

The background of the cover features a silhouette of a soldier in full combat gear, including a helmet and backpack, standing on a rocky outcrop and saluting with his right hand. To the right of the soldier, the national flag of Afghanistan is flying on a tall pole. The flag is divided into three vertical stripes of black, red, and green, with the national emblem in the center of the red stripe. The scene is set against a clear blue sky with a bright sun low on the horizon, creating a strong silhouette effect. The bottom right corner of the cover is a white triangle.

THE AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

SPECIAL REPORT BY THE CASPIAN POLICY CENTER

CPC



CASPIAN
POLICY
CENTER

ABOUT US

The Caspian Policy Center (CPC) is an independent, nonprofit research think tank based in Washington D.C. Economic, political, energy, and security issues of the Caspian region constitute the central research focus of the Center.

CPC aims at becoming a primary research and debate platform in the Caspian region with relevant publications, events, projects, and media productions to nurture a comprehensive understanding of the intertwined affairs of the Caspian region.

With an inclusive, scholarly, and innovative approach, the Caspian Policy Center presents a platform where diverse voices from academia, business, and policy world from both the region and the nation's capital interact to produce distinct ideas and insights to the outstanding issues of the Caspian region.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Ambassador (Ret.) Richard E. Hoagland
Caspian Security and Politics Program Chair,
Caspian Policy Center

Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland was U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, October 2013–August 2015. Before returning to Washington in September 2013, he spent a decade in South and Central Asia. He was U.S. Deputy Ambassador to Pakistan (2011–2013), U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan (2008–2011), and U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan (2003–2006). He also served as U.S. Charge d’affaires to Turkmenistan (2007–2008). Prior to his diplomatic assignments in Central Asia, Ambassador Hoagland was Director of the Office of Caucasus and Central Asian Affairs in the Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs, Department of State (2001–2003). In that position, he wrote and negotiated four of the key bilateral documents defining the Central Asian states’ enhanced relationship with the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. His earlier foreign assignments included Russia where he was Press Spokesman for the U.S. Embassy (1995–1998). During the course of his career, he received multiple Presidential Performance Awards, State Department Meritorious and Superior Honor Awards, as well as the Distinguished Honor Award.



Sara Huzar
Research Intern,
Caspian Policy Center

Sara Huzar is a member of George Mason University’s Honors College Class of 2019 and is one of its nineteen members to receive the prestigious University Scholarship. She has held numerous leadership positions in on-campus organizations and spent the spring of 2017 living in Kyiv, Ukraine while interning at the US Embassy in the city. She has completed a funded research project on the discursive construction of Afghan women in congressional debates and presented it at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research 2018. Currently she is researching how ethnic otherization shapes Russian disinformation campaigns in Ukraine. Her research interests focus on nationalism and national memory at the intersection of international security and ethnic conflict.

A BRIEF HISTORY FROM AMBASSADOR (RET.) RICHARD E. HOAGLAND

I joined the U.S. diplomatic service in June 1985. Only a few weeks into the initial training program, the Personnel Director of the U.S. Information Agency, where I started my diplomatic career and that was eventually folded into the State Department in 1998, pulled me aside and said, “We’d like you to stop training and go to work right away on a special project.” How this happened is still one of the great mysteries of my life, but it set the direction of my career for the next 30 years. The “special project” was to help set up the Afghan Media Resource Center (AMRC). Why an AMRC, which most Americans would have found pretty esoteric at that time?

The AMRC was one of the overt elements of the much broader Reagan Doctrine that had just been implemented the year before in a conscious U.S. effort to push back against the Soviet Union in specific regional conflicts, including in Central America, Angola – and in Afghanistan. In the previous decade, Afghanistan had experienced historic upheaval. In 1973, the traditional royal family was overthrown in a coup by the Afghan Communist Party. At the end of December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to prop up its proxy government, leading to significant resistance and, quite quickly, the Soviet-Afghan War.

