Diplomacy of Disaster: The Afghanistan 'Peace Process' and the Taliban Occupation of Kabul

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Summary

On 29 February 2020 in Doha, the United States signed an 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan' with the extremist Taliban movement. Yet on 15 August 2021, the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul. This article argues that the Doha Agreement did not simply precede the Taliban takeover; in significant ways it contributed to it. In its negotiation, content and implementation, it created destructive incentives for domestic and international parties, and it had effects on mass psychology in Afghanistan that its creators seemed not to have anticipated or understood. In that sense, it serves as a cautionary tale about the danger of assuming that negotiated 'diplomatic solutions' are necessarily superior to messy alternatives. The closest 20th-century equivalent was the Munich Agreement of September 1938.

Keywords

negotiation – Afghanistan – Taliban – United States – Munich

1 Introduction

At a ceremony in the Qatari capital of Doha on 29 February 2020, something very remarkable occurred: representatives of the United States and of the militant ‘Taliban movement’, signed an ‘Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan’ (*Mowafeqatnamah-e awardan-e solh ba Afghanistan*).¹ What made the event remarkable was that US forces and their allies had for years battled the Taliban,² who before 2001 had provided a safe haven to the *Al-Qaida* terrorist group that was responsible for the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in New York and Washington, DC. The US signatory to the Agreement, Dr Zalmay Khalilzad, described 29 February as ‘A Day to Remember’. Yet on 15 August 2021, after eighteen months of mounting violence and widening Taliban attacks, the besieged Afghan President, Dr Ashraf Ghani, fled the country, and Taliban forces entered the capital.³ Scenes of horror surrounded the attempt to evacuate vulnerable Afghans on rescue flights from Hamed Karzai International Airport, and credible reports rapidly surfaced of Taliban brutality and repression.⁴ If the February 2020 Agreement brought ‘peace’ to Afghanistan, it was the kind of peace that Hitler brought to Warsaw once Polish forces surrendered to the German invaders on 27 September 1939. And even if one were to take the cynical view that the real objective of US diplomacy was simply to sacrifice its Afghan allies, with some kind of ‘decent interval’⁵ occurring between the withdrawal of US forces and total collapse, it failed in that respect too.

The unravelling in Afghanistan was a result of the interaction of a range of complex factors, although attempts have already been made to explain it by reference to simplistic, reductionist tropes such as ‘graveyard of empires’ or ‘tribal society’. Problems of institutional design, political legitimisation, leadership, aid management and externally driven insurgency all contributed in particular ways.⁶ Thus far, however, relatively little attention has been paid to the contribution of *diplomatic* activity to the catastrophe that unfolded. Diplomacy can be immensely useful in producing durable solutions to complex and intractable problems — so much so that it is easy to overlook that, in certain circumstances, it can also be perilous. Zartman’s concept of ‘ripening’, namely, ‘heightening the parties’ realisation that they cannot escalate their way out of

1 US Department of State 2020.

2 See Giustozzi 2019; Malkasian 2021.

3 See Aikins 2021; Kilcullen and Mills 2021.

4 Amnesty International 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021.

5 See Snapp 1980.

6 For more detail, see Jamal and Maley 2022.

the conflict and that staying in it imposes increasingly burdensome costs,⁷ has as its point of departure the *existence* of such a realisation. If, however, one embarks on 'peacemaking diplomacy' when no such realisation exists, there is a risk that any agreement that diplomatic engagement produces may be of little or no value, yet with the potential to alter the calculations of diverse political actors and set the scene for dangerous and dramatic unintended consequences. In this article, we argue that the Doha Agreement and the diplomatic activities associated with it did not simply precede the Taliban takeover; in significant ways they contributed to it. In its negotiation, content and implementation, the Agreement created destructive incentives for domestic and international parties, and it had effects on mass psychology in Afghanistan that its creators seemed not to have anticipated or understood. In that sense, it serves as a cautionary tale about the danger of assuming that negotiated 'diplomatic solutions' are necessarily superior to messy alternatives. While more granular detail about the course of the negotiations will doubtless emerge, it is highly unlikely to dispel the image of the Doha process as a case study in diplomatic disaster, one that is associated with what one experienced observer has called a 'multinational criminal cartel'⁸ capturing Afghan state institutions and presiding over what became, in less than three months, one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.⁹

The Doha Agreement also came in the context of a longer history of efforts to use diplomatic tools to solve Afghanistan's problems, and we begin this article with an overview of two major endeavours from the 1980s and the 1990s, before the emergence of the Taliban, which pointed to pitfalls of which the Doha negotiators should have been aware but appeared to ignore. We then discuss efforts to engage with the Taliban before 2001 that highlighted some of the difficulties and dangers arising from their character as radical non-state actors. Thereafter we turn to the revival of interest in negotiating with the Taliban, which occurred long before the specific negotiations that led to the Doha Agreement; and then to the specific endeavours associated with the presidency of Donald Trump. Following this, we outline the content and the flaws of the Doha Agreement itself and show how the process spawned a range of parallel activities that were no better grounded in reality than the text of the accord. We conclude with some observations on how the process appeared from the inside, and with a discussion of the similarities of the Doha Agreement to the

7 Zartman 2018, 120.

8 Peters 2021.

9 BBC 2021.

main 20th-century candidate for the title of 'diplomatic disaster', namely the Munich Agreement of September 1938.

2 The Ambiguous Achievements of Past Peace Processes

Before the process that culminated in the Doha Agreement, there were two notable earlier negotiation processes in Afghanistan — both conducted under the auspices of the United Nations — that were designed to advance peace and stability. The first culminated in the signing of the Geneva Accords on Afghanistan of April 1988, while the second imploded spectacularly in April 1992 when the collapse of the communist regime headed by Dr Najibullah aborted attempts to put an interim government of 'neutrals' in place. Each of these exercises offered significant lessons for those attempting to negotiate peace agreements in Afghanistan, but those lessons did not appear to have been absorbed when the Doha Agreement was being crafted.

The Geneva Accords were the culmination of a process that was initiated following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The Soviet invasion had been widely condemned internationally,¹⁰ and it served the USSR's interests to create the impression that its intention was to withdraw at some point. In May 1980, the Soviet-backed regime of Babrak Karmal issued a statement directed at Iran and Pakistan outlining a programme for a 'political solution';¹¹ the agenda of subsequent talks strictly mirrored the framework of issues that the May 1980 statement outlined. The United Nations facilitated indirect communications between Kabul and Islamabad from April 1981, and from 1982 to 1984, a UN envoy, Diego Cordovez, engaged in 'shuttle diplomacy', travelling between the various capitals to share the perspectives of the different players. In August 1984, the format shifted to 'proximity talks' in Geneva, with Cordovez moving between delegations in nearby rooms.¹² For years, the negotiations produced nothing of substance, and it was rather obvious that the USSR and its Afghan clients were using the process as a diversion rather than to craft a genuine settlement.¹³ To some degree, this changed with the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985; and at a meeting of the Soviet Politburo in November

¹⁰ See Grasselli 1996.

