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A Peacekeeping Mission in Afghanistan: Pipedream or Path to Stability?

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A Peacekeeping Mission in Afghanistan

Pipedream or Path to Stability?

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Abstract¹

This article analyzes how an international peacekeeping operation (PKO) can support an intra-Afghan peace settlement by mitigating information and commitment problems and fostering compliance during the settlement's implementation phase. To frame the information and commitment problems currently hindering an intra-Afghan settlement, I briefly review noncooperative bargaining theory, its application to civil conflicts, and how PKOs can lessen mutual uncertainty and foster stability. Anchoring this research on Afghanistan, I analyze the first peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, the 1988–1990 United Nations Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan (UNGOMAP). UNGOMAP's eventual failure to foster peace highlights Afghanistan's complexities and the dangers of an insufficiently resourced PKO operating in a state without a viable, incentive-compatible settlement. I apply these lessons to policy analysis, where I explore possible PKO options and their potential for incentivizing compliance with a future intra-Afghan deal. Though a viable PKO currently seems improbable given Afghanistan's ongoing violence and the Taliban's insistence on the complete withdrawal of foreign forces, future conditions may change, and I highlight necessary prerequisites where a PKO may become possible. If designed properly, an Afghanistan PKO can fill a critical monitoring and verification capacity and bolster Afghanistan's prospects for long-term stability.

Introduction

The possibility of a stable Afghanistan presents a welcome opportunity for the Afghan people, who have endured 42 years of continuous civil conflict. If warring parties can reach an incentive-compatible, bargained settlement, then all have much to gain from the cessation of ongoing hostilities. Beyond benefiting parties within Afghanistan, a stable Afghanistan would benefit neighboring states and the international community, who have dealt with the negative externalities of Afghanistan's civil conflicts.² It is widely recognized that a political settlement among Afghan parties is the most practical way to end the fighting and attain lasting stability.³ Given the large risks associated with Afghanistan's civil conflict continuing, the United States should assess the viability of an international peace-

keeping operation (PKO) that may alleviate Government of Afghanistan (GOA) uncertainties in negotiations with the Taliban and support compliance with an eventual intra-Afghan peace settlement.⁴

The US–Taliban settlement, signed on 29 February 2020, provides a starting point for intra-Afghan talks and a conditional exit strategy for remaining US and NATO forces.⁵ If the Taliban continue negotiations with GOA, maintain a reduction in violence, and uphold their commitment that Afghanistan will not be used as a terrorist safe haven, then all US and NATO forces could be completely withdrawn from Afghanistan by 2021. Increasing US domestic pressure to end the 19-year US military mission is impacting political decision making, and it is unlikely that US/NATO forces will remain in Afghanistan for the long term, despite the Taliban’s continuing offensives against the GOA.⁶ Widespread uncertainty remains regarding the possibility of a bargained settlement between the Taliban and the GOA, as evidenced by the latter’s May 2020 announcement that Kabul would continue large-scale offensive operations against the Taliban.⁷

Uncertainty over an intra-Afghan settlement is manifested in two primary forms. First, it is unknown if warring parties can reach a feasible settlement, especially without US/NATO forces maintaining coercive pressure to compel the Taliban to negotiate with the GOA. Potential impacts to Afghanistan’s political structure, legal system, security forces, disarmament, reintegration, and civil liberties all remain unknown, and there is deep, mutual mistrust. Second, if a settlement is reached, there is significant uncertainty as to whether internal parties would comply with the settlement’s provisions, especially without a credible enforcement mechanism to deter violations. If intra-Afghan parties *do* reach a bargained settlement, the historical record and conflict research suggests there will be incentives to cheat or spoil the peace process among Afghanistan’s numerous armed groups, complex tribal networks, and regional power brokers.⁸ Further, given Afghanistan’s rugged terrain, remote villages, and the GOA’s limited reach, covert defections will likely go unobserved, increasing incentives to cheat.

