

## ***U.S. Looks to Build on Secret Portions of Taliban Deal to Reduce Violence***

In the final weeks before the U.S. is set to withdraw from Afghanistan, officials are trying to negotiate with the insurgent group and stave off a Taliban spring offensive.



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DOHA, Qatar — U.S. diplomats are trying to build on parts of the peace deal made with the Taliban last year, specifically the classified portions that outlined what military actions — on both sides — were supposed to be prohibited under the signed agreement, according to American, Afghan and Taliban officials.

The negotiations, which have been quietly underway for months, have morphed into the Biden administration's last-ditch diplomatic effort to achieve a reduction in violence, which could enable the United States to still exit the country should broader peace talks fail to yield progress in the coming weeks.

If these discussions, and the separate talks between the Afghan government and Taliban falter, the United States will likely find itself with thousands of troops in Afghanistan beyond May 1. That's the deadline by which all American military forces are meant to withdraw from the country under the 2020 agreement with the Taliban and would come at a time when the insurgent group likely will have begun its spring offensive against the beleaguered Afghan security forces.

Both of these conditions would almost certainly set back any progress made in the past months toward a political settlement, despite both the Trump and the Biden administrations' fervent attempts to end the United States' longest-running war.

"Time is really running out for the Biden administration," said Asfandyar Mir, an analyst at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. "If there is no breakthrough in the next two to three weeks, Biden will have scored his first major foreign policy failure."

The proposed agreement specific to two annexes of the 2020 deal, which were deemed classified by the Trump administration, is intended to stave off an insurgent victory on the battlefield during the peace talks by limiting Taliban military operations against Afghan forces, according to U.S. officials and others familiar with the negotiations. In return, the United States would push for the release of all Taliban prisoners still imprisoned by the Afghan government and the lifting of United Nations sanctions against the Taliban — two goals outlined in the original deal.

These new negotiations, which exclude representatives from the Afghan government, are being carried out amid a contentious logjam between the Taliban and the Afghans, despite pressure from international and regional actors on both sides to commit to some form of a path forward.



Afghan security forces at an outpost in Kandahar, on the edge of the Panjwai district, in January. The Taliban have overtaken much of the area. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

With May 1 just a few weeks away, there is a growing sense of urgency and uncertainty looming over all sides.

The United States currently has around 3,500 troops in the country, alongside thousands of contractors and international forces still on the ground. Withdrawing those forces and all their equipment by May 1 is, at this point, almost logistically impossible, experts and officials said.

The United States' unilateral negotiations with the Taliban have drawn ire from Afghan negotiators, who see the side discussions as a distraction from the broader peace talks. Even if the United States and the Taliban reach a deal to reduce violence, it is not likely to result in a full cease-fire, said one of the Afghan government negotiators, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Specifically, the United States is pushing for three months of reduced violence and has been for some time — though U.S. diplomats hope that timeline could be extended.

But in recent months, the Taliban submitted their own proposal, first reported by Voice of America, with requests that were not fully accepted by the U.S. negotiators and included severe restrictions on U.S. air power.

Many of the delays in securing a new deal to reduce violence stem from the original February 2020 agreement.

That deal loosely called for the Taliban to stop suicide attacks and large-scale offensives in exchange for the Americans scaling back drone strikes and raids, among other types of military assaults. But both sides interpreted those terms differently, officials said, and both have accused one another of violating the deal. The Taliban is also supposed to cut ties with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, but the U.S. intelligence community has seen little movement toward that goal.



Taliban prisoners lined up at the Bagram military base in Afghanistan before their release in May 2020. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Under the current arrangement, U.S. forces can defend their Afghan allies if they are being attacked, but the Taliban said U.S. airstrikes have been carried out against their fighters who were not attacking Afghan forces.

Digital spreadsheets maintained by the Taliban and viewed by The Times detail hundreds of purported U.S. violations. They record in detail the group's wounded and killed, along with civilian casualties and property damage. However, the Taliban often do not distinguish between offensive operations carried out by Afghan security forces from those by U.S. forces, and several of the events The Times was able to independently verify from June 2020 did not involve American troops.

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The new terms for a reduction in violence have been a serious point of contention during the past several months, during meetings frequently held at the Sharq Village and Spa, a luxurious resort in Doha, Qatar.

Meetings between American officials and the Taliban in Doha — including with high-level officials like then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in November and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark A. Milley, in December — attempted to scale back Taliban attacks and stop the bloody assassination campaign wreaking havoc across the country, but made little headway.

With time running out, the Biden administration is hoping for more success, though these discussions continue to hit roadblocks.

Negotiations between the Afghans and the Taliban, which began in September, have practically come to a halt as the insurgent group has remained reluctant to discuss any future government or power-sharing deal while the United States remains noncommittal about whether it will withdraw from Afghanistan by May 1.

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**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

The Biden administration's recent push for talks in Turkey could be promising, officials and experts said, but the Taliban have yet to agree to attend.

The insurgent group thinks Mr. Biden's negotiators are manipulating the proposed agreement to reduce violence by asking for "extreme" measures, such as halting the use of roadside bombs and pausing attacks on checkpoints, according to people close to the negotiations.



American service members at Camp Shorabak in Helmand in 2019. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Taliban negotiators say they believe the American requests equate to a cease-fire, while U.S. military officials say that if certain parameters are not clearly outlined, then the Taliban will shift their tactics to exploit any loopholes they can find — like they have done in the past.

Some of the more striking episodes happened in the past week when C.I.A.-backed militia forces were accused of killing more than a dozen civilians in a Taliban-controlled village in Khost Province in southeastern Afghanistan.

In retaliation, the Taliban authorized their fighters to attack the American military and C.I.A. base there and publicly took responsibility for the rocket attack that followed: a first for the insurgent group since it has mostly stopped, or refused to acknowledge, attacks against U.S. bases and troops, per the terms of the 2020 deal.

Some Taliban officials believe the C.I.A.-backed forces should be disbanded and their operations stopped if the insurgent group agrees to any further reduction in violence, according to people close to the negotiations, but it is unclear if the insurgent group has raised those concerns directly. Regardless, any such request is likely to fall on deaf ears as the U.S. military and intelligence community views these forces as some of the Afghans' most effective, despite the litany of human rights abuses leveled against them.

The Khost incident highlights the difficulty of reaching an understanding when it comes to decreasing the intensity of the war, and the need for an international third-party monitoring body, such as the United Nations, in any future cease-fires or agreements to reduce violence, experts said.



Overlooking territory contested by the Taliban at a lone government security outpost on the periphery of Panjwai district in Kandahar in January. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

It is unlikely the United States and Taliban will reach a new deal before May 1, analysts say, unless U.S. officials are willing to make serious concessions to prevent a violent offensive this spring, one that seems to already have started given the series of large attacks and assassinations by the Taliban in recent days.

Some experts have criticized the United States' narrow focus on a short-term reduction of violence as a distraction from the larger effort of reaching a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

"I am hard pressed to see what payoff there's been for the amount of effort that has been put into trying to get limited violence reduction front-loaded in the peace process," said Laurel E. Miller, a former top State Department official who worked on Afghanistan and Pakistan diplomacy under the previous two administrations. "It might be helpful for political optics in covering for an American withdrawal. But what's going to make this stick afterward if there isn't a real settlement? Nothing."

Farooq Jan Mangal contributed reporting from Khost Province.