third parties, actors and interests this report examines both battlefield and off-the-battlefield considerations for the Taliban that may alter their interest in a negotiated settlement. In so doing, it provides insights for U.S. practitioners and policy-makers that balance the desire to further decrease the role of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan with the need for stability in Afghanistan.

The eight most consequential findings of the analysis include:

1. The Taliban is in a stronger position on the battlefield given its continued ability to contest, take and hold Afghan territory through force of arms. This also confers the Taliban with an advantage as regards influence over the population. Consequently, this serves as a strong disincentive to negotiating in earnest at the present time.
2. Nevertheless, the Taliban is also aware that total victory by force of arms is unrealistic. So long as the GoIRA maintains its international backing, the Taliban will not be able to take complete control of all of Afghanistan's major cities. As such, fruitful negotiations with the Taliban are more plausible over the longer-term (e.g., after they have maximized the amount of territory they can capture through armed conflict), or through sufficient incentives with respect to off-battlefield motivations.
3. For negotiations to be fruitful, they will need to recognize the Taliban's dominant position, especially in rural Afghanistan. This will likely involve extensive devolution of power to the local level, thus allowing the Taliban to formalize their political dominance throughout much of the countryside. It will likely be necessary for the U.S. government to exert substantial pressure on GoIRA in order to incentivize it to go along with sharing a significant amount of political power with the Taliban.
4. The Taliban is not monolithic, and there exist off-battlefield opportunities to incentivize some faction to lead the group as a whole to the negotiating table. For example, a small number of Taliban leaders are deeply motivated by ideology and the desire to re-establish an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan. However, their core interests diverge from many local Taliban leaders who are primarily concerned with local control of territory, economic gain, etc.
5. A critical ideological hardline for the Taliban is its refusal to engage in direct talks with the GoIRA on the grounds that the government is an illegitimate establishment constructed and

supported by foreign powers. Framing participation in negotiations as a way to improve local conditions could help mitigate these concerns.

6. The Taliban has conditioned their participation in any talks on the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Serious steps towards the withdrawal of U.S. troops could help pave the way for Taliban participation in negotiations, while also improving the popularity of the GoIRA (as the presence of U.S. forces is broadly unpopular).
7. The current system of centralized government in Afghanistan is and has historically been untenable. Negotiations will only succeed if plans for a new government structure provide incentives for both government elites and Afghanistan's myriad ethnic, tribal and other forms of local powerbrokers (heretofore referred to as local leaders).
8. The competing interests of influential external third parties, such as Pakistan, Russia, India, China and Iran will need to be reconciled in negotiations to the extent that they have both sufficient capability and motivation to prevent fruitful negotiations or destabilize an agreement.

The report concludes by offering broad-scope recommendations for the terms of a durable and lasting settlement in Afghanistan. Based on the analysis and conclusions in this research, it suggests that the best possible hope for a durable and lasting settlement is a political structure where power is disaggregated to local leaders at the district level. Additionally, it identifies six conditions that are most likely to result in a stable Afghanistan including:

1. An eventual stalemate in the conflict and perception of symmetry on both sides or sufficient motivation for both sides in a near-stalemate situation.
2. The willingness of local Taliban leaders in Afghanistan to break with more ideologically motivated Pakistani-based leaders to enter negotiations with the GoIRA.
3. Concrete action by both the United States and the GoIRA to indicate they are serious about ending the Bilateral Security Agreement.
4. The GoIRA's willingness to negotiate a decentralized power sharing structure that will require it to relinquish a national monopoly on power.
5. Decentralization at the district level, which puts power formally in the hands of local government and local leaders in the territories they control.
6. The ability of third party stakeholders to both meaningfully engage in and commit to the terms of an agreement. This is especially important for the United States, Russia, Pakistan, China, Iran and non-Taliban local leaders who have both the capability and sufficient interest to act as spoilers.

## Introduction

Since 2001, U.S. involvement in Afghanistan has been myopically focused on *winning*. In two addresses delivered in the immediate aftermath of September 11, President George W. Bush proclaimed that the United States would “direct every resource at our command” to winning “the first war of the 21st century decisively” (Bush 2001a, Bush 2001b). Though he warned that it would be a long and determined campaign “unlike any other we have ever seen,” he assured Americans of “the victories to come” (ibid.). Roughly a year into the War in Afghanistan, President Bush reiterated that despite running a “small and short-term” budget deficit, the United States was “winning the war on terror” (Bush 2002). The objective of winning in Afghanistan persisted throughout President Barak Obama’s administration. Despite his campaign promise to end the war, as president he declared Afghanistan to be “a war that we have to win” (Landler 2017). To that end, he significantly increased the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to almost to 100,000 (ibid.). In 2013, President Obama declared that while “America’s commitment to a unified and sovereign Afghanistan will endure” (Calamur 2018), the nature of the commitment would change. Strategy would shift to empowering U.S. military and civilian personnel to train Afghan forces to maintain stability while continuing to combat al-Qaida (AQ) militants and to focus on “winning hearts and minds, and establishing good intelligence” (ibid.; Corum 2007, 258; Tan 2009, 11). Like his predecessors, President Donald Trump – the third and current commander-in-chief of the war – has declared his commitment to winning in Afghanistan, promising that the U.S. military will be provided “the equipment, the resources, and the funding they need...to always, always, always win” (Trump 2017, 25). After 2,347 casualties, nearly \$6 trillion spent, and 17 years of talking about *winning* (DCAS 2019), Afghanistan today is largely controlled by the Taliban, and a decisive U.S. victory is nowhere in sight. This situation raises an important question: Can the United States instead achieve a grand bargain to end the conflict in Afghanistan?

While the United States continues to maintain its official rhetoric on the need to win in Afghanistan and its commitment to doing so, growing unpopularity for the war and shifting political and economic circumstances at home and abroad have forced the United States to consider an exit strategy. It has become increasingly clear that neither the Bush administration nor its successors have had a coherent strategy in Afghanistan. The U.S.-supported GoIRA was established to undermine the Taliban and stabilize the country. However, it is largely viewed as an illegitimate product of foreign imposed regime change by most Afghans. Additionally, the form of governance and political structure (i.e., Western state-centric democracy) that the United States has imposed on Afghans defies the cultural, ethnic and geopolitical particularities of the country, and further serves to undermine the legitimacy of the Kabul-based GoIRA in the eyes of the public. This sentiment is especially pronounced in the provinces (Sidky 2019, 9). Under these circumstances, the United States cannot justify remaining in Afghanistan, but it also cannot initiate an abrupt exit in the absence of a peace deal for the following reasons: 1) abrupt withdrawal without a political settlement would create a power vacuum for the Taliban or other VNSAs to

flourish, raising terrorism risks that could threaten the region, the globe and the U.S. homeland 2) a power vacuum would likely lead to internal, regional and global instability as myriad third parties with divergent interests in Afghanistan could compete, unrestricted, for influence and control over Afghanistan and its resources. Fortunately, at least some of the conditions necessary for fruitful negotiations have already been established including the death of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, a decrease in violence, and subsequent reduction of the number of U.S. troops in the country. However, successful negotiations will not only need to satiate the Taliban, GoIRA and the U.S. government, but also influential third parties, including Russia, China, Pakistan, India and Iran, which have strong interests in Afghanistan as well as internal stakeholders, such as non-Taliban local leaders, who might act as spoilers.

Efforts to negotiate peace in Afghanistan between the Taliban, the GoIRA and the United States officially began in 2010. Despite a series of roadblocks, recent developments have once again sparked hopes that the conflict may finally come to an end. GoIRA President Ashraf Ghani extended a grand gesture of peace, offering to enter negotiations with the Taliban with no preconditions or strings attached. This sparked a wave of pro-peace movements across Afghanistan. Despite the Taliban's refusal to negotiate directly with Kabul, and continued fighting across Afghanistan, some remain optimistic that Taliban leaders may soon be willing to engage in negotiations, pointing to their willingness to negotiate with third parties including the United States and Russia. International support for the peace effort has also increased, with high-profile conferences in Uzbekistan and Indonesia helping to galvanize support for the Ghani peace effort (Walsh 2018).

Perhaps the most symbolically significant development to date occurred in June 2018, when a three-day ceasefire by government and Taliban forces was observed over the Eid ul-Fitr holiday. The ceasefire resulted in unprecedented peaceful interactions between government and Taliban forces in numerous locations in the provinces. This episode came about when the government unilaterally declared a cease-fire. The Taliban then followed suit, albeit they did not acknowledge that their actions were a response to the government. The government's offer to extend the ceasefire was rejected; however, the unprecedented peaceful interaction between opposing forces was interpreted by some as a sign that the Taliban may finally be willing to bend from its hardline stance against negotiating with the government to reach a political settlement (Walsh 2018). Moreover, it sent a clear signal that not only are the Afghan people tired of war, but the rank-and-file on both sides have tired of fighting as well. It remains unclear if any of these developments are serious indications that either or both parties are ready to come to the negotiating table with the intention of achieving a long-lasting peace.

The refusal of the Taliban to recognize the legitimacy of the central Afghan government is still a significant ideological impediment, which might preclude direct negotiations between the GoIRA

and the Taliban from taking place at all. Furthermore, certain leaders on both sides have interests that would be threatened by peace, lowering the chances that negotiations would produce a durable and lasting peace agreement. Competing international interests will also complicate efforts to achieve peace, with Pakistan being the most significant spoiler.

It is, however, theoretically possible to reach an agreement under the right conditions. This report seeks to identify these conditions by examining the extant literature on the bargaining model of war, as well as other relevant theoretical frameworks. It also draws insights on bargaining with belligerents from relevant historical negotiated peace processes. Based on this analysis, this report offers recommendations for creating the best possible circumstances under which fruitful negotiations towards a lasting peace agreement can be achieved.

### **Data and Methodology**

This report is the product of an open-source investigation involving secondary sources. This report leverages existing political science theories – namely the literature on the bargaining model of war – to structure a rigorous qualitative research design leveraging case study methodology, thick description and process-tracing. Detailed descriptive analysis of this sort is ideal for developing complex, multidimensional concepts and theories (Coppedge 1999, 31). It is also useful in shedding light on complicated causal processes.

### **The Bargaining Model of War and Other Theoretical Considerations**

#### **Bargaining as a Continuation of War**

The way peace has largely been discussed within the context of Afghanistan is flawed. Most discussions explicitly or implicitly view peace processes as distinct from armed conflict. The desired outcome – an outright military victory – articulated by Presidents Bush, Obama and Trump would have entailed a linear process with peace beginning after military engagements have ended. In the Afghanistan context, however, this idealized outcome is no longer possible. If peace materializes in Afghanistan, it will be a negotiated peace that is not preceded by an outright and complete military victory. Consequently, bargaining will occur simultaneously on and off the battlefield. Political science and other academic research offer important theoretical insights on these processes. Importantly, the literature recognizes that these processes are complex and intertwined. They often entail multiple actors, each with distinct goals and competing priorities.

Clausewitz's seminal work, *On War*, is the genesis for political science research on the bargaining model of war. Clausewitz famously observed that war is merely "the continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means" (Clausewitz 1976, 605). This paradigm continues to influence the study of war as part of the diplomatic process rather than a phenomenon that results from failure of politics (605-610). Clausewitz argued that war, "a true political instrument," serves no purpose in itself because "the political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and



means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose” (87). The bargaining model approaches international politics as disputes over scarce goods, where the use of bargaining tools – including but certainly not limited to war – are necessary to achieve the optimal allocation.

Accordingly, negotiations to settle the allocation of goods and resources are essential to armed conflict, as well as non-violent political processes. In the Clausewitzian sense, war is not the “breakdown of diplomacy” but rather a “continuation of bargaining” (Reiter 2003, 27). Thus, it is a cyclical process; war ends when a deal is reached; peace breaks down when there is a disagreement about the terms. While war utilizes military means such as destroying enemy forces and occupying enemy territory, the ultimate goal is to create political conditions under which the adversary feels compelled to begin negotiations, and eventually stop fighting (Clausewitz 1976, 90-91).

Over the years, Clausewitz’s initial observations spurred an increasingly sophisticated research agenda that continues to develop. In his survey of the bargaining model literature, Reiter attributes this development to the introduction of research methods that “strengthened the logical foundations for old hypotheses and generated an array of provocative new hypotheses,” that view war as a single theoretically consistent process along with its causes, conduct, conclusion and consequences (Reiter 2003, 27-29). The modern approach to the bargaining model of war also borrows from Clausewitz’s observation that most wars are limited rather than total, and assumes that wars generally result in a bargain rather than one side’s decisive defeat.

Extant literature suggests that in most cases armed conflict arises because actors fail to reach an agreement over the settlement of an issue and seek a better settlement by means of combat (Reiter 2003, 29). Fearon (1995) asserts that the possibility of war increases under three conditions. First, the unwillingness to commit to a resolution out of fear that future changes in the balance of power could alter the conditions of the bargain. A potential change in the balance of power may prompt either side to review the conditions of a diplomatically settled agreement, but if the agreement is settled through the decisive victory of one side, future negotiations may be evaded. That said external guarantors of a peace process can help mitigate these concerns, a notion which will be explored further in a review of the literature on third parties in negotiations.

Second, the indivisibility of the objective may cause opposing sides to go to war with each other. If what is at stake cannot be divided between the parties of the conflict, it would prevent them from reaching a mutually-agreeable bargain. This is especially likely to be the case in insurgent conflict where the primary objective is toppling the existing government. This also occurs in territorial disputes wherein the territory being fought over has religious or other significance which precludes its subdivision (Fearon 1995; Goddard 2002; Reiter 2003; Walter 2009).

Third, war results from uncertainty. Prior to fighting neither side can be sure of the others capabilities and resolve. Indeed, questions may exist about one's own capabilities or resolve prior to conflict onset. Accordingly, states of approximately equal power are more likely to go to war as both belligerents will recognize that they have a decent possibility of proving victorious (Reiter 2003; Reed 2002 and 2003; Wittman 2001). However, in insurgent conflicts, the weaker side may still opt into armed conflict based on either or both the belief that guerrilla tactics will compensate adequately for material weakness and/or that they will prevail despite asymmetries simply because their resolve is far greater. For example, in 1946, during the lead up to the First Indochina War, Ho Chi Minh famously articulated that his theory of victory rested in the fact that North Vietnamese resolve was superior to French resolve. Ho proclaimed, "You can kill 10 of my men for every one I kill of yours, yet even at those odds, you will lose and I will win" (Time 1998). Ho articulated a similar point when asked how long he thought he would need to resist the U.S. in Vietnam. He stated, "twenty years, maybe 100 years – as long as it took to win, regardless of the cost" (ibid.).