When I was pulled out of my initial diplomatic training class to help to set up the AMRC for the Afghan resistance to learn the basics of media reporting so that they themselves could cover the war at that time, the personnel director told me it would be only for a few weeks. But, in fact, it lasted for a full year. And now, decades later, the sum total of the AMRC’s video, photo, and print work is archived at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

Toward the end of my first diplomatic year, I was told that I was being sent to U.S. Consulate Peshawar in Pakistan for my first foreign diplomatic assignment.

Why Peshawar? It was a U.S. Consulate that was fast becoming ground-zero for U.S. efforts to push back against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. However, until the Reagan Doctrine kicked in, U.S. Consulate Peshawar had been considered such a sleepy post that it was in the process of being dismantled and closed down. The mover’s boxes were already stacked in the hallways. But the Soviet-Afghan War historically reversed that bureaucratic decision, and U.S. Consulate Peshawar soon became one of the premier front-line diplomatic assignments of the second half of the 1980s.

The American Club in Peshawar, sponsored by the U.S. Consulate, became a sort of Star Wars Bar, heavily patronized every night by a colorful mix of international diplomats and intelligence officers, humanitarian assistance workers (some of whom, at least from Europe, also did double duty on the dark side), foreign journalists, and international mercenaries and other assorted “freedom fighters,” some free-lancing and some on the hard-core dark side. I’ll never forget

one young Brit who strode into the bar one evening with a bloodied bandage around his head and who loudly proclaimed, “Free drinks for all! I just delivered a million dollars cash to Ahmad Shah Masood in the Panjshir Valley!”

On the record, my specific assignment at Consulate Peshawar was as the Public Affairs Officer that traditionally focused on U.S.-Pakistan relations. In reality, my job was to build relations with the seven official Afghan Resistance Parties. My office, located in the upscale Peshawar suburb, University Town, tended to attract “interesting drop-ins.”

One day, a young Afghan man, already balding and dressed in a well-pressed white shalwar-kamize, speaking impeccable British-accented English, visited into my office and said, “Mr. Hoagland, you know nothing about Afghanistan, and I’m going to teach you!” He was the foreign affairs adviser for the moderate resistance party headed by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi. I wasn’t the least bit offended by what he’d said; I was intrigued, and we became friends. His name was Hamid Karzai. We stayed friends for decades, through thick and thin. I eventually had the honor to visit him in the Presidential Palace in Kabul in 2012.

Let’s back up a bit. At the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, hundreds of resistance cells led by hyper-local warlords proliferated throughout the country. But once the United States made Afghanistan a key element of the Reagan Doctrine, we, working with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, winnowed them down and merged many of them. The final, more manageable official resistance parties became known as the Islamic Unity of Afghanistan Mujahideen, and ranged from internationally sophisticated “Gucci Guerilla” types to hard-core “kill ‘em all and let God sort it out” types, the latter dominated by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Abdur-rab Rasool Saayaf. These were the parties that became known as The Peshawar Seven:

The first group, generally more moderate, were Afghan traditionalists:

National Islamic Front for the Liberation of Afghanistan led by Pir Sayyid Ahmed Gilani
Afghan National Liberation Front led by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi
Islamic Revolution Movement led by Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi

The second group, generally more radical, tended to be political Islamists:

Jamiat-i Islami led by Burhanuddin Rabbani
Hezb-i Islami Khalis led by Mulavi Younas Khalis
Hezb-i Islamic Gulbuddin led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar
Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan led by Abdur-rab Rasul Sayyaf

Ethnic Pashtuns dominated all seven parties, except Rabbani’s Jamiat-i Islami that was pre-

dominantly, but not exclusively, Tajik. And, in fact, Rabbani's broad-based party included both moderate traditionalists and more radical Sunni political Islamists. None of the seven parties specifically represented the Shia minority of Afghanistan.

