

SPECIAL REPORT

2021: Afghanistan's Year of Reckoning

Alexey Davydov | Michael Kugelman | Alexey Kupriyanov | Rakesh Sood



APRIL 2021

FOREWORD

This joint report on Afghanistan – led by scholars from the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Wilson Centre (WC), and Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) – is a crystallisation of some of the efforts of the three organisations engaged in an India-Russia-U.S. trilateral Track II dialogue for the past couple of years.

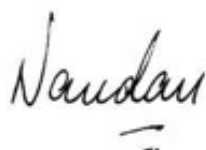
The aim of these deliberations is to foster a frank exchange of ideas on areas of mutual interest, identifying possible convergence, as well as divergence, on global and regional issues. The focus is on developing a more nuanced understanding of each other’s concerns to narrow down differences where possible, and to promote avenues for joint cooperation. The trilateral meetings have coincided with an increasingly turbulent period in world affairs, where bilateral relations between the three powers are evolving. At the same time, as major powers in their own right, the three countries continue to deal with the impacts of the emerging global order.

Under these circumstances, it became necessary to identify practical ways to think

through specific aspects of trilateral convergence and divergence. This resulted in the idea of a joint report, where each side would present a detailed investigation of the chosen issue from their country’s perspective. The December 2020 meeting of the trilateral dialogue identified Afghanistan as the subject of the first collaborative analysis.

Not only are India, Russia, and the US all stakeholders in a stable Afghanistan, they continue to be affected in myriad ways by the emerging situation in the war-torn country. Acknowledging that they do not have identical views on the issue, and that a consensus report might not fully capture the nuances involved, this report presents three separate essays that present how the scholars from the three countries perceive Afghanistan. Having analysed the issue from different perspectives, the authors seek to arrive at a conclusion, sketching ideas for a way forward where the interests of all parties are conserved.

This report is the result of the labours of Amb. Rakesh Sood (ORF), Dr. Alexey Kupriyanov and Dr. Alexey Davydov (IMEMO), and Mr. Michael Kugelman (Wilson Centre), who bring their vast experience and knowledge to this effort. This report is especially timely, given the ongoing efforts to determine the road ahead for Afghanistan.



Nandan Unnikrishnan,
Distinguished Fellow
Observer Research Foundation



Feodor Voitlovsky
Director
IMEMO RAS



Matthew Rojansky,
Director - Kennan Institute,
Wilson Center



Source: "Afghanistan Regional Map," WorldAtlas, <https://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/asia/afghreg.htm>

AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

RAKESH SOOD

Introduction

President Joe Biden is the third United States (US) president to grapple with the challenge of managing the withdrawal of his country's troops from Afghanistan. Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump undertook detailed policy reviews and announced new initiatives during their tenure but left office without seeing the process through to the end. Each time, the problem became more intractable.

After 20 years of military engagement, during which US troop presence exceeded 100,000 a decade ago and declined thereafter to 2,500 today—US policy is again at a crossroad. To be sure, President Biden is no stranger to the Af-Pak challenge, having visited the region nearly a dozen times as senator and as vice president. However, the cumulative errors of omission and commission over the past two decades have made Biden's challenge greater.

Attribution: Alexey Davydov, Michael Kugelman, Alexey Kupriyanov, Rakesh Sood, "2021: Afghanistan's Year of Reckoning," Special Report No. 135, April 2021, Observer Research Foundation.

What Obama and Trump Achieved

Obama had pledged to end what he called the “dumb war” in Iraq and turn around the “good war in Afghanistan that we have to win.” Eventually, his policy review in 2009 led him to announce a surge in US troop presence to battle what was increasingly seen as a counter-insurgency (COIN), with a drawdown beginning 18 months later, in mid-2011. The goal was to seize and clear territory, hold and re-build on the peace and hand it over within 18 months to the Afghan people. Gen. David Petraeus, who had overseen a similar surge followed by a drawdown in Iraq, took command in Afghanistan to implement Obama’s policy. By the end of 2014, US troop presence was down to 8,500 and Operation Enduring Freedom was replaced by Operation Resolute Support. US troops no longer had a combat role; their primary role was to train, advise and assist the Afghan security and defence forces that had been expanded and whose capabilities were enhanced. The downside of Obama’s policy was that with more drone attacks and heightened counter-insurgency operations, the fight became increasingly seen as one between Americans and Afghans. According to the US COIN handbook, the operation needed a force of 20 soldiers per

thousand population—or a combined US-NATO force of 500,000—a number that was politically impossible to muster.¹

Taking over in 2017, President Trump ordered another review and then declared in August of that year that the “U.S. was seeking an honourable and enduring outcome.” He agreed to Gen. John Nicholson’s request to send an extra 5,000 soldiers to turn the tide against the Taliban, raising US troop presence to 13,500.² A year later, Trump changed course and appointed Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to pursue peace and reconciliation talks with the Taliban; thus did the Doha process begin.³

On 29 February 2020 in Doha, Khalilzad signed an agreement with the Taliban Deputy Leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. The document bore a curious title – “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognised by the US as a state and is known as the Taliban and the USA”—which perhaps reflected the mistrust between the parties and the fragility of the deal.⁴ It is just as well that the deal was signed on 29 February with its anniversary due in 2024, by which time its ignominy would be forgotten.

Biden's Options

More than a year since the Doha agreement was inked, it is commonly held that it is in tatters. A fundamental problem is that it was packaged as a “peace deal” when it was, in reality, a “withdrawal deal”. As the latter, it was initially on track, but the US elections in November intervened and increased violence in Afghanistan shifted the focus back to a ‘peace deal’. Under the Doha terms, the US is to withdraw its remaining 2,500 troops from Afghanistan (and the 1,000 for counterterrorism operations) by 1 May 2021, in return for unverified counterterrorism guarantees and the open-ended negotiation of an intra-Afghan peace agreement that might bring some stability to Afghanistan. The latter two conditions have not been met, and Biden is faced with the choice of either keeping to the deadline or finding other options.

There is little of that, however. If Biden pulls out all 3,500 troops by May—as Trump had promised during the campaign—it is a foregone conclusion that the fragile government in Kabul would collapse, possibly within only the year, and ignite a bloody civil war. The US could try to negotiate a brief extension of the deadline but this would need cooperation from the Taliban—something that is not forthcoming. Nevertheless, an extension is unlikely to help unless the Taliban are pressured to fulfil their commitments; this is not possible without cooperation from Pakistan,

Iran and Russia. The US could also decide to extend its stay unilaterally, since NATO has already declared that “the conditions of withdrawal have not been met” and the alliance will withdraw “only when the time is right.”⁵ NATO members (other than the US) have another 7,500 soldiers in Afghanistan. While this may give comfort to the Kabul regime, it is unlikely to stem the steady military gains of the Taliban over the last 12 months. Given that Taliban links with Al Qaeda have remained intact and IS–Khorasan is active in some of the eastern provinces of Afghanistan, the US could also decide to extend its war indefinitely, by maintaining a small counterterrorism force, together with NATO, to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for such terrorist groups in the future. This is unlikely to go down well in Afghanistan or in the region. Therefore, the Biden administration must find the lesser evil. This could be a short extension of stay, perhaps for six months until November, with Taliban acceptance and a reduction in violence as part of a renewed push towards intra-Afghan negotiations.

President Biden has acknowledged that “it was not a very solidly negotiated deal.”⁶ However, the administration’s helplessness is apparent in that Ambassador Khalilzad has been retained—he who delivered the flawed February 2020 agreement under Trump and is now tasked with transforming that deal into a new one that will enjoy support in Kabul, with the Taliban, and in key global capitals.

The U.S. Dilemma

The US' problem is not in withdrawing from Afghanistan; it is in managing the optics of such an exit. It needs to ensure a decent interval after its departure so that the Afghan chapter can be finally closed. This will need a deal with the Taliban, who can sense military victory and therefore have little reason to oblige. They emphasise that a ceasefire was never promised, and that they have upheld what they did commit: “no attacks on departing U.S. forces”. Since a ceasefire cannot now be introduced on the agenda, Khalilzad is reduced to pleading for a “significant reduction in violence”, hoping that the quantum of reduction and its duration (if the Taliban agrees) will be a politically sellable “decent interval” in the Western narrative.

The term “decent interval” has a chequered past in US history. In the late 1960s, the administration of Richard Nixon had realised that a military solution in Vietnam was not possible and tasked Henry Kissinger to negotiate a US exit. During Kissinger's covert visit to China in July 1971, he assured Premier Zhou Enlai that the US would completely withdraw from Vietnam

in return for the release of US POWs and a ceasefire lasting a “decent interval” of perhaps 18 months or so. Kissinger and Nixon knew that the deal would leave their ally, the South Vietnamese government led by President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, vulnerable. In the declassified 1972 White House tapes, Nixon and Kissinger acknowledge that “South Vietnam is not going to survive and the idea is to find a formula that can hold things together for a year or two.” Nixon reaffirmed the assurance during his pathbreaking visit to Vietnam the following year in February.⁷ The plan worked.

