

THE US- TALIBAN PEACE AGREEMENT (1)

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The US and the Taliban have signed an "agreement for bringing peace" to Afghanistan after more than 18 years of conflict.

After more than eighteen years of war in Afghanistan, the United States and the Taliban reached an agreement in what were both sides' and most intensive efforts yet to end the war.

President Trump said it had been a "long and hard journey" in Afghanistan. "It's time after all these years to bring our people back home," he said.

Experts stress that the deal between U.S. President Donald J. Trump's administration and the Taliban leadership is only the first step to achieving lasting peace. The US and Nato allies have agreed to withdraw all troops within 14 months if the militants uphold the deal.

What did the United States and the Taliban agree to?

Following nine rounds of discussions, negotiators signed a peace agreement in February 2020 that addresses four main issues:

- **Cease-fire:** Negotiators agreed to a temporary reduction in violence and said that a lasting cease-fire among U.S., Taliban, and Afghan forces will be part of intra- Afghan negotiations.
- **Withdrawal of foreign forces:** The United States agreed to reduce its number of troops in the country from roughly 12,000 to 8,600 within 135 days. If the Taliban follows through on its commitments, all U.S. and other foreign troops will leave Afghanistan within fourteen months. Experts have cautioned that pulling troops out too quickly could be destabilizing.
- **Intra-Afghan negotiations:** The Taliban agreed to start talks with the Afghan government in March 2020. Throughout the negotiating process, the Taliban had resisted direct talks with the government, calling it an American puppet. But the Taliban has more recently indicated that talks are possible, with deputy Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani writing in a *New York Times* op-ed, "If we can reach an agreement with a foreign enemy, we must be able to resolve intra-Afghan disagreements through talks."

• **Counterterrorism assurances:** The United States invaded Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001, attacks largely to eliminate the threat to terrorism, so it seeks to halt terrorist activities in the country, including by al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State. As part of the agreement, the Taliban guaranteed that Afghanistan will not be used by any of its members, other individuals, or terrorist groups to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.

U.S. officials have also stressed protecting women's rights. Prior to the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban, the group shuttered girls' schools and prevented women from working, among other abuses. This issue could be discussed during intra-Afghan talks.

What's in the agreement?

Within the first 135 days of the deal the US will reduce its forces in Afghanistan to 8,600, with allies also drawing down their forces proportionately. The move would allow US President Donald Trump to show that he has brought troops home ahead of the US presidential election in November. The deal also provides for a prisoner swap. Some 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan security force prisoners would be exchanged by 10 March, when talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are due to start. In Kabul, activist Zahra Hussein said she feared the deal could worsen the situation for women in Afghanistan. "I don't trust the Taliban, and remember how they suppressed women when they were ruling," the 28-year-old told AFP.

The agreement is born of America's determination to bring troops home and a recognition, at least by some Taliban, that talks are the best route to return to Kabul. It's a significant step forward, despite deep uncertainty and scepticism over where it will lead. When the only alternative is unending war, many Afghans seem ready to take this risk for peace.

What reactions has there been?

• UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stressed "the importance of sustaining the nationwide reduction in violence, for the benefit of all Afghans."

• NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg: "We went in together in 2001, we are going to adjust [troop levels] together and when the time is right, we are going to leave together, but we are only going to leave when conditions are right."

• UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace: "I welcome this small but important step towards the change for Afghans to live in peace, free from terrorism... We remain absolutely committed to building an Afghanistan that is a strong partner for decades to come."

What are challenges to the peace process?

While the peace process is supported by a vast majority of Afghans, many issues remain to be worked out during intra-Afghan negotiations, including sharing power, disarming and reintegrating Taliban fighters into society, and determining the future of the country's democratic institutions and constitution. These negotiations were already off

to a precarious start following the U.S.-Taliban deal in February. The United States and the Taliban agreed to the release of upto five thousand Taliban prisoners in exchange for upto one thousand Afghan security forces, but the Afghan government said it had not committed to such a swap.

Why are U.S. troops in Afghanistan?

The United States invaded Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks, which were carried out by al-Qaeda. The Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun, Islamic fundamentalist group that had ruled Afghanistan since 1996, provided refuge to al-Qaeda and refused to hand over terrorist leader Osama bin Laden. At start of the war, in October 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush said the U.S. mission was to "disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime."