¹¹ BBC 1980.

¹² For detailed discussions of the process, see Khan 1991; Cordovez and Harrison 1995; Rubin 1995a.

¹³ See Saikal 1984.

1986, an 'in-principle' decision was taken to withdraw from Afghanistan.¹⁴ This led to the signing of the Accords, which comprised four interrelated texts dealing with non-interference, international guarantees, the voluntary return of refugees and 'the Interrelationships for the Settlement of the Situation Relating to Afghanistan'. It was in the last of these documents that the commitment was made that all Soviet forces would be withdrawn within nine months.

The signing of the Accords was widely celebrated as a triumph, but their limitations as devices for conflict resolution were all too apparent. They provided the Soviet Union with a veil to cover what might otherwise have seemed an ignominious retreat, but they did not address the internal dispute within Afghanistan over the appropriate location of political authority. The Afghan resistance forces (*Mujahideen*) had been party to neither the negotiations nor the Accords; and the USSR, having secured what *it* wanted from the negotiations, had no strong incentive to press the Communist regime in Kabul to make any significant concessions to its opponents. Thus, the effect of the Accords was to remit the core of the Afghan conflict to the battlefield.¹⁵ Thirty years later, the Doha Agreement did something very similar.

Faced with ongoing conflict, on 15 March 1990 the UN Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, established the 'Office of the Secretary-General in Afghanistan and Pakistan', headed by Benon Sevan and tasked with pursuing a negotiated solution to the ongoing conflict. In a statement on 21 May 1991, the Secretary-General put forward a framework for such a solution, proposing 'the establishment of a credible and impartial transition mechanism with appropriate powers and authority (yet to be specified) that would enjoy the confidence of the Afghan people and provide them with the necessary assurances to participate in free and fair elections, taking into account Afghan traditions, for the establishment of a broad-based Government'.¹⁶

Sevan and his team set out to find appropriate 'neutral' figures to serve in such a 'transition mechanism', but their endeavours came to naught. The cessation of Soviet funding to the Kabul regime following the disintegration of the USSR itself at the end of December 1991 proved fatal to the regime's survival, and it collapsed on 15 April 1992, with the then-president, Dr Najibullah, seeking protection in UN premises in Kabul.¹⁷ The notion that at this point the Afghan *Mujahideen* would step aside to make way for a foreign-brokered

14 For a transcript of the meeting, see Grossman 1993. On the withdrawal decision more broadly, see Kalinovsky 2011; Drozdova and Felter 2019.

15 Maley 1989.

16 Quoted in Maley 2021a, 146.

17 For further detail, see Maley 1998; Corwin 2003; Mukhopadhyay 2012.

'transition mechanism' was wishful thinking.¹⁸ Yet in August 2021, with Kabul surrounded by the Taliban, a similar idea — that of replacing President Ghani with a 'transitional government' in which the Taliban would share power with other political actors — was to resurface in Doha.¹⁹ President Ghani's flight put paid to the idea, but in truth it was no more realistic than the Sevan plan had been nearly 30 years earlier: it was naïve to think that power-sharing was ever part of the Taliban's agenda.

3 Engagement with the Taliban before 2001

The emergence of the Taliban movement in 1994 significantly altered the constellation of actors relevant to Afghanistan's internal politics. While the Taliban were ostensibly led by an elusive religious figure, Mullah Mohammad Omar, and in their values reflected a crude, extreme and eccentric interpretation of the Deobandi school of Islamic thought, they were essentially a military force.²⁰ They were also a transnational force: the author Ahmed Rashid estimated that between 1994 and 1999, some '80,000 to 100,000 Pakistanis trained and fought in Afghanistan'.²¹ They were instrumentalised by the Interior Minister of Pakistan, retired Major General Naseerullah Babar, who infuriated his colleagues in the Pakistan Foreign Ministry by referring to the Taliban as 'our boys'.²² With Pakistan's help, they succeeded in taking over Kandahar in 1994, Herat in 1995 and Kabul in 1996. But having won these military victories, they failed altogether in translating them into success in the international political realm. They were unable to secure control of Afghanistan's seat in the General Assembly of the United Nations, and they secured diplomatic recognition from only three states: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.²³ This was partly because their antediluvian policies on gender proved toxic in the wider world, but also because of their use of extreme violence: in August 1998, they massacred thousands of ethnic Hazaras in the city of Mazar-e Sharif, a massacre that Rashid described as 'genocidal in its ferocity'.²⁴

Despite the relative isolation of the Taliban between 1996 and 2001, there were several attempts by UN officials to engage with them over both

18 For further discussion, see Rubin 1995b.

19 See Barakat 2021.

20 Davis 1998.

21 Rashid 1999, 27.

22 Perlez 2011. See also Musharraf 2006, 202.

23 See Maley 2000, 12–14.

24 Rashid 2000, 73.

humanitarian and political issues. The negotiation processes were not especially fruitful, but they did highlight aspects of the Taliban approach to negotiation that arguably reappeared two decades later when the United States decided that it was timely to engage actively with the Taliban once again.

The sphere of humanitarian negotiation proved particularly troubling, not an uncommon experience.²⁵ There were notable difficulties on both sides. The United Nations was not a unified hierarchy, but a somewhat dysfunctional family of organs and agencies that were often not in step with each other. Thus, while the Security Council and the Secretary-General were often keen to send clear and unambiguous signals to the Taliban about what behaviours could be considered internationally acceptable or unacceptable, humanitarian components of the UN system were often in search of pragmatic forms of engagement with the Taliban to expand humanitarian access.²⁶ The difficulties that could arise were well illustrated by a 13 May 1998 Memorandum of Understanding between the Taliban 'Planning Minister' and the UN Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, which in Article 13 stated that 'women's access to and participation in health and education will need to be gradual'.²⁷ While one respected commentator from a humanitarian perspective saw this as a case of 'the Taliban accepting that girls' education opportunities would increase over time',²⁸ others saw it as compromising, in writing, key norms of which the UN system was the custodian.²⁹ On the Taliban side, the problem of disunity proved even greater. It was far from clear that those who appeared as Taliban negotiators actually enjoyed plenipotentiary authority. One seasoned observer compared negotiating with the Taliban to 'grasping smoke'.³⁰ In a way this mirrored the phenomenon of the 'mud curtain' noted by the anthropologist Louis Dupree, who recorded that in rural Afghanistan, a village council usually contained 'one individual who is the "go-between" with the nearest government offices ... The "go-between" would never make a spot decision on an important issue but would refer the matter to the village council for a collective consensus'.³¹ This was an issue that also surfaced in Doha two decades later: with what authority did the Taliban attendees speak?