President Nixon was re-elected on a peace platform in November 1972, scoring a record margin against his rival. In January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed and by end-March, the US had completed its withdrawal from Vietnam, ending its direct military involvement in the conflict. US POWs were released. By end-1973, the ceasefire was in tatters: Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese forces on 30 April 1975. To win re-election in 1972, Nixon promised an honourable peace and delivered a delayed defeat but by then, the world had moved on. Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973. The secret assurances given by Kissinger and Nixon in 1971-72 seeking only a “decent interval” surfaced after four decades.

Today, a “decent interval” does not have to be 24 months, but only as long as it takes for the public in the West to lose interest, likely to be manipulated in weeks in today’s 24/7 news cycle-driven, crisis-prone age. As former Defence Secretary Gen. James Mattis once said, “U.S. does not lose wars, it only loses interest.”⁸ But the problem that both Obama and Trump faced was getting to the “decent interval” even as they realised that the US had outlived its welcome.

A cumulative set of errors fuelled the Western fatigue with the Afghan project: a belief in 2002 that the Taliban had been defeated when they had only dispersed to sanctuaries in Pakistan; introducing a highly centralised presidential system that lacked institutions to provide checks and balances, resulting in weak local governance; the focus shifting to the disastrous war in Iraq in 2003; the gradual return of the Taliban beginning in 2005 and US inability to check Pakistan’s duplicity on the matter; growing factionalism; rising opium production that fuelled the insurgency; corruption; announcing

the troop surge in 2009 along with the drawdown beginning in 2011; and a growing legitimisation of Taliban as a political force, cemented by the opening of the Doha office in 2013 spearheaded by some European states like the UK, Norway and Germany. Put simply, the Taliban sponsors (Pakistan’s ISI) remained consistently loyal and the government in Kabul lost its supporters. The US’ failure was not in its inability to transform Afghanistan, but in failing to change Pakistan’s policy of “run with the hare and hunt with the hounds”. As the late Gen. Zia ul Haq explained the art of handling the US – “The water in Afghanistan must be kept boiling at the right temperature, but not boil over.”

“The US’ problem is not in withdrawing from Afghanistan; it is in managing the optics of such an exit.”

What to Expect from Bonn 2

Pakistan has consistently maintained that the Bonn agreement hammered out in 2001 was fatally flawed because it excluded the Taliban, and the only way to rectify it is to do a Bonn 2. Khalilzad has been able to sell this notion to the Biden team. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has written identical letters⁹ to President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, Chairperson of the High Council for National Reconciliation, indicating that while the policy review has not been completed, an initial conclusion is that peace talks need to be accelerated. A draft agreement to jumpstart the intra-Afghan peace talks is doing the rounds—it contains provisions for bringing in a transition government based on power-sharing with the Taliban and proposes a Bonn 2 under the auspices of the United Nations.¹⁰

This may provide the elusive “decent interval” that in turn could enable a “responsible US withdrawal” if the Taliban agrees and President Ghani steps down. Still, this is unlikely to bring peace to Afghanistan. The reason is that calling it “Bonn 2” implies a desire to turn the clock, and yet as the old saying goes, you cannot step in the same river twice. Bonn 1 was not a peace conference. The four groups invited (Rome, Cyprus and Peshawar groups, and the Northern Alliance) were not fighting each other and were

not likely to do so; Bonn 1 only sought to set up a road map for political normalisation in Afghanistan. These four groups would hardly have countenanced Taliban in Bonn; nor could the US have allowed it given the ties between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. For Bonn 2, there are essentially two parties, the Taliban and the Afghan government, who are at war. The Taliban have gained legitimacy, expanded their presence, and are militarily strong. The Kabul government is internationally recognised but has lost considerable legitimacy because of its disunity, consequent fragility and incompetence. Most importantly, the US can no longer count on the same kind of support it received from Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran in 2001.

The most important internal factor is Afghanistan’s demographics – a median age of 18.4 years, with 46 percent of the population below 15 years and another 28 percent between 16-30. This large cohort are used to living in a conservative but open society. If the Doha agreement generated concerns among youth, women and minorities (and the Afghan government), the new proposal confirms their worst fears. The only thing they all agree on is that they will not accept a return to the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan. The Taliban have remained opaque about their stand on issues of concern like democracy, constitution, and human rights, other than dropping vague hints that their positions have “evolved”. Fortunately for the Taliban (and for their Pakistani backers), there are

quite a few “useful idiots” who maintain that the Taliban have changed, pointing to their clever use of social media or the fact that they do not want to be isolated as was the case in 1990s. Yet, no Afghan believes that the Taliban will take part in elections or have any interest in sharing power.

There is consensus among Afghans for peace, but none on the price that they are willing to pay for it. At the same time, the Taliban are not the Viet Cong: they are reportedly fractured and questions have surfaced about the control of the Quetta shura on all those fighting in the field. Lack of an internal consensus makes it easier for Afghanistan’s neighbours to find their preferred powerbrokers. A decade ago, Taliban numbers were estimated at 6,000; today, the number is upward of 60,000. The US has assured that its financial commitment for Afghanistan stands but this will quickly dry up when the chain of command in the Afghan army of the police force starts breaking down because of disunity among the leaders.

The Afghan vision of a sovereign, independent, democratic and pluralist Afghanistan is not subscribed to by all its neighbours, preventing a regional consensus. With growing rivalry between the global powers, consensus too, is limited to ensuring an early US exit. As the Kabul government realises, proxy wars are easy but peace by proxy is not possible. In the absence of a consensus, the Afghans are left with no good options that can bring them closer to their vision. Internal rivalries, conflicting interests among

the countries in the region, and divergent and often unstated objectives have rendered peace-making in Afghanistan an impossible act of political balancing.

Russia has stepped up its role in recent years by opening up channels with the Taliban, supporting the Doha process, sponsoring the troika of Russia, China and the US, an expanded troika that includes Pakistan, and the Moscow format that includes India, Iran and Central Asian and other states. Its core interest is in preventing destabilisation in the region, any long-term US presence, and a check on the opium production. In returning to the scene, Russia has sought to wipe out the legacy of the 1979-89 intervention successfully as the attendance at the conferences it has sponsored shows.

Even a tenuous and vaguely worded Doha agreement between the US and the Taliban took 18 months to work out. It would be difficult to expect an agreement in the next eight weeks on a transition government and a significant reduction in violence. For the US, the “least bad” option of an exit even without a “decent interval” is still an option; for the Afghans yearning for peace, there is no quick solution that Bonn 2 can bring about. However, the call for President Ghani to step down in the interest of peace is gathering momentum. Iran, Russia and Pakistan favour it, too, albeit for their own reasons, as do a number of Afghan leaders who have been antagonised by Ghani’s behaviour. While this convergence creates an illusion of a consensus, it is limited to seeing the exit of the Ghani government, and not beyond.

India's Options

In the post-Taliban phase, India undertook an extensive development programme covering humanitarian assistance,^a infrastructure development,^b over 700 infrastructure reconstruction projects, and capacity development.^c Today there are over 16,000 Afghan students pursuing higher education in India, and during the last two decades, over 60,000 graduates, post-graduates, and other professionals have returned to Afghanistan. Indian assistance, estimated at US\$3 billion, has been spread across all provinces, cutting across ethnic lines. In undertaking these activities, India has sought to work with the newly created institutions rather than through preferred partners.

This approach has helped India to build upon the age-old cultural ties between the two countries. Zahiruddin Mohammed (Babur), founder of the Mughal empire, finds his resting place at Bagh e Babur in Kabul, a picnic garden that was restored by a renowned Indian architect specialising in the preservation of Mughal-era monuments and gardens.^d Afghanistan's beloved national poet Abdul Qadir 'Bedil' (or Bedil Dehlavi in north India) died in Delhi in the 18th century. He earned his renown as a poet at the Mughal court and was also considered a Sufi saint. His shrine, Bagh e Bedil, remains

popular among Afghan visitors to Delhi. Building on this, a sports stadium on the outskirts of Delhi serves as training grounds for the Afghan cricket team, with India providing coaching and technical support. Hindi-language movies (or the 'Bollywood' industry) are an abiding link, surviving even political upheavals.

India is also the traditional market for Afghanistan's horticultural produce. In the absence of road links through Pakistan, a dedicated air freight corridor set up in 2018 has seen nearly 500 flights that have ferried 5,000 metric tonnes of Afghan exports to India. However, India has not hosted Taliban delegations, preferring to follow the lead of the Afghan government, in keeping with its stated position of supporting "an Afghan led, Afghan controlled and Afghan owned" peace process. The absence of a shared border and focus on using 'soft power' reflects the reality that India lacks the leverage to play 'spoiler', unlike Afghanistan's other neighbours.

At Bonn 1, India was invited because it had been a key supporter of the Northern Alliance, along with Russia and Iran. Today, India is being invited because it has acquired the distinction of a preferred development partner. This realisation is not lost on the Taliban either, who have been supportive of India's developmental role.

a Such as food assistance, school child feeding, and deploying medical teams.

b Some examples are the Zaranj-Delaram highway, the Pul e Khumri power transmission link to Kabul and sub-stations, Salma dam, and the parliament building.

c India provided both short-term and long-term courses in India and set up training centres in Afghanistan.

d The restoration was funded by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Conclusion

By the end of 2021, it is likely that US and NATO troops would have already left Afghanistan. It is also likely that if Russia, Pakistan and Iran exert influence on the Taliban to agree to a six-month extension, the incidence of violence would have come down for a brief interlude. A Transition Government is almost a certainty given the growing domestic and the international consensus that President Ghani should step down.

