Afghanistan: “Peace” as the Vietnamization of a U.S. Withdrawal?

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One has to be careful when examining the “peace” the United States is now seeking in Afghanistan. There are many warning signs that this peace effort may actually be an attempt to provide the same kind of political cover for a U.S. withdrawal as the peace settlement the United States negotiated in Vietnam. At the same time, U.S. policymakers may be taking the current peace effort in Afghanistan seriously and believe it could actually succeed. At best, it is a well-intentioned attempt at peace, whose authors do not realize that this form of “peace” is likely to rapidly deteriorate into a Vietnam-like withdrawal.

Seeking a failed peace is an all too real possibility. After all, almost all current U.S. and other international peace efforts lack a clear strategy that goes beyond military victory or conflict termination. In Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, the U.S. goal is limited to bringing an end to the current fighting, creating some form of ceasefire, or defeating the current terrorist threat. There is no clear effort or plan to produce a stable peace and create both a workable and lasting structure in any country’s governance, security, or economy. Looking for a hidden motive in the lack of a meaningful peace strategy for Afghanistan can easily end in discovering that a motive does not even exist.

And yet, all of the public descriptions of the current U.S. peace efforts in Afghanistan are so shallow and short-term that they at least seem designed to provide a cover for a U.S. withdrawal. Like the “peace” in Vietnam – they involve an extraordinary level of risk. In fact, if there is a major difference between the prospects for the current U.S. peace efforts in Afghanistan and the actual outcome of the U.S. peace efforts in Vietnam, it may only be that the current U.S. peace efforts in Afghanistan seem less likely to produce success than the U.S. efforts that ended in the fall of Saigon and North Vietnam’s conquest of the South.

A Real Peace with No Clear Security Guarantees?

From what the U.S. government has made public to date, the current U.S. peace efforts will end in some form of ephemeral benefits like a ceasefire, a Taliban agreement not to support extremism or terrorism, and/or some form of initial cooperation between the Taliban and the current Afghan central government. So far, however, the only clear goals behind the U.S. side of the negotiations – beyond withdrawing U.S. combat forces – seem to be getting some form of a ceasefire or conflict termination and a pro forma Taliban agreement not to support terrorism.

The United States has not publicly defined any security guarantee for the Afghan government. It also has never clearly admitted that today’s U.S. and NATO-backed Afghan forces are slowly losing the fight to control the countryside or that Afghan forces cannot survive without the aid of major U.S. air strikes, intelligence support, and backing – especially from the elite U.S. ground force elements used for direct “train and assist” support of the Afghan Army and elite Afghan counterterrorism forces.

Polls of the Afghan people demonstrate Afghanistan’s deficiency in security and governance. The Asia Foundation has been polling Afghan public opinion for years and has developed a highly respected annual poll of how Afghans perceive their country and the war. The Foundation’s 2019 poll of the Afghan people found that,
...74.5% of respondents say that they always, often, or sometimes fear for their personal safety. This represents an increase of over 3 percentage points since 2018 (71.1%) and a new high for the Survey. Fear for personal safety has risen every year since 2012, when it stood at 48.2%. Looking beyond the recent year-on-year increases, the 2019 figure represents an almost 100% increase from the first time the question was asked, in 2006 (39.6%), and a sizeable increase from 2012, when fear for personal safety was at its third-lowest point (48.2%). Fear while participating in an election is also at its highest recorded level (63.3%). This fear has increased by more than 50% since the question was first asked, in 2006 (41.1%), and it is representative of a longitudinal trend of rising fear and insecurity across much of the country. Increased fear is not restricted to elections: the number of respondents who report some or a lot of fear while participating in a demonstration has also reached its highest level ever, 75.2%, roughly a 25% increase over 2006 (60.6%). Fear when encountering the Taliban (93.1%) is nearly the same as in 2018 (93.6%), as is fear when encountering ISIS/Daesh (95.0% in 2019, 94.9% in 2018).

Reporting to Congress by the Lead Inspector General of the Department of Defense (LIG), the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), the UN – specifically their reporting on Afghan casualties and “safe” areas for aid operations – as well as reputable sources – like the Long War Journal and CSIS – all show how tenuous the government’s control of Afghanistan has become. They also make the remaining shortcomings in Afghan forces all too clear (see Figure One).