The CIA, working with and generally deferring to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) service, with significant support from Saudi Arabia, tended to favor delivery of lethal assistance — including Stinger missiles starting in 1986 — to the more radical and violent Islamist elements of the Peshawar Seven, although official U.S. policy was that we favored none and gave equal assistance to all. In fact, that was not true: Pakistan funneled the bulk of our assistance to the Islamists. Saudi Arabia had no such pretense. From the beginning, its money and weapons went to the Islamists — and, significantly, it encouraged the most radical Islamists in Saudi Arabia to leave the Kingdom and go to fight in Afghanistan, in part to get them out of the royal family's hair. Even in the late 1980s when I was in Peshawar, the name of a young and especially violent Saudi mercenary came to our attention — Osama bin Laden.

After the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, civil war dominated the next decade as the Islamists fought for control of Kabul, with the radical Pashtun Gulbuddin Hekmatyar leading the initial attacks that devastated Kabul to prevent Burhanuddin Rabbani and his Tajiks from gaining power. All the while, Pakistan continued to support the Pashtun Islamists that eventually became known as the Taliban. Why? Because Pakistan — or at least the military and intelligence service that to this day dominate foreign and security policy in Pakistan — adamantly believes it needs Afghanistan for “strategic depth,” as a fallback territory against India, and that the Pashtuns, who live on both sides of the border, will guarantee that goal.

By the late 1990s, al-Qa'eda had emerged from the remnants of the Islamist elements of the Afghan Resistance of the Soviet-Afghan War. The infamous 9/11 attacks on the United States were a wake-up call that required international engagement. The International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001, chose Hamid Karzai as President of Afghanistan. He was a logical choice because he was a Pashtun descendent of the former royal family of Afghanistan; and although he was from the nationalist wing of the Afghan Resistance (Mojaddedi's Afghan National Liberation Front), he had always maintained warm relations with Rabbani's Tajiks and so was seen as a “unifier.” But because Karzai was a nationalist, not an Islamist, Pakistan redoubled its efforts to support the Taliban, and gave special support to the Haqqani Network, an especially violent group allied to the Taliban that had evolved from Hezb-i Islami Khalis. *Plus ça change!*

Jump forward another decade, and today U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, himself of Afghan origin and a former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, is — finally — negotiating with the Taliban to try to find a way for them to become, eventually, part of the Afghan government.

A Look at Peace Discussions

A LOOK AT PEACE DISCUSSIONS

U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad's negotiations started after President Trump ordered U.S. diplomats to seek direct negotiations with the Taliban last July, a significant deviation from the previous U.S. policy of insisting that the Taliban speak only with the Afghan government. The talks are focusing on four goals: generating a timeline for American troop withdrawal, obtaining assurances that Afghanistan will not become a safe haven for terrorist groups, brokering a cease-fire, and starting an intra-Afghan discussion and settlement. Khalilzad tweeted in January that both parties had "agreed in principle" to all four of these elements and "agreed in draft" to the first two.¹

The most recent round of negotiations kicked off on May 1. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in an email statement that "full withdrawal of foreign forces" and "preventing Afghanistan from harming others" would be the main agenda items.² Most likely, the U.S. side is looking to discuss the specific mechanisms for enforcing the Taliban's guarantees that Afghanistan will not become a haven for terrorist organizations. The Taliban, meanwhile, will press for a timetable on American troop withdrawal.³

The American-led talks are not the only format in which these discussions are taking place. There is, in fact, a second negotiation taking place under the Moscow Process, a series of meetings between Russia and other neighbors of Afghanistan. The first meeting in 2016 included Russia, China, and Pakistan – notably excluding Afghanistan itself. Kabul was added in 2017 along with India and several Central Asian countries.