Given the wide divergences, however, the interim government might not last once the US leaves. Under the circumstances, the Taliban might not announce a Spring offensive for 2021; the signs for 2022 are more ominous. Indeed, in Afghanistan, things come together in different ways but fall apart according to the same script: the fragmentation of the regime in Kabul.¹¹

“There is consensus among Afghans for peace, but none on the price that they are willing to pay for it.”

A RUSSIAN VIEW

ALEXEY KUPRIYANOV
ALEXEY DAVYDOV

Introduction

Perhaps no other country in modern history has suffered as much as Afghanistan from an enduring, internal ethno-political and ideological confrontation that has had the overwhelming participation of foreign powers. Instability has been the default for this country for almost four decades.

The current conflict in Afghanistan was not caused by solely by the invasion of, first, the Soviet Union, or the United States; it will not end after the last of these interventions is over. The conflict will continue until the social

transition in Afghanistan is completed in one form or another—whether with the collapse of the state, the pacification of warring tribes and clans, and the creation of a new “social contract” based on a redefined balance of power. This country has tried different ways of modernization—Soviet socialist, Western liberal—but none of them has changed its deep social structures and the conglomerate type of Afghan statehood. But the diversity of Afghanistan never meant the divergence of the nation and of the united national identity which integrates Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras and other ethnic groups. This identity, together with informal social ties and institutions of the Afghan nation, continues to unite the country rather than any formal institution.

US President Joe Biden faces a tough choice. The 20-year military campaign in Afghanistan is one of the longest the US has ever had. Despite the great amounts of effort and funding, and after massive loss of human lives, the US and NATO allies have never gone close to winning the war. Countless Afghan people on different sides of this conflict have also died or have been injured. Today Washington faces a looming threat of losing control over the situation in the near-term, which could cause the conflict to spillover outside the so called “Af-Pak” region. Afghanistan may yet become another front of competition between the United States, on one hand, and other powers, such as China, and possibly Iran and to some extent Russia.

This raises a crucial question: What state of conflict will the world see in Afghanistan by the end of 2021? What forces and dynamics will shape the situation by that time and what is the likelihood of different outcomes — ‘very bad’, ‘bad’, or ‘suitable’? In order to portray such outcomes, this essay analyses local internal trends in Afghan society and the positions and interests of the stakeholders.

“The Afghanistan conflict will continue until the social transition is completed in one form or another: the collapse of the state, the pacification of warring tribes, or the creation of a new social contract.”

Domestic Afghan Trends and External Parties' Interests

Afghanistan faces serious domestic challenges that are not likely to be resolved even in the medium term. First, the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces are not competent enough to be an independent, self-sufficient force. This raises the possibility of losing the strategic initiative on the battlefield against rebel forces and terrorists. Second, despite the massive amounts of development aid given to the country, most Afghans remain poor.¹² The level of socio-economic development in the country remains one of the lowest in the world, creating fertile ground for anti-government forces to expand membership, and for the illicit drug market to thrive.¹³ The population of Afghanistan is very young (the average age is 17 years) and increasing – it counts about 39 million people now and grows by 1 million annually. Third, Afghan government institutions are not strong enough to provide long-term stability. They are susceptible to corruption, there is dominance of tribal traditions (for example, in the judicial system), local warlords continue to hold clout in many areas,¹⁴ and there are constant difficulties in paving the way for a peaceful and democratic transition of power.

All three trends impede the fulfillment of the US' strategy of a suitable withdrawal. Afghanistan has been occupying a significant place in the US foreign policy agenda over the last three presidencies of George W Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. These commanders-in-chief repeatedly fell into the same cycle of decisions. In their first term, they were eager to increase the capacity of the Afghan government and its security forces and together with its international partners gain control over the territory. This control gradually declined, leading to the loss of previously obtained strategic initiative. President Biden now faces fundamental challenges that complicate its attempts to achieve a desired end-state – overcoming the rebel forces, dismantling the terrorist safe havens, and maintaining the US' strategic influence in the region.

The previous Trump administration seemed to be eager to act decisively, presenting not an “exit”, but a “solution” strategy, focused on achieving a certain end-state, rather than an end-date. Trump failed to achieve that, and he also did not fulfil his agenda of destroying terrorist shelters within Pakistan territory. Even Trump's plans to intensify US cooperation with India (a regional supporter for limiting Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and an opponent of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) were mostly

directed by the Indo-Pacific strategy, rather than the desire for the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. Despite efforts of the White House to overcome the negative trends, Kabul is controlling less than half of Afghan territory. This increases the danger of further destabilisation in South Asia and Central Asia, and the risk for the US of losing political influence in the region.

The United States is interested in ending the Afghan war with the least possible political loss for itself. This implies certain guarantees of stability for a friendly Kabul regime that would require relatively little military and financial support, would preserve at least some of the formal institutional achievements (especially elections and protection of women and minority rights) for at least five years after the withdrawal of the US troops. More importantly, the US would like to have a regime that would be sympathetic to its strategic interests and could easily grant it access to the region.

India has maintained a trade and political relationship with Afghanistan for centuries and is perceived by the Afghan public as a friendly great power that does not threaten the interests of their country and able to provide assistance. So far, India has been involved in the Afghan conflict to a less extent. It provided limited assistance to the Northern Alliance during the Taliban rule. Despite all US attempts to get Indian troops in Afghanistan, New Delhi chose to be careful, limiting itself to providing humanitarian aid, building infrastructure, and training police officers. Today, India has no serious economic interests in Afghanistan. India has consistently supported the regime in Kabul for strategic reasons.

Should the Taliban, linked to the Pakistani Intelligence, come to power, Pakistan will receive the strategic depth it needs to calm its North-West frontier. It will allow Islamabad to focus its efforts on destabilising Kashmir and will deprive India of a potential ally. At the same time, it is important for Pakistan that these new potential Afghan elites take a tough stance against organisations like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and to work closely with the Pakistani army and special services. Based on these considerations, India is interested in the American presence in Afghanistan and in cooperation with any anti-Taliban forces.

Russia, for its part, has a long and uneasy history of relations with Kabul. The long and unsuccessful Afghan war gave rise to the so-called “Afghan syndrome” in Russia, which is expressed in the unwillingness to intervene in the events in Afghanistan in any form. To be sure, Russia is interested in a stable and strong Afghan state, which would adhere to a policy of consistent and friendly neutrality towards Russia. Russia does not need Afghanistan as a client state, since it does not have the ability to pay for its development; it is equally dangerous that Afghanistan remain in a state of chaos, as it will mean constant pressure on the southern borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and a hostile Afghanistan, which will also pose a threat. At the same time, in principle, Russia is rather indifferent to which foreign policy line the Afghan government will adhere to, as long as it is friendly-neutral towards Russia and its allies.

Moscow is more concerned on having good relations with all regional parties directly or indirectly involved in the conflict, since the loss of a fragile balance might lead to unforeseen consequences for

Central Asian allies. This is why Russia is interested in having good relations both with Islamabad, that has significant influence on the evolution of the conflict, and New Delhi, which is considered in Kremlin as a strategic ally, a potential key trade and investment partner, and a significant arms market. The paradigm about Russia's unilateral support of Pakistan that has been actively discussed in the US expert community might be a serious exaggeration of the realities. Both New Delhi and Moscow have developed a long partnership that was not affected even by the Cold War. They have mutual economic interests, and they share a strategic vision of a polycentric, non-confrontational world order.

On one hand, Russia perceives the American presence in Afghanistan negatively: it is of the view that the United States, under the guise of fighting terrorism, is trying to strengthen its influence in Eurasia and create a zone of potential destabilisation and power projection. On the other hand, Moscow realises that, at present, American forces in Afghanistan are keeping the country from slipping into uncontrollable chaos – this does not contradict Russia's security interests. This determines Russia's ambivalent attitude to the situation in Afghanistan. At the same time, Russia is critically interested in preventing destabilisation in Central Asia, as it could threaten Russian borders. Therefore, Russia also takes into account the interests of Central Asian countries, primarily Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Both states are interested, first, in preventing ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks from being persecuted in Afghanistan, and second – in preventing the export of extremist ideologies and practices from Afghan territory.

Therefore, both Russia and the US are interested in stabilising the situation in Afghanistan. The difference is that the US is focused more on the short-term, while Russia and India, on the longer-term. India's long-term goal is to have Afghanistan without Taliban domination. Thus, the less affected by the war in Afghanistan—India—has the narrowest corridor of acceptable options before it.

China's interests in Afghanistan are driven primarily by security considerations. Beijing needs no training camps for Uyghur militants on the territory of Afghanistan, and these militants would not penetrate into China through the Wakhan corridor. In order to prevent this infiltration, China is developing security cooperation with local authorities in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, and Chinese forces are present in these areas in small numbers. At the same time, China is interested in Afghanistan's natural resources, primarily copper. This requires a stable and independent regime in Kabul, which would not exist under direct American control. China is concerned about the presence of American troops in Afghanistan, which Beijing considers as its backyard.