The Afghan Army would have almost certainly already lost some provincial capitals if it had not had massive U.S. air support and land combat support from U.S. train and assist units as well as small combat elements. It would also have almost certainly lost significant territory to ISIS without U.S. air, intelligence, and advisory ground support – a challenge that the United States has never publicly addressed when stating that the Taliban must limit terrorism in Afghanistan.2

A close reading of either the SIGAR or the LIG reports to Congress shows that the Afghan local, paramilitary, police forces, and major elements of the Afghan Army are years from being ready to secure the country without direct U.S. combat support.3 Worse, they have not shown that they can provide effective civil policing capability, which would be a critical mission if any peace settlement was actually to function – and also a necessary prerequisite for Afghans if they were to turn to the government for action rather than to the Taliban.4

Personnel levels also remain a problem, in spite of the fact there are so few job opportunities outside the government and armed forces. SIGAR reports that the total Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) personnel did rise in 2019, but the total for the Army (ANA) only rose by about 5,000 while the total for the Afghan National Police (ANP) actually lost personnel. These figures also remain uncertain, and SIGAR reports that the total personnel at the end of 2019 was only 77.5% of the assigned strength of 352,000. These numbers also may not fully reflect substantial desertions and do not address what seems to be a growing reluctance to serve because of rising Afghan casualty figures.5

The Afghan Air Force is still a shell of an active force, and the United States Air Forces Central (USAFCENT) data shows that Afghan forces have been critically dependent on U.S. and Coalition intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support since U.S. and NATO major combat forces left in 2013. The number of manned and unmanned air strikes rose from only 947 in 2015 to 1,337 in 2016; to 4,461 in 2017; to 7,362 in 2018; and down to 6,727 in the first 11 months of 2019 (see Figure Two).

A metric used to estimate the effectiveness of properly equipping and training Afghan forces is the number of independent operations carried out by the Afghan security forces without the assistance of U.S. or Coalition forces. However, SIGAR recorded that the Afghan Special Security
Forces only carried out 31% of their ground operations independently in the months of October to December 2019 – clearly demonstrating that the Afghan forces are not at the capacity to function autonomously, not to mention that interviews also raise serious questions about how truly “independent” these operations really were.

The Official U.S. Army History of Vietnam warns that somewhat similar problems existed in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) after the Vietnam peace settlement, but also indicates that the ARVN looked far stronger at the time than today’s Afghan forces. Moreover, the South Vietnamese government at least appeared to be dealing with a war where North Vietnamese forces seemed to have been largely defeated and had left South Vietnam.6

Equally important, World Bank and IMF reporting make it clear that the Afghan forces cannot develop and survive without the United States providing roughly half of the Afghan national security budget – and will require at least $4.6 billion a year in aid moving forward. They also need the aid of our NATO allies, but even with such aid, it is far from clear that after a major U.S. presence is gone, Afghan forces will be able to remain unified and effective enough to hold together in the face of the Taliban – rather than dissolve into a mix of competing forces loyal to given warlords and power brokers (see Figure Three).

In total, the SIGAR 46th Quarterly Report reveals that the majority of U.S. funding – about $86.4 billion as of December 31, 2019 – supports Afghan security measures.7 Yet, despite the significant investment of monetary support into the Afghan security forces, the ineffective use of U.S. funding has failed to create a security force that can sustain itself without having to rely indefinitely on foreign assistance.

Overall, the United States has given Afghanistan approximately $137 billion just towards reconstruction projects since 2002 (see Figure Four). The sheer amount of money and resources expended on Afghanistan has made U.S. involvement a long-term investment – one which cannot easily be abandoned.

Moreover, the United States has not publicly addressed any aspect of the role NATO countries would play during the implementation of any peace agreement or the assistance in guaranteeing its effectiveness. NATO’s Resolute Support Mission reported in December 2019 that 38 NATO and allied countries deployed 16,705 personnel in Afghanistan – of which 8,000 were American. This was roughly half of the total U.S. military personnel reported to be in country.