When conflict results from uncertainty, the act of fighting itself serves to provide additional information and reduce uncertainty. In short, bargaining begins on the battlefield. Smith (1998), Smith and Stam (2002), Filson and Werner (2002), and Powell (2002) argue that fighting reduces uncertainty about the enemy's capabilities and resolve, thus revealing more information regarding the conduct and conclusion of the conflict. Once uncertainty regarding the actors' capabilities is lifted, the odds of the belligerents reaching a negotiated agreement increases (Reiter 2003, 29 - 30).

The contemporary approach to the bargaining model is also concerned with the consequences of war – mostly sustaining the post-war peace (Reiter 2003, 33). Two distinct hypotheses are noteworthy. Werner (1999), posits that if the post-war balance of power experiences frequent alterations, war becomes more likely as the belligerents will be more likely to turn to war to realign the distribution of goods and power between them. Smith and Stam (2002), on the other hand, hypothesize that the more the states fight, the more information is revealed about the capabilities and resolve of each party, causing the expectations to converge. The convergence of expectations, therefore, helps sustain the post-war peace and stability. Their argument also supports the long-standing "war-weariness hypothesis" that peace lasts longer after long-lasting wars (ibid.). Smith and Stam's hypothesis has enjoyed a larger acceptance in the conflict literature (see, Walter 2004; Filson and Werner 2002; Powell 2006; Horowitz 2010).

Despite the growing importance of the bargaining model of war in conflict management and security studies, the literature contains significant gaps regarding empirical applications of the model in the context of irregular warfare. Contemporary bargaining model literature focuses heavily on dyadic conflict between sovereign states, with little attention to bargaining in cases like

Afghanistan, where the nature of the conflict is irregular, involving asymmetric power relations, civil war, and domestic and transnational insurgencies. Thus, other extant theories from political science and other disciplines, such as behavioral economics, combined with empirical analysis of case studies are necessary to enable a more complete analysis of the prospects for fruitful negotiations in Afghanistan.

Behavioral economics, and prospect theory in particular, offers additional insights on negotiating diplomatic solutions to military conflicts. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (1979) show that when faced with risky decisions, individuals exhibit several pervasive effects that are inconsistent with the fundamentals of utility theory – or the belief that individuals consistently make perfectly rational decisions on the basis of cost-benefit analysis. Specifically, they find that people are risk-averse in the domain of gains (less willing to take risks to achieve greater gains) and risk-acceptant in the domain of losses (more willing to take risks to recuperate or avoid losses). The authors further demonstrate that individuals are relatively more risk-acceptant in the domain of losses than they are risk-averse in a comparable domain of gains. In addition, Post, et al. (2008) show that in repeated interactions, individuals who initially experienced gains (losses) that surpassed expectations are systematically more likely to adopt a far less (more) risky strategy than utility maximization would warrant going forward. These decisions are path dependent and are unlikely to change substantially even if the initial large gains (losses) do not continue. While these scholars are focused on economic decision-making, their findings are transferable to the study of war. For example, in the case of an insurgency that started out struggling to compete with state security forces, we would expect that insurgent group to engage in extremely risky behavior for the duration of the conflict, even long after they have turned the tides and have made extensive inroads against the state. Importantly, it is often the case that insurgencies start off weak and gain momentum overtime. Thus insurgent forces, are generally speaking, psychologically predisposed to high-risk engagements.

Behavioral economics also explains why fighting leads to negotiations off the battlefield. Conventional wisdom would suggest that while combat lifts uncertainty, the side that is faring better on the battlefield should raise their demands as a result of their victory, thus reducing the probability of a negotiated peace (Reiter 2003, 31; Wagner 2000; Wittman 1979). As it turns out however, the losing side tends to lower their expectations more than the winner raises theirs, making a bargain possible (Reiter 2003; Filson and Werner 2002; Smith and Stam 2002; Labs 1997). In other words, war happens because the competing sides disagree about each other's ability to "inflict and/or absorb costs," and actual combat helps end war by "reducing disagreement between two sides over these two factors and by creating a bargaining space (Reiter 2003, 31-32)."

Other relevant literature addresses the timing of efforts for negotiations and conflict resolution. According to ripeness theory, the decision to negotiate occurs when both sides recognize that continued armed struggle will not result in total victory. They realize that a negotiated solution is the best chance for achieving their objectives, at least in part, and is thus a more beneficial approach than continued armed conflict (Zartman 1996; 2000). More specifically, a “ripe” moment for conflict settlement occurs when belligerents perceive there to be a “Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS)” (Zartman 2001). An MHS is a situation wherein belligerents find themselves locked into a conflict they cannot win through further fighting that is painful to both parties. When belligerents perceive that they are in an MHS, they are more likely to agree to terms that they would have previously rejected or even accept proposals that have been on the table for some time. Not all ripe moments lead to negotiations or resolutions, however, as they must be recognized and seized by either the parties themselves or through the persuasion of third party mediators to recognize and act on the desirable objectives of ripeness (Zartman 2001, 1). This theory expands this framework by adopting a multiple causal factor model that takes into account changing environmental factors and psychological states, and separately examines the motives of each side for ending the conflict.

While ripeness theory is grounded in perception and cost-benefit evaluations, readiness theory focuses on the motivations for ending a conflict. It recognizes that the most influential factors on each side may change as they re-estimate the possibilities for success or failure, or as they weigh the importance of concrete advantages against the costs and benefits of continuing the conflict. Importantly, third party pressure is viewed as one source of motivation that can bring parties to the negotiating table even if they do not perceive themselves to be in an MHS (Mitchell 1991, 35; Pruitt 2005, 8).

### **The Bargaining Model in Irregular Warfare**

The literature on the bargaining model almost exclusively focuses on conventional conflict dyads. Though few in number, there have been recent studies that attempted to apply the bargaining model to irregular conflict and civil wars, focusing especially on challenges of negotiating with insurgents, the impact of third party intervention on the duration of civil wars, and the importance of legitimacy (Bapat 2005; Butler et al. 2009; Salehyan 2007; Fearon 2004; Hazelton 2007; Pischedda 2015; Costalli et al. 2017).

#### **Challenges of Bargaining with Insurgents**

Bargaining with insurgents poses unique challenges for sovereign states. Bapat (2005, 699) argues that opportunities for peaceful negotiations in such conflicts are infrequent as violence is the norm, and governments often refuse to recognize the insurgents as legitimate bargaining partners. He concludes that in the earlier stages of insurgency – which he calls the “initial vulnerability” – governments would use their resources and armed forces to repress the

insurgency. Surviving this period would mean that the insurgency has grown in capacity and capability. If the insurgency continues to be successful, this would then introduce an opportunity to negotiate a peaceful resolution, where the government may be forced to negotiate from a less advantageous position. If these negotiations fail, the insurgency finds a renewed sense of invulnerability and legitimacy and may no longer want to negotiate.

Civil conflict involving multiple parties, including insurgents, pose unique sets of challenges. For instance, inter-insurgent conflict within a larger war involving a state actor raises the associated cost and risk for these groups, allowing states (typically the strongest conflict actor) to consolidate resources and make military and political gains, often leading to state victory (Pischedda 2015). Risk, cost, and potential rewards are among the driving forces of alliances in civil wars, and understanding these dynamics are crucial for effective counterinsurgency policy planning and implementation. Civil war alliances follow minimum winning coalition (MWC) logic, where participants want to be in a coalition big enough to win but small enough for victors to win an optimal share of spoils. Once the MWC threshold is passed, according to Christia (2012), belligerents, fueled by a combination of greed and security concerns, risk looking to smaller coalitions to maximize their gains, independently of ethnicity and other alignment preferences. Pischedda identifies two conditions under which the costs and risks related to inter-insurgent conflict are “likely to be more than compensated by the resulting benefits,” which include windows of opportunity and vulnerability (293-294).

The notion of windows of opportunity refers to a period when an insurgency faces weaker “co-ethnic rivals” and government opposition, prompting a “hegemonic bid” to eliminate all rivals. While the “favorable balance of power and the limited threat posed by the government ensures that the risk and cost of infighting would be kept at acceptably low levels,” overlapping bases of support may allow the dominant insurgency to defeat others and absorb their resources as well (293). The victor, then, would be in a better position to challenge the government. The window of vulnerability, on the other hand, occurs when an insurgents experience an unfavorable shift in the balance of power among other co-ethnic rivals and faces an immediate threat from the government. Pischedda argues that in the absence of a feasible solutions, the insurgents may resort to use of violence in an attempt to improve their situation (294). In Pischedda’s work both windows of opportunity and vulnerability apply to war between insurgent groups and not just exclusively between governments and insurgencies. These concepts are relevant to a holistic application of the bargaining model as they directly relate to the fundamental question of which conditions increase the possibility of transitioning from armed conflict to successful peace negotiations. Moreover, this line of research recognize that insurgent organizations are not monolithic actors.

Even though not every insurgency is a civil war, they exhibit similar attributes that often make observations about one applicable to the other. For instance, Fearon's comparative research on the duration of civil wars posits that civil wars where neither side can disarm the other are often protracted and result in military stalemates (Fearon 2004). His research raises five important hypotheses. First, civil wars that come out of coups or popular revolutions tend to end quickly. Second, peripheral insurgencies – civil wars involving rural militias typically operating near state's borders – have an equal chance of succeeding and failing either by military victory or by achieving a favorable negotiated settlement. Third, civil wars that involve land or resource conflict last longer, especially if they are fought between dominant, state-supported ethnic groups against ethnically distinct inhabitants of the disputed region. Fourth, civil wars in which rebels have access to finance from contraband goods like opium or cocaine also last longer. Lastly, wars fought against “colonial” powers tend to be somewhat shorter than the average (ibid.). The second, third, and fourth hypotheses are especially applicable to Afghanistan.

### Third Party Involvement and Transnationality

Cetinyan (2002, 647-8) developed one of the first models that examines how external parties impact conflict outcomes. He argues that while the presence of an external peace broker does not fundamentally alter the bargaining outcome, it may enhance group strength and the incentives for extended deterrence. Cetinyan concludes that power disparities between ethnic minorities and state actors play an important role in how states treat said groups but does not affect the likelihood of said groups rebelling against the state. He further argues that there is not significant correlation between external intervention on behalf of ethnic groups and the magnitude of mistreatment of ethnic groups by the state (648).

On the topic of external intervention, Jacqueline Hazelton (2007) observes that powerful Western-centric external parties usually utilize what is often referred to as the “good governance approach.” The logic is that by implementing democratizing reforms, popular grievances will be reduced, although this has not proven to be particularly effective. This is evidenced by empirical study of Afghanistan's contemporary history, as well as the other case studies discussed later in this report. Hazelton's findings are particularly useful when analyzing the failures of the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan and the possibility of reaching sustainable peace. The good governance theory fails to comprehensively address the fact that the most challenging grievances fueling insurgencies often cannot be resolved through reforms, and lead to full-blown armed conflict. This is especially true when governments are not able to carry out their policy promises even with external support. This underscores Clausewitz's point that war is simply a continuation of politics with different means. Furthermore, external support complicates dynamics between warring parties. Insurgencies that receive external support gain additional resources, competence and resolve which, consequentially, enhances their war-time performance and endurance as well as post-war projections. On the other hand, if the government is on the receiving end, it may cause

them to appear weak and reduce their legitimacy – a weakness which can be exploited by insurgents (113). Additionally, efforts to establish a democratic system in a non-democratic state can exacerbate violence and existing tensions (Hazelton 2007, 113; Smith et al. 2008, 42; Mansfield et al. 1995).

As an alternative to the governance approach, Hazelton proposes a “theory of coercion,” (81) identifying three requirements states must meet in order to defeat an insurgency. First, they must engage domestic political elites such as warlords and ethno-regional leaders to consolidate power and collect intelligence (from rival groups) about the insurgency. Second, they need to utilize brute force to control the civilian population in order to curtail the flow of resources to the insurgency. Third, they need to apply brute force to defeat the will and capacity of the insurgency to continue fighting. Counterinsurgency efforts, therefore, do not require a “redistribution of power and wealth among all citizens” or “popular support for the state” in order to succeed, as the good governance approach would suggest. In fact, such externally-supported political reforms are often not implemented successfully due to domestic political considerations, as well as high human and financial resource costs (Hazelton 2007, 81-82).

In an empirical study on transnational rebel groups, Saleyhan (2007) claims that regional conditions are the key to understanding the dynamics between warring parties. National boundaries limit states’ ability to quash transnational rebel groups, which may find sanctuary – or even patrons – in external states. For example, the Afghan Taliban certainly benefit immensely from cross-boarder sanctuary and other forms of support from the Pakistani government. Thus, Saleyhan (2007, 241-242) argues that while defeating transnational groups requires international collaboration, neighboring states require special consideration due to the direct impact they have on the dynamics of intra-state wars and the ability of insurgent groups to prolong conflict duration through manipulation of favorable circumstances in neighboring states.

### Implications for Afghanistan

Historical precedence indicates that the western-centric democratic model promoted by the United States in Afghanistan has been unsuccessful in the context of Afghanistan’s diverse ethnic make-up, unique tribal sociopolitical structure and difficult geographic terrain. As such, it has proven highly resistant to systems of strong centralized government (Barfield 2019, 7-8). The bargaining model views war as a one political instrument in the dispute over scarce goods and resources (which include influence and power). It posits that war ends when an agreement is reached and peace breaks down when there is a disagreement about the terms. Barfield recommends a decentralized power structure where no ethnic group constitutes a national hegemony, but instead are able to exert influence and authority in parts of the country where they are the majority (ibid., 8). However, based on past precedence, there are reasons to believe that an

even more decentralized system of governance might be a better solution, as will be discussed further in the penultimate section of this report.