Finally, Iran is interested in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, where the interests of the Shiite minority would be protected. Tehran will be satisfied with the coming to power of any moderate and friendly regime in Kabul, which will be sympathetic to Iran's interests in the areas where Shiites live and will not be under US control. The American presence in Afghanistan in connection with the tense relations between the US and Iran is viewed by Tehran as a threat.

Possible Outcomes

In the short term, it makes sense to consider three potential scenarios: the continuation of war, the end of war after the victory of the Taliban, and the end of war after the Taliban and Kabul forces come to an agreement.

a) *The continuation of war* is possible if the Kabul regime constantly receives financial and military support from the outside—from the United States, Russia, India or any other force or coalition. Moreover, this support guarantees only the retention of the front and tactical victories. If the external aid stops fueling the regime, Kabul will last anywhere from several months to five years. The scenario in which Kabul wins the war unilaterally seems unrealistic. It might be possible only if Pakistan withholds its support from the Taliban—which is highly unlikely, unless there occur structural geopolitical changes.

b) *A victory for the Taliban* is the least preferable for India, since it presents an opportunity for Pakistan to increase its influence in the region. For the United States, such outcome means a crucial political loss that not only could lead to a decline in its regional presence but has the potential to fuel internal political debates regarding foreign interventions.

For Russia, such option might look conditionally acceptable. To begin with, Moscow is interested in any stable government that could guarantee border control, neutrality towards Russia and its allies, and the possibility of implementing infrastructure projects. Although the Taliban might seem a suitable option for that mission, recent trends have shown the defragmentation of the Taliban movement. In this case, the overthrow of the Kabul government could lead only to a temporary increase of power of only one of the Taliban groups, which eventually could lead to a new round of war.

c) *A Taliban-Kabul agreement* is tactically most acceptable for all parties, but strategically might be dangerous. The long-term goals of the parties diverge: the US is focused on forging an agreement that would work at least for a short period of time, so that the withdrawal of American troops does not look like a second Vietnam. Although India and Russia have different goals, both are interested in making the agreement work for the foreseeable future. It is likely to expect a new round of great-power struggles as soon as any agreement is reached.

Recommendations

There is a small window for cooperation between the US, Russia, India and China, mainly on the security issues. All parties are willing to resolve the conflict and eliminate the terrorist threat, otherwise the risk of significant regional destabilisation will remain, and no strategically important integration processes can occur.

It is important to contribute to the elimination of terrorist safe havens in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. In that case, Russia and the US have common interests. Claims made by some US military officials that Russia is supplying the Taliban movement with weapons are doubtful (the Russian National Antiterrorism Committee categorises the Taliban as a terrorist organisation). Supporting it means fueling Afghan destabilisation, which could lead to the creation of “grey zones” – a fertile ground for terrorists and extremist organisations (like it happened in Iraq) not only in the “Af-Pak” region, but in the Central Asian member-states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Therefore, the best first step is to reinstate dialogue between Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia, the US, China and India a constant multilateral dialogue on how to bring political solution to the crisis and destroy the terrorist shelters. Maintaining an “antagonistic” mindset will only be counterproductive, and it is more likely that Russia will welcome the US to participate in multilateral negotiations (like the Moscow dialogue), rather than oppose it.

Negotiations between Russia and the US on Afghanistan might have as fruitful results as previous cooperation on the Syrian chemical weapons disarmament in 2013, and on the Iran Nuclear deal in 2015. Yet, even if these two states manage to break the vicious cycle of mistrust, conflicting interests of the US and China, and between India and Pakistan, are still the biggest obstacle towards peaceful negotiations. Yet despite the strategic rivalry, there is some ground for collaboration between the US and China in stabilising and developing Afghanistan: 1) fighting together against Islamist groups that operate in Afghanistan and could potentially assist disturbances in China’s Xinjiang province; 2)

sponsoring common infrastructure projects; and 3) assisting the political process of national reconciliation. Such cooperation could stumble upon Pakistan and India-related problems. The differences between China and the US on these issues will have a direct influence on the place Afghanistan would occupy in post-conflict Eurasian integration projects, which might undermine the negotiation process. At the same time, successful cooperation between the two great powers will help in finding mutual understanding on local issues and, possibly, make the confrontation between China and the United States less tense and dangerous.

The effectiveness of measures to resolve the conflict depends on the scale with which the regional players are ready to cooperate with one another. The more these actors take a unilateral approach, the more difficult it will be to find common ground on the Afghan crisis resolution. At the same time, it is necessary to avoid unnecessary illusions and understand that the conflict in Afghanistan will not end in the foreseeable future. What is required is either to wait until the end of the transformation processes in Afghanistan, or to make these processes controllable—this requires a comprehensive understanding of Afghanistan, the social groups inhabiting it and their interests, the willingness to sponsor the transformations and guarantee them by force if necessary.

“The effectiveness of measures to resolve the conflict depends on the scale with which the regional players are ready to cooperate with one another.”

A VIEW FROM THE U.S.

MICHAEL KUGELMAN

Many years ago, Winston Churchill famously referred to the Soviet Union as “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.”¹⁵ Today this could be an apt illustration for the future of Afghanistan. So much about the country’s direction is in flux or unknown, especially against the backdrop of a new and fragile peace process and a likely withdrawal of US forces.

Internal Factors and Their Implications

Three key factors inside Afghanistan will shape the country’s fate. One is the degree of unity within a political class rife with rivalry. Progress on a peace process will require these rivalries to be set aside, so that the government and other key political stakeholders can present a common front and agree on principles and guidelines for peace. Washington will apply pressure, including

the possibility of threatening aid reductions, to encourage this consensus.

Yet it might be folly to expect such unity. Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani’s political opponents, hoping to weaken his power, may unite among themselves; however, a union between them and Ghani’s camp is unlikely. Ghani could find himself in a double bind: On a collision course

with his political rivals, and under pressure from Washington to embrace a peace process—including a new interim government that likely excludes him—that could end his presidency and political career.

A second key factor is the performance of Afghanistan's military. There is no question that Afghan troops will continue to struggle against the Taliban; the question is how much. Should US troops remain in Afghanistan through the end of the year, an uneasy status quo will remain in place, with the Taliban continuing to gain influence and control in rural areas while Afghan forces retain control of the cities. However, Afghan security forces could also be disadvantaged by a US troops stayover. If American forces remain unilaterally—without Taliban approval of an extension beyond the May 1st withdrawal deadline stipulated in a 2020 US-Taliban agreement that ended hostilities between the two sides—there is a strong chance that the insurgents will declare war on US forces once again. This would distract the US military from its training and advising mission and complicate efforts to provide battlefield assistance to Afghan forces.

A departure of US forces, followed by the exit of other NATO troops, would put Afghan forces in a more perilous place. Denied the option of US

airpower, they would struggle to keep the Taliban from advancing into cities. However, the biggest risk to Afghan security forces is a cutoff of US financial assistance. The Afghan state is heavily dependent on such support, and would suffer heavy losses without it.

Accordingly, there is no realistic scenario under which Afghan forces will be stronger at year's end than they are now. They may hope for a ceasefire or a peace deal. The former is unlikely—and especially if US troops remain in Afghanistan. The latter is a virtual impossibility, given the slow pace of negotiations. A somewhat more realistic positive scenario for Afghan troops is that Washington negotiates with the Taliban for an extension of the withdrawal deadline, and American troops stay in place. Even under this scenario, however, the Taliban would continue to make crucial advances in rural spaces and push into city outskirts.

A third key internal factor is the Taliban's strategy. There are two decisions that the Taliban might take this year that will have a significant impact on the security and negotiating environments. One is how the insurgents respond to a US decision to remain beyond May 1st—an increasingly likely outcome, given two developments in March: President Joe Biden's acknowledgement that departing by that

date will be “tough”; and a report that he was considering staying until November.¹⁶ If the Taliban agrees to an extension, it will not re-declare war on the US. If it rejects an extension, it would likely do so—this could scuttle the peace process set in motion by the US-Taliban deal.

The second key Taliban decision this year relates to violence. If, even after pressure from Washington, Islamabad, other regional actors, and the UN—it refuses to scale down its violence, the environment for peace negotiations could become even more untenable. The Taliban

may feel pressure to give in to such a large global consensus in order to maintain the international legitimacy that it badly seeks.¹⁷ However, the Taliban will not easily give up violence—precisely because it is the group’s leverage.

The US hopes its new peace plan will lead to a reduction in violence. But the Taliban may well reject a plan that calls for free and fair elections and a new Afghan constitution guaranteeing full political, civil, and women’s rights. In sum, Afghanistan’s horrific violence is unlikely to have abated by year’s end.

“There is no realistic scenario under which Afghan forces will be stronger at year’s end than they are now.”

Key External Factors

There are three key sets of external forces shaping Afghanistan's future: The United States, Afghanistan's immediate neighbors, and other regional players.

America is the most consequential external actor influencing Afghanistan's future because of its contributions to the peace process, its military presence, and its financial assistance. The Biden administration has announced an all-hands-on-deck effort to advance a new peace plan. However, Washington has not indicated how long it will pursue this plan, and should it fail, what Plan B is.