Noncooperative bargaining models in civil conflict settings provide helpful starting points for analyzing these complex problems.⁹ These models advance information asymmetries and commitment problems as driving factors resulting in bargaining failures. If unaddressed, these problems may prevent combatants from reaching settlements or lead to relapsed fighting after a settlement is reached. Conflict research also suggests monitoring and verification mechanisms may offer partial relief from commitment and information problems and incentivize compliance with peace settlements.¹⁰ Given the US strategic interest in fostering long-term stability in Afghanistan, the US government should advocate for a proven monitoring and verification mechanism in postconflict environments—an

international PKO.¹¹ While the United States cannot *direct* other states to contribute to a PKO, Washington can leverage US diplomatic and economic power to identify willing contributors, secure financial donors, and shepherd the process through the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Two critical scope conditions are required for a PKO to be a viable option in Afghanistan. First, the Taliban and the GOA must successfully negotiate an incentive-compatible, intra-Afghan peace settlement.¹² Second, Afghan parties (including the Taliban, the GOA, opposition, and civil society leaders) and the future Afghan government must consent to an international PKO.¹³ Objectively, these scope conditions seem improbable given ongoing violence and the Taliban's insistence on the complete withdrawal of foreign forces. However, it is also improbable that 150,000 Taliban could decisively defeat the GOA's 300,000 soldiers and take over Afghanistan.¹⁴ As ongoing fighting imposes large costs on the GOA, it also imposes costs on the Taliban—costs that may not be sustainable in the long run. To end a costly status quo and gain desired reforms, the Taliban may willingly accept a short-term, consent-based PKO in the future, in exchange for bargained concessions that produce an incentive-compatible agreement. If the United States and the international community lay the groundwork for a credible PKO and it becomes a viable option during intra-Afghan negotiations, then it may offer both sides relief from information asymmetries and commitment problems and incentivize settlement compliance during the implementation phase.

Since an Afghanistan PKO has not been seriously discussed, this article analyzes the conditions where a PKO may become viable and provides initial analysis for a hypothetical PKO's ideal composition and disposition. This article proceeds as follows. First, I review contemporary research on noncooperative bargaining in civil conflicts and how PKOs can alter conflict dynamics. Leveraging historical lessons, I then review the 1988–1990 UNGOMAP to explain why that PKO was unsuccessful in creating stability in Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal. I close with policy recommendations, where I explore several possible PKO options and analyze their potential for incentivizing compliance with a future peace settlement. If designed properly and paired with an incentive-compatible intra-Afghan settlement, an Afghanistan PKO can fill a critical monitoring and verification capacity and bolster Afghanistan's prospects for long-term stability.

Noncooperative Bargaining, Civil Conflicts, and Peacekeeping

Noncooperative bargaining theory allows for a structured analysis of armed conflict and provides a useful lens to analyze Afghanistan's continued fighting.¹⁵ Based on rational actor assumptions and formal models, these works attempt to explain the paradox of why costly wars occur when less costly bargained settle-

ments may exist.¹⁶ Emerging from this literature, information asymmetries and commitment problems emerge as two primary factors that generally explain why bargaining fails and wars occur.¹⁷ While much of the noncooperative bargaining theory is designed around interstate wars, civil conflict researchers have found that these bargaining obstacles are further exacerbated during civil conflicts, impeding bargained settlements and incentivizing conflict recurrence when settlements are in place.¹⁸

During civil conflicts, information asymmetries create large obstacles that obstruct warring parties from reaching bargained settlements and adhering to peace settlements. Since combatants want to get the best deal possible, each side has incentives to misrepresent private information about their capabilities, financing, strategies, goals, and resolve to appear tougher than they may be in reality.¹⁹ It is often difficult for opponents to ascertain this private information, and these problems are exacerbated when rebels use guerilla tactics, enjoy covert external support, and exploit international borders for sanctuary.²⁰ Rough, inaccessible terrain also provides rebels with a degree of sanctuary, shielding them from government information collection efforts.²¹ Civil conflicts ending with decisive military victories are less likely to revert to fighting, compared to conflicts ending through bargained settlements.²²

Combatants also struggle to make credible commitments required to end ongoing civil conflicts and sustain peace settlements. First, given the high-stakes nature of armed conflict and the possibility that one side may be destroyed, civil conflict combatants face large obstacles in realizing the benefits of mutual cooperation by credibly committing to a peace settlement.²³ Weaker groups are particularly apprehensive to accept compromises that reduce their relative power. This is apparent when rebels with consistent financial flows from contraband items like diamonds or opium may have incentives to continue fighting to maintain access to those financial flows.²⁴ In cases where a peace settlement does exist, relative power shifts can incentivize one side to defect from the agreement and continue fighting. If a credible third party is not present during demobilization and disarmament, then one side may prefer continued fighting rather than expose themselves to future exploitation from a stronger opponent.²⁵ Taken together, these incentives to misrepresent private information and difficulties overcoming credible commitment problems present clear obstacles to ending civil conflicts and sustaining peace settlements during the implementation phase.