Many of the 38 countries deployed only very limited forces whose roles were more political than substantive. However, four of the eight major advisory commands in Afghanistan had non-U.S. commanders, and countries with 300 or more personnel had a substantive presence and role: Australia (300), Czech Republic (306), Germany (1,300), Georgia (871), Italy (895), Poland (355), Romania (797), Turkey (588), and the United Kingdom (1,100). Other smaller groups of forces also played a useful specialist role. Moreover, the total number of supporting contractors seems to have exceeded 15,000.8

As is the case with civil development and aid, failing to fully include allies in peace planning and negotiations can be as dangerous as ignoring the Afghan government.

**Can Peace Materialize in the Absence of Unity within Afghan Leadership?**

Between the Afghan government and the Taliban, there does not seem to be any foreseeable decrease in violence without some form of peace settlement or other agreement that is actually
honored by both sides. The SIGAR 46th Quarterly Report recorded the highest level of enemy-initiated attacks in Afghanistan since 2010 from the months of October to December 2019 (see **Figure Five**). This accounts for a 6% increase in terrorist attacks from the previous year.

If the Taliban somehow does negotiate a deal with the Afghan government, there is little indication that the Taliban has any intention of using this “peace” as anything more than a means to dominate the country. In an article from the Taliban’s “Voice of Jihad” published on January 20, 2020, the Taliban stated that,9

> After nearly two decades of armed struggle and resistance by the Islamic Emirate against foreign occupation, the invaders have come to the conclusion that this war is unwinnable and that Afghanistan is not a place that can be used as a permanent outpost. It is due to this realization that arrogant America has pursued negotiations with the Emirate and is holding talks about the withdrawal of their forces with them as a decisive force shaping the future of Afghanistan.

> From the very onset of the invasion, America sought to create an impotent and incapable governing system with the aim of attaining their objectives in Afghanistan in tandem with deceiving its people; a fact that has explicitly been made clear by the former head of this administration (Hamid Karzai) in multiple media interviews. This supposed administration has consistently been sidelined in every major decision regarding Afghanistan and has been used as a mere tool by the invaders for their own interests over the course of this protracted period.

> … At this very moment, negotiations between Talib envoys and America about the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan has entered a crucial stage and hopes are high that both sides shall reach an agreement about the withdrawal of America forces from Afghanistan. And yet again the stooge administration remains marginalized and has not even yet even been informed about the latest developments by the lead American negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad as evidenced by the remarks of Ghulam Siddique Siddiqui, the spokesperson for the incumbent head of the Kabul administration Ashraf Ghani.

> A famous Afghan proverb says “Powerless shall always remain shareless” and this saying distinctly describes the Kabul-based administration. They have continually remained loyal to the interests of the invaders and toed the official line of their masters over the past two decades and therefore, they shall continue to remain an insignificant party when it comes to major issues.

There is no way to tell how unified and effective the Taliban will be in displacing the central government once the United States withdraws, or to identify what level of non-Taliban rule might emerge in some parts of the country. There are, however, no indications that the Taliban has any interest in actually sharing power or cooperating in a peacetime government.

**What Would a Post “Peace” Government Actually Be?**

The civil dimension of such a “peace” may actually involve more risk. So far, the United States has made no public effort to describe the way Afghanistan will be governed if the “peace” that the United States is seeking occurs. It is also important to point out that Vietnam’s government failed even though it appeared to be far stronger and far more unified than the current central government of Afghanistan – and South Vietnam did not have to consider a partnership or power sharing with either the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese.

Afghanistan has no real central government at present. Its recent Presidential elections failed. Its legislature is a hollow shell that is far more representative of Afghanistan’s divided factions than the areas and constituencies it should represent, and it does not have effective control over the Afghan budget. Afghanistan’s pro-central government factions are deeply divided, and the current peace proposals almost certainly will result in some form of shared governance with the Taliban or division of part of the country.
The United States has not publicly outlined any proposal for such arrangements and neither have the Afghan central government nor the Taliban. However, it is all too clear that the central government is so divided and subject to outside power brokers that virtually any proposal that does not divide the country will create a major risk of the Taliban taking over. These risks are further complicated by deep sectarian, ethnic, and tribal differences in the country – particularly by the splits between the major Pashtun and non-Pashtun factions – and by the de facto dependence of the central government’s power structure on income from corruption and narco-trafficking.

