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By Bill Van Auken
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Afghanistan peace deal begins to unravel as Kabul rejects prisoner swap

Within barely 24 hours of the US government and the Taliban signing the so-called “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” Washington’s puppet government in Kabul, which was excluded from the negotiations that produced the deal, has rejected one of its provisions.

The president of the Kabul government, Ashraf Ghani, announced that he would not accept an exchange of prisoners that was to have served as a “confidence-building” measure. The exchange was to be carried out on March 10, the date set for the beginning of “intra-Afghan negotiations” involving the Taliban, the Ghani regime and potentially other Afghan political actors. The agreement states that these talks are to produce a “permanent and comprehensive ceasefire,” along with a “future political roadmap of Afghanistan.”

While the deal proposed the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners—roughly half of the number held by the US and its puppet regime—along with 1,000 prisoners held by the Taliban, Ghani told reporters on Sunday, “The government of Afghanistan has made no commitment to free 5,000 Taliban prisoners,” adding, “It is not in the authority of the United States to decide; they are only a facilitator.”



U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, left, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban group's top political leader shake hands after signing a peace agreement between Taliban and U.S. officials in Doha, Qatar, Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020. (AP Photo/Hussein Seyed)

This defiance by a titular head of state, who could not remain in power for a week without US backing, is a measure of the puppet regime's concern that it has few bargaining chips in the "intra-Afghan" talks, and the fact that it is not willing to give up one of them, the fate of imprisoned Taliban fighters.

The success of such talks is one of the conditions attached to the agreement signed by Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad in the Qatari capital of Doha on Saturday.

The main basis of the deal is the promise of a withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in exchange for a commitment by the Taliban to deny the use of Afghan soil to Al Qaeda or any other group that could "threaten the security of the United States and its allies."

The signing of the agreement, presided over by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, constitutes an unmistakable admission by Washington that the nearly 19-year-long war it has waged in Afghanistan, the longest war in US history, has produced an unmitigated debacle.

After sacrificing the lives of nearly 2,400 US troops, along with the wounding of tens of thousands more, and spending well over \$1 trillion, Washington is signing a deal it could have reached with the Taliban 18 years ago without sending a single soldier.

The deployment of some 800,000 US troops in Afghanistan over the course of two decades, the dropping of vast quantities of munitions on the impoverished nation, and the killing of at least 175,000 of its people have left the US and its puppet government in control of less than half the country, while the Taliban holds sway over more territory than at any time since it was overthrown by the illegal US invasion of October 2001.

The Taliban had demanded an immediate pullout of all US troops, but the Doha agreement calls for a phased and “condition-based” withdrawal, with a promise that their number will be reduced by July of this year from the current level of approximately 14,000 to 8,600, roughly the same number that were deployed there when Trump took office in 2016. The agreement states that this will be followed by a “complete withdrawal of all remaining forces” by April of next year.

The deal has no doubt been crafted at least in part to serve the electoral interests of President Donald Trump, who campaigned in 2016 on the claim that he would call a halt to Washington’s “endless wars.” A partial draw-down of troops in the run-up to the vote in November would allow him to claim fulfillment of this campaign promise, while leaving sufficient forces in place for a potential continued occupation or even another buildup to be carried out after the elections.

Unconfirmed reports state that secret clauses in the agreement include the retention of a US Special Forces and CIA contingent on the ground in Afghanistan. In an op-ed column published in the *Washington Post* Sunday, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper wrote that “the United States will continue its financial and military support to the Afghan government and its security forces.”

He continued, “There are other details to the plan’s implementation, and the administration looks forward to briefing them to Congress in the coming days.” Esper had flown to Kabul for a ceremony with Ghani on Saturday as the deal was being signed in Doha.

Further complicating the proposed “intra-Afghan” negotiations are sharp differences within the Kabul regime itself. Just last month, results were announced for a presidential election held last September, with Ghani proclaimed the winner amid charges of wholesale fraud. Ghani’s principal opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, who was given the position of “CEO” after the last fraudulent election, has refused to accept Ghani’s victory, threatening to set up a parallel government.

Abdullah denounced Ghani for secretly sending a delegation to Doha for talks with the Taliban on upcoming negotiations. "Sending a team from the Presidential Palace to Doha, without consulting with other people in Afghanistan, as representatives of Afghanistan ... these were the issues which caused the absence of a big number of politicians in [Saturday's] ceremony" in Kabul, Abdullah said.

Among those absent were the Afghan warlords Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Hizb-e-Islami, and Abdul Rashid Dostum, who holds the post of first vice president. Also staying away were former president Hamid Karzai, the head of the High Peace Council, Mohammad Karim Khalili, and the second deputy chief executive, Mohammad Mohaqiq.

These divisions raise the prospect that any negotiations with the Taliban will be carried out by rival political factions jockeying for positions in a post-Ghani government. Until now, the Taliban has refused to negotiate with the Kabul government, describing it as a "puppet regime," a characterization that has been confirmed by Washington's signing a deal with the Islamist movement without any participation by Ghani's administration.

The Taliban has proclaimed the Doha agreement as a victory over the US military occupation. Taliban leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada issued a statement Saturday calling on his followers to uphold "real Islamic law" and for "the Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate" to become "more active and stronger."

The Trump administration has jettisoned the hypocritical "human rights" justifications for the imperialist war put forward by the Democratic administration of Barack Obama, which raised troop levels in Afghanistan to 100,000 to no avail. Professed concerns about the Taliban's retrograde Islamist ideology, which led during its rule to girls being barred from schools and women from working, have given way to a view that the Taliban leadership, which is staunchly anti-Iranian and had entered into negotiations with US oil companies in the 1990s, are men with whom the US can do business.

The prospects for the agreement signed in Doha leading to a US withdrawal from Afghanistan are far from certain. US imperialism's catastrophic intervention in the country dates back more than four decades to the CIA-orchestrated war by the mujahideen against a Soviet-backed government in Kabul. That war ultimately claimed a million lives and turned millions more into refugees.

The war begun in 2001, launched on the pretext of combating terrorism and capturing Osama bin Laden, had been prepared well in advance. It was aimed at projecting US military force into the energy-rich region of Central Asia in the wake of the dissolution of

the Soviet Union. Washington's drive for hegemony in the country, which borders Iran and China and is in close proximity to Russia, will continue.

Also continuing to drive the Afghan conflict are the conflicting interests of the region's two nuclear-armed powers—India, which has backed the Kabul government, and Pakistan, whose military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) provided sanctuary to the Taliban leadership. Saturday saw India's foreign minister attend the ceremony in Kabul, while his Pakistani counterpart was at the signing in Doha.

Far from inaugurating peace, any retreat from the US debacle in Afghanistan would help pave the way for a far more dangerous eruption of US militarism, as Washington shifts its global strategy from the "war on terror" to preparations for war against its "great power" rivals, in the first instance, nuclear-armed China and Russia.

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