The bargaining model and the other theories enumerated in this section have important takeaways for the conflict in Afghanistan and its potential resolution. The bargaining model assumes that there is a strong relationship between power asymmetry and willingness to negotiate. Currently, as will be explored in full detail in the remainder of this report, the Taliban appears to have the stronger position in Afghanistan. Thus, they are able to continue to refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the GoIRA, or negotiate, until they have maximized their martial gains and their vision is prioritized as part of a framework for a future deal in Afghanistan. For the GoIRA's part, the Taliban is beyond the initial vulnerability stage and thus, according to the bargaining model, combat is not the best strategy to defeat them. Second, 17 years of fighting have revealed the strengths and weaknesses of both sides. While the mutual perception of a stalemate on the battlefield may not yet have been reached in Afghanistan, both ripeness and readiness theories suggest that both parties could be brought to the table through various off-battlefield incentives and through third party pressures and mediating tactics. These options will be explored in detail throughout this report, with special consideration to how the United States might help create the conditions for ripeness and/or readiness for both the Taliban and the GoIRA. Lack of trust between GoIRA and the Taliban remains a serious impediment that has undermined talks thus far, as there is little faith that negotiations will produce an agreement that is honored on both sides. Distrust and competition between various third parties with stakes in the conflict and its resolution further complicates matters as they seek to influence negotiations and their outcomes. Prospect theory, with its emphasis on risk-acceptance and risk-aversion, shows that insurgents may be inherently risk-acceptant, and thus willing to continue fighting even with good negotiating outcomes, whereas governments are less likely to accept risk even if they are losing and are predisposed to taking a less-than-ideal settlement. As such, while opportunities for third parties to act as guarantors of a potential agreement are present, a durable and lasting agreement will likely hinge on how well negotiations address the competing interests of external powers in Afghanistan.

### **Comparative Case Studies**

Comparative examinations of other negotiations between states and insurgents provide a useful demonstration of the aforementioned theories and help to draw out relevant insights for Afghanistan. An examination of the durability of the peace in each case will also prove instructive for Afghanistan. This section examines the Colombian, Sri Lankan and Northern Ireland peace processes. It is important to note that not every theory will be relevant to every case, and some theories are better suited to analysis of certain conflict dynamics than others, but all theories discussed have at least some applicability to Afghanistan.



These cases were selected as they all entailed protracted conflicts involving insurgent forces. Negotiations occurred in all three cases, albeit to varying degrees of success. They are intended to highlight the conditions under which negotiations are likely to take place and/or succeed. The Colombian case provides an example of how, after multiple failed rounds of negotiations, a settlement was reached in 2016. Both the process and the difficulties associated with implementing the deal provide lessons for Afghanistan. The Sri Lankan case was selected as an example of how, despite the fact that the LTTE was ultimately defeated militarily, multiple attempts at negotiations failed due to specific conflict dynamics that provide insights for the Afghan case. Finally, Northern Ireland was selected as an example of how a negotiated political settlement was made possible through the mutual acknowledgement of the conflict being stalemated. All three cases provide useful points of comparison with Afghanistan that will be explored in further detail.

### **Colombia (1964-2016)**

A November 2016 peace agreement between Colombia's Marxist-leftist insurgent group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*; FARC), and the Colombian government ended over half a century of conflict between the two sides. Negotiations spanned four years (2012-2016) and mainly took place in Havana, Cuba between government and FARC negotiators with significant civil society and international involvement. The FARC was formed in 1964 in response to an agreement that ended Colombia's civil war but excluded the left from political participation and sparked a wave of anti-leftist violence. The involvement of right-wing paramilitary forces and narco-traffickers escalated the violence, resulting in over 250,000 casualties and approximately 7 million displaced persons (BBC 2016; The Guardian 2013; The Economist 2018). The 2016 agreement followed myriad previous failed attempts at peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC. Unlike previous attempts to negotiate a lasting peace agreement, each of which followed surges in the FARC's military capacity and ability to target the state, the government was the stronger party in the 2012-2016 negotiations (Castano and Tarrant 2009; DeAtley 2010). The negotiations followed a sustained military campaign against the FARC, which reduced its force strength by nearly half. Additionally, for the first time, the government was able to successfully target and kill top FARC leaders with the use of U.S.-provided targeting intelligence and precision guided munitions (Priest 2013).

There are several explanations for why previous attempts at negotiations failed while the most recent succeeded. First, previous rounds were conducted at times when the conditions for ripeness and readiness were lacking, as they followed periods of dramatic expansion in FARC military strength and territorial influence. When the FARC was negotiating from a position of strength, they had little incentive to make serious concessions that would result in a lasting peace agreement. This long history of negotiations in Colombia is broadly consistent with extant

literature, which suggests that when insurgents experience sustained successes, governments are more likely to be willing to negotiate even from less advantageous positions, while failed negotiations serve to increase the confidence of insurgent groups and make them more difficult to negotiate with going forward. The 2012-2016 peace process marked a turning point, as the shift of the military balance of power in the government's favor left no hope of a rebel victory. International isolation, particularly by its neighbors, further motivated the FARC to negotiate. While total defeat was unlikely, as the FARC would have retained a capacity to wage irregular warfare as a guerilla organization indefinitely, it would not have been able to openly confront the government's armed forces. However, the Santos administration's strategic approach of curtailing the FARC's ability to wage conventional warfare on one hand, and offering attractive incentives and conditions for demobilization on the other hand, created a situation where a negotiated solution was preferable to indefinite asymmetric warfare (Mitchell 1991, 38). In line with bargaining model's core principles, this outcome materialized as uncertainty regarding the capability and resolve of the FARC and the government had lifted.

Unlike conventional wisdom, which suggests that the winning side would raise their demands rather than offer unprecedented incentives, prospect theory helps explain why, even despite being in a winning position, the government was willing to offer numerous concessions to the FARC as a risk-avoidant strategy in the face of gains. The Santos administration's approach differed greatly from previous negotiations that simply demanded the surrender of arms in exchange for the reintegration of rebels. Its practical concessions were unprecedented, but effective. The allowance for a judicial process for former belligerents, where those who confessed and made reparations would not be required to serve jail time, guarantees on political participation and other generous allowances ultimately paved the way for a deal. In addition to these obvious incentives, negotiations offered the FARC an opportunity to present itself as an advocate for majority interests by negotiating socioeconomic and political reforms that, despite being compatible with the capitalist system and liberal democracy, could result in broad-scale socioeconomic and political democratization (Valenzuela 2017). Ideologically, the administration's approach to negotiations offered the FARC a dignified way out of the conflict by addressing key points of its mission statement and agenda (particularly the opposition to Western-style capitalism and the desire for redistribution of wealth) that continued to draw the support of many social sectors. Although many of these concessions were rhetorical, this approach allowed the FARC to save face despite sticking to its previously declared hardline stances. Thus the Colombian conflict demonstrates that despite rhetoric to the contrary, insurgent organizations are not immune to change when conflict dynamics shift, nor do their priorities and preferences remain fixed (Valenzuela 2018). This assessment is supported by quantitative dyadic analysis of government and FARC actions which shows that while the Colombian Ministry of Defense (MINDEFENSA)'s new ability to kill or capture substantial numbers of senior FARC leaders was instrumental in

bringing the FARC to the negotiating table, non-kinetic, conciliatory actions were still essential to ensure the FARC's eventual demobilization (Koven 2018).

A peace accord was finally signed in August 2016, but a referendum to ratify the agreement in October 2016 failed with 50.2% of voters opposed and 49.8% voting in favor. Both sides returned to Havana to sign a revised deal, which was ratified by both houses of Congress – instead of being put up for a public referendum – in late November 2016. Revisions included a requirement for FARC members to go to designated transitional zones within five days and surrender their weapons to United Nations (UN) representatives within six months. The FARC would then be allowed to form a political party (Koven 2018). The decision of both parties to return to the negotiating table to revise the agreement reflects the importance the deal had taken on for both sides by 2016. President Santos had essentially staked his presidency on achieving peace, with the embarrassment of failure a potentially even greater motivator than the benefits of success. Similarly, failure to reach an agreement after the FARC's rank-and-file experienced raised hopes of demobilization and reintegration into society would have been a major blow to morale, likely resulting in desertions and decreased combat effectiveness. Furthermore, the FARC had already begun to demobilize, creating a void in lucrative territories for illicit activities such as narco-trafficking that already were being filled by other insurgent and organized criminal groups. Thus, if the FARC were to walk away from a deal, it would not only have to fight state forces, but it would also have to engage other VNSAs in order to reoccupy strategic territory (Koven 2016).

While the agreement remains in place, there are significant concerns about whether peace in Colombia will last. As previously noted, the demobilization of the FARC has created space for other violent organizations to increase their power and influence including the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*; ELN) insurgent group and drug traffickers with paramilitary pasts. These groups are funded by the cocaine trade. Significantly, while the agreement stipulated initiatives to curb the cocaine trade, land dedicated to coca cultivation increased by 30 percent between 2016 and 2017, raising doubts that non-state actors will decline in the foreseeable future (Economist 2018). Moreover, former FARC insurgents have demonstrated difficulty transitioning to other activities, with identity issues proving difficult to resolve. Furthermore, there are concerns that despite claims to the contrary the FARC has not fully disarmed. Their efforts to achieve legitimate political relevance have also been unsuccessful thus far, with their party gaining only 0.4 percent of the vote in the last parliamentary election (The Guardian 2018). Afghanistan, with its lucrative opium cultivation, myriad non-state actors and inherent problems with central government would likely face similar hurdles following successful peace negotiations. Any peace plan will need to account for these potentialities.

Specifically, the Colombian case provides multiple insights and lessons for Afghanistan. Most obviously, the limited success of the FARC in the democratic political system and the poor

reintegration of its fighters into society are indicative of potential problems of a “good governance” style settlement in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Colombia’s long history of attempted and failed negotiations shows that putting pressure on the belligerents to make substantial concessions when they are in a position of military power is unlikely to result in a lasting agreement without considerable off battlefield incentives. In this case, it took the FARC’s military deterioration on the battlefield in combination with serious government attempts to provide off-battlefield incentives to reach an agreement. Another enabling element was that Santos staked his domestic and international reputation on achieving peace, making him more amenable to large concessions for the sake of a deal. Similarly, Ghani’s offer to negotiate a political settlement with the Taliban is an extraordinary gesture, driven both by his desire to win reelection in September 2019, as well as to improve perceptions of the Kabul government as effective and legitimate. The gesture has generated a great deal of enthusiasm internationally and has raised optimism about the possibility for peace for the first time since 2015. Success would simultaneously bolster both Ghani’s domestic and international political credibility. The wave of domestic pro-peace demonstrations and international support that followed his offer are reminiscent of the pro-peace movements in Colombia that surrounded the peace process. The willingness of the FARC to bend their hardline stances can be informative of how the Taliban might be convinced to engage in negotiations while remaining credible in the eyes of its members and supporters. Similar rhetorical cushioning might allow the Taliban to make ideological concessions while not appearing to surrender their hardline ideological stances outright. Persistence of other violent non-state actors in Colombia should also warn against talks in Afghanistan that do not incorporate local leaders, such as warlords, that could threaten the peace if left out of a potential agreement. With regards to external support, unlike the FARC, which faced souring international perceptions, the Afghan Taliban continues to benefit from the support of its Pakistani patrons (which include both elements within the Pakistani government and the Pakistani Taliban).

Finally, the Taliban exists at the intersection of the crime-terror nexus, as was the case for the FARC during much of the conflict in the Colombia. A lasting peace in Afghanistan will be hard to achieve with the cultivation of opium as a continued source of revenue for non-state actors. Nevertheless eradication efforts are likely to prove detrimental to peace processes. The FARC extensively engaged in narco trafficking and had subsequently branched out to all sorts of other illegal activities, and the Taliban are heavily involved in opium poppy cultivation and trafficking, as well as a slew of other illegal activities. Part of the FARC’s strategy in negotiations was to cast itself as a champion of agricultural workers. It was an easy sell as government-led forced eradication campaigns were deeply unpopular among rural agrarian communities, which grew coca in order to eak out a meager living. While the Taliban is in part reliant on revenue from opium poppy cultivation and trafficking, attempts to stem opium poppy cultivation will likely strengthen support for the Taliban in agrarian communities, while disincentivising many warlords from participating in negotiations.

### **Sri Lanka (1983-2009)**

The Sri Lankan conflict was a protracted ethno-nationalist conflict. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, also known as the Tamil Tigers (LTTE), engaged in an insurgency against the Sri Lankan Government in response to political, social and economic marginalization and discrimination. Unlike the previously discussed Colombian case, the four attempts at negotiations did not succeed in producing a lasting diplomatic solution and the conflict only ended with the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009. The conflict claimed over 100,000 civilian lives, the majority of which were Tamils, with an estimated 24,000 military casualties occurring after 1981 and 22,000 LTTE casualties after 1982 (Dcosta 2013).

The LTTE was founded in 1976 to fight for an independent Tamil state. Beginning in 1983, the LTTE waged an insurgency against the government, with support from India in the form of arms and training. In 1987, the Indian and Sri Lankan governments signed an agreement to bring an end to the conflict, in which the Sri Lankan government agreed to devolve power down to the provinces. India would act as a guarantor of the agreement with the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to oversee the surrender of arms in exchange for the government's cooperation (Tuncer-Kilavuz 2017). The LTTE, along with other political parties and factions, opposed the accord, and the LTTE clashed with the IPKF leading to the eventual withdrawal of the peace keeping force from the country (ICG 2006). The pause in hostilities allowed the LTTE to build up strength to resume war against the government, and in 1991 LTTE agents assassinated Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Two years later, the LTTE also succeeded in assassinating Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa. Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratuna promised to open talks with the LTTE and devolve power to the regional level but attempts in 1994 and 2001 both failed to produce an agreement as the LTTE withdrew from negotiations and resumed fighting (Tuncer-Kilavuz 2017).

The 2001 election of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, who supported open-ended negotiations with the LTTE, opened up a new round of peace talks (2002-2008). His government successfully negotiated a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in 2002, which is considered the most successful attempt at negotiations in Sri Lanka to date. The peacebuilding effort in Sri Lanka involved heavy international facilitation of peace talks, which were led by Norway and backed by Japan, with the United States and India as co-chairs (Goodhand and Walton). In 2002 a ceasefire was declared with said international parties acting as guarantors, as well as the establishment of an international ceasefire monitoring mission and funding for reconstruction. However, negotiations came to a halt in 2003 when the LTTE withdrew from the talks. Attempts to revive negotiations for a political settlement in February and October 2006 were unsuccessful, as influential leaders on both sides emerged who viewed outright victory as possible. The bargaining model's view of uncertainty as a cause of war is apparent here in that each side viewed the

potential for a future change in the balance of power in their favor as an incentive to continue fighting.

