

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: Is There Hope for the Afghan Peace Process?

featuring

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interviewed by

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Full Transcript

Nadia: This is Nadia and you're listening to University of Chicago Public Policy Podcast.

Root of Conflict Interviewers: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies and policy issues it affects. You'll hear from experts and practitioners can conduct research, implement programs and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P, in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research Institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Aishwarya Raje: The war in Afghanistan has ravaged on for decades and peace negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban officials during that period have often broken down, time and time again, with a number of foreign actors involved in the conflict and in the negotiations, the most prominent being the United States, reaching a comprehensive peace agreement has proven to be exceedingly complex. But now, with a new set of negotiations taking place in Doha, we may be seeing a window of opportunity to make progress towards peace. My name is Aishwarya Raje, and in this episode of Root of Conflict, Mwangi Thuita and I speak with Laurel Miller, the Asia Program Director at International Crisis Group. Laurel discusses the intricacies of the war in Afghanistan and how they've evolved over the years, and the best-case scenario for what a peace agreement can look like. Laurel, thank you so much for joining us today.

Laurel Miller: My pleasure to be with you.

Aishwarya Raje: Your topic during the Pearson Global Forum was, of course, a case study on Afghanistan, which is undoubtedly a very complex conflict. We could probably do an entire podcast series just to talk about it, but can you give us, or lay out for us who the main players have been in this conflict? And from a U.S. perspective, how have our goals in Afghanistan changed over the last 20 years?

Laurel Miller: Sure. And, and I should say I came to this position at International Crisis Group already having focused quite a bit in recent years on policy issues related to Afghanistan. It's one of our priority areas within my current job, which I've been doing not even for two years now, but, had done some analytical work of my own when I was at the RAND Corporation related to Afghanistan.

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And I also served in the U.S. State Department from 2013 through the middle of 2017 as the deputy, and then the Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan and was working on issues related to War and Peace in Afghanistan at that time. So that's what I drew on in my presentation at the Pearson Forum, and in other work that I do. So, the conflict there, it's multi-sided and complex, and it has both internal and external dimensions. Often, from an American political and popular perspective, we think of the war in Afghanistan as the war that has been there since after 9/11, after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, and toppling of the Taliban regime there. And that is one dimension of the war, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan at the end of 2001, because the Taliban regime had harbored Osama bin Laden and had refused to hand him over.

The U.S. took the position at that time that it needed to not only endeavor to capture or kill bin Laden and his associates, but also make an example of the Taliban regime in order to say that, state sponsorship, state harboring of terrorists will not be tolerated. So, one dimension of the conflict in Afghanistan is that the United States invaded and gradually built up the number of troops on the ground in Afghanistan over several years. After having wiped away the Taliban regime, it was one of the key actors in installing a new government there, putting in place a new constitution, elections, et cetera. But then the Taliban regrouped, from safe havens in Pakistan. Across the border from Afghanistan, the Taliban regrouped as an insurgency and the United States then became embroiled in a counterinsurgency war against the Taliban.

So that's one dimension. Rolling a little bit back further in time, Afghanistan was not a fully peaceful place before 9/11. There had been a civil war in the early 1990s after the Soviet Union withdrew from the country and the U.S., which had been heavily engaged in supporting the anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan, including bin Laden, decided to exit the region and the country descended into a civil war in the early 1990s, which then created the opening for the Taliban to sweep to power and hold power in the later part of the 1990s. The Taliban had by and large consolidated control of the country, but not complete control of the country, and there were dimensions of warfare that were still going on related to that fight even before the U.S. invaded after 9/11.