The sphere of political negotiation also proved unrewarding, predominantly because the conflict between the Taliban, occupying much but not all

25 See Maley 2021b, 125-139.

26 See Donini 2007.

27 For the full text, see United Nations 1998a.

28 Donini 2004, 132.

29 See Rubinstein 1998.

30 Keating 1997, 12.

31 Dupree 1989, 32. For discussion of the 'mud curtain', see Dupree 1980, 249.

of the territory of Afghanistan, and its opponents, occupying Afghanistan's seat in the UN, was simply not ripe for settlement: the Taliban 'refused to enter into formal negotiations with other possible rival political leaderships in Afghanistan'.³² The UN Special Mission to Afghanistan, established by General Assembly Resolution 48/208 of 21 December 1993, managed to organise some low-level exploratory meetings in Islamabad between Taliban and a delegation of Taliban opponents led by an arch-conservative cleric, Fazal Hadi Shinwari, but nothing of substance resulted and the talks finally collapsed on 3 May 1998.³³ It was also the case that the Taliban were indifferent or hostile to some of the key norms of the international system: in March 1998, a prominent member of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammad Hassan, who was to be named as Taliban 'Prime Minister' in 2021, physically assaulted a UN staffer in Kandahar, prompting the UN Under-Secretary General for Special Assignments, Lakhdar Brahimi, to order the withdrawal of UN expatriate staff from Kandahar and to remark that 'the international community has a standard and if you want to be a member of the club you have to abide by the rules'.³⁴ As Barnett R. Rubin put it: 'Increasingly, the major problem that Afghanistan posed to international actors was not the persistence of a civil war in some corners of the country but the behavior of the force that was consolidating power'.³⁵ Yet there was something quite instructive about these failed efforts at political negotiation: the Taliban approach, far from reflecting any disposition to bargain or persuade, basically consisted of the presentation of demands which those across the table were expected to meet. The Taliban approach to the Doha negotiations proved to be eerily similar.

In addition to these UN efforts, the United States also maintained low-level contacts with the Taliban, focused on counter-narcotics, counterterrorism and Osama Bin Laden. The engagement, however, proved unrewarding. As a careful study by Juergen Kleiner demonstrated, the gulf between the parties in terms of ideology, values, expectations and negotiating capabilities was simply too great.³⁶ Indeed, it would be generous to describe the interactions as involving negotiation in any meaningful sense. And securing peace in Afghanistan was not an agenda item. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, there was some messaging (via Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) interlocutors) between the United States and the Taliban

32 Hayes, Kaminski and Beres 2003, 459.

33 United Nations 1998b, para.12.

34 Maley 2000, 23.

35 Rubin 2002, xxx.

36 See Kleiner 2006.

about the possibility of Bin Laden's being handed over to the United States, which would have served Pakistan's interest in keeping the Taliban regime intact.³⁷ Unsurprisingly, given the anger in the United States at the 9/11 attacks and the evasiveness of the Taliban,³⁸ the discussions, such as they were, led nowhere.

4 The Revival of Interest in Engaging with the Taliban

The overthrow of the Taliban regime following the terrorist attacks led directly to the Bonn conference of November-December 2001 that sought to lay out a pathway for post-Taliban political transition in Afghanistan and resulted in the establishment of an Interim Administration under Hamed Karzai, and ultimately the drafting of the 2004 Afghan Constitution. On occasion it has been suggested that the Taliban should have been invited to participate in the Bonn conference, but this overlooks the state of collapse in which the Taliban found themselves following their overthrow.³⁹ Furthermore, even if some 'Taliban' had been invited to participate, it is far from clear that any commitments they might have made to a peaceful future would have been meaningful at all.

It has sometimes been suggested that no efforts were made to engage with the Taliban in the immediate aftermath of their overthrow, but this is not strictly the case. Engagement with the Taliban after 2001 came in different forms and stages. Initially, the focus was on 'reconciliation' with Taliban combatants, conducted pursuant to a programme established by the Karzai government called the 'Program for the Strengthening of Peace' or 'PTS' (*Purusa-i Tahkim-e Solh*). It did not, however, prove to be an especially effective programme, and Michael Semple, who studied it in some detail, concluded that a problem he had noted at the outset, namely that 'only politically and militarily insignificant people might avail of the invitation because the Taliban still favored armed resistance and would thus effectively block the scheme' had 'clearly materialized'.⁴⁰ A hugely complicating factor here was the active sanctuary and support given to the Taliban, and violent components of the Taliban such as the terrorist 'Haqqani network', by Pakistan's ISI, for whom the Taliban were a valuable tool in preventing the establishment of a stable pro-Indian Afghanistan.⁴¹ This

37 Coll 2018, 57-63.

38 See Zaeef 2010, 149.

39 Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012, 219-260.

40 Semple 2009, 57. See also Whitlock 2021, 268-269.

41 See Jones 2007, 15; Weinbaum and Harder 2008; Waldman 2010a; Gall 2014; Coll 2018; Alexander 2021.

sanctuary and support was something that deeply troubled the US military: the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, publicly described the Haqqani network, by far the deadliest component of the Taliban movement, as a 'veritable arm' of the ISI.⁴² Even Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf candidly admitted during a visit to Kabul that 'There is no doubt Afghan militants are supported from Pakistani soil. The problem that you have in your region is because support is provided from our side'.⁴³

Once the limits of 'managed reconciliation' became clear, more attention began to be paid to the possibility of negotiating with the Taliban at an elite level to put an end to insurgency in Afghanistan. 'President Karzai's dream throughout his presidency', Joshua Partlow has written, 'was to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict with the Taliban'.⁴⁴ Some of the dangers of attempting to negotiate with the Taliban were all too plain at the time.⁴⁵ The analyst Thomas Ruttig, aware that both President Karzai and the bulk of the Taliban leadership were members of the Pushtun ethnic group, warned of:

a growing fear among important social, political, and ethnic groups in Afghanistan that Karzai might go for a deal with the Taliban, or with certain elements of the movement. This is seen by many Afghans as a Pashtun solution, at the expense of other ethnic minorities and women. It has increased polarization and mistrust and undermines the still-weak Afghan institutions.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, a range of actors were either taken with the idea — including British Foreign Secretary David Miliband⁴⁷ — or at least gave it some attention.⁴⁸

Attempts to engage with the Taliban leadership got off to a very shaky start. One reason was that the Taliban power structure was itself extremely opaque. A dramatic manifestation of this came in 2010 when it emerged that a man who had purported to be a prominent Taliban figure, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, and on the strength of the claim had met with senior NATO and Afghan