There are several explanations for why the LTTE chose to continue fighting instead of reaching a deal prior to 2006. First, the conditions for ripeness and readiness were lacking. As the LTTE's strength increased, its negotiating strategy became less flexible. Unlike many insurgencies, the LTTE saw itself as negotiating from a position of strength from the start, and in 2001 claimed to have military parity with the state. Eventually, like the FARC, the LTTE became capable of winning conventional military engagements in tandem with its continued use of asymmetric tactics. Thus, they approached negotiations as a self-declaration of strength and status, anticipating that their substantial military gains would result in commensurate concessions from the government (Orjuela 2009, 257). As in Colombia, the success of the insurgency pushed the government to negotiate from a position of weakness, and the subsequent failures of such negotiations emboldened the LTTE and further fostered their sense of invulnerability. Furthermore, in accordance with prospect theory, the LTTE (an insurgent group predisposed to higher risk behavior), were more comfortable with the risks of continued fighting. On the other hand, given their gains on the battlefield, they were increasingly risk-avoidant off the battlefield. They refused to make adequate concessions to the government, fearing that a peace agreement would give the government the power it had been unable to win through war (Tuncer-Kilavuz 2017). The government's weakness and its inability to deal with spoilers were ultimately detrimental to negotiating an agreement. Peace talks were opposed by the military, nationalist political parties and other influential actors. The LTTE exploited these divisions, weakening the government's negotiating position.

The decision to continue fighting ultimately led to the defeat of the LTTE. It was significantly weakened by splits within its ranks, particularly the defection of senior leader Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (better known by his nom de guerre, Colonel Karuna Amman) in 2004, who announced he was forming a breakaway faction. With protection from the Sri Lankan military, he cooperated with the state and provided the government with massive amounts of secret intelligence on the LTTE. This renewed the government's confidence that military victory was possible. The LTTE continued to deteriorate in strength over the following years and was eventually defeated in 2009. The Sri Lankan case further demonstrates that international support and mediation efforts are only successful when both sides are willing to come to an agreement.

Despite the fact that the Sri Lankan case ultimately ended in a military resolution, important lessons for Afghanistan can still be drawn. Fracture and factionalization of the LTTE was critical for state victory. While a military defeat of the Taliban is unlikely, schisms within the Taliban's senior leadership could set conditions for negotiations with certain, less ideologically committed factions. As mentioned prior, the Taliban leadership fall into two broad camps. Some leaders,

particularly within the Pakistani-based contingent, prioritize the establishment of an Islamic emirate above all else, whereas others are less ideologically principled and prioritize local interests over broad scope ideological ones (Barfield 2018, 7). Fractionalization, which could empower local Afghan leaders who are more likely to prioritize local, practical concerns over ideological ones, could drastically improve negotiating prospects. However, the Sri Lankan case is also a cautionary tale of how negotiations break down. Insofar as the Afghan Taliban correctly see themselves as the stronger actor (relative to the GoIRA) the risk of negotiations failing in similar ways to what occurred in Sri Lanka is considerable. Finally, Sri Lanka demonstrates how third party brokered negotiations that do not involve key stakeholders can quickly fall apart, as evidenced by the LTTE's exploitation of divisions between influential state military leaders, nationalist parties and other elite actors. Such considerations are crucial for Afghanistan as Taliban and GoIRA leaders are not the only parties that must be brought to the table to produce a durable and lasting agreement.

### **Northern Ireland (1969-1998)**

The end of the 30 year-long violent conflict in Northern Ireland, also known as "The Troubles," is a commonly cited a model case study for conflict resolution involving an insurgent group. The Good Friday Agreement (April 10, 1998), also known as the Belfast Agreement, is considered to have ended the sectarian-nationalist conflict, resulting in a consociational power sharing political structure that largely privileged elites (Huges 2014).

The Irish Republican Army (IRA), the primary armed group in the conflict, engaged in an insurgency against the British army and Irish Unionist/loyalist parties and paramilitaries. While Northern Ireland's conflict was primarily political and nationalist, much of division fell along religious lines. The primary political struggle was for the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, between the mostly Protestant loyalists, who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom (UK), and the mostly Catholic nationalists, who wanted Northern Ireland to leave the UK and join the rest of Ireland as an independent state. Fueled by historical inequality, the conflict began with political demonstrations against the discrimination of the Catholic/nationalist minority in Northern Ireland by the Protestant/unionist government and police force, ushering in decades of violence (Landow and Sergie 2018).

The peace process itself occurred primarily between 1985-1998. The Anglo-Irish Agreement began the movement towards peace. The agreement was between Ireland and the UK and acknowledged that the Republic of Ireland would be granted an advisory role in Northern Ireland. Secret talks between the republican movement and the British government began in the 1990s, during which the British government agreed to enter into dialogue with Sinn Féin, (the IRA's political wing), within three months of an end to violence (Arthur 1995, 10). This was followed by a number of facilitating factors that led IRA elites and Sinn Féin to advocate for the establishment

of a nationalist coalition to engage the British government and Northern Ireland's unionist parties in negotiations. In the December 1993 Downing Street Declaration, the British and Irish governments jointly voiced their acceptance of the idea of Irish self-determination (north and south), releasing a statement declaring that Britain had "no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland," (Boyle and Hadden 1995). A dialogue between Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams and John Hume, the leader of the larger, Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), helped form one pillar of the nationalist consensus. In February 1992, Albert Reynolds became the Prime Minister of Ireland. He had little ideological interest in Northern Ireland and was thus more apt to make concessions in order to strike a deal (Mallie and McKittrick 1996).

After years of fighting, uncertainty about the capabilities and resolve of both sides had dissipated. So too had expectation that future changes to the balance of power would result in a better deal. However, none of the movement towards peace would have been possible without the increasing perceptions of symmetry on both sides. As both sides found themselves in a military stalemate, they began to shift their strategies (McAuley, McGlynn and Tonge 2018). The fundamental precondition for ripeness was met, as both sides viewed alternative, unilateral action as insufficient to achieving their goals and were forced to turn to diplomatic solutions. Third parties seized the ripe moment to encourage the primary parties to negotiate. While the importance of third party mediators to the successful resolution is contested (see below), they at least provided republican and loyalist paramilitaries freedom of maneuver to discuss the merits of a political solution and advocate for an agreement to end the conflict. Additionally, it is worth noting that the establishment of a working coalition of political representatives made possible the transition from armed conflict to peace (McAuley, McGlynn and Tonge 2018).

Both critics and supporters of the Belfast Agreement agree that it is constructed around a consociational framework that privileges elites and institutions of government. In this sense, the agreement was successful because it ended the violence. However, critics of the agreement claim that by not addressing the "root causes" of the conflict, namely the societal divisions, and how they are reflected in socio-economic structures and everyday realities, the only positive outcome of the conflict is that it ended at all (McAuley, McGlynn and Tonge 2018). Furthermore, the international dimensions of the conflict in Northern Ireland were contentious. It is evident that the IRA was heavily funded by Irish-Americans since the 1970s. However, how consequential international actors were in the peace process remains contested. The European Union (EU) has promoted its role in bringing the conflict to an end, and have propagated it as evidence of the success of the "European peace-making model," (Hughes 2014). This model emphasizes the role of economic success in promoting peace. However, many academics have criticized this narrative that serves to confirm and reinforce the EU's own developmental model, claiming that EU, British and Irish politicians are reluctant to acknowledge consociationalism as the primary reason for the end of the conflict in favor of their own political agendas (Hughes 2015). The United States is also



thought to have played an influential role, with Bill Clinton engaging in talks with the IRA's armed wing and facilitating talks between factions to secure further influence in the region (Dumbrell 1995). This assessment comports with criticisms of the good governance model, while instead highlighting the importance of satisfying domestic political elites and etho-regional leaders in order to secure peace.

As previously stated, the single biggest factor that allowed both sides to come to the table in Northern Ireland is the perception of symmetry coupled with a shared understanding of the conflict as being in a stalemate. Perception of symmetry – or at least that neither side will be able to make further, substantial changes to the status quo through the continued application of military force – will likely be an important precursor for negotiations in Afghanistan. The conflict in Northern Ireland provides a few additional lessons. First, a power-sharing agreement that privileges elites, while not solving grievances, can lead to a freeze in fighting. However, this situation is less than ideal insofar as it creates unstable foundations for preventing future violence, especially if a centralized power-sharing government framework is established without improving governability at the local level. Second, the change in perceptions that allowed both sides to bend on their hardline stances might apply to the Taliban, as their refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the government will likely require some sort of philosophical concession so as to facilitate a start to direct negotiations between the Taliban and the GoIRA. Furthermore, the notion that external guarantors are fundamentally interested in establishing good governance solutions to conflicts that benefit the populations over furthering their own political agendas is highly relevant in Afghanistan and is further complicated by competing external stakeholders. Finally, demobilization and violence reduction was largely possible due to geographic and social segregation of opposing sides. Parts of Afghanistan exhibit similar degrees of segregation with clear ethnic majorities.

### **Key Takeaways for Afghanistan**

In sum, there are many insights applicable to Afghan case that can be drawn from the Colombian, Sri Lankan and Northern Ireland conflicts that either reaffirm or supplement the extant literature on peace negotiations involving insurgent forces. All cases are reflective of a common principal when bargaining with belligerents – belligerents negotiating from a position of power do not feel a greater urge for peace and have less incentive to make significant concessions in negotiations or to commit to an unfavorable agreement. Other valuable lessons can be drawn. The Colombian case in particular is a cautionary tale against an agreement that tries to demobilize fighters and incorporate belligerents into an existing, centralized political system. Such an agreement is unlikely to produce favorable outcomes and stability in the absence of barriers such as geographic sectarian segregation – as were present in the Northern Ireland case. The Sri Lankan case illustrates the potential for intra-group fractionalization and disagreement between group leadership to provide an avenue for local Taliban leaders to come to the negotiating table and

break with ideologically motivated (and likely more hardline) Pakistani leaders. However, it cautions against pursuing an agreement in the absence of significant, compelling off-battlefield incentives. The Northern Ireland case serves as an illustration of how talks that involve elites can produce relative stability under the right conditions, which may be part of the solution for Afghanistan. Conversely, the Sri Lankan case serves as a caution against excluding influential leaders outside of the GoIRA and the Taliban, which could lead to spoilers and the resurgence of intrastate war. Finally, all three cases provide lessons for the involvement of third party mediators and guarantors where external parties should be wary of prioritizing the good governance approach of ameliorating popular grievances over measures that prioritize privileging elites and their interests. This is evidently true in places like Afghanistan where foreign imposition of non-indigenous good governance approaches have caused more harm than good (Jochem et al. 2016, 294).

### **Key Actors and Interests**

Both the Taliban and the GoIRA have recently expressed their desire to stop fighting. That said, neither side possesses the capabilities to “dislodge the other from its areas of core strength” (Barfield 2019, 7). As the number of international troops decreases, however, the Kabul government is forced to undertake the burden of fighting, incentivizing them to seek negotiations (ibid., 7). Over the past 17 years, multiple international stakeholders have been involved in Afghanistan either as armed powers, political guarantors, and/or players in reconstruction and stabilization efforts. The situation in Afghanistan is especially complicated by the divergent interests and strategic visions of multiple influential stakeholders. As the primary actors, the GoIRA and the Taliban must obviously be involved in negotiating an agreement. However, fruitful negotiations will also require the involvement of influential internal and external third parties. Terms that do not satisfy powerful potential spoilers are unlikely to produce long-term stability. This dynamic applies to both internal and external third parties in Afghanistan’s conflict. Third parties with capabilities to destabilize an agreement will likely do so if they evaluate that they have more to gain from fighting than from maintaining peace and stability. This section offers a comprehensive overview of the key internal and external actors and their associated interests in Afghanistan.

There are diverging views of the roles of external third party actors in helping to negotiate or guarantee peace agreements. Ripeness and readiness theories would suggest not only can third parties encourage the primary conflicting actors to seize the opportunities of a ripe moment, but they can also serve as motivators through the application of external pressure on one or more parties to negotiate. Furthermore, these theories suggest that interests of third parties can be subjugated when a ripe moment for conflict resolution presents itself. However, third parties can also undermine negotiations by influencing conflict dynamics such that the incentives for one or more belligerents to negotiate are diminished. While, the bargaining model literature mostly takes

for granted that external third parties will primarily act as guarantors of negotiated settlements in intra-state conflicts, in Afghanistan external third parties are very clearly self-interested participants that will seek to advance their own interests. As such, fruitful negotiations in Afghanistan will need to account for the preferences of external powers when evaluating the terms and conditions of a potential agreement. The longevity and durability of any deal will largely depend on how well negotiators are able to reconcile the divergent interests of the parties with both sufficient interest and capacity to scuttle negotiations or undercut the implementation of a peace deal.

As regards internal parties, it would be safe to say both the GoIRA and the Taliban are in favor of a durable resolution to the conflict. However, that is the extent of unanimous consent as each side has its own preference about what the outcome should be and how to achieve it. These differences have been emphasized by international actors, who have imposed their “zero-sum outcome” attitudes on both the Taliban and GoIRA, rather than incentivizing them to seek long-term compromises that “best suit the interest of their respective leaders” and bases (ibid., 7). As the bargaining model suggests, in the resolution of disputes over scarce goods and resources (including power), a durable and lasting peace agreement must address the interests of parties that, if excluded, have the power to throw the country back into a state of war. These include local leaders such as warlords. A peace agreement that grants a level of autonomy to local leaders to inform their system of governance would eliminate many problems in Afghan politics today and would have the potential to create conditions for a durable peace.

### **The United States of America**

The Taliban is a primarily Pashtun movement that emerged in the 1990s following the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. In 1996, the organization began providing sanctuary to AQ under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, following his pledge of allegiance to Taliban leader, Mullah Omar. It was from Afghanistan that the September 11, 2001 attacks were planned.

Following September 11, 2001, the U.S. intervened in Afghanistan. After the initial military success against the Taliban, the UN Security Council moved to establish a transitional administration in Kabul and asked the member states to send peacekeeping forces to promote stability and secure aid delivery. While the Taliban’s surrender of Kandahar on December 9, 2001 marked the end of formal Taliban governance, the organization regrouped from their safehavens in Pakistan, and launch a sustained guerilla campaign thereafter. Since the massive escalation of insurgent violence in 2003, Afghanistan turned into an intractable conflict for U.S. and coalition forces (CFR 2018).