And so, there's a war still going on in Afghanistan that has a lot to do with what was happening in the 1990s, even before the U.S. invaded. That's another dimension and layers to the conflict in Afghanistan. And then, Afghanistan also is surrounded by some meddlesome neighbors, it's in a very difficult neighborhood. The key players in this regard are both Pakistan and Iran, but others too have over many decades sponsored, favored, proxies and clients in the country, and have, have helped to perpetuate warfare there through these relationships. And as I mentioned, Pakistan, in particular, is consequential in that it gave safe haven to the retreating Taliban figures who then regrouped as an insurgency. And so, there's another dimension to the conflict and the set of actors in Afghanistan that has to do with the external players within the neighborhood, not to mention the United States and NATO as external players further afield, and Russia and China too have interests and involvement in Afghanistan. So, it's a particularly complex conflict because of these both internal and external dimensions that overlap, but also represent distinct sets of interests on the part of all of these players.

Mwangi Thuita: So, what has changed in the last few years, so that there's now more of an emphasis on a negotiated settlement as opposed to achieving a military victory, as a precursor to U.S. withdrawal, even though there's still, like you mentioned, during your panel, a low likelihood that, a peace agreement will be agreed upon and implemented properly.

Laurel Miller: So, I think you have to look a little bit back in time to see how the U.S. came to this point of being focused on negotiating a settlement and negotiating directly with the Taliban. Initially in Afghanistan, the U.S. saw itself as being initially after the invasion as outright victorious, militarily. It didn't capture bin Laden.

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He famously escaped and later was caught and killed in Pakistan. But the U.S. did very quickly topple the Taliban regime over time and was able to pretty much decimate the Al Qaeda presence in the region and saw itself in those first few years after the invasion as having really utterly defeated the Taliban. From the time when the Taliban began to reconstitute as an insurgency, gradually, certainly by 2005, 2006, it was clear that there was an insurgency.

I think it's fair to say from that point on the war from a U.S. perspective has never gone well. The U.S. from that point began to increase the number of forces steadily. Even before Obama came into office, there were already a series of surges. And then there was what was literally called a surge in the beginning of the Obama administration, to at the peak, there were 100,000 American forces deployed in Afghanistan. In 2002 it was like tiny numbers, a few thousand at most, and then to a 100,000 American forces in Afghanistan at the peak, plus NATO forces for a total of between 140 and 150,000, plus in any military deployment like this, you then have to multiply several times more contractors, including doing military-like tasks in addition to this number of troops on the ground.

The reason why the numbers kept going up is because the war wasn't going well, and the U.S. saw the U.S. military advocated for the application of more resources to try to turn it around, to change the trajectory. From the peak period, already by 2013, 2014, the number of U.S. forces was diminishing because the idea was that the surge of forces in the Obama administration was supposed to be temporary, and so there was a plan to surge up and then come down. And at the same time, there was an emphasis placed on building up the capabilities of Afghan security forces to take the lead in the fight against the Taliban, but still with the U.S. engaging in counter-terrorism efforts. But even with this sort of peak, and then initial decline of U.S. forces there, it was never really turning around.

The Taliban was steadily gaining ground and even with the enormous devotion of American resources to building up the Afghan security forces, they still hadn't and still haven't today proven capable of entirely on their own handling the counterinsurgency without American backing. From around 2015, when the number of U.S. forces really began to dip, it became even harder for the Afghan security forces, and there were even more gains by the Taliban. And even today, with the numbers of U.S. forces almost down – by next week, it's supposed to be down to 4,500 – obviously the Afghan forces are carrying much more of the burden of the fighting, much, much more, but still, in really the most exigent circumstances, they need American military support, particularly air support, meaning they need the bombing of Taliban positions in order to not be overrun by the Taliban.

And the Taliban has continued to improve its position. So that's the trajectory of the war fighting. And I mentioned that in answer to your question about the peacemaking, because it's the explanation. If the U.S. had been militarily successful in partnership with the Afghan government, and eliminating the Taliban insurgency, then I don't think anyone would be talking about a political settlement, or they'd be talking about one that's really just negotiating the terms of the Taliban surrender. But that's not the case. There are many people who think if the U.S. started being serious about a negotiation much earlier, it could have negotiated on much more favorable terms, but as the Taliban has gained strength, we are nowhere there in negotiating the terms of the Taliban surrender. It was more than a decade ago now that some American policymakers recognized that the war was not winnable and that there had to be an effort to begin trying to negotiate a political settlement of the conflict.