42 Bumiller and Perlez 2011.

43 Shah and Gall 2007.

44 Partlow 2016, 381.

45 Maley 2007; Tellis 2009; Maley 2015; Maley 2018, 222-239.

46 Ruttig 2013, 432.

47 Weaver 2009.

48 See Waldman 2010b; Waldman 2010c. For an overview of analyses from this period, see Waldman 2014.

officials, was in fact a grocer from the Pakistani city of Quetta.⁴⁹ Just how serious a problem this opacity posed became clear in 2015 when it emerged that the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, had actually died of natural causes more than two years earlier without a word having leaked.⁵⁰ This was not the only case of a death that overshadowed an attempt at negotiation. The US diplomat Richard Holbrooke, who on 22 January 2009 had been named as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, died suddenly of an aortic aneurysm on 13 December 2010;⁵¹ and former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, who had been appointed by Karzai as head of a 'High Peace Council', was assassinated by a Taliban suicide bomber on 20 September 2011. But the death of Mullah Omar was arguably much more significant, as it had the potential to affect the character and internal authority structure of a critical party to negotiations in a way that the other deaths did not.

Despite these challenges, the attempt to bring various parties together for the purposes of negotiation limped on, and culminated in the opening of a Taliban political office in the Qatari capital of Doha on 18 June 2013, an idea actively promoted by the Obama Administration in the face of deep wariness from Karzai.⁵² But if this was the beginning of a new phase of international engagement for the Taliban, it was the end of meaningful efforts on the part of the Obama administration to promote a negotiated outcome. As Coll described the event, which was televised by *AlJazeera*:

The screen showed a giant sign behind the speaker's podium that read ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN. Out front of the building, the broadcast showed, was a flagpole. It flew the former black-and-white flag of the Islamic Emirate high above the compound's wall ... The Taliban had blatantly violated terms Obama had guaranteed to Karzai. The Afghan president reacted furiously and quickly. He announced his withdrawal from the American negotiation effort ... It did not take long for the [US] Conflict Resolution Cell to accept that the fiasco was irreversible and that the negotiations they had met on bi-weekly for three years were dead.⁵³

49 See Filkins and Gall 2010; Partlow 2010.

50 Gall 2015.

51 See Packer 2019.

52 Coll 2018, 632-634.

53 Coll 2018, 639-640. Coll offers the most comprehensive account of this episode.

'The Doha office failure', Coll observed, 'was an episode of remarkable diplomatic incompetence'.⁵⁴ Karzai's reaction was utterly predictable: he understood that the sign and the flag displayed by the Taliban could be seen as 'regalia of statehood'.⁵⁵ A hard lesson that emerged from this episode was the need for extreme care and caution when dealing with non-state actors intent on pursuing their own agendas irrespective of whether this involved violating diplomatic norms. Unfortunately, it was a lesson that was too swiftly forgotten.

5 The Trump Administration and Negotiation with the Taliban

On 21 September 2018, Dr Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghanistan-born American with longstanding links to Republican Party circles and who had served as US Ambassador in Kabul from 2003 to 2005, was appointed as US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. Khalilzad, who enjoyed something close to *carte blanche* in handling subsequent negotiations, went about his task by side-lining not only the Afghan government but also the broader international community, including NATO member states that had expended blood and treasure at the request of the United States under NATO's Article 5 Collective Defence provision. Engaging a group that the United States was still fighting, to the exclusion of allies, radically changed the calculations of all actors and altered their incentives, to the detriment of the Afghan republic. This was especially the case when Khalilzad abandoned a defensible 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed' formula in favour of a two-stage process in which a bilateral US-Taliban agreement would precede any discussions between the Taliban and the Afghan government.⁵⁶ The danger was that if the first agreement gave the Taliban too much, they would have no reason to negotiate meaningfully at a later stage.

From the beginning, Khalilzad adopted a 'crash-through' approach that prioritised his outreach to the Taliban over the constitutionally mandated Afghan presidential elections,⁵⁷ which he seemed to see as a threat to his endeavours. Although US-Taliban discussions were in their early stages, the 'peace versus elections' formulation dominated Afghan political discourse from as early as November 2018, months ahead of the polls scheduled for May 2019. By positing the end of a 40-year-old series of conflicts as the *alternative* to timely

54 Coll 2018, 640.

55 Osman and Clark 2013.

56 Mashal 2019.

57 Gul 2018.

elections, Khalilzad not only undermined a key pillar of Afghanistan's constitutional republic, but also gave in to Taliban demands that they would not engage with an incumbent government ahead of elections.⁵⁸ It would not be until mid-August 2019 — three months after the originally planned election date — that Khalilzad said unequivocally that elections could move forward, removing the cloud of uncertainty from Afghan politics.⁵⁹

There was no compelling reason why elections and talks could not move forward in tandem. This was the position of the Afghan government and international partners including France, India and the European Union.⁶⁰ By framing elections and talks in 'either/or' terms, Khalilzad split the international community over a fundamental component of the Afghan political system, throwing in doubt the funding, planning and security of elections.⁶¹ This also helped the Taliban cement a claim that President Ashraf Ghani was seeking to extend his tenure at the expense of peace, a claim that became a potent line of attack for Ghani's domestic political opponents. Thus, the peace-or-election formulation conflated President Ghani's (legitimate) desire to renew his political mandate with the Constitution's requirement for election, contributing to the undermining of both the government and the democratic order. For members of Afghanistan's political class, who had long calibrated their activities on their perception of US policy, American outreach to the Taliban at the expense of the Afghan state constituted the writing on the wall. Some political figures started reaching out to the Taliban and organised their political activities in ways that signalled their openness to working with a group that, far from making peace, was still fighting the Afghan state.⁶²

Talks with terrorist organisations contribute to a sense of their mainstreaming, but the United States went out of its way to give the Taliban what they coveted: international attention. In his actions and communication, Khalilzad at best treated the government and the Taliban on an equal footing, although he often proved much more solicitous to the sensibilities of the Taliban: one recent report states that on 19 April 2019, President Ghani wrote to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo 'complaining that he was being cut out of Khalilzad's

58 In February 2019, Khalilzad told an audience in Washington, DC that if Afghanistan's talks with the Taliban produced a 'roadmap', then 'that would be dominant'. See Khalilzad 2019.

59 *Radio Azadi* 2019.

60 ATN News 2019; Popalzai 2019.

61 For example, the United Kingdom announced UKP8 million in election support only after Khalilzad came out in support of elections.