On December 28, 2014, the International Security Assistance Force formally ended and U.S. and partner forces went from a height of over 130,00 personnel to just 9,800 (Landler 2014). The majority of the remaining forces were also operating under more restrictive rules of engagement.

Subsequently, the Trump Administration increased the number of troops first to 11,000, and then to 14,000 (Cooper 2017; Mitchell 2017). This was coupled with a renewed focus on counterterrorism, and an open-ended timeline. Many partners and other interested parties found this strategy rather underwhelming and characterized it as simply “more of the same” (Gurganus 2018).

After 17 years of active combat operations and a total price tag in the trillions of dollars, it is clear that a military solution to the conflict is not on the horizon. As of May 2018, 229 out of 407 districts (56.3%) were under the control (74) or influence (155) of the central Afghan government. 59 districts (14.5%) remained under the Taliban control, while 122 districts (30%) were contested. Concomitantly, the strength of national government, the economy and levels of inter-group tolerance are all on the decline (SIGAR 2018). As such, the U.S. government is currently invested in the idea of a negotiated solution. Specifically, Washington wants to start a process of stabilization based on mutual participation from all international actors, as well as an Afghan government that represents all parties to form a stable Afghanistan that does not harbor international terrorist organizations. In addition, the U.S. government is seeking an intra-Afghan dialogue as a form of reconciliation and the declaration of a permanent ceasefire. These four considerations would allow the government to exfiltrate itself from a long a deeply unpopular war, while saving face and establishing the basis for longterm stability.

### **The Russian Federation**

Early on in Afghanistan, Russian and American interests were aligned. Both states wanted to eliminate AQ and its affiliated terrorist groups in order to prevent the reemergence of terrorism and to restore stability and security Afghanistan. Starting with the earlier days of the 2001 U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and continuing well into the Obama administration, Russia became increasingly cooperative: Moscow agreed to stop funding proxies and support stability in the region, allowed the United States to use Russian territory to transfer equipment and supplies to NATO forces in Afghanistan, sold Russian Mi-17 helicopters to U.S.-backed Afghan forces, and partnered with the United States to restrict opium production and the drug trade (Worden 2017, Gurganus 2018; Gurganus and Rumer 2019). However, there were stark differences beneath the surface. As the war went on, Russia not only became highly skeptical of the course the war was taking but split from the United States regarding what stability in Afghanistan would look like. While the United States envisioned a strong central government in Kabul with a well-trained national security force, Russia demonstrated willingness to work with actors that compete directly with the GoIRA. Russia believes the U.S. engagement is not producing results, and it may have to deal with an unstable Afghanistan on its own when U.S. forces withdraw. As a result, Moscow began developing an independent strategy to defend its own regional interests in case of a collapse of the GoIRA (Gurganus 2018). As bad as the prospect of a long-term U.S. military

presence outside its borders, the biggest concern for Russia is the presence of highly trained Chechen nationalists fighting in Afghanistan.

As discovered during Russian efforts to suppress a Chechen uprising in North Ossetia in 2014, North Ossetian fighters were being bolstered with clandestine training, financial and operational support from Afghan-based Chechens. Evidence suggests that AQ and its affiliates were increasingly taking ownership of Chechen subversive movements in Afghanistan (Vidino 2005, 1), which only served to further boost the capabilities of these groups. For their part, AQ's Ayman al-Zawahiri claimed in 2001 that the oil rich Caucasus could become a "hotbed of jihad," and shelter Muslim mujahedeen across the Muslim world (Vidino 2005, 2). The Wall Street Journal reported in 2016 that Afghan and foreign officials estimate around 7,000 Chechen and other foreign fighters were believed to be operating in Afghanistan, "loosely allied" with the Taliban and other militant groups (Donati and Totakhil 2016). Moscow is concerned that the continued presence of a large number of Chechen fighters in Afghanistan so close to the Russian mainland could trigger other nationalist separatist movements within the Federation and neighboring countries, as well as allow jihadists to cross into Russia.

Despite connectivity between the Taliban, AQ and IMU, Moscow believes that the Taliban is "focused on gaining power over territory within Afghanistan," and thus is a threat to the GoIRA within and not beyond Afghanistan. This is in stark contrast with its view of AQ and the Islamic State elements that operate within Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan. It sees these groups – which support Chechen fighters – as transnational terrorist organizations that threaten Central Asia (Gurganus 2018). As such, Russia is not ruling out collaboration with the Taliban if it advances their broader interests. Indeed, it has provided to segments of the group operating in northern Afghanistan, organized meetings with Taliban leaders, and helped garner support for the Taliban from Tehran and Islamabad (Trickett 2018; Worden 2017).

Russia is also interested in using Afghanistan to impose costs on the United States, while simultaneously undermining U.S. influence in the region. Russia is currently engaged in global gray zone competition with the United States. The opportunity to bleed the United States in Afghanistan is attractive. Moreover, Russia is also actively developing its own network of partners, expanding its involvement in Afghanistan, and consolidating its position as a regional player, while seeking to erode U.S. regional influence. To this end, Moscow has strengthened its relations with Pakistan, Iran and China through numerous trade deals, investment projects, and bilateral security agreements (Gurganus 2018).

Despite competition with and a lack of confidence in the U.S. approach to the Afghan conflict, Russia does not want an abrupt U.S. withdrawal out of fear that it would create a power vacuum that would exacerbate the transnational terrorism threat (Gurganus 2018). Moreover, despite

Russian support for the Taliban, Russia is uncertain as to the longterm outcome in Afghanistan and therefore seeks to hedge by playing both sides. Specifically, Russia provides military and economic aid to the GoIRA in Kabul. Indeed, it likely favors a strong government in Kabul that can minimize the Chechen risk and negotiate “regional integration initiatives,” while undermining U.S. influence in Afghanistan and the broader Central Asia region (Trickett 2018).

Russian support for both the GoIRA and the Taliban is likely to effect the incentives of both sides to negotiate. If the balance of Russian support were to shift to favor one actor more thoroughly than the other, this may alter the belligerents’ perceptions of their ability to make additional inroads through force of arms. Should negotiations materialize, Russia’s increasing influence in Afghanistan, its partnership with both the GoIRA and the Taliban, and growing bi- and multi-lateral relations with other regional actors, as well as its involvement in addressing the regional transnational terrorist threats increases the odds that Russia would want a seat at the negotiating table. In fact, Afghan national security adviser Mohammad Atmar recognized Moscow’s “significant role” in working to convince the Taliban to begin negotiations (Meyer 2017). Indeed, Russia has already hosted three rounds of multilateral talks involving China, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, a Shanghai Cooperation Organization contact group on Afghanistan including India and Pakistan, and met with Taliban leaders in Russia and Tajikistan (Gurganus 2018; Sobhani 2017). By excluding the United States, Moscow wants to establish itself as a major regional actor at the expense of the United States, while ensuring it plays a prominent role in any future negotiations.

### **The People’s Republic of China**

Since 2001, China’s desired end state in Afghanistan has been clear: “no victory for the West, nor for extremists; no long-term U.S. bases and no terrorist training camps for Uighur separatists” (Small 2012). A narrow strip of mountainous and lightly populated territory – the Wakhan Corridor – in the Afghan Badakhshan province separates China from the rest of Afghanistan. Given their shared border, China understandably has a lot at stake in Afghanistan. That said, China has remained almost entirely neutral for most of the conflict. Unsurprisingly, Beijing is playing a long game. It avoided provoking a reaction from the Islamic world by not aligning with the Western-led war efforts, and also managed to avoid adding strain on relations with the West by not supporting the insurgency. The looming eventuality of U.S. disengagement, however, has brought Beijing more directly into the fold. By urging U.S. officials and NATO forces to “withdraw responsibly,” China wants to avoid further destabilization with a civil war in Afghanistan or proxy wars among regional stakeholders (Small 2012). Beijing recognizes that by beginning to play multiple roles – peace broker, aid provider, investor and military protector – in Afghanistan, it can strengthen its regional influence, ensure access to Afghanistan’s valuable natural resources, support its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and balance against Russia and India.

Like Russia, China is concerned by the nexus between subversive elements in Afghanistan and Chinese ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. Located in western China, Xinjiang is home to a rebellion by the local, Turkic Uighur population. The Uighur subversive group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), seeks to establish an independent state called “East Turkestan.” Many thousands of ETIM fighters are currently engaged in fighting in Afghanistan and Beijing is concerned about spillover of ETIM fighters from Afghanistan to China (Ramachandran 2018). To this end, a new military base is being set up in Badakhshan province with the Chinese extending financial support covering all material and technical expenses for this base, ranging from weaponry and military equipment to uniforms for soldiers. In addition to the base, China is financing an Afghan mountain brigade that will operate in Badakhshan province along the border (Putz 2018).

Beijing is wary of becoming embroiled in an intractable conflict. As such, their military investment is limited to initiatives – like the aforementioned base – that directly relate to their own physical or economic security. That said, China is employing economic instruments of power much more broadly in order to gain influence over the GoIRA, the Taliban and their sponsors. Accordingly Beijing and Kabul signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighborly Relations in 2006. Two years later, Chinese companies were awarded a \$3 billion, 30-year contract to extract copper from the Mes Aynak mines in Logar province, becoming the first foreign country to secure an exclusive contract for copper mining in Afghanistan. This may be just the tip of the iceberg. Recently around 24 mineral formations, worth an estimated \$900 billion, were identified in Afghanistan. The most prominent formations include the massive North Aynak copper and cobalt mine near Kabul in Logar Province, Zarkashan copper and gold resources in Ghanzi Province, Khanneshin rare-earth element deposits in Helmand Province, the Haji Gak iron reserves in Parwan Province, and lithium in Herat, Ghanzi, Nimruz and Farah Provinces (USGS Report 2011). However, China has yet to be able to commence mining due to high levels of insecurity in the region (Ramachandran 2018, Sharif 2015; Wishnick 2012). More generally, between 2002 and 2013, Beijing provided \$240 million in aid to Afghanistan. In 2014 alone, however, China gave \$80 million in aid and pledged an additional \$240 million over the next three years. In September 2017, China extended \$90 million toward development projects in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province alone (Downs 2013; Jennings 2018; Small 2012). Currently, China’s flagship BRI bypasses Afghanistan, substantially increasing transit times and costs. However were Afghanistan to stabilize, this could change.

Beijing has also increased its civilian, military, and infrastructure investment in Pakistan, where it enjoys deep support across Pakistani political spectrum (Smalls 2012). For instance, China has built a port in Balochistan to establish land and sea trade routes to reach Middle Eastern, European and African markets (DW 2017). Additionally, China has invested \$62 billion in Pakistan through what is called the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor – a series of infrastructure projects

to modernize Pakistani transportation networks, establish energy projects and create special economic zones as part of the BRI initiative (Jennings 2018; DW 2019). Some argue that China is seeking a peaceful resolution in Afghanistan in order to ensure it profits from its investments in the region and BRI more generally.

In 2017, Beijing called for trilateral peace talks between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Taliban, recognizing that bringing the Taliban to the table would not bear fruit so long as Kabul and Islamabad were at odds (Small 2012). Circumstantial evidence suggests that Pakistan and China played a key role in brokering the aforementioned Taliban ceasefire in 2018 (Ramachandran 2018). China is also a part of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, which includes Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States, working towards ending the crisis in Afghanistan.

In short, China desires peace in Afghanistan for economic reasons and because it would mean the withdrawal of U.S. forces from a neighboring country (Sharif 2015). However, China is wary of committing serious military resources to Afghanistan for good reason. Beijing will not likely support a peace process if it does not ensure the security of Chinese territory from spillover.

## **India**

Unlike most regional actors, India has consistently opposed the Taliban. India was the only South Asian country to recognize the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and continued to support PDPA President Najibullah's leadership following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989 (Crosette 1989). After the collapse of the Najibullah's government in the wake of an aggressive armed opposition, domestic struggles and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, India became a crucial supporter of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. This put India in direct opposition with Pakistan, whose support was instrumental in establishing the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan at the end of the Afghan civil war. Afghanistan, therefore, became a proxy for the Indo-Pakistani rivalry. India often accuses Pakistan of aiding the Islamist terrorists across the region, including Northern India, and instigating attacks on Indian diplomatic missions across Afghanistan.

During the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan following the September 11 2001 attacks, India was among the first nations to establish diplomatic relations with the new Afghan government following the Taliban's ouster. India consistently supported U.S.-led coalition forces by providing intelligence and logistical assistance, as well as by training Afghan security forces.

Importantly, India is also the second largest regional aid provider to Afghanistan, after the United States, having provided approximately \$3 billion to date in humanitarian and economic aid.



India's economic assistance is carefully designed to reduce Afghanistan's economic dependence on Pakistan, which controls landlocked Afghanistan's southern trade routes (the most efficient transit route for maritime commerce). To this end, India has partnered with Iran to develop a "free port" in Chabahar, Iran in the Gulf of Oman, rivaling Pakistan's Gwadar port (jointly developed with China) in Baluchistan (Bajoria 2007; *The Economist* 2007). The Border Roads Organization (BRO) of India opened Route 606 (also known as the Zaranj-Delaram Highway) to the public in January 2009, directly connecting Chabahar to the Afghan city of Delaram, bypassing Pakistan's unsafe southeastern Quetta district (Bajoria 2007). The port of Chabahar and this direct road network has reduced transportation costs and delivery time for goods arriving to Afghanistan by sea (Ahmad 2018). Not surprisingly, Pakistan views these investments by arch-rival India as threatening and China sees them as competition (DW 2018).