But for many years, that effort was in fits and starts. It was, “We're going to keep going with the war effort, and this is something we'll do on the side.” And it doesn't usually work out very well if you don't put something that hard at the center of your efforts. And so, it was very ebb and flow of attention to this, changing more

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affirmatively, more concerted in the direction of trying to negotiate a political settlement only around the end of 2018. Even in the Trump administration, for the first year, there was a mini-surge, again, trying to turn around the war and negotiate from a position of strain. It didn't happen that way. There wasn't a positive change from an American perspective in the war, and so, efforts were redoubled in early 2018, not coincidentally, because you have a president who campaigned on and seems to still want the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan as a policy priority.

Aishwarya Raje: So, given that context, how consequential is the upcoming US presidential election going to be on the peace process? What are some differences we could expect from four more years of Donald Trump versus a new Biden administration?

Laurel Miller: Yeah, the short answer is very consequential, potentially, even though I'm not expecting a major change of direction if Biden wins. If Trump wins the second term, then based on the recent trajectory of the policy efforts, as well as the recent public statements by Trump himself and the tweets and his national security advisors' comments, which suggest a plan to reduce U.S. forces even more by another half, down to just 2000, around there by January. I think that's a pretty safe bet that that would continue and that the ability of U.S. diplomats to try to negotiate a decent political settlement will be much reduced if Trump wins, because the policy will be a policy about troop deployments, not a policy about Afghanistan. I think Trump has pretty clearly shown that, because he said he really doesn't care about Afghanistan.

He doesn't see the risk or threat there, or issues of U.S. credibility, or what do allies think about, it's really just about troops, no troops. And so, I think that you would see a push to just make as fast and dirty a deal as you can, so that you least have a fig leaf for a complete withdrawal. If Trump loses, we have a question as to what happens in the period of time while he's still president after that loss. And there, I think we're all expecting if Trump loses, to have all of oxygen sucked out of the air by litigation of what the result of the election was. He's already relitigated it. So, people post litigate it too.

And so the question in my mind, then is, did he just lose interest in what he said about Afghanistan, and it's all really just about litigating the result of the election, literally and figuratively litigating, and is Afghanistan just off the radar and forgotten about, and nothing happens between that and the inauguration? Or, does he decide he's just going to burn it all down? And now, his legacy is "I said I was going to do it, and now I'm just going to do it." That's possible to be too. I think the bureaucracy would have ways of slowing down anything serious that happens between the election and the inauguration, but not necessarily to a great degree. So, there's a lot of uncertainty about that period. If Trump loses and, we get through the November to January period without too much happening with the status quo being essentially preserved, then I think there's an opportunity for the Biden administration to do a bit of resetting, first of all, to kind of re-energize the peacemaking effort, which is right now, pretty much stalled because of the U.S. election – other factors too - but neither side of this negotiation is foolish enough to think they can count on what will happen after an American election.

So, they are being very careful. We're not going to take any risk by entering into any agreements that they're not sure about. So, things are stalled right now because of the election, and if they stay stalled, there'll be an opportunity for Biden administration to re-energize its peacemaking efforts, to maybe repair some of the gaps, to probably take a little more time and be a little more orderly about it. I think they will still be focused on peace process, but the issues themselves are not going to get any easier, and the prospects of ultimate success in a peace negotiation are not going to be orders of magnitude higher, even with a more orderly American foreign policy.

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Mwangi Thuita: So, there've been some efforts to imagine alternative histories of the war in Afghanistan, how U.S. strategy could have been implemented a bit better. Last year, Harris professor, Ethan Bueno de Mesquita wrote in the Boston Review that we were always going to lose the war in Afghanistan because, and I want to quote him, here, "Counterinsurgencies are wars of attrition. Wars of attrition are won through resolve and the side facing an existential threat will always have the greater resolve." He suggested that what could have been a successful, narrowly defined counter-terrorism operation became an unwinnable counter-insurgency moving forward. Do you think the U.S. has learned the right lessons about counterinsurgencies?

