

The Taliban's Battle Plan

And Why It's Unlikely to Succeed

By *Michael Semple*

Zalmay Khalilzad, the United States' envoy for Afghan reconciliation, has breathed new life into attempts to conduct peace talks between the Afghan government and the [Taliban](#). Having met with Taliban representatives in Qatar and lobbied leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Khalilzad now says he is "[cautiously optimistic](#)" about reaching a peace deal by April of next year.

Yet as far as Taliban leaders are concerned, the group has little reason to commit to a peace process: it is on a winning streak. The Taliban control key Afghan highways and are conducting targeted assassinations across the country. They have made important territorial gains and now have complete or partial control over some 250 of about 400 districts.

These gains are not sufficient to pose an existential threat to an Afghan government with U.S. backing, but they have emboldened the Taliban to keep fighting, in the hope of eventually eroding U.S. resolve. Even if Khalilzad manages to bring the Taliban to the table, don't expect his efforts to produce a lasting peace anytime soon.

SO MUCH WINNING

On the surface, the balance of power in Afghanistan appears to be shifting in the Taliban's favor, especially since their annual spring offensive began in April. The insurgents billed the military operation—which they named "Al Khandaq," after a historic battle fought by the Prophet Muhammad—as a campaign to "crush, kill, and capture" invading U.S. forces and their allies while avoiding harm to civilians. They dismissed the Afghan government as a corrupt U.S. stooge and, in a bizarre twist, claimed that enemy-controlled areas hosted "secret centers for obscenity." For all that, the Taliban reiterated their "policy of peaceful negotiation," with the proviso, of course, that the United States was deliberately "sabotaging all chances of peace" by keeping its forces in the country.

As far as Taliban leaders are concerned, the Al Khandaq military campaign has been a smashing success. Government security forces had promised a major push of their own for 2018, but the insurgents felt they kept the government on the defensive all year. Across the country, Taliban forces have pushed into rural areas. They have made inroads into the country's central and northern provinces, once firmly under government control. In November, they even made a sally into Shiite-populated districts of Ghazni, an anti-Taliban stronghold south of Kabul, provoking panic and demonstrations in the capital.

In marked contrast to what they announced in April, the Taliban have not prioritized attacking U.S. forces. Instead, they have targeted the so-called *arbakai*—local militias

assigned to protect pro-government rural areas. Across Afghanistan's northern provinces, the Taliban measure their progress in the hundreds of these militiamen that they have killed, forced into surrender, or pushed back into bigger towns.

The insurgents themselves mostly steer clear of urban areas. Taking towns is costly, and success is often short-lived. Instead of capturing cities, the Taliban flex their muscles on the highways that link them. The ring road that connects Kabul to Kandahar in the south and Herat in the west, for instance, bristles with impromptu Taliban check posts, where the insurgents conduct identity checks and arrest or execute anyone they dub a government collaborator.

The Taliban have worked on their storming tactics for taking isolated government security posts—and rejoice in the fact that many of the outposts have been abandoned anyway. Meanwhile, assassination squads are busy picking off government officials, pro-regime clerics, and tribal or political figures. In October, the group claimed its most prized scalp in the person of General Abdul Raziq, a high-ranking police chief in Kandahar. In all of this, the Taliban have benefited from increasingly advanced weapons and know-how—including, allegedly, night-vision equipment and newly trained snipers.

A propaganda machine runs around the clock to spread word of these achievements, primarily among the group's own activists and supporters. Taliban commanders have fallen in love with messenger apps, which provide a daily stream of multimedia content boasting of victory after victory. Using these apps comes at a considerable risk, because smartphones can alert U.S. drones to their targets' location. Still, it seems as if every captured or killed enemy soldier must be filmed and the video disseminated to boost morale through the Taliban ranks.

PLANNING FOR PEACE

Nominally, the Taliban are led by the group's supreme leader, Sheik Haibatullah. But the leader is in hiding and conducts few meetings, making him more a convenient figurehead than an active commander. In practice, power rests with Haibatullah's two deputies, Mawlvi sYaqoob and Khalifa Haqqani, who lead an unofficial committee of around one dozen Taliban heavyweights dispersed around Afghanistan and Pakistan. Decisions are reached collectively—with due weight given to the interests of the military wing, which holds the most power—and passed down to other commanders. The Taliban also operate a Political Commission, which is often in the headlines because it is based in Qatar and acts as the group's international representative. But the men in the Political Commission are effectively diplomats who take their orders from the leadership collective.

That collective has decided that the Taliban's battlefield strength warrants an ambitious political agenda focused entirely on a single goal: U.S. withdrawal. Absent this withdrawal, Taliban leaders refuse negotiations with the Afghan government, which they see as a U.S. puppet lacking authority over the issues in dispute.

To this end, the group is trying to erode support for the Afghan government by reaching out to powerful Soviet-era jihadists, such as Ismail Khan and Atta Nur, inviting them to cut deals with the Taliban and promising them protection and a place in the coming

Islamic Emirate. The Taliban's diplomatic wing in Qatar, meanwhile, is working to restore the movement's international legitimacy by casting it as Afghanistan's rightful—and inevitable—ruler. The real cause of conflict in Afghanistan, according to the Taliban's representatives in Doha, is the continued presence of U.S. troops, and the Taliban will be open to compromise once the troops are out. This, in essence, was the message that the Taliban's delegates delivered at a peace conference Russia hosted in early November.