62 Major political actors such as Farooq Wardak, Omar Zakhilwal — two former ministers — and Jafar Mahdawi, leader of a Hazara political party, started reaching out to the Taliban and speaking publicly about their displeasure with the republic.

talks with the Taliban, and that Khalilzad had spoken to him for a total of only six minutes during a sixteen-day stretch of negotiations'.⁶³ Each time Khalilzad visited Kabul, he also went to Doha to meet Taliban leaders. In his public communications, he demanded that 'both sides' or 'all sides' 'do more' or 'work together', even as the Taliban escalated their violence and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) responded to such aggression. This offered the group an image of virtual parity with the Afghan state, ignored its status as aggressor, and sent a discouraging signal about how the United States viewed the ANDSF's cause.

Khalilzad's methods created a vicious cycle in favour of Taliban mainstreaming by removing hesitation among other international actors about engaging with the group.⁶⁴ For example, France started back-channel contacts with the Taliban,⁶⁵ and Turkmenistan, notorious for strict adherence to its policy of permanent neutrality, invited a Taliban delegation to Ashgabat.⁶⁶ China not only hosted Taliban delegations before and after the deal but also promised to send them civilian assistance in early 2020.⁶⁷ India, one of the last major countries with no publicly known contacts with the Taliban, made tentative contact⁶⁸ after exhortation by Khalilzad.⁶⁹ India did not pre-co-ordinate the contact with Afghanistan.⁷⁰ Such international diplomacy with sanctioned members⁷¹ of a designated group side-lined the Afghan state and redefined 'Afghan-led, Afghan-owned' peace efforts to mean that such efforts were often not even government-connected, let alone government-led or owned.

63 Coll and Entous 2021.

64 In February 2019, when asked how he saw Russian outreach to the Taliban, Khalilzad said he welcomed 'positive' contribution by regional players to peace in Afghanistan: Khalilzad 2019.

65 The French Embassy in Kabul informed one of the authors that France was seeking security guarantees from the Taliban because Paris believed the provisions for safety of diplomatic missions under the Doha Agreement were inadequate for French interests.

66 Gandhara 2021.

67 In January 2020, Chinese Ambassador Wang Yu requested the Afghan government's consent to ship humanitarian supplies to the Taliban's Health Commission pursuant to an agreement reached with Mullah Baradar during his earlier visit to China.

68 Haidar 2021.

69 Haidar 2020.

70 One of the authors was in communication with the Afghan Ambassador to India, Farid Mamundzay, who was caught unawares as media reports emerged of the India-Taliban rendezvous in Doha.

71 Eleven members of the Taliban's political office in Doha were on the UN sanctions list prior to the deal, a number that increased to fourteen *after* the deal as the group made changes to its personnel in Doha.

Khalilzad also actively courted Pakistan for its cooperation vis-à-vis the Taliban. He travelled frequently to Islamabad and praised Pakistan⁷² for its help in bringing the Taliban to negotiate with the United States while overlooking Pakistan's active role in enabling the Taliban to fight the ANDSF, attack civilians and undermine the state. Pakistan, which benefited from US praise on the one hand and wilful US neglect of its warm relations with its Taliban proxy on the other, had little incentive to play a constructive role. Khalilzad's approach made some limited sense because the goal for his 'peace process' was not peace but — at best — a ceasefire that left out key issues of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of fighters. Yet by aiming for a ceasefire (and ultimately a mere 'reduction in violence') instead of peace, he implicitly allowed the Taliban to retain their capacity for violence and hold it over Afghanistan like the Sword of Damocles. A weak state contending with an externally sponsored insurgency and undermined by the diplomatic activities of a strategic ally is virtually guaranteed to fail.

The one glitch in the process — but it proved to be only a glitch — came on 7 September 2019 when President Trump halted the negotiation process after a suicide bomber killed a US soldier in Kabul on the eve of what Trump had planned to be a signing ceremony at Camp David for a US-Taliban agreement.⁷³ This halt could have provided a very useful opportunity for the United States to pause, regroup and critically review the entire approach that had been taken in engaging with the Taliban, not least because President Trump, left on his own, might well have lost interest in negotiating with the Taliban when the process had proven so fraught. A critical review at this point might have supplied some useful lessons for the United States and its hyperactive envoy. Instead, within days, officials in Washington were reportedly endeavouring to revive the discussions, something that could only have signalled to the Taliban that they were dealing with a player that was desperate for an agreement — never a wise signal to send in the context of high-stakes negotiations. On 7 December 2019, apparently as a result of a decision by Secretary of State Pompeo,⁷⁴ Khalilzad resumed his discussions with the Taliban in Doha.

6 The February 2020 Agreement and its Defects

The signing of the 29 February 2020 Agreement took place with a great deal of pomp and ceremony, but the fine print of the detail immediately provided

⁷² Ahmed 2020.

⁷³ Crowley, Jakes and Mashal 2019.

⁷⁴ Coll and Entous 2021.

cause for alarm. Its wording plainly suggested that for the United States the Agreement was really an exit agreement rather than an agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan. It contained no provision for a ceasefire, nothing to offer any protection for constitutional or human rights, and nothing to address the issue of Pakistan's ongoing support for the Taliban. By prohibiting attacks on US *but not Afghan* targets, it virtually incentivised strikes against the latter. While there was some talk of 'secret annexes' to the Agreement, on 1 March, in an interview on CBS 'Face the Nation', Secretary of State Pompeo described the 29 February text as 'the complete agreement', a remark that in effect freed the Taliban from any commitments in unpublished annexes. What the Agreement *did* do — apart from giving the Taliban a cherished place at the diplomatic 'high table' — was specify a timetable for the complete withdrawal of US forces, 'including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel', as well as the forces of 'its allies and the Coalition'.

But that was not all. The Agreement also provided, as a 'confidence building measure', for the release by 10 March 2020 of 'up to five thousand' Taliban 'combat and political prisoners'. Given that the prisoners were in the custody of the Afghan government, which was not a party to either the negotiations or the agreement, this provision was a clear affront to Afghan sovereignty. The provision appeared to have been inserted, or to have reappeared in the draft text, at the last minute; according to US congressman and former Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski, on 15 February 2020:

during a meeting attended by more than a dozen members of Congress at the Munich Security Conference in Germany, I asked Secretary of State Mike Pompeo about a rumor that the deal might also commit the Afghan government to releasing Taliban prisoners — a huge upfront concession that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani understandably did not want to make. Pompeo told us categorically that the deal would say nothing about releasing prisoners.⁷⁵

Nor was there mention of prisoner releases in a 17 February 2020 article, defending the looming deal, penned by an academic who had earlier worked at the State Department as part of Holbrooke's team.⁷⁶ Just a few days before the Doha ceremony, a senior German official in a meeting with the Afghanistan National Security Adviser stated that the issue of prisoner releases had been

75 Malinowski 2020.

76 Rubin 2020.

stricken from the draft of the deal and put on the agenda for intra-Afghan talks. The obvious inference was that the Taliban had demanded more of the Americans at the very last minute, and that Khalilzad had opted to concede to their demands. The effects of this hasty shift were lamentable: it ensured that Khalilzad would neither be trusted by the Afghan government nor feared by the Taliban. The prisoner release provision, touted in the Doha Agreement as a confidence-building measure, proved to be a confidence-destroying measure.