Laurel Miller: I largely agree with what you just described from that position, but with some caveats, because I'd want to know what that alternative looked like to getting embroiled in the counterinsurgency. To say we just go in, we talk with the government, and then we say, see you later, that doesn't work particularly well either in terms of stable outcomes. So, there there's a lot to unpack about what that alternative history really looks like. In terms of whether the U.S. has learned the lessons, I'm not sure at all. I don't think the lessons have even been drawn fully yet about Afghanistan, much less learned. And what I think we've seen happen in recent years within the U.S. military establishment is simply sticking your fingers in your ears about counterinsurgency. It's like, "Oh, we just don't talk about counterinsurgency, we don't do counter-insurgency anymore. We're not going to do it again. So why should we bother to think too much about what went right and what went wrong?" I'm exaggerating slightly. The military does have its procedures for doing lessons learned, but it's only a partial exaggeration. There's just been such a rapid swinging away from the notion that we're ever again be in a counterinsurgency, just like happened after Vietnam when it was "Well, we're not going to do that again." And then lo and behold, we did do that again. That inhibits really learning the lessons. What I do agree with is the idea that the United States could be a successful counter insurgent in Afghanistan, without the Afghans themselves being successful counterinsurgents. That to me is highly problematic.

And if you look at the literature about counterinsurgency doctrine and the supposed success stories of counterinsurgency, that the doctrine is drawn from, the successful examples are not of external powers being the primary counterinsurgents. They are of the internal power being the successful counterinsurgent. And so, to me, that was the fundamental flaw of the U.S. strategic approach to the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, was the idea that without the Afghans, that we could be the primary determinant of success in the counterinsurgency. Now, I don't mean to suggest that no one paid attention to the Afghan forces – there was also an effort to build up their capability – but I think there was a lack of realistic appraisal of how quickly and successfully you are going to be able to build up the indigenous Afghan capability to fight the counterinsurgency.

Aishwarya Raje: So finally, in the context of the peace process, you've talked about how any peace deal being brokered in the immediate future is highly unlikely, but what would a successful peace deal look like for Afghanistan? Part of the answer might be depending who you ask just based on the number of actors that are involved in it. But, let's say for example, if we look at Afghanistan and the U.S., how do we align our best-case scenarios?

Laurel Miller: Yeah. So, first to be clear, I'm a proponent of the peace process in Afghanistan. And I think the chances of success are not zero, and the payoff is high enough that the efforts should be made. Even if you can't say that the likelihood of success is high, from an American perspective, I think the bottom line needs to be what the Afghans themselves can agree to. So, I don't think the U.S. should be that particular about what some of the details of a political settlement look like, even in terms of issues like hot-button issues, like women's rights in Afghanistan. Now, I feel comfortable saying that because there's enough diversity of voices and participants that I don't think that anything that the current Afghan government would agree to would be

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too compromising on issues like that. But I don't think that the U.S. should have red lines about what the exact nature of the state and governance looks like.

Let's imagine for instance, that the state structure that emerged looked like Iran. Should we really have a negative view on that? It would be better than Saudi Arabia, if it did, just to be realistic, it would be better than any of the monarchies in the Gulf that we're perfectly friendly with. It would potentially even be not worse than Turkey. So, to my mind, the highest value is in ending the violence and enabling Afghans to live their lives in relative peace. And, from an American perspective, I think that in terms of the details, of what the structure of the state and governance looks like, there's a lot that should be sacrificed for that highest value.

Aishwarya Raje: Well, Laurel, you've been very generous with your time today. Thank you so much for speaking with us.

Laurel Miller: Well, it was my pleasure to join you. Thanks for that.

Aishwarya Raje: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict, featuring Laurel Miller. Special thanks to UC3P and the Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. For more information on the Pearson Institute's research and events, visit the [Pearson institute.org](http://Pearson.institute.org) and follow them on Twitter.