

Statement of Ambassador James B. Cunningham, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Israel and the United Nations

House Committee on Foreign Affairs, “The Trump Administration’s Afghanistan Policy,” September 19, 2019

While the specifics of the deal negotiated by US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Khalilzad remain unknown, its apparent elements raise serious concern about failure in its application. Now that President Trump has called a halt to the discussions with the Taliban, the opportunity exists, if the administration will take it, to course correct and seek a better deal that will lead to a political agreement ending the conflict – the goal which President Trump correctly set two years ago. A flawed deal on withdrawal of US forces, one not grounded in the context of an actual peace agreement, risks the collapse of Afghanistan into chaos, the return of the oppressive and extremist Taliban Emirate, and the growth of the Islamist terrorist threat to Western security and values. The American and Afghan peoples, and our many international partners in Afghanistan, deserve better.

One side negotiating against a deadline is at a severe disadvantage when the other is not, and Ambassador Khalilzad has been operating under extremely complex conditions. But an agreement which fails in fact to open the way to peace for Afghanistan will be a defeat for US leadership and values, and sacrifice unnecessarily US and Afghan interests in stability and security in that troubled region.

Certainly a discussion with the Taliban about ending the conflict is to be welcomed. But hope for an “intra-Afghan dialogue” is not a strategy, and there is little to suggest that the Taliban version of peace would be acceptable to the vast majority of Afghans or to the international community. Taliban representatives have told other Afghans that the United States is defeated and that they will restore the Islamic Emirate. While they suggest that the Emirate would be less severe and barbaric, there is little doubt what that would mean for today’s Afghanistan, nor of the risks that outcome would pose for Afghan women.

Negotiations should be resumed as soon as possible, but on a different basis, geared to actually ending the conflict. A sound deal with the Taliban will involve the Afghan government. It will as a first step end the violence by making the discussion of US withdrawal contingent upon a ceasefire which ends the killing of Afghans. While forces can be reduced based on conditions as a ceasefire takes hold, it will make a durable peace agreement between the universally recognized Afghan government and the Taliban the sine qua non for the ultimate withdrawal of international forces. That negotiation in turn must take into account the reality, as demonstrated by the horrific ISIS bombing of a Kabul wedding hall last month, that future Afghan governments will likely require international assistance in combatting terrorism. They will also without doubt require significant international donor support for a peace agreement. A new Taliban Emirate will be deserving of neither.

There has been much discussion in the past weeks about the futility of continued US engagement in Afghanistan and American fatigue, and calls for withdrawal – often without addressing the consequences. Peace negotiations, on the terms we, most Afghans and our international partners would seek, will be difficult but not impossible to create. We have not adequately tested the proposition, which requires a complex diplomatic and military effort and continued support for the Afghan security forces. We have long recognized that a military solution is not in the offing. But a peace process does require an adequate military instrument in support of a multilateral, multifaceted, high level diplomatic campaign to set the conditions for negotiations.

The irony of where we are today is that President Trump’s South Asia strategy, announced two years ago, corrected shortcomings which handicapped President Obama’s efforts to withdraw U.S. forces and establish a peace process. Knowing that President Obama had a timeline for bringing our troops home, the Taliban had no incentive to negotiate. In 2017, President Trump agreed to restore military capabilities needed to strengthen the American Train and Assist and counterterrorism missions, and to focus on creating conditions for negotiations. His strategy for peace correctly aligned three key elements for getting the Taliban to genuine negotiations: bolstering the Afghan security forces; basing the reduction and eventual withdrawal of military forces on conditions and not artificial deadlines; and focusing on Afghanistan’s regional context, particularly on ending the nefarious role of Pakistan in providing safe haven to the Taliban.

That strategy was aimed at success – a political settlement, including respect for the Afghan constitution and its protections for human rights, women and a free media. It appears to be coming apart. The re-establishment of unrealistic US deadlines will again undercut the Afghan security forces. Deadlines and the ever-present threat of withdrawal absent an agreement encourage Taliban intransigence. Speculation about an interim government, which hopefully is now moot, risked the demise of democracy in Afghanistan. Washington appears yet again to have allowed Pakistan to avoid concrete action to change the calculations of the Taliban leadership in Pakistan.

Afghanistan is neither a failed state, nor to be dismissed as a “forever war.” Afghanistan is a struggling democratic, Islamic partner in the generational conflict between extreme Islamist ideology and terrorism and the civilized world to which most people, including Muslims, aspire. Our 18-year effort in Afghanistan has had several distinct phases, and mistakes have surely been made. But yielding to fatigue rather than correcting our strategy would be the greatest mistake of all. The costs of engagement in Afghanistan are much lower than in the past, can be lower yet, and are sustainable. As with the Cold War, staying power will be required to win the ideological conflict with Islamist extremism, in which Afghanistan is a chapter. We can certainly be smarter and more effective. But as with Iraq, the costs of premature withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the prospects of peace unsecured, will be much higher. Among the more important of those costs will be the accelerated erosion of the notion that the United States is a reliable and durable partner when there is a price to be paid for leadership and defense of US values.