Even more dangerous than the details of the text were the underlying assumptions that the United States took to the negotiations. Three, in particular, stood out. First was the assumption that things would proceed largely according to plan. This assumption was highly optimistic, almost a case study of what has been called the 'Nirvana approach' to policymaking that sees 'the relevant choice as between an ideal norm and an existing "imperfect" institutional arrangement'.⁷⁷ There seems to have been far too little reflection on how things could go wrong once the Agreement was signed, even though a key lesson from both the Geneva Accords of 1988 and the 1992 negotiations was that things rarely work out as planned in Afghanistan. On the other hand, far too much weight seemed to be attached to the assumption that the Taliban were genuinely interested in 'good faith' negotiation with a view to *sharing* power with other political actors. Putting aside soothing statements from the Taliban⁷⁸ and their Pakistani backers, there was nothing in the way of concrete, meaningful evidence to justify this assumption. And given the impenetrable character of Taliban decision-making, as well as the high stakes involved, it was hardly to be expected that 'socialisation' of the negotiators would deliver any significant change in the character of the movement and its objectives.⁷⁹ Most seriously of all, the Taliban, having been gifted all that they really wanted in the 29 February Agreement, had no real incentive to negotiate seriously thereafter. Instead, they opted for strategic stalling. Conversely, the Agreement did increase the urgency for the Afghan government to make the Doha talks work, but this was a recipe for overall failure: when one side wants a deal more than the other, the other side wins. Once 'intra-Afghan' negotiations finally began, Coll and Entous reported, 'the Kabul team found that the Taliban were exceedingly stubborn. It took more than two months to resolve one agenda item'. Furthermore, the Taliban:

77 Demsetz 1969, 1.

78 Most notoriously, Haqqani 2020.

79 For an interesting discussion, see Sharp 2003.

also protested many American strikes carried out in support of Afghan forces, calling them a violation of the Doha accord's annex on managing combat. Like aggressive corporate litigators seeking to drown their opponents in paper, the guerrillas filed more than sixteen hundred complaints to Khalilzad's team, and used them to justify their intensifying military campaign against Kabul.⁸⁰

There is much to be said for the assessment offered by Semple, Raphel and Rasikh, that the Taliban 'appeared to be ready to accept little short of capitulation by the Kabul government, which guaranteed there would be no progress in intra-Afghan negotiations'.⁸¹

Second, the United States too often erred in its framing of the conflict. 'Framing', Chong and Druckman have argued, 'refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue'.⁸² In July 2017, an article was published by an official who until shortly before the article appeared had acted as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the State Department. The article depicted the problem in Afghanistan as 'vested interests on all sides in continuing the war', and argued that the United States could influence the Taliban's calculations through 'applying military pressure and offering political opportunity' and 'using our leverage with the Afghan political elite to ensure their commitment to negotiating'.⁸³ There is no doubt that Afghanistan was awash with conflicts of interest, but this particular framing crucially overlooked the conflict of *values* that separated the Taliban not only from the post-2001 political framework, but also from a young and increasingly globalised, society.⁸⁴ A clearer understanding of this gulf in values might have prompted more careful exploration of the underlying assumption that the Taliban would be interested in 'good faith' negotiation to share power.

Third, the United States appeared to have little or no understanding of how perceptions of the Agreement and its content could affect the dynamics of power *within Afghanistan itself*. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* argued that 'Reputation of power, is Power'.⁸⁵ The effect of the Doha Agreement was to boost the reputation of the Taliban and undermine the reputation of the Afghan government, which was not even mentioned by name in the text and

80 Coll and Entous 2021.

81 Semple, Raphel and Rasikh 2021, 2. See also Semple 2021.

82 Chong and Druckman 2007, 107.

83 Miller 2017.

84 See Ibrahimi and Maley 2020.

85 Hobbes 1996, 62.

had been excluded from the negotiations. The danger that flowed from this development was that of a *cascade*, where people positioned themselves not on the strength of their own preferences, but on the strength of what they saw as the likely consequences of choices that others might make.⁸⁶ Thus, if Afghans were led to believe that the Taliban would come out on top, they could choose for prudential reasons either to sit on the fence or shift to the Taliban, not because they liked the idea of Taliban rule, but because they thought that it was going to eventuate anyway and that it would not pay to be on the losing side. There is a very strong case that this is exactly what happened in Afghanistan, and that the Doha Agreement was the event that lit the fuse.

All in all, it was naïve to think that so complex, intense and deep-rooted a conflict as that in Afghanistan could ever be resolved with the ease and speed that the Doha Agreement seemed to assume. Philipp Münch and Thomas Ruttig had identified this problem of a 'peace process' in 2014: 'The international community needs to understand that such a process — with its multi-faceted internal and regional dimensions — will be so multi-layered that it probably needs much more time than just three years'.⁸⁷ Yet once the Doha Agreement was signed, many players outside Afghanistan — governments, think tanks, commentators and journalists — were swept up in the process's apparent momentum, the result being the emergence of what the experienced analyst Kate Clark bluntly called 'fantasy castles of research, advocacy and new institutions'.⁸⁸ One result was that the danger of disaster received much less attention than it objectively merited.

7 The Implementation and Effects of the Agreement: An Inside Perspective

After signing the Doha Agreement, the United States increasingly gave in to the Taliban's maximalist interpretation of its terms and to their tactic of reading entirely new terms into the deal. The international community, noting the shift in US policy, adjusted its posture accordingly. Both the US concessions and the international community's changing disposition operated increasingly to the detriment of the Afghan state. The new US administration promised, but did not deliver, a course correction.