### **Pakistan**

Ahmad (2018) argues that the war in Afghanistan has become "a war of logistics," and Pakistan plays a key role as it controls crucial supply lines, especially for the United States. Since 2001, Pakistan has served as a major logistical hub for U.S. and NATO forces. Washington has relied heavily on Pakistan's air and ground routes to transport lethal and nonlethal supplies to support its war efforts in Afghanistan (Ahmad 2018; Riedel 2010; Mazzetti 2018). In 2009, then Vice President Joe Biden paid an official visit to Kabul and met with President Hamid Karzai. President Karzai urged Biden to exert more pressure on Pakistan to help clean out Taliban sanctuaries there, to which Biden responded: "Pakistan is fifty times more important than Afghanistan for the United States (Mazzetti 2018)." Pakistan has closed key border crossings in the past in retaliation for NATO forces crossing into its territory and/or harming Pakistani soldiers while pursuing Taliban fighters (Thomas 2010). This afforded Pakistan ample leverage. That said, the development of cheaper, shorter and safer alternative routes, as well as India's willingness to play a bigger role in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan has significantly reduced Pakistan's leverage over the course of the war (ibid.). Concomitantly, the Trump Administration has curtailed support for Pakistan.

For their part, Pakistan continues to harbor the Taliban, Haqqani network and AQ (Allen et al. 2017). Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has also been linked to a slew of recent Taliban attacks in Afghanistan (Bremmer 2018). This strategy is not without costs for Pakistan, which continues to experience a slew of extremist attacks. However, it is a calculated decision. Pakistan's primary interest is ensuring a weak Afghan state that it can influence, as it fears being sandwiched between a strong and unfriendly Afghanistan on one side and India on the other (Pant and Paliwal 2019; Thomas 2010). As long as Pakistan continues to view India as an existential threat to its survival, and that peace and stability in Afghanistan decreases Pakistani strategic depth, it should be expected that Pakistan will continue to support insurgent violence and work to undermine peace processes.

## **Iran**

Iran's interests in Afghanistan are complex. Immediately following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Iran pledged its support to the United States (Carter 2010, 987). Since then, escalating tensions with the United States have led Iran to change course. Iran has since refused to engage in strategic discussions regarding Afghanistan with the U.S. present. Moreover, like Russia and China, Iran appreciates the opportunity to bleed the U.S. in Afghanistan and has provided material support to the Taliban as a means to increase pressure on the U.S. during negotiations and in response to sanctions. Iran also appreciates the Taliban's opposition to the Islamic State. Importantly, Iran provides safe haven for al-Qa'ida leaders, which has proven especially valuable. Unlike in Pakistan, the United States has so far opted to avoid pursuing al-Qa'ida targets inside of Iran (Hastert 2007; Hirsh 2019; Taub 2019).

Instability resulting from Taliban violence benefits Iran economically and environmentally. As regards economics, Iran currently receives a steady supply of blackmarket U.S. dollars via Afghanistan. A stable and peaceful Afghanistan would likely entail better border security and could limit Iran's access to U.S. dollars (Malikzada 2019). In addition, a peace agreement that proves acceptable to Pakistan would necessarily entail a diminished role for India in Afghanistan, which would also adversely affect Iranian interests. This is the case as it may entail a sharp reduction in commerce destined for Afghanistan and beyond transiting through the Indo-Iranian port at Chabahar (DW 2018). Afghanistan is currently the fourth largest importer of Iranian goods, and this relationship may become even more consequential to Iran as the U.S. increases sanctions (Malikzada 2010).

As regards environmental considerations, Iran – which has experienced regular water shortages – has an existing agreement to source 820 million cubic meters of freshwater annually from Afghanistan. For this reason, it is staunchly opposes U.S.-backed agricultural projects in Afghanistan that involve damn construction upriver from Iran. Instability resulting from Taliban activities helps to undermine these development projects (Malikzada 2019).

That said, like China, Iran is hedging by also maintaining relations with the GoIRA. To this end, Iran has hosted both belligerents for separate talks regarding the future of Afghanistan and prospects for peace (ibid 2019).

## **Tribal and other Non-State Afghan Elites**

While external actors certainly possess the power to prevent negotiations or disrupt an agreement, internal actors aside from the Taliban and GoIRA must also be considered. The landscape of power in Afghanistan is marked by a unique combination of political elements like warlords and decentralized, non-state local militias. These constitute significant key actors that must be considered in the context of a bargain, as excluding them has historically led to instability in the

country. Tribal and other non-state local elites, such as warlords, have unofficial but significant command over resources, local constituencies and military power. In the Afghan context, the term warlord is a “charismatic military leader who, because of the weakness or absence of a state, ends up playing a political role, though he lacks political legitimacy” (Giustozzi 2010). In Afghanistan, major warloards often command and act as “service providers” to large networks of local, more minor, military commanders seeking resources, political representation and military backing. Major warlords have commanded “networks of networks” in Afghanistan and are thus influential enough to act as serious spoilers to an agreement that does not address their interests and needs. This has been empirically demonstrated by contemporary Afghanistan’s inability to maintain stability and peace due to its particular intra-VNSA landscape (Giustozzi 2010). While it is important not to reduce Afghanistan’s complex polity to the level of binary opposites of tribal elites and state actors, Kabul’s inability to provide security without the support of militias, combined with public dissatisfaction with “the power of the ‘strongmen,’” make the incorporation of warlords into the government and state-building processes a possibility (MacGinty 2010, 578). When left without “a political patron and without a charismatic (and ruthless) figure to restrain them,” warlords may look for alternatives. During the resurgence of the Taliban in 2007-08, for instance, many warlords and their militias negotiated and allied with the Taliban, even in areas of strong resistance (Giustozzi 2010). Successfully incorporating these tribal elites into negotiations about national politics will be a necessary component of any viable peace deal. While these actors are no doubt diverse, they are largely united by their desire for influence in areas over which they already poses defacto control. A schema for decentralizing governance that recognizes their local positions of power and importance for lasting peace would go a long way to ensure that they advance the cause of peace.

The next two sections on-battlefield and off-battlefield considerations will primarily address the positions of the GoIRA and the Taliban, with significant attention paid to the role of the United States in sustaining these conditions. The penultimate section on pathways towards a potential deal will broaden the aperature and consider the negotiating positions of all critical actors.

### **Battlefield Considerations**

Clausewitz observed that “the side that feels the lesser urge for peace will naturally get the better bargain” (1976, 92). The aforementioned theoretical and empirical case studies confirm that when insurgents bargain from a position of battlefield strength, they are especially disincentivized from making major concessions towards a lasting peace agreement. Practically speaking, this means that peace negotiations in Afghanistan will only succeed or endure to the extent that the terms of an agreement are favorable to the interests of the stronger party. That said, the Northern Ireland case study suggests that shared perceptions of the conflict being stalemated – with the possibility for major changes to the status quo through battlefield victories forestalled - can inventivize both

parties to negotiate in earnest. This section offers an assessment of the martial strength of the Taliban and the GoIRA.

The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has officially described the situation as a stalemate since late 2017. DOD's assessment has subsequently been reiterated in recent reports by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and NATO's Operation Resolute Support (RS) (SIGAR 2019, 68). In late 2018, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, confirmed that not much has changed over the past two years and the Taliban "are not losing" (DOD OIG 2019, 10). Despite DOD's assessment that the conflict has stalemated, it appears that slow change in the battlefield positions of both belligerents is occurring. cursory review suggests that not only has the Taliban held more Afghan territory since early 2017 than at any point since the American intervention, it continues to slowly take and hold additional territory. If accurate, this suggests that the Taliban has an incentive to continue fighting and delay negotiations as long as possible, while it fights to maximize its territorial holdings.

An assessment of strengths and capabilities is not straightforward. It requires assessment of martial capabilities, as well as non-material considerations like influence and population control. Assessment is further complicated by the inconsistency of statistics across various official sources. DOD figures put the GoIRA in a far stronger position than events on the ground, or even many Afghan officials, would suggest. Numerical estimates suggest the Taliban should be far weaker and less effective than it actually is. While the Taliban's strengths are difficult to quantify, their ability to take, hold influence and significantly contest territory indicates that they are at least a somewhat stronger and more capable fighting force than the GoIRA's National Security and Defense Force (ANDSF).

Official DOD estimates on the strength and capabilities of both sides differ substantially between the GoIRA and Taliban estimates, as well as from other unofficial estimates published by reputable independent sources. These discrepancies can be attributed to different methodologies. Despite differences across the various estimates, it is clear that the Taliban currently controls more territory than it has at any other point since 2001, despite massive investment in the ANDSF.

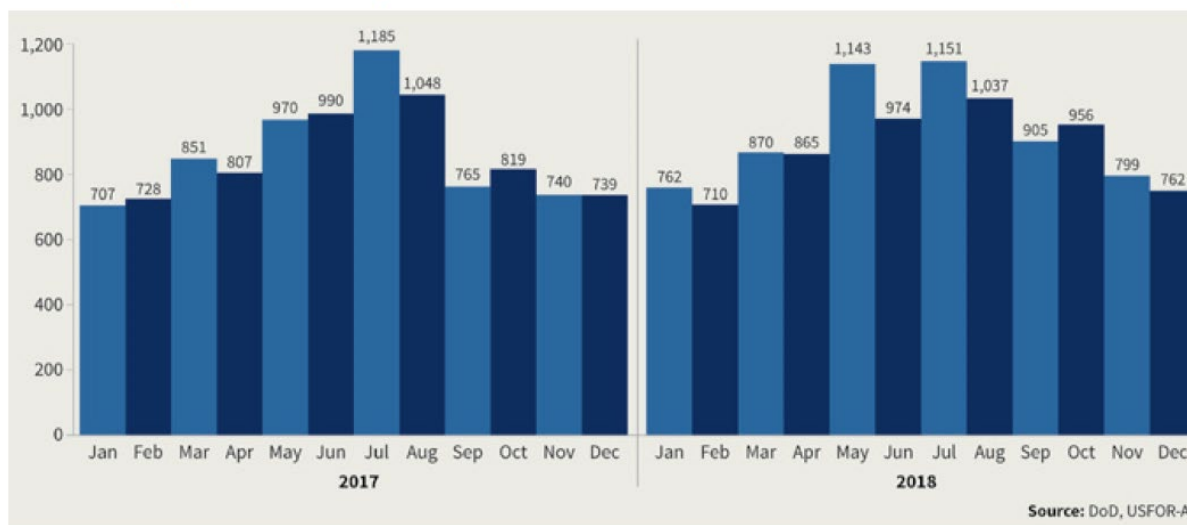
The Lead Inspector General's March 2017 quarterly report to Congress (heretofore referred to as DOD OIG quarterly report), estimated that the Taliban controlled or contested 44 percent of Afghan territory, whereas the GoIRA controlled 56 percent (DOD OIG 2017). However, this estimate credited the GoIRA with control over districts where the ANDSF controlled only the district headquarters and military barracks and ceded the rest of the district to the Taliban. Estimates by military analysts at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, published in *Long War Journal*, for the same month put territories controlled or contested by the Taliban much higher, at 61 percent (Roggio and Guttowski, 2017; Norland, Ngu and Abed 2018). In late 2017,

U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and the GoIRA stated that a major objective of the South Asia strategy was to increase security, so that 80 percent of the population lived in areas under government control or influence by the end of 2019. However, the DOD OIG quarterly report (October 2018 -December 2018) shows a trend in the opposite direction, indicating that the Taliban are continuing to make inroads, albeit slowly (DOD OIG 2019,14). Resolute Support's (RS) district-stability data for the same quarter offer further evidence of this trend, with the number of districts under the GoIRA control and influence down by seven, the number of districts under insurgent control or influence up by one, and the number of contested districts up by six from the previous quarter (Roggio and Gutowski, 2019; SIGAR 2019, 65). In light of the negative trend, the DOD and RS have claimed that district-stability data "is not indicative of effectiveness of the South Asia strategy," and there is "uncertainty in the models that produce them" (DOD OIG 2019, 16). Nonetheless, it is clear that the Taliban is strong enough to at least hold the territory it currently controls and challenge GoIRA control in some additional areas. To this end, in 2018, the strategic cities of Farah and Ghazni were overrun by Taliban insurgents. In Ghazni, it took the government six days to regain control, at the cost of the lives of nearly 200 soldiers and police officers (Norland, Ngu and Abed 2018). Unfortunately, USFOR-A anticipates that the Taliban will execute more damaging attacks on provincial capitols (DOD OIG 2019, 15).

Force size is also a critical indicator of strength and capability. 2017 estimates put the government in a far stronger position than the Taliban, with approximately 10 Afghan security force personnel for every one Taliban fighter (DOD OIG 2017, 10). If these estimates were accurate, this would mean that there were 314,000 government forces compared to 25-35,000 Taliban forces (estimates for the latter vary considerably). However, some Afghan officials estimate that approximately a third or more of the ANDSF that remain on the payroll are inactive, having either deserted or been killed. They claim that those that remain are poorly trained or are simply unqualified (OIG 2019, 25). OIG reporting highlights wild inconsistencies in the completion of basic Afghan National Army (ANA) warrior training, with graduation rates varying from 46 to 100 percent since 2017 (OIG 2019, 111). The most recent RS estimates show that ANDSF personnel strength has fallen to its lowest level since the beginning of the RS mission in January 2015. This puts the ANDSF at just 87.7 percent (43,307 personnel short) of its authorized strength, down from 88.8 percent during the same period in 2017 (SIGAR 2019, 79). On the other hand, DOD estimates of Taliban strength have gone up since 2017, albeit not by very much. In September 2018, DOD estimated that the Taliban had a maximum of 40,000 fighters, but claimed that at least 5,000 fighters are part of the Haqqani network (DOD OIG 2018, 19). Ultimately, even the most realistic official numbers would suggest that the GoIRA is in a far stronger position, size wise, than the Taliban. However, extensive research suggests that in irregular conflict, the requisite ratio of security forces to insurgents for successful COIN operations range from 10:1 to 100:1. As such, the ANDSF's force strength is below even the bottom end of this range. Moreover, COIN requires highly capable forces (Department of the Army 2009, 1-7). In this regard the ANDSF are clearly lagging

behind the Taliban. Despite massive U.S. investment, the Taliban outperform the ANSDF in engagement after engagement (DOD OIG, 27; SIGAR 2019, 83, 91). OIG quarterly reports have shown little change in the Taliban’s ability to effectively execute attacks against the government. In areas with active and open Taliban presence, militants have demonstrated the ability to conduct frequent, successful attacks on government positions, ranging from large organized group strikes on military bases, to small, but damaging, attacks on and ambushes of military convoys and checkpoints. Figure 1, below is from the DOD OIG’s recent quarter (October 1-2018 through December 31, 2018). It shows the alarmingly high, and sustained rate of successful enemy-initiated attacks throughout 2017-2018.