Applied to Afghanistan, this research provides helpful insights that partially explain why the current civil conflict has persisted for decades. Information asymmetries complicate intra-Afghan talks, as much remains unknown about the Taliban's strength, the nature of its relationship with Pakistan and al-Qaeda, or

even the organization's ultimate goals.²⁶ The Taliban exploit cross-border sanctuary in Pakistan and Afghanistan's rugged terrain, limiting the GOA's and coalition's military superiority. Vast uncertainty also surrounds the GOA. Though the GOA still relies on foreign aid for the majority of its expenses (especially for security forces), external donors are already curtailing aid spending.²⁷ Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) also remain largely dependent on US and NATO military support, and it is unclear how they will perform without foreign support.²⁸ At the same time, Pres. Ashraf Ghani's credibility is diminished following the contested 2019 presidential election.²⁹ Given these factors, large uncertainty exists regarding the GOA's ability to sustain independent operations. These information problems represent significant hurdles for power brokers participating in intra-Afghan talks.

In the long run, additional commitment problems will present challenges in implementing and enforcing an agreement if one is reached. The Taliban have resisted initial negotiations with the GOA and avoided commitments that would limit their military strength, like agreeing to ceasefires with the GOA prior to finalizing an intra-Afghan settlement.³⁰ The GOA has similarly resisted releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners as a precondition for starting intra-Afghan talks, since that would strengthen the Taliban's fighting force. Further complicating matters, there appears to be widespread resistance against Taliban ideology among the GOA's core constituents, especially those in urban areas.³¹ Given these challenges, both sides may prefer the high costs of ongoing conflict, rather than risk future exploitation that may follow an intra-Afghan settlement. However, noncooperative bargaining models suggest monitoring mechanisms, like international PKOs, may partially alleviate information asymmetries and commitment problems.³²

PKOs generally improve compliance with peace settlements, reduce violence against civilians, and increase the duration of peace in post-civil conflict environments.³³ PKOs have historically taken on two general forms: traditional and transformational.³⁴ Traditional missions are based on impartiality and are focused on monitoring and verifying settlements where conflicts have generally ended. Transformational missions have expanded mandates, authorizing peacekeepers to use force to defend their mandate, and are often paired with more expansive state-building missions. During settlement implementation, PKOs deter violations by imposing political and military costs on potential defectors.³⁵

Traditional PKOs primarily impose political costs through passive monitoring and verification, serving as a neutral arbiter to investigate and report on suspected violations and often acting as a buffer between former combatants. In addition to those same political costs, transformational PKOs also impose military costs through controlled violence aimed at actively compelling defectors toward settle-

ment compliance. Both types of PKOs can directly lessen commitment and information problems by serving as a neutral third party that can offer protection during disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.³⁶ PKOs with widespread geographic coverage and increasing numbers of peacekeepers significantly improve monitoring capacity and are associated with lower levels of violence against civilians, compared to missions with smaller troop levels.³⁷

While Afghanistan suffers from several information and commitment problems that complicate attempts to create and implement an intra-Afghan settlement, PKO research suggests a policy option to mitigate these problems. Afghanistan experts have also stated the need for a third-party monitoring and verification mechanism during settlement implementation.³⁸ In the short term, if a PKO was agreed on by Afghan parties during talks, this may lessen their uncertainties, supporting a bargained solution. In the long term, a PKO would incentivize compliance with a settlement through monitoring and verification mechanisms. While a transformational PKO in Afghanistan will likely be a nonstarter with potential troop-contributing countries and the Taliban, a traditional monitoring PKO may present a more acceptable option. Though research suggests a properly resourced PKO would support settlement implementation and long-term stability, others suggest that underresourced missions do not represent credible monitoring mechanisms and are not effective at fostering peace.³⁹ To highlight the dangers of an insufficiently resourced PKO, I next analyze the UN PKO that deployed to Afghanistan during the Soviet withdrawal in 1988.