These problems mean the Afghan central government is worse than divided and ineffective. At many points within the top of the government, Afghanistan seems to remain a near-kleptocracy. Both IMF and World Bank reporting also warn that while Afghanistan has developed yet another structure to try to fight corruption, it has not implemented any major measures to produce actual change. The SIGAR 46th Quarterly Report highlights some of these challenges – one of the most pressing problems being the Afghan government’s inability and lack of political will to arrest high-ranking officials engaged in corruption.10

Moreover, public opinion surveys show that corruption is pervasive to the point where it affects a major part of the GDP. Transparency International’s 2018 reporting on Afghanistan in *Policy, SDGS, and Fighting Corruption for the People* lays out these problems in grim detail, and the Asia Foundation’s national public opinion survey for 2019 found that11

Overall, 81.5% of respondents in 2019 say corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan as a whole, identical with last year (81.5%). At the same time, 15.6% say corruption is a minor problem, and 2.5% say corruption is not a problem at all… By province, respondents in Panjshir (96.8%), Helmand (95.0%), Nangarhar (93.1%), and Kabul (92.9%) are the most likely to say corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan, while respondents in Paktia (50.0%), Sar-e-Pul (56.3%), Ghor (57.0%), and Paktika (57.1%) are least likely. Urban respondents are more likely to say corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan (88.7%) than rural respondents (79.0%).

…Some 67.9% of Afghans surveyed say corruption is a major problem in their daily life, 2.7 percentage points lower than the 70.6% in 2018. More than one-fifth of respondents, 23.1%, call this a minor problem, and 8.3% say it is not a problem at all…Perception of corruption as a major problem in daily life is highest in Helmand (93.7%), Badghis (85.2%), Uruzgan (83.4%), Nangarhar (83.2%), and Kabul (82.7%) and lowest in Paktika (30.4%), Panjshir (35.6%), Nimroz (42.0%), Kapisa (47.7%), and Paktia (50.1%)…Urban residents (75.6%) are more likely to see corruption as a major problem in their daily lives than rural residents (65.3%), and males (71.7%) are more likely than females (64.2%). This result for females represents a notable decline from 70.6% in 2018.

The Afghan government will not understand the gravity of the current situation – or even the U.S. commitment against corruption – unless there are tangible repercussions. According to the SIGAR 46th Quarterly Report, USAID provided $60 million to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) right after the State Department told the Afghan government that funding would be withheld due to the central government’s failure to meet benchmarks for transparency and accountability.12

Unless the United States – assuming all the agencies can coordinate with each other – sends a firm message to the Afghan government that denounces corruption by either limiting or cutting off funding and actually forces corrupt officials out of office (by potentially denying those officials and their families visas to enter the United States), no real change can occur – especially not with the wasted U.S. dollars being siphoned away from meaningful projects.

The open-source reporting by the SIGAR, the LIG, USCENTCOM, the World Bank, the IMF, and the CIA also warn of the Afghan government’s vulnerability and its inability to perform its basic
functions properly. Even a glance at the World Bank’s governance indicators (see Figure Six) shows just how ineffective the Afghan central government really is.

If the Afghan government does not begin to systematically remove corruption and effectively govern the country, not only will U.S. and donor money be wasted – but the Afghan people will lose faith in their leaders.

There Is No Real Peace without the Aid Needed to Achieve Stability in Meeting the Afghan People’s Needs

Any future Afghan government will also face massive civil and social challenges that the Taliban can potentially exploit. The central government will have to deal with a massive need to create more and better jobs, equally serious income distribution and poverty problems, and rising education and health care issues – that are compounded by over a million refugees and internally displaced persons that are being forced out of Iran and Pakistan – and the need for security rather than development.

UN population data shows the seriousness of the population pressures in Afghanistan, which are some of the highest in the world (see Figure Seven). To give just one example, the U.S. Census Bureau’s International Database estimates some 864,000 Afghans will be born between 2019 and 2020 in a country whose total population in 2019 was only 35,780,000. Meanwhile, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) recorded 485,096 undocumented Afghan migrants returning from Iran and 19,881 undocumented migrants returning from Pakistan as of January 4, 2019.

While recent UNHCR data only show a limited number of formally registered refugees (5,494) and internally displaced persons (262,429) as of late 2019, the real numbers are much higher. They are driven, in part, by the fact that Afghan government forces cannot secure major population centers much less the people in the countryside. As the UNHCR also notes they get very limited aid,

Voluntary repatriation remains the preferred solution for Afghan refugees, and while the situation in Afghanistan is not presently conducive to support large-scale returns UNHCR is working closely with the Government of Afghanistan and partners – including through cross-border initiatives with Pakistan and Iran – to implement a range of programs aimed at improving the conditions in Afghanistan to support sustainable returns while ensuring Afghan refugees are able to make informed decisions about going home.