U.S.-led forces quickly ousted the Taliban, which retreated to Pakistan. From there, it has continued to wage an insurgency against the U.S -backed government in Kabul, whose president was democratically elected in 2004. The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) mission then worked to bolster the Kabul government's authority and reconstruct Afghanistan, in addition to fighting the Taliban insurgency.

What's been the toll of the war?

More than 157,000 people have died in the war since 2001, according to researchers for the Cost of War Project at Brown University. More than 43,000 civilians have died, and by 2018 there were almost 2.5 million Afghan refugees worldwide, according to the UN refugee agency. More than 2,400 Americans have been killed and another 20,000 injured. Over 1,100 NATO troops have died. Analysts estimate that about 45,000 Afghan troops and police officers were killed in the past five years. Tens of thousands of Taliban fighters are believed to have been killed since 2001.

What's the role of other outside powers?

The U.S.- Taliban peace process has received wide support, including from NATO partners and from China and Russia.

- **Pakistan:** The Taliban formed in Pakistan in the 1990s following the Soviet Union's departure from Afghanistan. Many of its original fighters were Pashtuns who studied in Pakistani madrassas. After the U.S. invasion, Pakistan granted the Taliban safe havens and its Inter-Services Intelligence, which was thought to have some degree of control over the Taliban for years, provided military expertise and fundraising assistance. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has denied that the country has provided support to the Taliban and he has supported negotiations.

- **India:** New Delhi is a strong supporter of the Afghan government and has given \$3 billion to develop infrastructure and cultivate business in Afghanistan since 2001. Its main goals are to minimize Pakistan's influence and prevent Afghanistan from

becoming a safe haven for anti-India militants. The Indian government did not back U.S. efforts to reach the agreement with the Taliban and disagree with legitimizing the group as a political actor.

- **Iran:** Shiite-majority Iran has long viewed the Taliban, a Sunni group, as a foe, especially since it has received support from Iranian rivals Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Iran accepted U.S. efforts to overthrow the Taliban in 2001 and supported the Afghan government. The trafficking of drugs from Afghanistan through Iran and opium addiction in Iran are problems in the two countries' relationship.

- **Russia:** Moscow hopes to rekindle ties with Afghanistan that were frayed when it withdrew from the country in 1989 following its decade-long occupation. Experts say Russia wants to take a lead role in the peace process and grow its influence in Afghanistan to counter the U.S. and NATO presence in the region. It has hosted several meetings between Taliban delegations and Afghan representatives in the past year.

- **China:** Beijing's interests in Afghanistan are primarily economic, as it hopes to integrate it into the Belt and Road Initiative, a collection of development and investment projects. China is the country's largest source of foreign investment and it is interested in tapping into Afghanistan's vast natural resources. Additionally, Beijing is concerned that terrorists could use Afghanistan to establish links within China. In late 2019, Afghan and Taliban officials attended a conference in Beijing, and Chinese leaders supported a U.S.-Taliban agreement.

- **International aid:** Dozens of countries continue to provide assistance to Afghanistan, with 75 percent of the government's public expenditures currently covered by grants from international partners, according to a World Bank report. The report warned that Afghanistan will continue to require billions of dollars in aid for years to come. Some experts believe that aid could be used as leverage to keep the Taliban in negotiations with the Afghan government.

Why has the war lasted so long?

There are many reasons for this. But they include a combination of fierce Taliban resistance, the limitations of Afghan forces and governance, and other countries' reluctance to keep their troops for longer in Afghanistan.

At times over the past 18 years, the Taliban have been on the back foot. In late 2009, US President Barack Obama announced a troop "surge" that saw the number of American soldiers in Afghanistan top 100,000.

The surge helped drive the Taliban out of parts of southern Afghanistan, but it was never destined to last for years.

The BBC World Service's Dawood Azami says there are five main reasons the war is still going on now.

They include:

- a lack of political clarity since the invasion began, and questions about the effectiveness of the US strategy over the past 18 years
- the fact each side is trying to break what has become a stalemate - and that the Taliban have been trying to maximise their leverage during peace negotiations
- an increase in violence by Islamic State militants in Afghanistan - they've been behind some of the bloodiest attacks

--- by **Swati Gupta**



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