86 See Kuran 1989; Kuran 1995.

87 Münch and Ruttig 2014, 36-37.

88 Clark 2021a.

On the issue of the release of Taliban convicts, the United States shifted the goalposts with the Afghan government. The United States told the Afghan government that the release of ‘up to’ 5,000 Taliban prisoners — a cornerstone of the deal — meant that releasing, say, 250 could satisfy the terms, and the United States would work to convince the Taliban to accept it. But not only did the United States fail to convince the Taliban, it gave in when the group came up with a list of 5,000 *specific* individuals that it insisted be released.⁸⁹ The United States also failed to demand reciprocity from the Taliban with respect to the list of ANDSF hostages whose release the Afghan government wanted. The result was that, while the Taliban achieved the release of every one of the convicts on their list when the process finished in September 2020, the Afghan government secured only a fraction. This was not a surprising outcome. In June, the United States told the Afghan government that the Taliban had promised to release all ANDSF hostages after 3,000 Taliban convicts were released.⁹⁰ Even as freed Taliban convicts exceeded 3,000, the United States failed to persuade the group to live up to its promise, leaving high-value ANDSF hostages — among them pilots and special forces members — in Taliban custody. The Afghan government then had to turn to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to pursue their release.⁹¹ Among the list of Taliban convicts were those involved in drug trafficking, suicide bombings, assassinations, kidnappings and other grievous acts of terrorism, including the 2017 bombing outside the German embassy that killed at least 90 people.⁹² Six of these were of particular concern to the United States, Australia and France. The Afghan government went to great lengths to prevent their release and offered to free any other six convicts instead. But the Taliban rejected the offer, making the release of the six a condition for starting negotiations with the government. This conditionality was beyond the terms of the deal, but the United States failed to push back. The much-delayed talks started after the six were transferred to Doha under supervised detention, over stiff objection by Australia

89 National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib mentioned this in several meetings with Western ambassadors as an illustration of Afghanistan's frustrations with the implementation of the deal.

90 This was conveyed in a 6 June 2020 call between Deputy National Security Adviser Ibrahimi and Henry Ensher, a member of Khalilzad's team working with the Taliban's Prisoners Commission in Doha.

91 One of the authors worked with the ICRC team in Kabul on this matter.

92 Mashal, Abed and Sukhanyar 2017. For further discussion, see Maley 2018, 1.

and by France, whose statement on the occasion contained scathing criticism of the government.⁹³

The Doha process also affected aid commitments. Preparations for the 2020 Afghanistan Conference in Geneva kicked into high gear soon after talks started. Partly because of the looming withdrawal deadline of May 2021 and the uncertainty about whether a 'republican' Afghanistan would emerge intact after the talks, most donors at the November aid conference either pledged considerably less than their previous four-year commitment at Brussels in 2016 or offered aid for shorter periods. An Afghan National Security Council tally of the pledges in 2020 showed a total of under USD5 billion, a stark reduction from the USD15.67 billion four years earlier.⁹⁴ The United States made half of its USD600 million pledge — down from USD4.2 billion — contingent on progress in talks,⁹⁵ an impossible condition because progress depended on Taliban cooperation. For a conference designed to demonstrate the international community's support for the Afghan republic, this was a stunning blow — especially given that Afghanistan was facing an economic slump, the COVID-19 pandemic and historic levels of violence. Secretary of State Pompeo, it seemed, was seeking not progress towards peace, but capitulation from the government.

Cutting aid appeared to have been a favourite Pompeo tactic: to induce President Ghani and his 2019 election rival Dr Abdullah to resolve their post-election differences, in March 2020 he announced a proposed cut of USD1 billion in aid, with inevitable risk to the capabilities of the ANDSF⁹⁶ who had just successfully secured the elections and were fighting high levels of Taliban violence that spring. A week-long 'reduction in violence' period in February 2020 saw 131 ANDSF casualties,⁹⁷ which was significant even if lower than regular levels.⁹⁸ The United States rejected several requests from the government for a 'deconfliction mechanism' with the Taliban to monitor future 'reduction in violence' periods jointly. The February experience showed that the group,

93 The French Embassy, acknowledging the government's difficult position, promised a lenient statement that would put the blame more on the United States as the architect of the deal, but the statement turned out otherwise. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2020.

94 Memo to National Security Adviser on 2020 Geneva Afghanistan Conference Pledges.

95 *Reuters* Staff 2020.

96 Landay, Mohammed and Ali 2020.

97 Figures from the Tawheed National Intelligence Coordination Center at the Office of the National Security Council; figures do not include civilian casualties and hostages over the RiV period.

98 By comparison, the United Kingdom lost 23 soldiers in the operation to take and hold Helmand's Musa Qala district between 2006 and 2011. Graham-Harrison 2015.

which was already deconflicting with the United States in Doha, could unilaterally decide what counted as exceptions to 'reduction in violence' commitments and strike the ANDSF at will.⁹⁹ If 'reduction in violence' were to be a confidence-building mechanism, there were practical questions that required coordination between the government and the group.

The Biden administration started with a promise to do better. On 22 January 2021, National Security Adviser Sullivan promised his Afghan counterpart that the United States would review the deal, including the Taliban's adherence to it, with a view that the group would 'bear the consequences of its choices' if it failed to hold up its end of the bargain. But on 4 April, his deputy Jon Finer told the Afghan National Security Adviser that any US presence beyond May would be 'limited and not conditions-based', thus abandoning the earlier position of holding the Taliban to their commitments. Ten days later, Biden announced full withdrawal. But on 26 May, Sullivan appeared to backtrack and told his Afghan counterpart that the United States planned to support ANDSF 'at tempo and at scale' to show that a Taliban victory 'is not in the offing' after US withdrawal. But despite repeated requests from Afghanistan to share those plans, particularly for so-called 'over-the-horizon support', the plans never materialised.¹⁰⁰

As the Taliban advanced militarily, US diplomacy appeared increasingly desperate. On 19 October 2020, when Dr Khalilzad tweeted that 'Continued high levels of violence can threaten the peace process and the agreement and the core understanding that there is no military solution', he begged the obvious question of whether the Taliban shared a 'core understanding that there is no military solution', a belief which seemed increasingly spurious. On 28 February 2021, the US produced a draft 'Afghanistan Peace Agreement' and proposed that a major conference be held in Istanbul to finalise it.¹⁰¹ The US text — 'breathtakingly ambitious' in the assessment of Coll and Entous¹⁰² — proposed a vaguely defined 'Peace Government' and stated that 'All elections to be held pursuant to the current Constitution are cancelled during the tenure of the Peace Government'. It even proposed that the membership of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission be expanded to include

99 This became clear at a January 2021 meeting between high-ranking Afghan officials and Khalilzad.

100 A High-level US defence and national security officials visited Kabul on 2 June 2021 and received a document with this request. A similar document was delivered to the White House by President Ghani on 23 June 2021. General Miller, the then-commander of US forces in Afghanistan, and his successors — Admiral Vasely and General Buzzard — promised to share plans but never did.