- UNHCR facilitates voluntary repatriation of registered Afghan refugees from Pakistan, Iran and other countries to Afghanistan. The return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran under the Tripartite Agreements with the respective Governments and UNHCR. The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) remains the regional framework.
- More than 5.2 million Afghan refugees have repatriated with UNHCR assistance since 2002 despite a fragile security situation in many parts of the country and a range of socio-economic and political challenges. So far in 2019, 5,484 refugees returned to Afghanistan (3,975 from Pakistan, 1,443 from Iran and 66 from other countries). The rate of returns is lower than in previous years (15,699 in 2018 and 58,817 in 2017) due to the deteriorating and unpredictable security situation, and dire economic conditions.
- Refugee returnees are provided with a cash grant of an average of US$200 per person to meet their immediate humanitarian needs and transportation costs to their place of origin or destination.

While poverty figures use data and uncertain criteria, the IMF and World Bank agree that it is all too clear that the rates are growing, that many of the past gains in health care are being lost, and
that malnutrition is a serious problem.\textsuperscript{16} UNICEF reports that, “Afghanistan has one of the world's highest rates of stunting in children under five: 41 percent. The rate of wasting, the extreme manifestation of severe acute malnutrition, in Afghanistan is extremely high: 9.5 percent. One in three adolescent girls suffers from anemia.”\textsuperscript{17} In general, a report published by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) predicted that 11.3 million Afghans would face food insecurity between November 2019 and March 2020.\textsuperscript{18} The SIGAR 46\textsuperscript{th} Quarterly Report also noted that Afghanistan is one of the only three countries – alongside Pakistan and Nigeria – where polio remains endemic.\textsuperscript{19}

This growing population pressure – combined with problems aggravated by incoming refugees and internally displaced persons, the search for security, and the sheer poverty of the rural sector – is steadily increasing dependence on the market sector of the economy and is urbanizing the population far more quickly than the economy can create jobs and decent living standards.

There are no reliable statistics on Afghanistan’s direct and disguised unemployment, particularly on youth unemployment in the urban and other sectors dominated by a cash economy. Experts privately estimate, however, that the real unemployment rate for male youth in a country – which still sharply discriminates against women in the workplace – may exceed 30%. Many of those who are employed are working at unproductive jobs where they are paid a fraction of the money needed to sustain a living, or they serve in the Afghan forces for reasons that have little to do with their dedication to the central government.

Polls tend to survey wealthier and better educated Afghans, but the Asia Foundation’s 2019 poll still found that,\textsuperscript{20}

Respondents are also asked to name the biggest problems in their area. Responses include lack of utilities/public services (39.6%), lack of employment opportunities (32.7%), insecurity/crime (35.9%), lack of infrastructure (21.0%), economic issues (18.3%), lack of educational opportunities (10.3%), and governance/justice issues (7.2%). Insecurity/crime has risen 4 percentage points this year after a four-year plateau, while lack of utilities has dropped 5 percentage points...

In 2019, lack of employment opportunities is by far the most-cited issue (72.0%), followed by lack of educational opportunities (38.5%), personal/mental health issues (18.5%), economic concerns (14.6%), and violence/insecurity (9.1%). 63.6% of urban residents say the employment opportunities for their households have declined, compared to 52.0% of rural residents. Across provinces, reports of worsening employment prospects are numerous, ranging from highs of 79.2% in Panjshir, 71.7% in Kabul, and 69.5% in Jawzjan to lows of 25.6% in Laghman, 32.5% in Wardak, and 33.8% in Logar.