While US forces will likely remain beyond May 1st, whether they stay to the end of the year—or beyond—is unclear. At least initially, its timeline for withdrawal will likely be tied to movement on the peace talks. So long as it believes that the peace plan is progressing, it will want to keep troops on the ground as leverage to pressure the Taliban to negotiate in good faith and make concessions. If the peace plan struggles or fails, the administration will eventually aim for a withdrawal and send the message that the US did its best to help launch a peace process, and now it is leaving it to the Afghan people to find a resolution. Given that the peace plan contains elements that both Kabul and the Taliban

disagree with, success will not come easy, if at all. This challenge, coupled with Biden's signaling that he is keen to depart, suggests that the presence of US troops will recede, if not be eliminated by year's end.

Of America's future diplomatic, military, and financial roles, the latter is easiest to predict. The administration, aware of how dependent the Afghan state is on US assistance, and especially at such a precarious time, will not turn off the aid spigot at year's end. It understands that while Afghanistan could likely survive a removal of US forces, a cutoff of assistance could cause state institutions, including the armed forces, to fall apart. However, Washington may still use aid as leverage with the Afghan government, and threaten to reduce it if Kabul is perceived to be obstructing the peace process.

Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, including Pakistan and Iran, are playing a double game in Afghanistan. Pakistan has close ties to the Taliban while pursuing workable relations with Kabul. Iran provides episodic military support to the Taliban—mainly to push back against Washington—while also pursuing ties with Kabul. However, Tehran's most important goal is safeguarding the interests of Afghanistan's Shia communities. It has also developed and nurtured Shia militias in Afghanistan that have fought in the Middle East.

Islamabad, for its part, has little reason to oppose a peace process that, if successful, would result in a political settlement that gives its Taliban ally a share of power. Iran, which seeks more stability in Afghanistan, will support it as well, though more so if a settlement features safeguards for Afghan Shias. However, if the peace process has collapsed by year's end, each country—anticipating more destabilisation—will move to secure its interests in Afghanistan through proxies there. At the same time, Islamabad and Tehran will fear the spillover effects (including more cross-border violence, an intensified drug trade, and larger refugee flows) that could ensue from an increasingly destabilised Afghanistan.

The Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan lack the leverage to shape developments in the region, but their concerns about terrorism and desires to pursue connectivity projects with Afghanistan underscore their interest in stability. They will be enthusiastic participants in any regional peace mechanism.

Then there are the regional powers—China, Russia, and India. Beijing and Moscow—like Tehran—have a paradoxical interest: More stability in Afghanistan, but a removal of the US troops that help stave off more instability. They each worry about terrorism threats and the drug trade. For Beijing, more stability would enable it to pursue its long-deferred goal of expanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into Afghanistan. If the peace process is still on by year's end, China and Russia will be supportive of regional reconciliation activities.

Of all the regional actors, India has the highest stakes, no matter the trajectory of future developments—and especially because the most likely endgame is a withdrawal of US forces that boosts the Taliban and, by extension, strengthens Pakistan. Washington wants to incorporate India into the regional peace mechanism, but a series of factors will complicate the latter's ability to play a substantive role. These include Pakistan's key role in the peace process, and an ever-tense India-Pakistan relationship (notwithstanding a modest thaw due to a recent border ceasefire). Additionally, India's relations with China, another key regional player and Indian rival, are more tense now than they have been in several decades. Furthermore, Moscow's receptivity to a Taliban role in a future Afghan government positions it closer to Islamabad than to its longtime friend New Delhi on a key Afghanistan policy issue.

Indeed, the absence of a substantive Indian role in the peace process is ironic, given that New Delhi has closer ties to Kabul than does any other regional actor. India's best chance of gaining a more influential role in the reconciliation process may lie in quietly exploring engagements with the Taliban. Some influential Indian political figures have started hinting indirectly on the reasonability of such a step.¹⁸

‘Least Bad’ Outcomes

What does this analysis suggest about Afghanistan at the end of 2021? First, grim political and security realities will remain entrenched: Politics will be fractious, Afghan forces will be struggling, and the Taliban will be strong. Second, Washington’s footprint will be poised to recede. Third, regional actors will support a peace process if one is in place, and if not they will move—in many cases at cross-purposes—to secure their interests in a country that could only become increasingly violent.

For the US, the least bad outcome at year’s end is for a peace process to still be alive; for some degree of negotiations to be taking place between the Afghan state and Taliban; for a regional dialogue to be happening, and for a violence reduction plan to still be on the table. This would give Washington confidence that the conditions it wants in place for a withdrawal—progress in peace talks and less violence—are not far from materialising. The Biden administration could then plan for its much-desired withdrawal.

The least bad outcome is by no means the most likely, however. If the US stays on beyond May 1st and the Taliban trashes its agreement with Washington, the Doha peace process would be done. And if Kabul and the Taliban reject the new US peace plan (see Annexure), Plan B would be dead as well. There is a real possibility that there will not be any active peace process by year’s end, thereby ruling out the conditions-based withdrawal sought by the Biden administration.

America’s least bad outcome would be problematic for India, given New Delhi’s concerns about a peace process hardwired to confer power on the Taliban (and by extension on Pakistan), and about a US withdrawal that could further destabilise Afghanistan and benefit the Taliban. However, for India, a political settlement where the Taliban shares power would presumably be preferable to a civil war or a Taliban takeover by force. America’s least bad outcome would be less problematic for Russia, as it would entail a US troop departure. Still, that very departure could, in the absence of a peace deal, hasten the increased destabilisation feared by Moscow.

India's least bad outcome would involve US troops extending their presence in Afghanistan for a substantive period—but this is unlikely due to the Biden administration's clear desire to leave sooner rather than later. India's least bad outcome would also involve assurances that its Afghan political allies have prominent roles in the next government.

It is difficult to identify a least bad outcome for Afghanistan by the end of the year. Continued conflict and violence are all but certain, and Washington's least bad outcome would not stop it. The best option is the existence of some type of peace process that holds out hope, at the least, for a truce or reduction in violence—and a peace process that gives Afghan society (especially the women), and not just the Afghan political elite and external powers, an opportunity to help shape it.

“By the end of 2021, politics will remain fractious, Afghan forces will be struggling, and the Taliban will still be strong.”

Recommendations

There is potential for US-India-Russia cooperation on Afghanistan, but it will prove difficult—and not just because of worsening US-Russia tensions. In fact, Washington’s participation in an Afghanistan conference in Moscow in March suggests a US willingness to decouple its Afghanistan diplomacy from its broader tensions with Russia.

All three countries share interests in Afghanistan, especially more stability and less terrorism. But while they agree on the ends, they do not always agree on the means. India is less supportive than the US and Russia of a political settlement that ends the war but gives power to the Taliban. Additionally, the US, at least so long as it seeks Pakistani assistance in a peace process, is not likely—as India would prefer—to tighten the screws on Pakistan^e in order to compel it to crack down against the Haqqani network and other Afghanistan-focused terror groups on its soil. Still, the trifecta can establish a dialogue or working group, possibly in collaboration with Kabul, that discusses how best to address the terrorism threat and (if there is sufficient trust

between the Americans and Russians) provides a forum for intelligence-sharing about the nature of terrorist threats in Afghanistan.

Other topics for collaboration could include counternarcotics, connectivity projects, and public health (focused on combating coronavirus, polio, and malnutrition, among other challenges). To maximise the chances of success, these conversations should be blessed by the three governments but driven by and comprising private experts from academia, think tanks, and the private sector.

The American military endgame is approaching in Afghanistan. There is a good chance that US troops will be gone by the end of the year. But an end to the US military footprint only amplifies the importance of working diplomatically with like-minded nations—friends and foes alike—to tackle challenges that will endure, if not intensify, after the last American soldier has left Afghanistan.

^e Through sanctioning military and intelligence officials and taking steps to designate the country as a state sponsor of terrorism.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that our countries have a shared interest in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, where all Afghan people co-exist and are able to work together towards their social and economic betterment.

This leads us to make the following recommendations:

1. Establish a Track II dialogue on Afghanistan involving our three organisations (IMEMO, ORF and Wilson Centre) but inclusive in character and open to engaging with experts from think tanks in other concerned countries, and Afghanistan, to share views and assessments on the unfolding situation in Afghanistan.
2. Establish a Track I dialogue mechanism, involving senior officials of our three countries to hold discussions on areas of mutual interest. At present, we believe that these could include, inter alia, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, and building humanitarian disaster responses in view of Afghanistan's vulnerabilities. This is not an exclusive list but only suggestive, for the present.
3. Establish an open-ended Track 1.5 dialogue mechanism in a spirit of transparency involving not just officials from our three countries but also academics, business and civil society leaders to generate further ideas and identify issues of shared interest.

*Michael Kugelman
Wilson Centre (USA)*

*Alexey Kupriyanov & Alexey Davydov
IMEMO (Russia)*

*Rakesh Sood
ORF (India)*

Annexure

Annex 1. US Secretary of State Antony J Blinken's Letter to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani^f

THE SECRETARY OF STATE
WASHINGTON

His Excellency
Ashraf Ghani
President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Kabul

Dear Mr. President:

I hope this letter finds you well. I will be sending a similar message to Chairman Abdullah.