101 Gibbons-Neff, Zucchini and Jakes 2021.

102 Coll and Entous 2021.

the Taliban, who as recently as June 2020 had murdered Commission staff. But the Taliban, unsurprisingly, showed no interest in such a conference, and it never materialised. The very idea that a conflict as deep-rooted as that in Afghanistan could be solved with such a 'quick-fix' solution was ill-conceived; and in any case, when parties are forced into a 'fast-tracked' agreement by outside powers, it is more than likely that any resulting 'peace agreement' will fall apart.¹⁰³

The advent of the Biden Administration had created some initial optimism, but the new administration took nearly four critical months in spring 2021 for a review of the deal, only to snap back to the Trump approach. The policy uncertainty over those months of escalating Taliban violence was matched only by the Biden Administration's oscillations after the withdrawal announcement, making it difficult for Afghanistan to have any kind of predictable planning horizon. The implementation of the Doha Agreement was marked by moving goalposts, concessions to the Taliban and shifting positions that, cumulatively, made the policy environment for the Afghan government highly uncertain, undermined it at every step, and negatively altered the behaviour of Afghanistan's other allies. As Kate Clark of the Afghanistan Analysts Network put it:

Khalilzad had gambled all on the Taleban genuinely wanting to negotiate. He never had a Plan B of what to do if the insurgents were playing for time and actually intent on military conquest. Bizarrely, he and other US officials clung to their fantasy peace process into August, even as huge swathes of Afghanistan fell to the Taleban.¹⁰⁴

8 Conclusion: The Munich Parallel

In offering a concluding assessment of the Doha Agreement and its effects, it is tempting to resort to Cicero's maxim *res ipsa loquitur* — 'the facts speak for themselves'.¹⁰⁵ It is hard to imagine that any disinterested party could speak positively of how things played out, and even among recent occupants of the Oval Office, there emerged something of a 'blame game', with President Biden blaming a poor deal inherited from President Trump, and President Trump blaming poor implementation on the part of President Biden. Nonetheless,

¹⁰³ See Ladwig 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Clark 2021b.

¹⁰⁵ Berry 2011, 228.

there are advantages in probing a little deeper, and when one does so, certain similarities surface between the diplomacy that undermined the Afghan state and the diplomacy that undermined the state of Czechoslovakia 80 years earlier. Here, we refer specifically to the Munich Agreement of 29 September 1938 between Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy, and signed respectively by Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain, Édouard Daladier and Benito Mussolini.¹⁰⁶

One must always tread carefully if arguing from analogy,¹⁰⁷ and it is as yet unclear what all the short-term consequences of the collapse in Afghanistan might be, let alone the longer-term effects. Nevertheless, when one focuses specifically on diplomacy, there are some distinct similarities to note. First, the signatories to both the Munich and the Doha agreements used extravagant language to describe what had allegedly been achieved. Neville Chamberlain famously claimed to have returned from Munich bearing ‘peace with honour’ and ‘peace for our time’, words that, according to one historian, ‘were to haunt him and his reputation for ever more’.¹⁰⁸ As we noted earlier, Khalilzad described 29 February 2020 as ‘A Day to Remember’, which indeed it was, although not for the reasons he thought. Second, in neither case was the lead Western negotiator a seasoned *career diplomat*. Chamberlain had very limited experience of foreign affairs when he became Prime Minister in 1937, and Khalilzad was a controversial figure¹⁰⁹ whose earlier ambassadorial appointments, as is often the case in the United States,¹¹⁰ came from political connections rather than a lengthy career in the Foreign Service. Third, Khalilzad and Chamberlain were both disposed to make concessions that secured them little or nothing of value in return. The aphorism coined in the British Foreign Office to describe Chamberlain’s approach to Hitler in September 1938 — ‘If at first you can’t concede, fly, fly, fly again’¹¹¹ — applied equally strongly to Khalilzad’s approach to the Taliban. Fourth, just as the Afghan government was excluded from the process that culminated in the signing of the Doha Agreement, there were no representatives of Czechoslovakia present during the negotiations that sealed the fate of their country. Fifth, key parties to the two agreements — quite predictably — displayed no subsequent commitment to peace: Hitler’s forces marched into Prague on 15 March 1939, and the Taliban relentlessly

106 See Reynolds 2008, 37–95.

107 See Khong 1992. On the value of diplomatic history as a component of diplomatic studies, see Maley 2021b, 6–9.

108 Bouverie 2019, 289.

109 London 2021.

110 Scoville 2019.

111 Quoted in Steiner 2011, 639.

escalated their attacks on Afghan military and civilian targets, culminating in their own takeover of Kabul. Sixth, in each case, central players — the British in 1938 and the Americans in 2020 — seriously misread the intentions and character of their main adversaries, setting the scene for disaster. As a grim footnote, just as the Doha Agreement provided for prisoner releases by the absent Afghan government, so too did the Munich Agreement provide, in paragraph 8, for prisoner releases by the absent government of Czechoslovakia.

It did not take long for Czechoslovakia to disappear from the front pages, at least for a while, and the same is likely to be true of Afghanistan. As Winston Churchill put it in the House of Commons just days after Munich, 'All is over. Silent, mournful, abandoned, broken, Czechoslovakia recedes into the darkness'.¹¹² But as Munich demonstrated, diplomatic debacles can have lasting consequences, not least as a result of the impressions that they create about the capacities and commitment of the various parties. With the United States increasingly confronted by revisionist powers — such as Russia with respect to Ukraine or China with respect to Taiwan — it is not timely for it to appear to lack staying power or diplomatic skill. As Hitler moved to invade Poland in August 1939, he rejected the concerns voiced by some of his generals: 'Our enemies are small worms ... I saw them in Munich'.¹¹³ It would be premature to conclude that all the disastrous consequences of the Doha Agreement have yet come to light. A great power that can misread a situation as badly as did the United States when engaging with the Taliban has the potential to blunder in other ways and in other places. In particular, its optimistic approach to appraising the Taliban's character and objectives when there was little or nothing of substance to indicate that the Taliban would be much different from what they were in the 1990s suggested a dangerous weakness in Washington's capacity to understand the wider world;¹¹⁴ and Khalilzad seriously misunderstood the likely effects of his activities on the behaviour of other stakeholders. At heart, the Taliban were interested in regaining power, not building peace. The Afghanistan conflict was simply not ripe for a negotiated settlement, and the attempt to produce one became the trigger for an internal collapse.

In concluding his magisterial book *Munich: The Price of Peace*, Telford Taylor wrote that Munich was 'a potent and historically valid symbol of the dangers of not facing up to unpleasant realities. That is not a new lesson, but it is a great one, and it is the lesson of Munich'.¹¹⁵ It is also the lesson of Doha.

¹¹² House of Commons 1938.

¹¹³ Quoted in Kershaw 2001, 123.

¹¹⁴ On the dangers of such misunderstanding, see Shore 2014.

¹¹⁵ Taylor 1979, 1004.

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