Lessons Learned from UNGOMAP

Building on conflict research, I briefly analyze the UN's first peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, the UNGOMAP. The mission was launched in 1988 at the end of the Soviet Union's ten-year occupation, with a traditional mandate designed to provide limited monitoring and verification mechanisms.⁴⁰ Since a transformational mission with a peace enforcement mandate is not a feasible option for a future Afghanistan PKO, analyzing UNGOMAP provides useful lessons in designing a credible traditional PKO. In short, the UNGOMAP failed to foster stability because it was severely underresourced and lacked the force capacity to credibly accomplish its mandate. Further, UNGOMAP was not paired with a viable intra-Afghan peace settlement that granted rebels meaningful concessions from the ruling regime in Kabul. This case supports noncooperative bargaining theory's projections of civil conflicts continuing in the face of significant information and commitment problems. Moreover, it highlights an underresourced PKO's acute inadequacies and provides important lessons for optimally designing a future Afghanistan PKO.

The Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 to support Kabul's besieged communist regime, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Soviet and PDPA forces were confronted by various Islamist mujahideen insurgent factions, which were financially and logistically supported by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China. The Soviets and PDPA failed to reestablish control, and the brutal fighting left one million Afghans killed and displaced five million refugees.⁴¹ Seeking to end its costly quagmire, the Soviets began multilateral negotiations in support of an exit strategy in 1986. While the Soviets sought to keep a friendly PDPA regime in power, after three years of failed intra-Afghan peace talks, Moscow eventually agreed to withdraw its military forces without an internal peace settlement.⁴²

The UN facilitated the subsequent Geneva Accords, which were signed in April 1988 by the United States, Soviet Union, Pakistan, and Afghanistan's PDPA regime. The Accords provided an international framework to end the Soviet occupation and enable the voluntary return of Afghan refugees.⁴³ As the Soviets were not yet willing to fully abandon their PDPA allies, the Accords failed to meaningfully address Afghanistan's ongoing civil conflict. All mujahideen leaders were excluded from the Geneva negotiations, and the PDPA retained power in Kabul.⁴⁴ The incomplete agreement failed to "provide a robust groundwork for future political stability, good governance, or peace," and intra-Afghan parties were left to seek a settlement on their own.⁴⁵

Entering this complex and ongoing civil conflict, UNGOMAP's mandate consisted of three primary tasks: to monitor (1) the withdrawal of Soviet forces, (2) the mutual noninterference between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and (3) the voluntary return of refugees.⁴⁶ However, the mission was severely underresourced, consisting of only 50 multinational military observers who were spread between five outposts.⁴⁷ While UNGOMAP successfully facilitated the Soviets' military withdrawal, the understaffed mission was simply incapable of credibly monitoring its latter two mandates or investigating alleged violations.⁴⁸ Without a credible UN monitoring mechanism in place to identify interference, the United States and its allies sought to unseat the communist PDPA regime and continued supporting the mujahideen with financial and military aid.⁴⁹ The Soviets reciprocated with ongoing military and financial aid to the PDPA regime. Separate UN efforts to negotiate a diplomatic solution among intra-Afghan parties were hindered by this ongoing covert proxy support, with both sides hoping to secure a decisive military solution.⁵⁰ While the PDPA in Kabul registered complaints of these Geneva Accords violations, UNGOMAP lacked the personnel to properly investigate, and in-fighting continued.⁵¹

Despite pressure from the Soviets, internal efforts to draft an intra-Afghan peace deal, like PDPA president Mohammad Najibullah's National Reconciliation Agenda, failed to grant enough concessions to mujahideen.⁵² The majority of mujahideen factions refused to even talk with the PDPA regime. Without an incentive-compatible peace settlement or a credible third-party monitoring mechanism, mujahideen groups fractured into numerous competing groups, spawning regional conflicts as warlords battled for local control.⁵³ As then-UN Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar recalled the breakup of various Mujahideen groups, he noted that "victory eliminated the single objective that united them."⁵⁴ Internal fighting quickly derailed intra-Afghan negotiations, and Afghanistan's various warring parties continued fighting following the final Soviet withdrawal in February 1989.⁵⁵ UNGOMAP's troop contributing countries (Austria, Canada, Denmark, Fiji, Finland, Ghana, Ireland, Nepal, Poland, and Sweden) were apprehensive about extending their peacekeepers as violence spiraled, and the UNSC ended the mission on 15 March 1990.