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For its part, the United States has signaled openness to a negotiated settlement, not least by appointing Khalilzad as its envoy. Officially, U.S. policy remains to encourage the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan government. But Khalilzad has proved more willing than his predecessors to engage directly with Taliban representatives, and he has actively consulted with Afghan political figures and regional powers. The government in Kabul remains committed to peace negotiations but has shown signs of unease with the level of U.S. involvement, fearful of losing control (or, more politely, “ownership”) of the peace process.

Yet the notion that the Taliban are on the cusp of coming to the table is wishful thinking. So far, the group has remained decidedly uninterested in political compromise and steadfast in its public disavowal of talks with the Afghan government. The Taliban have a track record of missing opportunities and overplaying their hand. Instead of committing to serious peace talks, they may try to win power without a settlement. Taliban leaders seem confident that they can gradually wear out U.S. leaders until they withdraw their military support for the government in Kabul. Taliban fighters are told that the United States is defeated and will pull out its troops by 2020, opening the way for the group to recapture the country.

SO LONG, SAIGON?

In some ways, the Taliban are trying to replicate the conditions that drove the United States out of South Vietnam in the 1970s. U.S. President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, had been looking for a way out of Vietnam as early as 1969. Kissinger ratcheted up the military and diplomatic pressure on the Vietnamese communists, seeking to shore up the anticommunist South Vietnamese government with concessions extracted from the North in negotiations. This strategy, Kissinger hoped, would ensure the survival of the Saigon government even without U.S. troops there to defend it.

Nixon and Kissinger soon had to adjust their ambitions downward. Despite heavy losses, the North Vietnamese fought relentlessly. The government in the South, crippled by nepotism and corruption, was no match. Growing domestic opposition to the war forced the United States to speed up its troop withdrawal and limit its military assistance to the South's forces. By the time of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, Washington was mostly looking for a face-saving exit: free captured U.S. soldiers and bargain for a “decent interval” between U.S. withdrawal and the collapse of the South's regime, which came two years later. Taliban leaders today seem to hope that nearly two decades of attrition warfare against U.S. troops will soon yield a similar outcome.

Yet Afghanistan is not Vietnam, and today's Taliban leaders are wrong to imagine that they can replicate the successes of the Vietnamese communists. For all its messy politics and clientelism, the Afghan state is more viable than the South Vietnamese was. There is a shared political culture, an idea of national unity, and even significant buy-in to the democratic project. Reforms, an inclusive national leadership that took real ownership of the war, and a political class focused more on security and reconciliation than on its own privileges would all help. Still, the political system centered in Kabul is a reality for millions of Afghans. The parliamentary elections in October were chaotic, but the media, political parties, over 2,500 candidates, and most people in government-controlled areas all embraced the contest.

The Taliban's political base, by contrast, is in the Sunni clergy, which has provided them with a reliable cadre for fighting the war. But this is too narrow a constituency to make a plausible bid to lead a national government or remake the political system. The Taliban may have been able to capture power and impose authoritarian rule in the midst of a civil war 25 years ago. But Afghan citizens today expect security, freedom, economic management, and foreign relations from their government, and few believe the Taliban could deliver.

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Internationally, the Taliban remain far more isolated than North Vietnam ever was. No international actor is prepared to provide serious logistic or military support to them. And despite recent tensions between the United States, Russia, China, and Iran, these powers still broadly agree that a well-governed Afghanistan must not be a terrorist safe haven of the kind the Taliban ran before 2001.

On the military front, the Taliban are much weaker than their propaganda suggests. For years, Taliban fighters have been stuck in a guerrilla phase, incurring heavy casualties whenever they try to operate with formations of more than a few dozen fighters. Recent gains in the countryside are not so much proof of the insurgents' tactical skills as they are a testament to Kabul's mismanagement of its local militias.

It is telling that the Taliban's current offensive has no official objective beyond continued fighting: for any hope of a military victory, the Taliban have to wait for the United States to end support to the government in Kabul. Yet the war in Afghanistan costs Washington far less than Vietnam did in its day. In 1968, the war effort in Vietnam took up around 2.3 percent of U.S. GDP. By 2016, U.S. spending on the war in Afghanistan had fallen to about 0.17 percent of GDP. Likewise, the Vietnam War faced fierce domestic opposition in the United States and, by the end, was widely questioned even in the military. Residual involvement in Afghanistan, by contrast, [draws little ire](#) from the U.S. public and enjoys support in Congress and the military.

In effect, the United States has "Afghanized" the conflict, shifting responsibility to the Afghan government while U.S. forces operate in the background, providing air cover, specialist support, and money. Washington, in other words, has the capacity to sustain its commitment to Afghanistan for some time to come and is under no obligation to accept a bad deal. Leaving Afghanistan would be a matter of choice, not necessity.

As long as this fact is lost on Taliban leaders, however, U.S. efforts to mediate peace talks are unlikely to bear fruit. Khalilzad could try to tempt the Taliban with a commitment to withdrawal that avoids timelines and instead sets a substantive goal, such as the restoration of peace. If such an effort produced a cease-fire and political talks, that could mark the start of a real peace process.

Yet getting there will require changing the Taliban's basic calculus. Any move that boosts American staying power helps—even if this comes at the cost of slowly reducing the U.S. footprint. Already, some Taliban are showing signs of war fatigue. During a cease-fire in June, fighters poured into Afghan towns and spoke openly of their wish for peace. Local peace deals and de-escalation could take advantage of these sentiments. And unfashionable as it sounds, enhancing the effectiveness and democratic legitimacy of the Afghan government would also help the cause of peace.

The United States may not manage a responsible exit from Afghanistan by 2020. But there is still a chance to meaningfully improve the situation on the ground and, by so doing, reduce the Taliban's ability to wage war. The effort is worth making for the sake of the future and the shared interests of Afghanistan and the United States.