It is also worth noting that in spite of various economic aid efforts to date, Afghanistan’s civil economy and its ability to finance imports has become steadily more dependent on narcotics – and without that outside aid, Afghanistan would become a “narco-state” with only one major export and center of civil economic activity. UN and U.S. reporting has described Afghanistan’s growing output of drugs and the near total failure of counternarcotic efforts in detail – showing that the crop areas for narcotics in Afghanistan are now four times the growing area the country had in 2002.\textsuperscript{21}

However, it is the economic impact of narcotics which would be most critical after any form of peace, and this is an issue that no one has yet publicly addressed. An IMF study in 2018 made what is now a very conservative estimate of the role narcotic exports currently play in shaping the Afghan economy.\textsuperscript{22}

Afghanistan’s illegal opiate economy is of significant size when compared to its licit economy. The country is the world’s leading producer of illicit opiates and supplies more than 80 per cent of the global illicit opium production. The illicit gross output of the Afghan opiate economy was estimated to be US$ 4.1-6.6 billion in
2017 and US$ 1.2-2.2 billion in 2018. This corresponded to 6 to 11 per cent of the country’s GDP and exceeded the value of its officially recorded licit exports of goods and services in 2017 (estimated at 4.3 per cent of GDP).

The World Bank and IMF do indicate that Afghanistan could make civil progress if it was unified, actively pursued the right reform policies for a decade, and could develop effective tools for governance that were not so corrupt. At the same time, both World Bank and IMF reporting make it clear that the Afghan central government is so far incapable of taking such actions.

Rather, the survival of the Afghan central government is as dependent on outside civil aid as it is on military aid. The latest IMF Article IV report tries to give the current situation a positive spin but notes that progress will largely require a stabilization of Afghanistan’s budget and international financing, which is currently dependent on massive civil and military aid (see Figure Eight).23

Afghanistan is a fragile, aid-dependent country where insecurity combined with episodes of political uncertainty and adverse weather events have kept real GDP growth below 3% in recent years. In early September, U.S.-Taliban talks on a U.S. troop withdrawal as a basis for peace negotiations were suspended, with uncertainty as to the timing of their resumption. Presidential elections were held at end-September, but results have yet to be announced. The international community continues to support Afghanistan with civilian and military assistance and is pressing for intra-Afghan peace talks and an immediate reduction in violence. The authorities have expressed an interest in a new financial arrangement to support reforms.

A challenging political and security environment has constrained Afghanistan’s real GDP growth to below 3% in recent years. Most vulnerability and social indicators show Afghanistan trailing other low-income countries, with the poverty rate having risen to almost 55%. The authorities have focused on maintaining macroeconomic and financial stability and pursuing reforms, guided by the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework.

Regarding the macroeconomic outlook, growth is projected at 3% in 2019, up from 2.7% in 2018, buoyed by a recovery in agriculture, and rising to 3.5% in 2020 before stabilizing at 4% in the medium term, assuming no significant security deterioration, continued reforms, and sustained aid inflows. Inflation is expected to rise from an average of 0.6% in 2018 to reach 2% this year and rise gradually to 5% in the medium term, reflecting a pickup in economic activity. Assuming continued grant inflows, fiscal and external balances are expected to remain sustainable.

Risks to the outlook are tilted to the downside, and include a deterioration in security, heightened political tensions, a significant drop in aid, and reform slippages. On the upside, durable peace would boost confidence and economic activity, setting Afghanistan on a higher growth path.

While some elements of the U.S. government have been accused of exaggerating progress in Afghanistan, the CIA World Factbook is frank about the risks involved.24

The Taliban remains a serious challenge for the Afghan Government in almost every province. The Taliban still considers itself the rightful government of Afghanistan, and it remains a capable and confident insurgent force fighting for the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Afghanistan, establishment of sharia law, and rewriting of the Afghan constitution.

… Despite improvements in life expectancy, incomes, and literacy since 2001, Afghanistan is extremely poor, landlocked, and highly dependent on foreign aid. Much of the population continues to suffer from shortages of housing, clean water, electricity, medical care, and jobs. Corruption, insecurity, weak governance, lack of infrastructure, and the Afghan Government's difficulty in extending rule of law to all parts of the country pose challenges to future economic growth. Afghanistan's living standards are among the lowest in the world. Since 2014, the economy has slowed, in large part because of the withdrawal of nearly 100,000 foreign troops that had artificially inflated the country's economic growth.

The international community remains committed to Afghanistan's development, pledging over $83 billion at ten donors' conferences between 2003 and 2016. In October 2016, the donors at the Brussels conference
pledged an additional $3.8 billion in development aid annually from 2017 to 2020. Even with this help, Government of Afghanistan still faces number of challenges, including low revenue collection, anemic job creation, high levels of corruption, weak government capacity, and poor public infrastructure.