Analysis of UNGOMAP suggests the underresourced mission was destined for failure. First, the PKO was launched without a viable intra-Afghan settlement that would have incentivized peace among warring Afghan parties. Second, the mission's 50 personnel were incapable of implementing UNGOMAP's limited mandate. Third, the mandate was almost exclusively focused on interstate dynamics (among the United States, Pakistan, PDPA regime, and Soviet Union) and ignored intra-Afghan conflict.⁵⁶ Without a viable settlement or credible third-party monitoring mechanism backed by a legitimating mandate, internal Afghan parties proved incapable of overcoming information and commitment challenges and continued fighting. Beyond these internal dynamics, additional peacekeepers, with greater geographical reach, were needed for a credible monitoring and verification mechanism to incentivize mutual noninterference in Afghanistan from external parties and support refugee resettlement.

As the Cold War ended and Washington and Moscow agreed to cease supporting warring factions in December 1991, UNGOMAP was already disbanded, internal violence levels were rising, and the political will for a new PKO did not exist.⁵⁷ Two months after Soviet military and financial aid ceased, the PDPA government in Kabul collapsed and Afghanistan descended into chaos.⁵⁸ As the great-power proxy competition ended, the international political atmosphere facilitated the abandonment of Afghanistan, and remaining external influence from Pakistan fueled continuing civil conflict, eventually leading to the establishment of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996 and a safe haven for international terrorists.

In summary, UNGOMAP provides an instructive case for how an under-resourced PKO may fail in providing stability and incentivizing compliance with a peace settlement. Commenting on states that relapse back into fighting, Barbara Walter notes, “Commitment problems are more likely to emerge in countries where no third party has offered to help with the transition, or where peacekeepers were inadequate (e.g., they failed to arrive, they were too few to offer a credible force, or they left before the military and political transitions were complete).”⁵⁹ Though successful in verifying the withdrawal of conventional Soviet forces, UNGOMAP was not paired with a viable intra-Afghan settlement and lacked the capacity required to credibly monitor Afghanistan and Pakistan’s mutual noninterference. Lacking a mandate and resources to credibly monitor intra-Afghan parties, the PKO failed to meaningfully ease commitment and information problems hindering intra-Afghan bargaining efforts. Applying the historical lessons from UNGOMAP’s shortcomings and conflict studies’ work on noncooperative bargaining and PKOs, I next outline several policy options for PKO packages that may incentivize compliance with an intra-Afghan peace settlement.

Policy Options for an Afghanistan PKO

Conflict research and history provide invaluable lessons for how a well-resourced PKO may support an intra-Afghan peace agreement and long-term stability in Afghanistan. Below, I briefly outline three PKO options and then analyze each option’s benefits and costs. As initially discussed above, this PKO cannot occur without an intra-Afghan peace settlement and consent. While this currently appears improbable, conditions may change over time, and a credible PKO’s possibility could lessen uncertainty during intra-Afghan negotiations and provide a means of arriving at a settlement, especially if talks are stalemated. Later, I assess the likelihood of Afghan parties granting consent.

As noted above, these options are based on traditional peacekeeping missions, designed to passively monitor and verify a settlement’s provisions. Specifically, all three PKOs presented below would likely monitor a cease fire, investigate alleged settlement violations, and support refugee resettlement. Peacekeepers would be lightly armed with relatively narrow mandates that only authorized the use of force for self-defense.⁶⁰ A robust peace enforcement mission with a transformational mandate that authorized the use of force to enforce a settlement would likely not be acceptable for the Taliban, nor for troop-contributing countries. From the Taliban’s limited public statements, it is clear that they would not accept a peace enforcement PKO, and pursuing this approach would immediately negate Afghan consent.⁶¹

- **Option 1 Broad Coverage:** Afghanistan's civil conflict has engulfed the majority of the country, and current estimates suggest that 190 districts (of 397 total districts) are currently contested between the Taliban and the GOA.⁶² Presumably, these districts would be ideal locations for a peacekeeping force to monitor a ceasefire and assist with combatant demobilization and reintegration. Though detailed troop-to-task analysis is required, company-sized elements would provide the minimum force required to monitor and patrol each formerly contested district, while providing requisite force protection functions at respective PKO outposts.⁶³ PKO battalions should also be located in the ten largest cities, with a regiment based in Kabul. In total, the entire PKO force would approach 25,000. Based on estimates from contemporary PKOs, this mission would cost approximately 2 billion USD annually.⁶⁴
- **Option 2 Medium Coverage:** Rather than focusing on contested districts and cities, this option would only deploy peacekeepers in major cities. Using a threshold of 200,000 residents to define *major city*, the PKO would send one to two battalions to each of Afghanistan's ten largest cities, and a regiment to Kabul. In total, this would comprise approximately 12,000 peacekeepers. Using similar financial projections as described above, this mission would cost approximately 1 billion USD annually.
- **Option 3 Narrow Coverage:** Options 1 and 2 may be too intrusive to attain intra-Afghan consent for a PKO. This final option presents the smallest PKO possible that could provide a credible monitoring mechanism. Under this option, a PKO regiment would be based in Kabul, with PKO battalions based in Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif. In total, this mission would require 5,000 peacekeepers and would cost approximately 500 million USD annually.