The latest iteration of the talks, which took place in early February, was the most significant public contact between the Taliban and Afghan politicians.⁴ None of the Afghans in attendance were current government representatives, in keeping with the Taliban's policy of not yet speaking directly in public to representatives of the government in Kabul. However, several former officials, including former President Hamid Karzai, took part. The United States was also noticeably absent, having declined its invitation, and never publicly commented on the Moscow discussion.

The Moscow delegates released a nine-point declaration following the conclusion of their talks, outlining the areas in which all parties were in agreement. The document noted that the withdrawal of foreign troops and the protection of women's rights were important to lasting peace in Afghanistan.⁵ It also declared that all parties involved would support the Doha talks.⁶ However, the declaration seems to carry little concrete weight, since the Afghan delegation had no authority to formally negotiate on behalf of the government, and the United States, whose troops are the main foreign force on Afghan territory, was not in attendance.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Women's Rights

Women have been largely absent from peace negotiations with the Taliban. A recent Oxfam report details that of the eleven direct or indirect talks that have occurred between the Taliban and the international community, none have included women.⁷ Of the 16 overtures made by the Afghan government, only three involved female delegates. The lack of representation has left Afghan women concerned that their rights will be sacrificed in a deal that provides the Taliban with political representation. Hundreds of thousands have voiced their concerns on social media via the hashtag #MyRedLine, where they list rights they refuse to give up in a peace deal. This well illustrates how far Afghan women have come in recent years: They are a political force that needs to be listened to.

Impending Fighting Season

Both the Taliban and the Afghan government announced plans for military offensives earlier this spring.¹⁰ Historically, these announcements precede the “fighting season” from April–September, where changing conditions on the ground could negatively affect the peace talks. For example, the Taliban might feel tempted to double down on their military options if they make significant gains in the next several months.¹¹

Pakistan

Pakistan has held sway over the Taliban since its inception and currently provides the group sanctuary on its territory. This has been a persistent problem in Afghanistan–Pakistan relations, and caused Afghanistan to repeatedly criticize Pakistan for interfering with its sovereignty and preventing a peaceful resolution to the conflict.¹² Pakistan has the ability to use its leverage for good. It “facilitated some movement” between Afghanistan and the Taliban in February, according to an unnamed U.S. official.¹³ Anonymous Taliban members corroborated the story, adding that Pakistan “made it clear to us that we have to talk to the United States and Afghan government.”¹⁴ However, Pakistan is by no means committed to the peace talks, and any pressure it exerted to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table can certainly be applied to other ends. Pakistan could, therefore, be a spoiler in the peace negotiations if it chooses to be.

Ghani Government

From their earliest days, the talks between U.S. officials and Taliban representatives were labelled “talks before talks” that would, eventually, give way to an “Afghan-led Afghan-owned peace process.”¹⁵ However, as negotiations continue, the Afghan government has come to feel frozen out. Afghanistan’s National Security Advisor, for example, blasted the United States for a lack of transparency in mid-March.¹⁶ President Ashraf Ghani has been quieter on the sub-

ject, but with September elections looming, the negotiations present a political problem for his government by making it appear uninvolved and powerless. He attempted to push back on this narrative by holding a historically traditional gathering of Afghan leaders, a Loya Jirga, in early May, but has faced additional questions to his legitimacy since that time. Initially, his term as president was due to end on May 22 after elections were held on April 20. Elections were postponed to September, so the Afghan Supreme Court extended Ghani's term to keep him in office until a new president can be selected. However, the majority of opposition candidates have protested this decision, turning up the pressure on the Ghani government.

RECOMMENDATION: MAINTAIN A U.S. MILITARY BASE IN AFGHANISTAN

As Afghanistan's history shows us, Islamist movements are not monolithic. Relatively more moderate individuals within those movements will find a way to make their peace with, and join, the central government for the greater good of the Afghan nation. At the same time, other more radical elements of those parties will still lurk in the hills and mountains with their hand-held weapons and their ability to plant improvised explosive devices on the roadways "to make a statement." The British learned this lesson in the 19th century. The Soviet Union learned it in the 20th century. The United States, understandably eager to end its military engagement in Afghanistan, has the opportunity to do it right this time.