I have appreciated the opportunity to speak with you and to consult regarding the United States' review of its strategy in Afghanistan. Your and your team's perspectives have added value to our deliberations.

I am writing today to provide you with an update on where we stand, the immediate road ahead, and the urgent leadership that President Biden and I ask of you in the coming weeks. Although we have not yet completed our review of the way ahead, we have reached an initial conclusion that the best way to advance our shared interests is to do all we can to accelerate peace talks and to bring all parties into compliance with their commitments.

To move matters more fundamentally and quickly toward a settlement and a permanent and comprehensive cease-fire, we are immediately pursuing a highlevel diplomatic effort with the parties and with regional countries and the United Nations. This effort will include several elements:

First, we intend to ask the United Nations to convene Foreign Ministers and envoys from Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the United States to discuss a unified approach to supporting

^f Lyse Doucet (@bbclysedoucet), "We are immediately pursuing a high-level diplomatic effort," Twitter, March 7, 2021, <https://twitter.com/bbclysedoucet/status/1368545539642494979>

peace in Afghanistan. It is my belief that these countries share an abiding common interest in a stable Afghanistan and must work together if we are to succeed.

Second, I have asked Ambassador Khalilzad, whose vital work President Biden and I asked that he continue, to prepare and to share with you as well as with Taliban leaders written proposals aimed at accelerating discussions on a negotiated settlement and ceasefire. These proposals reflect some of the ideas included in the roadmap for the peace process that Ambassador Mohib shared with Ambassador Wilson. In sharing these documents, we do not intend to dictate terms to the parties. Rather, the documents will enable the Islamic Republic and the Taliban to move urgently to the tasks of developing a) the foundational principles that will guide Afghanistan's future constitutional and governing arrangements, b) a roadmap to a new, inclusive government; and c) the terms of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. I urge you to develop constructive positions on these written proposals to discuss with Ambassador Khalilzad.

Third, we will ask the government of Turkey to host a senior-level meeting of both sides in the coming weeks to finalize a peace agreement. I urge you or your authoritative designees to join other representatives of the Islamic Republic in this meeting.

Fourth, we share your view that every effort must be made to reduce the high levels of violence in Afghanistan, which are exacting an unacceptable toll on the Afghan people and deeply undermining efforts to achieve peace. We have prepared a revised proposal for a 90-day Reduction-in-Violence, which is intended to prevent a Spring Offensive by the Taliban and to coincide with our diplomatic efforts to support a political settlement between the parties. I urge you to positively consider the proposal, which Ambassador Khalilzad will share with you.

Unity and inclusivity on the Islamic Republic side are, I believe, essential for the difficult work that lies ahead. As you and your countrymen know all too well, disunity on the part of Afghan leaders proved disastrous in the early 1990s and must not be allowed to sabotage the opportunity before us. Your work together with Chairman Abdullah and your engagements with former President Karzai and Professor Sayyaf show promise toward building a more united Afghan front for peace. I ask that you work together to further broaden this consultative group of four such that Afghans regard it as inclusive and credible; to build consensus on specific goals and objectives for a negotiation with the Taliban about governance, power-sharing, and essential supporting principles; and to agree on overall tactics and public messaging that will demonstrate unity of effort and purpose. We will strongly support all efforts taken to make this united front work.

I must also make clear to you, Mr. President, that as our policy process continues in Washington, the United States has not ruled out any option. We are considering the full withdrawal of our forces by May 1st, as we consider other options. Even with the continuation of financial assistance from the United States to your forces after an American military withdrawal, I am concerned that the security situation will worsen and that the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains. I am making this clear to you so that you understand the urgency of my tone regarding the collective work outlined in this letter.

I look forward to continuing to work with you as a partner.

Sincerely,
Antony J. Blinken

Annex 2. Afghanistan Peace Agreement^g

The following discussion draft of a peace agreement is intended to jumpstart Afghanistan Peace Negotiations between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban. It sets forth principles for governance, security, and rule of law and presents options for power sharing that could help the two sides reach a political settlement that ends the war. The draft reflects a variety of ideas and priorities of Afghans on both sides of the conflict and is intended to focus the negotiators on some of the most fundamental issues they will need to address. Ultimately, the two sides will determine their own political future and the contours of any political settlement.

AFGHANISTAN PEACE AGREEMENT

The following Peace Agreement between the two sides to Afghanistan Peace Negotiations is made in three parts. First are agreed guiding principles for Afghanistan's Constitution and the future of the Afghan State. Second are agreed terms for governing the country during a transitional period of no more than [xx] months and a roadmap for making Constitutional changes and addressing security and governance matters critical to a durable and just settlement. Third are agreed terms for a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and its implementation

Part One:

Guiding Principles for Afghanistan's Future

The two sides agree on the following principles to guide the outcome of their talks and to serve as the basis of a new Constitution and of the Afghan State:

1. Afghanistan's official religion will be the holy religion of Islam. A new High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence shall be established to provide Islamic guidance and advice to all national and local government structures.
2. The ability of all Afghans to live peacefully will be paramount. Afghanistan will be a safe home for all of its ethnic groups, tribes, and religious sects. The safe, dignified, and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons will be prioritized.

^g "Afghanistan Peace Agreement," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2021, <https://context-cdn.washingtonpost.com/notes/prod/default/documents/728eb610-1dfb-4bca-afea-29d3f3409989/note/be16998f-f523-4679-9370-41ddee4cc8dc.#page=1>

3. The dignity, life, and property of all Afghans, as well as the protection of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights – including the rights to free speech and to choose their political leaders – will be respected and enshrined in the future Afghan Constitution. The future Afghan state will respect and uphold the will of the people, Islamic values, social and political justice, national unity, and the sovereignty and integrity of Afghanistan’s territory.
4. The future Constitution will guarantee the protection of women’s rights, and the rights of children, in political, social, economic, educational, and cultural affairs.
5. Afghanistan’s national entities and other public bodies – including educational and security institutions – will be recognized and strengthened as national assets that belong to and benefit all Afghans. This includes providing for the security of, and support to, public infrastructure, including schools, madrassas, hospitals, markets, dams, and other public offices.
6. The future Afghan state will honor and support all victims of the past 42 years of conflict, especially the wounded, orphans, widowed, and disabled. A national policy of transitional justice will be developed that focuses on truth-seeking, reconciliation, healing and forgiveness in accordance with applicable Afghan and international law.
7. Afghanistan will seek commitments from the international community to support and assist in the rebuilding and reconstruction of the country.
8. Afghanistan will have a non-aligned foreign policy and will seek friendly relations with all countries and the international community. Afghanistan will adhere to international law, including treaties to which it is a party. No one will be allowed to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of Afghanistan’s neighbors or any other country. Afghanistan will insist that all countries not interfere in its internal affairs.
9. The 2004 Constitution will be the initial template from which the future Constitution will be prepared.
10. The future Constitution will provide for free and fair elections for Afghanistan’s national political leadership in which all Afghan citizens have a right to participate. Ultimate authority to take decisions of paramount national importance will rest with the country’s elected government officials.
11. The future Constitution will set forth the structure of government and the balance of power

among the different branches of national government and between the national and local levels of government.

12. Ultimate authority to resolve constitutional and other legal disputes – including over the interpretation of Islamic law – shall rest with the independent judiciary. The High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence shall have a role in advising the judiciary.
13. Afghanistan will adhere to the highest standards of accountability and transparency and shall take all necessary steps to fight corruption and to counter the scourge of illicit narcotics.
14. The future Constitution will establish a singular, unified and sovereign Afghan state under a single national government, with no parallel governments or parallel security forces.

Part Two: Transitional Peace Government and Political Roadmap

I. General Provisions

- A. A transitional Peace Government of Afghanistan shall be established as of the date of this Agreement. The Peace Government shall exist until it transfers power to a permanent Government following the adoption of a new Constitution and national elections. This transfer of power shall occur no later than [xx] months from the date of this Agreement.
- B. The Peace Government shall include the following separate and co-equal governing branches: (1) an Executive Administration; (2) a National Shura; and (3) a Judiciary with a Supreme Court and lower courts. It shall also include a High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence and a Commission to Prepare a New Constitution.
- C. All appointments to the Peace Government shall be made according to the principle of equity between the two Parties to this Agreement, with special consideration for the meaningful inclusion of women and members of all ethnic groups throughout government institutions.
- D. The following legal framework shall be applicable throughout Afghanistan until the adoption of new Constitution: (1) Afghanistan`s current Constitution, to the extent its provisions are not inconsistent with this Agreement; and (2) Afghanistan`s existing laws, decrees and regulations – provided that the Peace Government shall have the power to amend or repeal such laws, decrees and regulations – or any new laws, decrees and regulations adopted by the Peace Government, to

the extent they are not inconsistent with (a) this Agreement, (b) Afghanistan's international legal obligations or (c) applicable Constitutional provisions.

- E. Subject to Afghanistan's international legal obligations, members of the Parties, including their forces, will not be prosecuted for treason or other political crimes, as defined by the two Parties, during the tenure of the Peace Government in order to promote national reconciliation.
- F. The Peace Government shall represent Afghanistan in its external relations, including at the United Nations and other international institutions and conferences.