Option Analysis and Recommendations

Option 1's broad coverage provides the most credible force to fulfill crucial monitoring, verification, and investigation mechanisms that would incentivize settlement compliance and deter violations. The PKO's wide geographic footprint supports widespread monitoring during the implementation phase and enables peacekeepers to verify if Afghanistan is being used as a terrorist safe haven. It further allows peacekeepers to promptly investigate alleged settlement violations. If acceptable to intra-Afghan parties, the sizable force in this option could monitor and assist with disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants. Considering that the current US military mission costs approximately 45–50 billion USD annually for 12,000 troops, this option's 2 billion USD annual

cost is relatively modest.⁶⁵ However, there are also real drawbacks to this option. First, the large peacekeeping force and budget would make this one of the largest PKOs ever conducted, and it would require large financial and troop contributions from supporting states. As the COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged economies around the globe, this option's steep financial burden may not be feasible.⁶⁶ Further, the larger footprint means that peacekeepers will face increased vulnerabilities. Hundreds of small, company-sized outposts, and platoon-level patrols will be vulnerable to attacks by potential spoilers like Islamic State–Khorasan (IS–K).⁶⁷ Because it is difficult to mitigate option 1's increased risk, it is unclear if the political will exists in potential troop-contributing countries (TCC) to support the PKO. When Afghanistan's rugged geography is paired with the PKO's wide coverage, this also increases the logistical burden on the PKO headquarters, requiring additional service, support, and medical evacuation assets. Finally, and most importantly, it is unclear if key Taliban stakeholders would willingly consent to a large foreign force in their country, as suggested in Taliban Deputy Sirajuddin Haqqani's recent *New York Times* op-ed.⁶⁸

Option 2's medium coverage presents lower risk to peacekeepers but does so at the cost of significantly degraded monitoring and verification capabilities. Basing PKO contingents in the cities will allow for bases with hardened force protection measures. When paired with the PKO's concentration in fewer locations, the risk to peacekeepers is significantly reduced, which may assist in recruiting TCCs. The reduced troop requirements will also halve the required PKO costs and ease PKO headquarters' logistical burdens. Though it will not provide coverage to Afghanistan's rural population, option 2 still covers 22.4 percent of Afghanistan's total population of 36.6 million people.⁶⁹ Despite these benefits to TCCs and financial backers, option 2's reduced troop presence decreases the PKO's ability to credibly monitor and verify a future settlement. This reduced coverage increases risks of settlement violations in rural areas, as local power brokers may be incentivized to use violence to assert control. This plan lacks the requisite forces to support disarmament and demobilization throughout Afghanistan. Further, it increases the risk that terrorist organizations will use Afghanistan to train, plan, and conduct operations in remote areas. The smaller peacekeeping force will lack capacity to credibly investigate alleged violations, outside of the cities where peacekeepers are based. This risk can potentially be mitigated by sending PKO patrols to investigate violations and supplementing the mission with unmanned, unarmed surveillance drones to monitor remote locations. However, long-range patrolling increases risk to peacekeepers and will strain local PKO contingents' available manpower and logistical support.

Option 3’s narrow coverage magnifies the risks and benefits from option 2. The smaller PKO footprint located in major cities decreases risk to peacekeepers, decreases resupply burdens, and significantly lowers the mission’s financial costs. Approximately 17 percent of Afghanistan’s total population and most large business interests reside in these four cities, and those Afghans would benefit from the additional security and stability brought by the PKO’s direct presence. Though this option entails large risks with further reductions to monitoring and verification capabilities, it still provides a degree of geographic coverage. This force’s small size further reduces the PKO’s credibility, and it would not be able to support disarmament and demobilization, and its investigatory capacity would be limited to local areas surrounding the four host cities.⁷⁰