The United States indeed needs to significantly change its engagement with Afghanistan from military occupation to a strong diplomatic presence with, one would hope, a residual but effective military presence at the Bagram Air Base north of Kabul.

Why maintain an official U.S. military presence? Because a rising China is now exploring a hard-power military presence in Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia. Russia still hovers to the north and is trying to make friends with the Taliban, if only to protect its interests in Central Asia. And Iran shares a major border with Afghanistan. Afghanistan, as it always has been, is the cross-road of larger powers jostling on the world stage.

The people of Afghanistan are always gracious and hospitable to their guests. But the one constant, true for centuries, is that they will not tolerate foreign occupation.

In the end, Afghanistan is Afghanistan. And always will be.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Khalilzad, Zalmay. Tweet. <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1105513780375625730> (retrieved May 13, 2019)
- ² "Khalilzad meets Mullah Baradar as Doha Peace Talks Resume." Al-Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/taliban-due-resume-doha-peace-talks-bid-war-190501061030851.html> (retrieved May 13, 2019)
- ³ Mashal, Mujib. "U.S. and Taliban Begin Highest-Level Talks Yet on Ending Afghan War." New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/25/world/asia/us-taliban-talks-afghanistan-qatar-baradar.html> (retrieved May 10, 2019)
- ⁴ Higgins, Andrew and Mashal, Mujib. "Taliban Peace Talks in Moscow End With Hope the U.S. Exits, if Not Too Quickly." New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-peace-talks-moscow.html> (retrieved May 10, 2019).
- ⁵ Langari, Syed Zabiullah, "Joint Declaration Issued After Moscow Talks." Tolo News. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/joint-declaration-issued-after-moscow-talks> (retrieved May 13, 2019)
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Nordland, Rod. "Peace Effort With Taliban Is Excluding Women, Report Says." New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/world/asia/afghan-women-excluded-from-peace-overtures-to-taliban-oxfam-says.html?module=inline> (retrieved April 22, 2019).
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Najibullah, Farangis. "Afghan Women Drawing #MyRedLine for Peace with the Taliban." RFE/RL. <https://www.rferl.org/a/myredline-the-afghan-women-who-won-t-accept-taliban-peace-at-any-cost/29972913.html> (retrieved May 15, 2019)
- ¹⁰ Mashal, Mujib. "Taliban Announce Spring Offensive, Even as Peace Talks Gain Momentum." New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/world/asia/taliban-spring-offensive-afghanistan.html> (retrieved June 3, 2019).
- ¹¹ Walsh, Johnny. "The State of Play in U.S.-Taliban Talks and the Afghan Peace Process." U.S. Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/04/state-play-us-taliban-talks-and-afghan-peace-process> (retrieved May 3, 2019)
- ¹² Noori, Hikmat. "Pakistan PM's Remarks on Afghan Peace Process Stir Diplomatic Row." Al-Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/pakistan-pm-remarks-afghan-peace-process-stir-diplomatic-row-190328115121755.html> (retrieved June 4, 2019)
- ¹³ Bowden, John. "Pakistan Playing Central Role in US-Taliban Peace Talks: Report." The Hill. <https://thehill.com/policy/international/429087-pakistan-playing-central-role-in-us-taliban-peace-talks-report> (retrieved June 3, 2019).
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ De Luce, Dan. "Trump Envoy is Selling Out Afghanistan in Taliban Peace Talks: Senior Afghan Official." NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/trump-envoy-selling-out-afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks-senior-afghan-n983326> (retrieved May 17, 2019).
- ¹⁶ Ibid.

NOTES

1015 15th ST NW Suite 380, Washington DC 20005
202 864 6958
INFO@CASPIANPOLICY.ORG
CASPIANPOLICY.ORG