II. The Executive Administration

- A. Governance. The Executive Administration of the Peace Government shall be entrusted with the day-to-day conduct of the affairs of the State and its President shall have the right to issue decrees and orders for the peace, stability, and good governance of Afghanistan.

- B. Composition.

Option (1): The Executive Administration shall consist of a President, [xx] Vice- Presidents, cabinet ministries, independent directorates, and other bodies.

Option (2): The Executive Administration shall consist of a President, a Prime Minister, [xx] Vice- Presidents, [yy] Deputy Prime Ministers, cabinet ministries, heads of independent directorates, and other bodies.

***Note: This document sets forth a roadmap pursuant to Option (1) above. If the Parties choose Option (2), this document will need modifications to set forth the respective authorities of the President and Prime Minister.*

The President and Vice Presidents [and cabinet] are named in Annex A, were selected based on agreement between the two Parties and are acceptable to both sides. The President [and Vice Presidents] shall only serve during the tenure of the Peace Government and shall be precluded from serving at any point in the future as Head of State or Head of Government in Afghanistan. The President and Vice Presidents may only be removed according to procedures in the current Constitution.

- C. Security. The President serves as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Under the President's authority, the Executive Administration will be responsible for internal and external security in

Afghanistan and shall exercise command and control over all units of the armed forces. The President will establish a Joint Military & Police Board, which will include representatives from both Parties to this Agreement, to make necessary adjustments to the chain of command structure and propose other security sector reforms, including policies on integration of forces.

- D. Foreign Relations. The President shall lead Afghanistan's foreign relations. The Peace Government commits (i) to a policy of non-alignment and non-interference in the affairs of other countries, (ii) not to host terrorists nor to permit any terrorist-related activity on its soil that poses a threat to any other country, (iii) to seek positive relations with the international community to help with Afghanistan's reconstruction, and (iv) to increase cross-border trade and investment.
- E. Joint Committees. Within [xx days] of this Agreement taking effect, the Executive Administration will establish Joint Committees, with equitable representation of the two Parties to this Agreement, to develop national policies on other issues critical for peace, including (i) transitional justice, with an emphasis on the rights of victims on both sides, truth and reconciliation; (ii) rehabilitation, livelihoods and reintegration of former combatants; (iii) economic development; (iv) counter-narcotics; (v) refugees and displaced persons; (vi) traditional dispute resolution; and (vii) any other issues as deemed necessary.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission established pursuant to the current Constitution shall remain intact and will be expanded to include [Taliban representation] [x members appointed by the Taliban].

III. The National Parliament

Option (1): A bicameral National Shura shall be composed of: (1) a [xxx]-member lower house, including the 250 members of the current Wolesi Jirga and [xx]

additional members to be named by the Taliban; and (2) a [xxx] member Senate, including (i) 34 Senators representing each of the respective provincial councils; (ii) [xx] Senators chosen by the Islamic Republic side; and (iii) [xx] Senators chosen by the Taliban. New members of Parliament shall be named within [xx] days of this Agreement taking effect. Authorities for the National Shura include those powers enumerated for Parliament in the current Constitution. It shall follow existing Parliamentary rules. Parliamentary decisions of paramount national interest, as defined by the Parties, need approval of [xx%] of the Wolesi Jirga members and [yy%] of the Senators. This Parliament's term shall expire at the end of the Peace Government's term and

following elections for a new legislature.

Option (2): Parliament shall be suspended during the tenure of the Peace Government with legislative authority transferred to the Executive Administration. Members of Parliament shall retain their respective benefits, rights and immunities during the period of suspension.

IV. The Judiciary

The judiciary of Afghanistan shall be independent and comprised of a [xx]-member Supreme Court and other appellate and lower courts established by law. Each side shall name [yy] members of the Supreme Court, with the President naming the final member. Its members are listed in Annex B. It shall include independent religious and contemporary legal scholars. Its rules of procedure shall be set internally. Supreme authority to interpret the current Constitution, the provisions of this Agreement and other existing laws of Afghanistan, and to issue final, binding decisions in Constitutional and other legal disputes, including disputes related to Islamic law, rests with the judiciary. The Independent Commission for Oversight of the Implementation of the Constitution, established under the current Constitution, will serve in an advisory capacity to the Supreme Court.

Non-State, customary and traditional resolution of civil disputes shall be permissible and promoted so long as consistent with Afghan State law, including its protections for women's rights and other individual rights as well as applicable international laws. The State has exclusive jurisdiction over criminal matters.

IV. The High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence

A fifteen-member High Council of Islamic Jurisprudence (the "Islamic Council") shall be established within [xx] days of this Agreement, to provide Islamic guidance on social, cultural, and other contemporary issues. Each side shall name seven members of the Islamic Council, with the President naming the fifteenth. It shall also review all draft laws, decrees and regulations prior to adoption to ensure compliance with the beliefs and provisions of Islam. In cases where the Islamic Council and the Supreme Court disagree on Islamic law, a joint reconciliation session shall convene. If a resolution is not reached, the Supreme Court's position is final and binding.

VI. State Leadership Council

A State Leadership Council consisting of the President, the Vice Presidents, the Speakers of Parliament,

the Chief Justice and the head of the Islamic Council, along with [xx] other influential figures to be chosen by the President [with the unanimous concurrence of the Vice Presidents], shall meet on matters of national importance to provide guidance and advice to the Peace Government.

VII. Sub-National Government Structures

A. Executive Administration. The President shall appoint all Provincial Governors and other heads of provincial offices [from lists of candidates provided by the Provincial Councils]. [The President will also] [Provincial governors will] appoint mayors, district governors and other heads of district offices [throughout the country] [in their respective provinces].

B. Provincial Councils.

Option (1): Provincial Council membership shall be expanded by [xx%], with the Taliban appointing the new members, in the following provinces: [xxxxxxxx]. New members shall be chosen with special consideration for women and representative balance across demographic groups in each respective province.

Option (2): Provincial Councils shall be suspended pending adoption of a new Constitution, and their authorities shall be transferred to the respective provincial governors. Its members shall retain their respective benefits, rights and immunities during the period of suspension.

VIII. The New Constitution

A [21]-member Commission for the Preparation of a New Constitution will be established within 30 days of this Agreement taking effect, with [10] members named by each Party to this Agreement and the President naming the [21st] member. Members of the Constitutional Commission will include both Islamic and contemporary legal experts. This Commission will prepare a draft Constitution after widespread consultation and present a final draft to a national Loya Jirga (“LJ”) for final debate and ratification within [xx] months. The composition of the LJ will be set by the Constitutional Commission in consultation with the Executive Administration and National Shura. The new Constitution will be consistent with the guiding principles agreed in Part One of this Agreement.

IX. Elections

All elections to be held pursuant to the current Constitution are cancelled during the tenure of the Peace Government. [An Afghan election commission will be established to administer] [An international

election management body will be invited to administer] free and fair national elections following the ratification of a new Constitution. These elections will be held pursuant to the new Constitution, other applicable laws and procedures, and in accordance with the guiding principles agreed in Part One of this Agreement.

Part Three:

Permanent and Comprehensive Ceasefire

I. Ceasefire Terms

- A. Each side shall immediately announce and implement [within xx hours] an end to all military and offensive operations and hostile activities against the other. Neither party shall, under any circumstance, proactively attack individuals or units associated with the other. If either party takes action against the other in perceived self-defense, it shall immediately seek to deescalate and report the action to the Ceasefire Commission. The Peace Government agrees to counter any armed opposition to implementation of this Agreement and to take any other necessary steps to prevent a resumption of hostilities between the two sides.
- B. Other forbidden provocations short of violence shall include: (a) massing of forces not authorized by the Executive Administration, (b) setting up of similarly unauthorized checkpoints, (c) abuses or harassments of local populations, (d) the denial of citizens' freedom of movement, (e) the planting of landmines or other dangers to civilians, (f) unnecessary patrols, (g) threats of force or (h) other actions reasonably deemed a threat by the other side to the peace and security of Afghanistan.
- C. The Taliban agree to remove their military structures and offices from neighboring countries, and they agree to end military relations with foreign countries. Also, the Taliban commit that they will not expand their force configurations nor recruit new fighters.
- D. Both sides agree to cooperate with relevant officials of the Peace Government, including the Joint Military and Police Board established by the President, on the successful implementation of the ceasefire and related security sector reforms, including the integration of forces.

II. Ceasefire Monitoring & Implementation

- A. A Joint Ceasefire Monitoring and Implementation Commission (the "Ceasefire Commission") shall be immediately established to monitor the ceasefire and investigate disputes, incidents or

alleged violations. The Ceasefire Commission will be made up of 9 members, 4 appointed by each side and the 9th by the President. It shall also include 3 independent international observers named by [the United Nations] whose role shall be advisory. Its members are listed in Annex C.