In 2017 Afghanistan's growth rate was only marginally above that of the 2014-2016 average. The drawdown of international security forces that started in 2012 has negatively affected economic growth, as a substantial portion of commerce, especially in the services sector, has catered to the ongoing international troop presence in the country. Afghan President Ashraf GHANI Ahmadzai is dedicated to instituting economic reforms to include improving revenue collection and fighting corruption. The government has implemented reforms to the budget process and in some other areas. However, many other reforms will take time to implement and Afghanistan will remain dependent on international donor support over the next several years.

As was the case with the security dimension, every parameter in Afghanistan’s civil structure is far worse than the situation in Vietnam at the time of its collapse. This makes it particularly ironic that the Asia Foundation’s survey of the Afghan people found the “… impact peace talks have had on optimism in the country.” While optimism in 2018 – at 32% – was effectively unchanged from 2017, Afghans this year reported a slightly higher level of optimism, with 36.1% of respondents saying the country is going in the right direction. In explaining reasons for their optimism, those who say “peace/end of war” have increased notably from 16.4% to 26.3% this year.25

**Peace as an Extension of War by Other Means**

The Afghan people are clearly putting far more trust in their hopes for a real peace than the current peace negotiations and conditions in Afghanistan deserve. A ceasefire is not peace, and neither is conflict termination. Any real peace requires stability, a correction of the divisions that led to conflict, and the creation of effective governance, security, and development.

So far, however, the United States government has not advanced any clear concepts or plans for creating such a peace. It instead has focused on an undefined settlement that must occur between the largely failed Afghan government and an all too active enemy.

The United States government has done so in spite of the fact that the previous analysis warns that Afghan government forces are losing to the Taliban forces and only survives because of U.S. train and assist efforts on the ground as well as U.S. air strikes. The United States also has not acknowledged the warnings which demonstrate how the Afghan central government is failing its people or the indicators that the Afghan domestic economy is weak and even more dependent on outside aid and grants than the Afghan forces. Rather, the United States is attempting to “optimize” its force size by downsizing the number of military personnel – regardless of the plausibility that a peace settlement with the Taliban can be achieved.

The end result of any “peace” that ignores these realities – and is not supported by firm U.S. security and aid guarantees – can all too easily be one where the Taliban wins the peace it has not yet been able to achieve in war. In this type of “peace,” although the part of Afghanistan that is still under central government control may not devolve into a power vacuum, it will almost certainly be remarkably close to one. The end result will be an Afghanistan that will be far weaker than a South Vietnam after U.S. forces left. As cases like Nepal and Cambodia have shown all too clearly, such a “peace” can easily become a power struggle where a group like the Taliban can use it to win the war by other means.

This peace may also create an Afghanistan without any form of an enduring coherent central government, and the country may devolve into both a center of extremism and a host for extremist movements. Its political divisions and its failures in development are so great that it can again
become a hub for terrorist violence, and – unlike South Vietnam – there will be no stable alternative regime.

Grim as it may be to say, this may still not be an argument against such peace efforts if they are the only alternative to a U.S. decision to withdraw from Afghanistan without the efforts necessary to create a real and lasting peace. Even a weak peace that allows the Taliban to dominate would probably be more merciful to the Afghan people – and be less likely to produce a major extremist threat to the United States – than a sudden U.S. withdrawal without any agreement with the Taliban.

From a “realist” viewpoint, it is also unclear that the United States would suffer any major strategic penalties. As in Vietnam, the United States would at least have created some image of concern for Afghanistan and the Afghan people in negotiating such a peace, and – again as in Vietnam – much of the world already views the war in Afghanistan as one that the United States cannot win and expects an inevitable U.S. departure.

The strategic environment for such a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is also probably more favorable than the U.S. withdrawal in Vietnam from a “realist” point of view. For all the fears which the fall of Saigon created at the time, South Vietnam was the only domino that actually fell. In the case of Afghanistan, a Taliban takeover might actually produce some strategic benefits for the United States.

