

The United Nations Security Council Arria Formula Meeting on the Peace Process in Afghanistan

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Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion today.

It goes without explaining in this forum that a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan would be the best way to advance peace and prosperity in that country and contribute to security beyond its borders. It also goes without explaining that peace-making is hard, and more often than not it fails. As an independent observer, I can perhaps best contribute to this discussion by highlighting a few key risks and realities that are important for those supporting an Afghan peace process to reflect in their policies and diplomacy, if the process is to have the greatest possible chance of success.

First, if the peace process succeeds – in other words, in the *most optimistic scenario* – the process will result in a government of which the Taliban are a substantial part, and which is structurally different than what we see today. What exactly the Taliban share and the structural changes will be can only be determined through negotiations, but trade-offs have to be expected. To anticipate otherwise would be to hope for Taliban surrender and there is no sign of that.

If and when the Afghan parties begin substantive negotiations, their starting positions are likely to be very far apart on the most fundamental questions of the political system and what kinds of democratic features it will and won't have as compared to the existing system. Either there will be compromises on these questions or there will not be a negotiated settlement – in which case, the bloodshed will continue, with or without a foreign troop presence, and Afghanistan's economic prospects will remain stunted.

One policy implication of this reality is that it is more important to focus support on the peace *process* than on specific outcomes. This isn't to suggest that supporting countries abandon their own values. But it is to say that without placing an end to the bloodshed, to the human toll, at the apex of desired outcomes in the nearer term, other desired outcomes – rights, justice for victims, democratic features – are unlikely to be realized over the longer term. If the mantra “Afghan owned and Afghan led” means anything, it should mean that members of the international community will support the outcomes of Afghan peace negotiations without imposing their own redlines.

Another policy implication is that, if a negotiated settlement materializes, promoting its implementation will require providing financial support to a government that includes the

Taliban. This is a reality that may be difficult to absorb for some parliaments and publics of countries that have been at war with the Taliban for two decades.

A second reality I'll highlight concerns timing constraints on the peace process. As I'm sure is well-known to this group, peace processes generally are lengthy, often years-long affairs. In Afghanistan's case, the *relatively* straightforward U.S.-Taliban agreement signed in February took nearly a year and a half to negotiate, after years of quiet preparatory steps. The more complex topics to be negotiated among Afghans will not easily be amenable to quick resolution. An *incremental approach* to negotiations, in which compromises are gradually accumulated, building toward the most difficult issues would offer the best chance for the parties to evolve their positions and acclimate their constituencies to compromises. This kind of approach takes time.

The U.S.-Taliban agreement, however, has shortened the time horizon for talks. It's not hard to imagine some flexibility on the agreement's May 2021 deadline for a full withdrawal of all foreign forces and other non-diplomatic personnel, particularly considering that none of the other deadlines in the text have held so far. And, it is theoretically possible that the Biden Administration will revisit elements of the deal or interpret some of its requirements more stringently; such modifications could extend the withdrawal timeline. Regardless of any Taliban flexibility or stiffened American conditionality – or even U.S. abandonment of the deal, though I don't expect that – the withdrawal provisions have undoubtedly shaped Taliban expectations. The withdrawal timeline was a big win for them, and they had insisted on that win up front, before commencing talks with other Afghans. It is unlikely Afghan talks can be sustained if that win is not sustained. And, unfortunately, it is also unlikely that talks would continue after a full withdrawal. The timeline may be somewhat elastic, but probably can't be stretched very far.

I mention the timing issue in part because some have been understandably frustrated with the dramatic urgency of U.S. diplomacy over the last couple of years and may be hoping for that to change. I cannot predict what the Biden Administration's approach will be. But I can say that objective analysis of the options available will have to treat the U.S.-Taliban agreement as a 'fact on the ground,' and will have to resolve the tension between the timing expectations that it created and the benefits of an incremental process.

Finally, I'll conclude with a practical suggestion for Security Council members' consideration. A missing feature in the peace process so far is an empowered, impartial mediator. It is difficult to see how the parties will be able to bridge the substantial distance between their starting positions without such help. Several governments have informally played a mediation role in the process so far, but this ad hoc approach is less likely to be effective as the talks get more difficult.

A Security Council imprimatur for a mediator would be helpful. Such an imprimatur would reflect the common interests of Council members in a stable Afghanistan that contributes to regional stability and provides no safe harbor for trans-national terrorists. It would also signal the clear backing of key countries for the peace process – countries whose support will be needed not only to keep the process on track but also to create conditions for effective implementation of any results.

Over the next two months, while the future direction of U.S. policy cannot be certain, the crucial task will be to keep the Afghan talks, currently stalled, on life support. After that point, a push to put in place a mediator could help re-energize the process.

Thank you.