Table 1: Credible Afghanistan peacekeeping options overview

PKO Factors	Option 1 “Broad”	Opt. 2 “Medium”	Opt. 3 “Narrow”
Estimated Size	25,000	12,000	5,000
Estimated Annual Cost	\$2 billion*	\$1 billion*	\$500 million*
Monitoring Capability	High	Moderate	Low
Verification Capability	High	Moderate	Low
Afghanistan Population Coverage	30-40%**	22.4%	17%
Risk to PKO	High	Low	Low
PKO Logistical Burden	High	Moderate	Low
Shared Factors	Traditional PKO with lightly armed forces, authorized to use force in self-defense, focused on settlement monitoring and verification		

* See endnote 63. Further financial analysis is required.

** Depends on ultimate composition and disposition of company-sized PKO units.

Of these possibilities, the option 1 provides the best monitoring and verification capability. Its wider geographic coverage will better enable peacekeepers to support disarmament and demobilization and credibly monitor a ceasefire and an intra-Afghan peace settlement’s implementation. Further, it can promptly investigate alleged violations. Despite increased risks to dispersed peacekeepers, this PKO’s presence would be critical to deterring widespread violations and local power struggles. It is possible that intra-Afghan parties may consent to a PKO but resist this plan’s wide geographic coverage and large foreign presence. Further, COVID-19’s economic impacts and risk averse TCCs may avoid this option’s large costs and troop requirements. Under these circumstances, it is important to note that these options are clearly not distinct choices. Rather they represent a continuum of possibilities. The exact PKO composition and disposition could be scaled up or down, based on Afghan requests and TCCs’ willingness and avail-

ability to contribute. While the US government should advocate for a broad coverage plan, if that is not acceptable to applicable parties, then scaling down to medium or narrow coverage would still partially support a settlement. In the long run, even narrow coverage would still provide an intra-Afghanistan peace settlement with increased probability of success.

Anything less than option 3 would no longer represent a credible monitoring and verification mechanism. For example, a PKO regiment based only in Kabul would represent a purely symbolic force that would not incentivize compliance with an intra-Afghan deal. Investing in a suboptimal PKO would be unwise, since it will give the Taliban the illusion of granting a concession, yet the mission would lack credible monitoring and verification capacity, negating all potential benefits outlined above. Given likely Taliban objections toward a PKO and increasing Western impetuous to withdrawal, the most probable Afghanistan PKO outcome appears to be a lightly resourced, symbolic mission that lacks the resources needed to provide a credible monitoring and verification mechanism. As seen with UN-GOMAP, an ineffectual PKO will not relieve the information and commitment problems that prolong conflict and incentivize reversion to fighting. Should the Taliban reject all these options, then the US and international community will be forced to rely on ongoing financial aid as its primary mechanism to incentivize settlement agreement and compliance.

Critics of these proposals may allege that an Afghanistan PKO may result in another indefinite mission, similar to those seen in the Congo and Darfur. However, this PKO does not need to be indefinite. Rather, it needs to provide monitoring and verification mechanisms while an intra-Afghan settlement is being implemented. During this fragile period, former combatants who are demobilizing will be vulnerable, spoilers will seek to inject confusion and misattribute attacks in efforts to derail successful implementation and compliance. As described above, a credible PKO could support stability during that transition period. Others may worry about an aggressive PKO that is used to *enforce* a future settlement. However, as I argued above, this PKO should be used as a monitoring and verification mechanism, rather than a transformative state-building mission that seeks to enforce the settlement. As noted by Lise Howard, peacekeeping missions are not counterinsurgency operations. Rather PKOs are based on “impartiality, consent of the warring factions, and the non-use of force.”⁷¹

Beyond the features I outlined above, a potential Afghanistan PKO should consider the following points to increase the mission’s probability of success:

- Ideal Troop Contributing Countries: Operation Enduring Freedom combatants would not likely be acceptable to the Taliban, given neutrality con-

siderations. Thus, troops from NATO members, Jordan, South Korea, Japan, Nepal, Ukraine, Georgia, Australia, and New Zealand cannot be used. Similarly, history, regional interests, and geopolitics disqualify Pakistan, India, Russia, and China. Possible options include capable South American states (i.e., Brazil, Columbia), African states (i.e., Senegal, Egypt), Indonesia, and Bangladesh. Though these states lack advanced militaries and regional expertise, a lightly armed PKO would not require advanced capabilities, and interpreters and liaisons could be attached to smaller units.⁷² It is unclear whether any of these states would willingly contribute forces to this high-risk mission. However, if a neutral PKO was operating with intra-Afghan consent, then risk to observers would be reduced. The United States and UNSC could further entice TCCs with financial and equipment incentives—though these will further increase the mission's costs.