- B. On the day of this Agreement, the Ceasefire Commission shall announce a set of written guidelines and a Code of Conduct for implementing the ceasefire to take immediate effect. The Ceasefire Commission shall establish and oversee 8 regional and 34 provincial fusion cells, as well as district-level fusion cells as deemed necessary by the Ceasefire Commission. All such cells shall coordinate with local independent Afghan entities, including religious, tribal and other civil society groups, to assist with ceasefire monitoring and implementation.
- C. In addition to the three international observers on the national Ceasefire Commission, the Peace Government invites an international monitoring mission under the auspices of [xxxxxxxxxxxx] to be organized at regional levels to help oversee ceasefire implementation.
- D. If the national Ceasefire Commission, the regional or local fusion cells or the international monitoring mission identify violations of the ceasefire, they shall attempt to deescalate such incidents quickly and professionally by communicating with the forces involved and their chains of command. They shall seek non-punitive remedies where possible, such as reassigning problematic units or commanders, or recommending compensation or other amends to the victims of the incidents. When necessary, such incidents shall be referred to relevant Executive Administration or judicial actors for remedial action and domestic enforcement.

Annex A. Members of the Executive Administration

President:

Vice Presidents:

Cabinet Members:

Other:

Annex B. Members of the Supreme Court

[xx] Members:

Annex C. Members of the Ceasefire Monitoring and Implementation Commission

[xx] Members:

Endnotes

1. Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (Simon and Schuster, 2010) provides a detailed account of the debates leading to the 'surge' decision. Mark Landler, "The Afghan War and the Evolution of Obama," *New York Times*, January 1, 2017 provides an overview of how Obama saw his dilemmas when he was demitting office - <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/01/world/asia/obama-afghanistan-war.html>
2. Donald Trump, South Asia Policy Speech (Fort Myer, August 21, 2017), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/full-texts-of-donald-trumps-speech-on-south-asia-policy/article19538424.ece>
3. Rakesh Sood, ORF Commentary, "Seeking a Managed Exit", September 24, 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/44444-seeking-a-managed-exit/>
4. Rakesh Sood, ORF Commentary, "Sum and Substance of the Afghan Deal," March 5, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-sum-and-substance-of-the-afghan-deal-61950/>
5. David Herszenhorn, "NATO delays decision on Afghanistan withdrawal," *Politico*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-jens-stoltenberg-delays-decision-afghanistan-withdrawal/>
6. President Biden, ABC interview transcript (ABC News, March 16, 2021), <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-abc-interview-transcript-march-17>
7. Ken Hughes, History News Network, "Nixon's "Decent Interval: Vietnam strategy should give pause to Obama" , July 12, 2014, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/140712>
8. Jon Basil Utley, "Mattis on our way of war," *The American Conservative*, December 6, 2016, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/mattis-on-our-way-of-war/>
9. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's Letter to President Ghani; text was leaked in early March. <https://tolonews.com/pdf/02.pdf>
10. US Draft Peace Plan, February 29, 2020. The text was leaked a week later. <https://tolonews.com/pdf/pdf.pdf>
11. With a deferential nod to Leo Tolstoy for his memorable opening line of Anna Karenina – All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.
12. Poverty Data: Afghanistan. Asian Development Bank. URL: <https://www.adb.org/countries/afghanistan/poverty> (accessed 06.04.2021).
13. Buddenberg D., Byrd W. Afghanistan's Drug Industry. Structure, Functioning, Dynamics, and Implications for Counter-Narcotics Policy. The UNOGC, The World Bank. – 214 p. URL: [http://fileserv.idpc.net/library/UNODC_RP_DrugsAfghanistan_EN%20\(1\).pdf](http://fileserv.idpc.net/library/UNODC_RP_DrugsAfghanistan_EN%20(1).pdf) (accessed 06.04.2021).

14. Terpstra N. Rebel governance, rebel legitimacy, and external intervention: assessing three phases of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 31, 2020, Issue 6. PP. 1143-1173.
15. Alan Cowell, "Churchill's Definition of Russia Still Rings True," *New York Times*, August 1, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/01/world/europe/01iht-letter.1.14939466.html>.
16. "Biden Calls Afghanistan Withdrawal Deadline of May 1 'Tough,'" Associated Press, March 17, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-afghanistan-george-stephanopoulos-taliban-f5f41f84cbdfb1871e32f43d58bcbd85> and Carol E. Lee and Dan DeLuce, "Biden Weighs Keeping U.S. Troops in Afghanistan Until November," NBC News, March 18, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/biden-weighs-keeping-u-s-troops-afghanistan-until-november-n1261433>.
17. Barnett Rubin, "How to Bargain with the Taliban," *War on the Rocks*, February 19, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/how-to-bargain-with-the-taliban/>.
18. Ram Madhav, "Approach With Caution: Cleaning the Afghan Mess," *Indian Express*, March 15, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/afghanistan-peace-talks-us-india-ashraf-ghani-7228468/>.

Dr. Alexey Davydov is Research Fellow at the Regional Relations Study Group of IMEMO RAS.

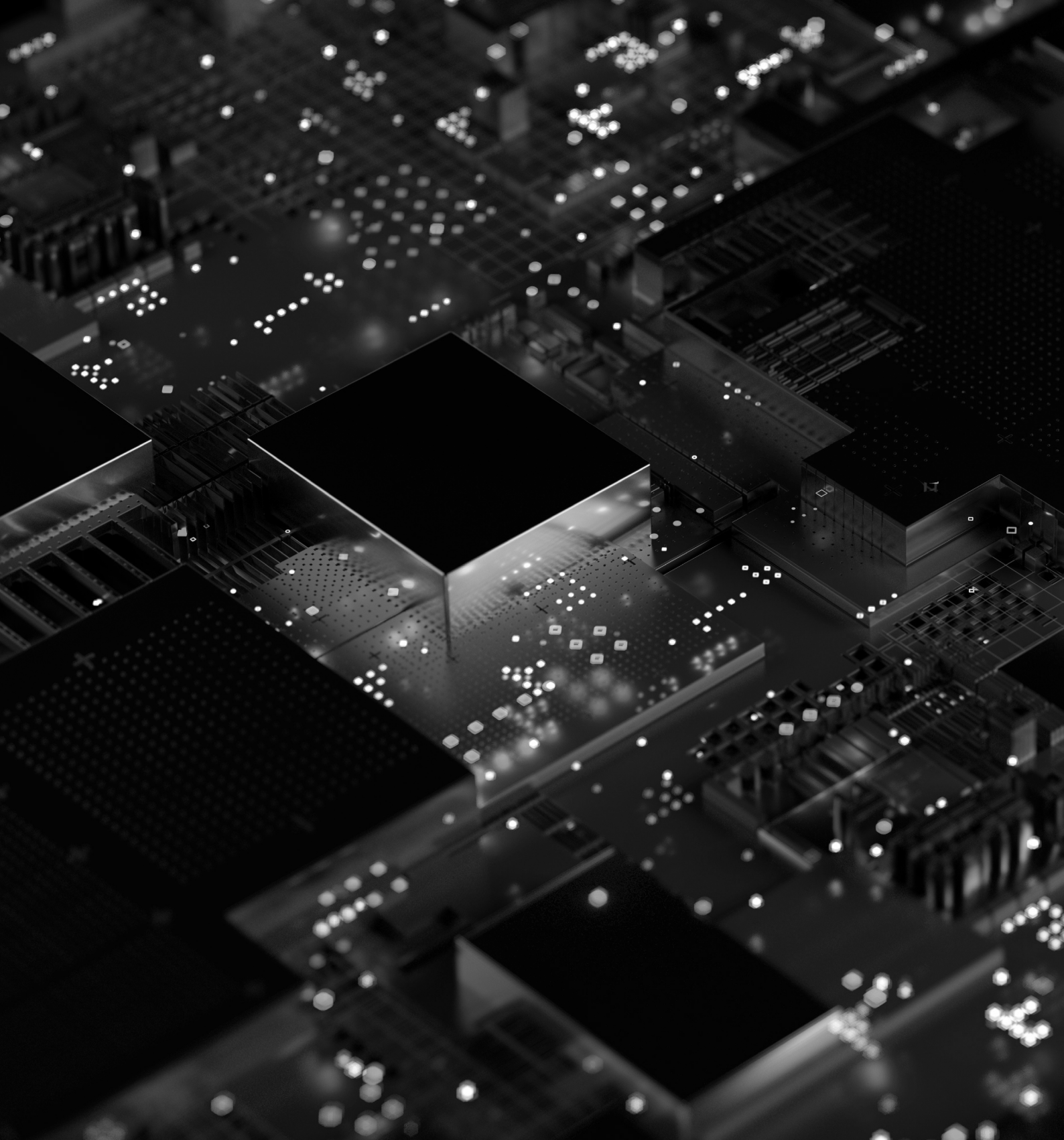
Mr. Michael Kugelman is Deputy Director of the Asia Program and Senior Associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center.

Dr. Alexey Kupriyanov is Head of the Group on South Asia and Indian Ocean of the Center for Asia Pacific Studies, Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO RAS).

Ambassador Rakesh Sood is Distinguished Fellow at ORF

Cover image: Getty Images/Wakil Kohsar

Back cover image: Getty Images/Andriy Onufriyenko



OBSERVER
RESEARCH
FOUNDATION

Ideas . Forums . Leadership . Impact

20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph.: +91-11-35332000. Fax: +91-11-35332005
www.orfonline.org



**Wilson
Center**

One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027
www.wilsoncenter.org/



23, Profsoyuznaya Str.
Moscow, 117997
Russian Federation
www.imemo.ru/en/