**Figure 1: Effective Enemy-Initiated Attacks, 2017-2018**



Influence over the population is also critical. While the GoIRA is deeply unpopular in much of Afghanistan, the Taliban have proven capable of winning substantial popular support. This enables them to safely operate in and transit government-held areas. In short, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) concluded, “the Taliban does not have to formally occupy territory to control what happens in it” (ODI 2018).

This presents three powerful disincentives for the Taliban to negotiate in earnest with the GoIRA. First, they can reasonably expect to continue to expand their territorial control and influence – albeit slowly – through continued fighting. Even if the Taliban were interested in a negotiated peace, they understand that the more territory they control and the larger the portion of the population they can exert influence over, the better the terms they can demand. Second, the Taliban has always been playing the long game. They understood they could outlast the International Security Assistance Force, and they likely perceive that they can outlast continued support to the GoIRA. Third, as already noted, the GoIRA is at a severe disadvantage when it comes

to popular legitimacy. Were the Taliban to negotiate with the GoIRA, this in and of itself would bolster the legitimacy of the GoIRA. For these reasons, RS has noted that in order to set conditions for a political resolution to the conflict, a necessary precondition is the perception by both sides that the conflict is in a military stalemate, or at least a belief that they cannot achieve their goals with continued fighting (RS 2019). Fortunately, for the GoIRA, it is likely strong enough (assuming substantial continued international support) to forestall sweeping Taliban victories in major cities like Kabul and Kandahar (Bolger 2019, 29). Thus a future stalemate is likely. That said GoIRA elites are not likely to offer sufficient concessions to the Taliban – which come at the expense of their own personal power – as long as they can count on continued U.S. security assistance.

All of this said, battlefield considerations are only one part of the equation when determining interest in negotiations. The following section will explore the off-battlefield considerations that are also necessary to consider when assessing the viability of negotiations.

### **Off Battlefield Considerations**

Case studies of negotiations with VNSAs have shown that while battlefield considerations certainly influence whether negotiations can occur or succeed, off-battlefield considerations are also consequential in bargaining between belligerents. This section proceeds in two subsections. The first explores political and ideological off-battlefield considerations, whereas the second examines financial ones.

#### **Political and Ideological Considerations**

Despite pro-peace rhetoric and GoIRA and Taliban participation in various third party negotiations and peace talks, there is little tangible evidence that either side is actually serious about negotiating under current conditions. In late 2018, U.S. Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation (SRAR), Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, met with regional leaders several times to discuss reconciliation with the Taliban. Taliban representatives participated in some of the talks, although never with Afghan government representatives present. Following the second round of talks in November, President Ghani gave a statement described as a “road map for peace,” and announced the creation of a 12-person Afghan negotiating team for peace talks with the Taliban. However, the seriousness of this effort is called into question as subjects such as an interim government and human rights issues were not discussed on the basis that they were “internal issues” to be decided among Afghans (OIG 2018, 20). President Ghani’s commitment to talks is also called into question by the appointment of two strongly anti-Taliban former defense officials, who have been credibly accused of human rights abuses and war crimes, and by his choice of runningmate – former intelligence chief, Amrullah Saleh – for the July 2019 elections. As regards the Taliban, in January 2019, Ambassador Khalilzad said that he had agreed with Taliban leaders, at least theoretically, to a framework for a deal under which the United States would withdraw troops from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban’s guarantee that Afghanistan would not

harbor terrorists (Mashal 2019; OIG 2018, 25). However, the reported framework did not address Taliban relations with the Afghan government, making it virtually meaningless. Thus, despite claims to the contrary, both sides are a long way from engaging in meaningful negotiations that might bring a peaceful end to the conflict. Indeed, the existing incentives structure likely needs to change in order to bring leaders from both sides to the negotiating table in earnest.

Afghanistan is comprised of myriad ethnic groups, none of which constitutes a majority on a national level. However, each of the major groups do constitute a majority in at least one part of the country. This makes truly centralized and effective control of Afghanistan virtually impossible, given recent histories of conflict. On paper, the 2004 Constitution gives the president far reaching executive powers – including the unilateral appointment of all provincial and district officials (Barfield, 8). In practice, the president’s sweeping authorities does not extend past major cities and provincial capitals in much of the country. As such, the current governmental structure is perhaps the greatest impediment for leadership on both sides to seriously pursue a peace agreement. It incentivizes both the Taliban and the GoIRA to seek short-term, zero-sum outcomes that best suits the interest of their respective leaders, rather than make long-term compromises in the interest of peace. On the GoIRA’s side, the issue of making peace may well be determined by the 2019 elections, and if the winner is willing to endorse structural government changes that can lead to a viable long-term peace agreement. These changes will necessarily require giving up a monopoly on power and influence. The Taliban will also have to address structural questions about whose interests should take precedence, which will likely pit the small, deeply committed ideologues seeking an absolutist Islamist state against the Taliban’s regional leaders, who prioritize local control (Barfield 2019, 7).

While the Afghan public is broadly supportive of a peace process, the Taliban has refused to negotiate with, or even acknowledge, the Afghan government on the grounds that the government is illegitimate. Naturally, this presents a substantial impediment to negotiations. However, the recent ceasefire has shown that the Taliban is willing to respond to government actions, albeit without explicitly referencing the government action they are responding to. Furthermore, the Taliban’s participation in negotiations with other actors, including the United States and Russia, may offer an alternative pathway forward. Perhaps most importantly, ideological commitments are not the main priority for all Taliban leaders. Framing negotiations as a way to improve local conditions may help encourage participation by local Taliban leaders who are more concerned with localized control than grandiose ideological positions. Importantly, these local leaders recognize that they have an inherent local advantage and may therefore be incentivized to participate in talks. In many rural areas, the Taliban is better positioned to provide basic governance to the population and is already seen as more legitimate than the GoIRA.



One expert assessment noted that the GoIRA has no track record, at least in recent memory, of being able to provide what the Afghan people want. In contrast, the Taliban is capable of instantiating some degree of fair market regulation and enforcement, fuel quality and quantity inspection, and vetting of professional qualifications, while also curbing corruption, ensuring functional local governance and efficient judicial processes (Liebl 2019, 20). Indeed, the Taliban's early popularity largely stemmed from their ability to squash corruption, reign in lawlessness and secure critical infrastructure in the areas they controlled so that commerce could grow (Stanford 2015).

Another way in which the Taliban may be incentivized to negotiate in earnest is if doing so accomplished their goal of achieving a U.S. withdrawal. Indeed, the Taliban have already agreed to negotiate with the GoIRA if it removes all U.S. forces from Afghanistan (Pahjwok Afghan News 2018). This ultimatum highlights the weakness of the GoIRA, while increasing the saliency of a common complaint by Afghans – the continued presence of U.S. forces – which undermines local perceptions of the legitimacy of the GoIRA. If the GoIRA did accede to the Taliban's terms, they would then be forced to negotiate from a far weaker position militarily.

It may be possible to split the difference so that the GoIRA is not forced to negotiate from an even weaker position following the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. forces. Perhaps a firm timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces, or the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces, which will be quietly backfilled by NATO allies involved in RS would be sufficient leverage to empower more moderate Taliban leaders to begin negotiations with the GoIRA over the objections of more deeply ideologically committed leaders. Sidelining the most ardent Taliban ideologues will also help increase local perceptions of the legitimacy of Taliban negotiators as the majority of the Afghan people oppose Islamist rule (Liebl 2019, 18).

While it is at least plausible that there are viable avenues for incentivizing Taliban negotiations that leverage political and ideological considerations, why would the GoIRA agree to engage in negotiations under these conditions? The government is militarily weaker and lacks basic legitimacy. A negotiations process that brings the Taliban to the table in earnest would likely increase the salience of and exploit this reality. As such, the GoIRA is strongly disincentivized from engaging in earnest negotiations at present. Only if their future prospects declined substantially (e.g., if faced with the impending withdrawal of U.S. support or a massive increase in foreign support to the Taliban), would it make sense to pursue earnest negotiations.

If both sides agree to come to the table, a disciplined agenda that focuses on economic and material objectives, and that frames ideological concerns as practical issues might be a solution. Addressing ideological issues in practical terms could help both sides lessen the negative optics of making concessions. For example, any version of a power sharing agreement is likely to involve

the government giving the Taliban some sort of formal control over at least some of the territory it currently occupies. If territorial concessions were framed as, for example, a cooperative initiative to improve stability in order to encourage private-sector led economic growth (see below subsection), this would help the government save face. Similarly, beginning any talks in secret – as was done in the Colombian and Northern Ireland conflicts – could minimize the Taliban leadership’s concerns about direct negotiations with the government.

### **Financial Considerations**

Transnational organized criminal activity plays a major role in financing terrorist organizations across the globe. Afghanistan is no exception. In fact, Afghanistan is the world’s largest producer of heroin and opium (Omelicheva and Markowitz 2018, 2). Afghanistan supplies more than 90 percent of the world’s opioids (ibid., 2; Schmidt 2010; Burnashev 2007; Madi 2004). While such activities are often used to directly finance VNSAs, the way these groups utilize the financial windfalls that accrue from illicit trafficking has evolved over time. For example, Colin Clarke highlights that the Islamic State has invested in legitimate businesses (hotels, hospitals, farms, car dealerships etc.) throughout areas in which it operates (Mansour and al-Hashimi, 2018). The Taliban, however, continues to rely on additional methods of illicit financing, including taxing the local population by creating shadow governments, contraband smuggling, exploiting natural resources, and through donations by sympathetic patrons from the Gulf nations (CFR 2018; Jackson 2018).

While opium poppy cultivation and these other, aforementioned activities have proven lucrative for the Taliban, they pale in comparison to the potential profits to be had from the extraction of Afghanistan’s rare earth metal and other mineral resources. As previously noted, around 24 untapped mineral formations, worth an estimated \$900 billion, were recently discovered in Afghanistan. The most prominent formations include the massive North Aynak copper and cobalt mine near Kabul in Logar Province, Zarkashan copper and gold resources in Ghanzi Province, the Khanneshin rare-earth element deposits in Helmand Province, Haji Gak iron reserves in Parwan Province, and lithium deposits in Herat, Ghanzi, Nimruz and Farah Provinces (USGS Report 2011). These deposits have generated substantial Chinese and U.S. interest (VOA 2017). However, their extraction at scale is not currently commercially viable given prevailing levels of insecurity (SIGAR 2018). That said, a negotiated peace would likely yield immense profits in the form of natural resource rents for local leaders in areas where extraction occurs. Importantly, a substantial portion of these deposits are located in areas currently controlled by Taliban forces. This may incentivize profit-driven Taliban leaders, as well as the Chinese government, to support a peace process.

Political and economic instability and endemic corruption generate ideal conditions for terrorist organizations and other violent non-state groups to engage in transnational organized crime. For

instance, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a designated foreign terrorist organization, was the main smuggler of opioids out of Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan (Falkenburg 2013; Makarenko 2002; Omelicheva and Markowitz 2018). Since the early 2000s, however, the Taliban has emerged as a major actor in the drug trade (in addition to arms, cash, and human trafficking) with a vast transnational network (Gulabzoi 2007; Hernandez 2013). The 2007 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report noted that Afghanistan's 2006 opium harvest was valued at about \$3.1 billion to farmers, laboratory owners and Afghan traffickers. These massive profits not only enable the Taliban to hire fighters and procure weapons, they also enable it to provide the population with basic services. Jackson argues that the Taliban coopts and controls public goods and services provided by the government and aid agencies, uses a hybrid network of NGO and state-provided services to provide health and education in Taliban-controlled areas, regulates school curriculums, and has even entered verbal and written cooperation contracts with provincial or district-level service provision ministries (2018, 5). The Taliban therefore, does not just occupy territory, but establishes some form of governance over it. Doing so helps to bolster their legitimacy, while undermining that of the GoIRA, which has failed to provide basic services to much of the population.

### **Potential Pathways to a Durable Peace Agreement**

This section outlines broad recommendations and principles for negotiating a durable and lasting peace agreement based on theory drawn from academic literature, empirical analysis of past peace processes, knowledge of the various actors and interests that must be accounted for in negotiations, and the on- and off-battlefield considerations relevant to key stakeholders that will determine the course of potential negotiations and their outcome. Perhaps the most crucial finding, which is discussed throughout this section, is that a durable peace will almost certainly require considerable changes to Afghanistan's government structure, including the devolution of substantial governing authority down to the district level.

Before considering the specific terms that might result in a durable and lasting agreement, it is critical to first identify which actors and interests must be privileged in negotiations by weighing their relative bargaining positions. On the GoIRA side, the best possible way to bring them to the table would be for the United States to seriously start drawing down its support and engagement so that the GoIRA leaders see the present moment as a ripe one. The fact of the matter is that they will never get a better deal in the future if the United States withdraws without a deal that guarantees them some degree of power in the future. Because this would necessarily be visible to the Taliban, there is a risk that they would simply decide to wait for the U.S. withdrawal and then attempt to make further inroads militarily against a weakened GoIRA. While this is certainly possible, the Taliban could be incentivized to negotiate if negotiations emphasized local governance and local issues of interest to the Taliban. While the Taliban may not yet have

achieved the maximal amount of territorial control possible through force of arms, economic incentives, political legitimacy and international recognition may be an attractive substitute for the Taliban, which encourages their participation in a peace process.

While central to any negotiating process and peace deal, the GoIRA and the Taliban are not the only two parties necessary to negotiate peace or sustain it. As discussed previously, local leaders such as tribal and ethnic warlords have historically been integral to guaranteeing even fragile peace in the country. If their interests are not carefully considered, they will most certainly act as spoilers. As such, it would follow that such actors must be included in any negotiations attempting to create a durable solution in Afghanistan.

With respect to internal actors, the longevity of any deal will depend on the terms of a new government structure in Afghanistan. Experts almost universally agree that the current governance structure is not suitable to peace (TRADOC G27 2018; TRADOC G27 2019). There are several different alternatives that might be considered. Some experts have suggested that decentralization alone could ensure sufficient Taliban representation within existing governance structures. If free and fair democratic gubernatorial elections were to occur today and be contested by Taliban candidates, they would be expected to win in many conservative Pashtun areas. Unlike Colombia's FARC, the Taliban benefit from a high degree of legitimacy and would be electorally competitive. Furthermore, competitive elections would create a larger number of GoIRA stakeholders, as unilateral appointments for elites would no longer be permitted and a greater number of candidates would be able to participate.