It would relieve the United States of an expensive burden. It would probably drag Afghanistan’s neighbors into the same morass – forcing Iran, Russia, China, and Pakistan to deal with the resulting threats of extremism and terrorism. As for the political costs of a collapse of the Afghan central government to the United States, much of the world has already come to view the U.S. efforts in Afghanistan as a failure. As was the case with the collapse of South Vietnam, it could have far less impact on foreign perceptions of the United States than many American strategists believe. This makes all too possible to argue that a hollow peace is the best of the bad options that are now left to the U.S. government.

At the same time, the “Vietnamization” of Afghanistan is not the only option. Debating U.S. options for a meaningful peace with clearly defined terms, developing credible plans to produce a stable Afghanistan, and examining costs and risks of U.S. security and aid guarantees, still seem to be worth publicly debating and exploring.

From a humanitarian viewpoint, Afghanistan does have a population of over 35 million people. From a counterterrorism viewpoint, a peace agreement that leads to a Taliban victory might well be seen by a significant number of potential terrorists as a major victory for Islamic extremism – and a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan might even become a sanctuary for terrorist movements that threaten the United States and its allies.

In short, there is a case for seeking a real peace, rather than the hollow shell of one. There is a clear case on moral, ethical, and humanitarian grounds – and a possible case on purely practical grounds from even the viewpoint of the most ruthless realist. Moving forward with the “Vietnamization” of peace the United States now seems to be negotiating in Afghanistan – without seriously debating the need for such a real peace – does not seem to be the right path forward in any sense of the word “right.”
Figure One: Areas of Government and Taliban Control

Areas of Government and Taliban Control


Location of Rising Volume of Successful Taliban Attacks

Figure Two: Growing Afghan Dependence on U.S. and Allied Combat Airstrikes: 2013-2015

Number of Weapons Released (Manned & RPA strike assets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sep</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2,758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>2,365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>79</td>
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<td>111</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>69</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1,337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>4,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>7,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>948</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>519</td>
<td></td>
<td>6,727</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Assets under CFACC control include a compilation of aircraft from all U.S. military branches of service as well as Coalition aircraft; however, not all aircraft flying in the AOR fall under CFACC control.

Number of Weapons Released from 2013-2019

[Bar chart image]

Figure Three: Afghan Government Is Dependent on U.S. and International Military Aid to Maintain and Grow Afghan Security Forces

Current Dependence on U.S. Security Aid Alone Is Some 4% Billion Annually


- Even if U.S. Forces stayed, and the Taliban did not continue to slowly win in the countryside, World Bank Estimates indicate security dependence on outside aid would only change marginally in the future

Figure Four: U.S. Reconstruction Accounts since FY 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. APPROPRIATIONS SUPPORTING AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS ($ BILLIONS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NINE LARGEST ACTIVE RECONSTRUCTION ACCOUNTS – $118.50 BILLION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASFF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$80.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OTHER RECONSTRUCTION ACCOUNTS – $6.72 BILLION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2.80</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CIVILIAN OPERATIONS – $11.76 BILLION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>$0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION – $136.97 BILLION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$90.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers have been rounded.

Figure Five: Fourth-Quarter Enemy Initiated Attacks Since 2010

FOURTH-QUARTER ENEMY-INITIATED ATTACKS SINCE 2010

Note: EIA = Enemy-Initiated Attacks, EEIA = Effective Enemy-Initiated Attacks.
Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call 1/7/2020; SIGAR, analysis of RS-provided data, 1/2020.

Figure Six: Afghanistan: World Bank Governance Indicators: 1996-2018

The solid blue line shows the selected country’s percentile rank on each of the six aggregate indicators. The grey-shaded region indicates the margin of error.


Transparency International rated as ninth most corrupt out of 180 countries rated in 2018.
Five Seven: UN Estimates of the Population and Employment Pressure in Afghanistan 1950-2050

UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Population Dynamics 2019”,
https://population.un.org/wpp/Graphs/DemographicProfiles/Line/4
Figure Eight: Security and Civil Budget Would Remain Dependent on Outside Aid Even if No Compromises Took Place with Taliban

Government Could Not Have Survived without Grants Dominating Financing of Budget in 2019

Grants Supported Critical Amounts of Afghan Civilian and Military Spending in 2019

Even if U.S. Forces Stayed, Security Dependence on Outside Aid would only Change Marginally

World Bank, *Financing Peace, Fiscal Challenges for a Post-Settlement Afghanistan*, p. I, 3,5,