Despite these limited benefits, attempting to integrate Taliban leaders into a centralized democratic system is probably not the best approach for a number of reasons. First, Taliban leaders are disincentivized from agreeing to terms that would require them to compete for power in elections, as they have already established uncontested control in many areas. Competitive elections would be similarly unpalatable to the GoIRA leaders that also currently enjoy uncontested power. There are three alternative options. The first is a power-sharing government at the ministerial level, the second involves adoption of decentralized regional governance in Afghanistan, and the third a decentralized district-level governance that heavily concentrates power in the hands of local leaders. Note, these power sharing agreements would not necessarily be democratic in nature and would likely involve an agreement between current Taliban leaders and GoIRA elites, but would have the best potential for bringing leaders to the negotiating table in earnest.

When modeling the potential outcomes for a power sharing agreement, the TRADOC G27 Models and Simulations Branch considered the first two options. Both models resulted in increased Afghan government control geographically and increased popular support for the Afghan

government. Of the two, a decentralized regional government structure showed the best outcomes with regards to both government control of territory and popular support for government. However, other TRADOC G27 analyses have concluded that putting power in the hands of regional leaders could result in the country fragmenting into chaos. They note that “recent Afghan history has shown that regional leaders often chafe under centralized control and will not hesitate to ignore the national government at best or plunge the country into civil war and chaos at worst” (TRADOC G27 2018; TRADOC G27 2019). However, rather than assuming that increased centralization is the solution to this problem, this report suggests that the answer may very well be even further decentralization to the district level.

A centralized system that privileges elites at the highest levels and excludes regional and local powerbrokers creates significant incentives for them to choose fighting for power over maintaining peace and stability, which has been the case for much of Afghanistan’s recent history. The center-periphery dynamics in Afghanistan are also important in this respect. The Kabul-based government does not have the reach to exercise control in the periphery, but the periphery has gained the ability to impose its will on the center (Schetter and Glassner, 2012). Furthermore, a regional distribution of power that effectively disenfranchises non-majority local powerbrokers creates incentives for them to fight for power at the regional level. Such a system ignores the preferences of Afghanistan’s numerous minority powerbrokers, such as tribal warlords, that would normally band together with regional actors in order to form broader peripheral networks for access to resources and power. When power is decentralized on a regional level, these networks are disrupted and the number of factions competing for power increases in the absence of a strong unifying objective. Decentralization to the district level would ameliorate much of the competition for power at the regional level by ensuring broader representation locally and thus a less stark divide between those with power and those who are excluded from it. Only the weakest of actors would remain completely disenfranchised and they lack the capacity to seriously destabilize the peace. Finally, the enhanced popular support for regional-level governance indicated by the TRADOC simulation would likely increase if control were decentralized on the district level.

Another major consideration is the issue of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). As demonstrated by the FARC, DDR of insurgents has not always been especially successful. Thus, absent battlefield incentive to demobilize, and political, financial or ideological incentive to lay down arms, the best option is to declare an indefinite ceasefire. If this is coupled with devolution of power, this will at least ensure that local leaders control the war material necessary to maintain – if not a monopoly – dominant control over the legitimate use of force locally. Evidence suggests that rank-and-file fighters on both sides are tired of war. Once elevated to formal positions in local governance their former leaders would be able to placate these fighters through patronage. It is in their interest to do so as local power in Afghanistan has historically been – at least in part – a

function of leaders' latent martial potential. Moreover, with security comes opportunity for economic and commercial development, especially in the lucrative extractive industries.

The Taliban has agreed, at least in principle, to a framework for a deal with SRAR Khalilzed where they promise not to harbor or aid terrorists in Afghanistan in exchange for the withdrawal of U.S. forces, a factor which is of concern to numerous external players. Any deal will need to include terms that formalize this promise. Renouncing AQ, something the Taliban has yet to do despite recent attempts to distance itself from the group, would go a long way (Marshal 2019). However enforcement of these terms would be nearly impossible, a problem made all the more difficult if Pakistan isn't on board with the agreement and motivated to better control their shared border.

The issues of opium cultivation, rare earth mineral extraction and illicit financing are issues that are best resolved via a decentralized power structure. Terms that prohibit the Taliban from harboring terrorists like AQ and financing terrorist and other criminal organizations via illicit trafficking will necessarily be required to reach a deal. However, requiring the Taliban to give up one of its primary sources of funding, particularly through the prohibition of opium cultivation, will likely be a deal breaker. The Taliban relies on opium profits to finance the provision of services and gain grassroots support. However, opium production is likely to become less overtly harmful to Afghan stability in a decentralized power structure, as local leaders will likely be more committed to maintaining control of their respective territories and stimulating legitimate economic activity via external partners (who would be encouraged to do so with legitimate Taliban partners), rather than focusing on financing a large-scale conflict against GoIRA and other forces. Stability also offers opportunity to replace opium poppy cultivation with the extraction of rare earth metals, perhaps one of the few activities that would yield higher rents. (It is however worth noting that one disadvantage of a decentralized system is that while this approach may work well in districts where poppy cultivation is occurring and rare earth metals are present, the benefits from extractive industries are unlikely to extend much beyond the areas where these resources are located. As such, mineral extraction will do little to stem cultivation in districts without deposits of valuable natural resources.)

The interests of key external actors are also critical. The United States seeks a graceful exit after nearly two decades of fighting in Afghanistan has yielded little progress. A negotiated peace would allow the U.S. to save face in exiting Afghanistan. Moreover, withdrawing absent a negotiated peace would create a power vacuum in a region that is already fraught with violence. For the United States, further instability in Afghanistan would risk U.S. interests throughout the region. The fact that Afghanistan remains a safehaven for both AQ and IS means continued instability also poses a threat to the U.S. homeland. This would need to be addressed in any negotiated settlement. More specifically, a viable agreement would need to ensure those governing Afghanistan (and in particular the Taliban) take concrete steps to deny safehavens to transnational terrorist

organizations. As regards achieving a peaceful resolution, the U.S. government is uniquely positioned to exert sufficient leverage on the GoIRA to negotiate in earnest by threatening to substantially alter the level of support they provide. A U.S. ultimatum to the GoIRA will also positively affect the willingness of most other external powers (with the notable exceptions of Pakistan and Iran) to support (or at least refrain from spoiling) a peace process. If the U.S. government ceases to serve as a guarantor of at least some minimum level of stability that limits the conflict from spilling over into much of the rest of the region, other actors like Russia and China, will be forced to assume this costly and undesirable responsibility in order to protect their regional interests (and in the case of China their own shared border with Afghanistan).

If the United States decides to seriously draw down its support and put pressure on the GoIRA, which is the critical first step towards negotiations and eventual exit from Afghanistan, other third parties will likely take a seat at the table to represent their interests. While Russia would prefer the United States remain mired in Afghanistan indefinitely as this would further bleed the country, a U.S. withdrawal following a negotiated settlement is preferable to a U.S. withdrawal absent an agreement. That said, Russia will seek to use negotiations to bolster their regional influence at the expense of the United States. For them, this is a zero-sum game. Indeed, Russia has already demonstrated its desire to ensure its interests are protected and to minimize the U.S. role in any potential peace processes by holding talks with the Taliban and GoIRA, without U.S. involvement. However, Russia lacks the leverage to force the GoIRA to the negotiation table on its own. It will therefore likely choose to participate in a peace process that also involves the United States. This potentiality is increased due to the fact that Russia also seeks to contain the extremist movements fueling separatist violence in places like Chechnya. While Chechens have trained and fought in Afghanistan, Russia views the Taliban as localized to Afghanistan and is not adverse to working with them, despite their ideology. This is especially true if the peace accord includes assurances that the Taliban will cease harboring transnational terrorist groups. (As noted this is also a key U.S. consideration.) Russia also has various licit (and illicit) financial interests in Afghanistan (Gurganus 2018). The former, at least, would benefit from increased stability.

China is also consequential given its significant economic interests in Afghanistan. Like Russia, China would prefer if the United States were to remain actively engaged in sustained conflict as this would serve to continue to distract the United States from long-term competition to China, while ensuring that the Chinese are not themselves forced to commit troops to providing stability in Badakshan Province, which shares a border with China. However, China too would prefer that if the United States withdraws, it is a result of a negotiated peace versus a unilateral decision. A successful peace process would advance China's economic interests in Afghanistan and the region more broadly. As already mentioned, Chinese firms already possess contracts to mine Afghanistan's trove of rare earth minerals, but have been unable to do so due to the poor security situation. Moreover, the BRI is a core Chinese interest in the region. Enhanced stability would contribute to

this program, and also help protect China's far more substantial economic investment in neighboring Pakistan. A substantial devolution of governing authority in Afghanistan may also make it even easier for China to exert further economic (and political) influence. Beyond economic considerations, China would look favorably on terms that addressed support for transnational terrorist groups. As previously noted, China is very concerned about the large number of Uighur fighters in Afghanistan and the implication for domestic stability in western China.

India has been openly anti-Taliban from the start and has invested heavily in Afghanistan. Despite their anti-Taliban stance, India is likely to support negotiations as a means to remain influential in Afghanistan. This will also ensure that their economic investments are protected.

Pakistan is perhaps the most difficult external consideration. Pakistan has little to gain from a stable Afghanistan, and elites within its security apparatus perceive it has quite a lot to lose from a lasting peace. As already noted, Pakistan fears being sandwiched between a hostile India on one side and an unfriendly yet strong Afghanistan on the other. However, there are certain, though admittedly unlikely, ways that these concerns could be mitigated. While improbable, they are worth discussing as Pakistan has considerable ability to scuttle a peace process. In particular, China may be well positioned to exert pressure on Pakistan. China and Pakistan maintain close economic and diplomatic relations. These relations have expanded considerably as Pakistan sought new patrons as relations between Islamabad and Washington became increasingly tense in recent years. For China's part, their BRI cuts through Pakistan, and both sides have strained relations with India (though China has taken recent steps to improve bilateral relations with India). It is at least conceivable that China could offer limited security guarantees to Pakistan to help guard against a major India encroachment via Afghanistan. While China is likely to be extremely wary of becoming embroiled in a conflict between India and Pakistan, Beijing is likely to realize that some of Pakistan's most extreme fears – an Indian incursion from Afghanistan – are pretty fantastical. Moreover, if a full-scale war were to ever break out between India and Pakistan, China would almost certainly be affected regardless of what they do given its geographic proximity. The United States could also entice Pakistan through a massively increased aid budget, as well as through generous foreign military financing. Moreover, Pakistan may still be able to ensure strategic depth if governing authority is devolved to the local level. This would ensure that Taliban leaders, which Pakistan can exert influence over, would govern much of the territory along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Finally, Pakistan suffers immensely from their current support for the Taliban and other extremists as they suffer regular attacks on their civilian population and security services.

As previously discussed, Iran benefits from instability in Afghanistan. Continued U.S. engagement diverts attention from conflict between the United States and Iran. Moreover, substantial U.S. involvement in negotiations likely precludes Iranian engagement, as evidenced by their decision



to not participate in previous stability talks. Thus negotiations would also serve to decrease their regional influence. Moreover, a stable Afghanistan would likely lead to a reduction in the flow of both portable water resources and black market currency from Afghanistan to Iran, although decentralized governance may limit the magnitude of these effects. Finally, in light of rising U.S.-Iran tensions, Iran will be looking for ways to impose costs in Afghanistan. To this end, working to scuttle peace talks would be an attractive option. Iran might be persuaded to remain on the sidelines in exchange for sanctions relief from the United States, coupled with clear prospects for increased trade between Iran and Afghanistan.

In sum, getting to negotiations will be difficult, but not impossible. The three largest stumbling blocks are that the GoIRA, Pakistan and Iran are all disincentivized from negotiating in earnest. The former two actors are almost certainly critical to success. It is at least plausible that some of these actors could be brought on side, but doing so would require drastic efforts by the United States and other actors to generate sufficient leverage. Notably, a credible threat of a unilateral U.S. withdrawal is crucial.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while a path towards a stable Afghanistan will be extremely difficult, it is not impossible. The findings of this report are critical to understanding the impediments to peace at present. These include the following points:

1. The Taliban is in a stronger position on the battlefield given its continued ability to contest, take and hold Afghan territory through kinetic means. The Taliban is also far more able to influence much of the population. As such, they are strongly disincentivized at present to negotiate in earnest with the GoIRA.
2. Nevertheless, the Taliban is also aware that they will not achieve total victory by continuing to fight indefinitely. While the GoIRA still has external support, the Taliban will not be able to take complete control over Afghanistan's major cities. As such, successful negotiations with the Taliban are more likely over the long term (i.e., after they maximize their territorial control to the greatest extent possible through force of arms) or through sufficient off-battlefield incentives.
3. Fruitful negotiations will need to concede that the Taliban is in the dominant position, especially in rural Afghanistan. This will likely mean extensive devolution of power to the local level, thus allowing the Taliban to formalize their political dominance throughout much of the countryside. The U.S. government will need to exert substantial pressure on the GoIRA in order to incentivize it to share a significant amount of political power with the Taliban.
4. The Taliban is not monolithic, and there are opportunities to leverage factional differences between local Afghan Taliban leadership and Pakistan-based leaders to achieve a negotiated peace. Dividing the Pakistani leaders, who are deeply motivated by ideology and

the desire to re-establish an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan, from local Taliban leaders who are primarily concerned with local territorial, economic gain, etc., will likely help jump start negotiations in earnest.

5. A critical ideological hardline for the Taliban is its refusal to engage in direct talks with the GoIRA on the grounds that the government is an illegitimate establishment constructed and supported by foreign powers. Framing participation in negotiations as a way to improve local conditions could help mitigate these concerns.
6. The Taliban has similarly conditioned their participation in any talks on the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Serious steps towards the withdrawal of U.S. troops could help pave the way for Taliban participation in negotiations, while also improving the popularity of the GoIRA (as the presence of U.S. forces is broadly unpopular).
7. The current system of centralized government in Afghanistan is and has historically been untenable. Negotiations will only succeed if plans for a new government structure provide incentives for both government elites and Afghanistan's myriad ethnic, tribal and other local powerbrokers.
8. The competing interests of influential external third parties, such as Pakistan, Russia, India and China will need to be reconciled in negotiations to the extent that they have both sufficient capability and motivation to prevent fruitful negotiations or destabilize an agreement.

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