- **Leadership:** The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) has the infrastructure and skill required to manage a complex PKO.⁷³ The multilateral nature of DPKO would enhance the mission's neutrality and legitimacy. Other regional organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe would not possess requisite neutrality. Considering the UNSC's interest in a stable Afghanistan, the Permanent Five would likely approve a DPKO-led PKO in Afghanistan.
- **Capabilities:** While the options above outlined basic PKO monitoring missions, several additional functions can be forecasted. In the options above, the PKO will not allow perfect coverage of Afghanistan's 397 districts. The mission should employ unmanned, unarmed surveillance drones to monitor districts without peacekeepers and conduct rapid aerial investigations of reported settlement violations. This drone capability would be even more important under medium or narrow coverage plans; however, most ideal TCCs lack these capabilities organically, and some technical requirements may need to be contracted. Explosive ordnance disposal units would be critical for demining and safely disposing of unexploded ordnance, which will be critical in minimizing harm to noncombatants.⁷⁴ Trained election monitors could monitor ballot stations if elections were part of a settlement.
- **Counterterrorism Mission:** Some analysts have argued that Afghanistan requires an external counterterrorism force to continue advise and assist operations with Afghan special forces to target remaining IS-K and extremist cells. Though not likely, if accepted by Afghan parties, this force should be excluded from the PKO, as this would violate the mission's impartiality.

Is a PKO a Realistic Option?

At this time, it appears unlikely that key Taliban power brokers would willingly consent to a PKO.⁷⁵ To date, the Taliban have consistently communicated that one of their main objectives is the departure of all international forces from Afghanistan.⁷⁶ Despite that fact, there is reason to believe that the Taliban may eventually be willing to accept a neutral PKO mission whose presence is based on Afghan consent, rather than a great power viewed as an invader. The status quo's ongoing fighting is costly, and estimates suggest at least 42,100 Taliban fighters have been killed over the last 19 years.⁷⁷ It is clear that intra-Afghan talks will be contentious and GOA power brokers doubt the Taliban's willingness and ability to credibly commit to a settlement's provisions. Stalemated negotiations will continue these costs for both the Taliban and the GOA. To gain desired reforms and end the costly status quo, the Taliban may willingly accept a short-term, consent-based PKO in exchange for bargained concessions that produced an incentive-compatible agreement.

The Taliban's success to date does not speak to the organization's ability to achieve a decisive military takeover of Afghanistan in its entirety. If the Taliban were to abandon intra-Afghan negotiations and seek a decisive military conclusion, it would incur large costs and face significant risks. While some estimates place the Taliban's military force at 150,000, the ANSF still have more than 300,000 soldiers.⁷⁸ While the Taliban control 19 percent of Afghanistan's districts, the GOA maintains control of 46 percent of the total population.⁷⁹ Survey data suggests that close to 70 percent of the population feel "threatened" by the Taliban, and large majorities oppose significant changes to the existing constitution's civil liberties.⁸⁰ These figures suggest the Taliban are far from parity with the GOA and lack the widespread support needed for a complete takeover. During the Taliban's initial rise to power in 1996, they failed to completely control the entire country and spent five years fighting the Northern Alliance.⁸¹ Even if the GOA were to fragment under pressure from the Taliban and reduced external support, many experts doubt the Taliban would gain complete control of the country.⁸²

Though not guaranteed, it is also possible that the United States may return to support its former GOA allies in a limited capacity. As seen in Operation Inherent Resolve and the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the United States military and international partners provided critical combat capabilities with minimal ground forces to enable successful host-nation military offensives. Further, if the Taliban did abandon talks for a military offensive, the United States could pursue aggressive aerial targeting of Afghan opium fields in Taliban-held areas, cutting off a critical source of Taliban financing. Thus, while

the Taliban may consider a military solution, rather than a diplomatic one, doing so would likely entail high costs.

Continued financial aid also provides the international community with further leverage to advocate for a PKO. Afghanistan will require significant and sustained financial assistance for the foreseeable future. This is evident as the GOA currently collects 2.5 billion USD in revenue to support an annual budget of 11 billion USD.⁸³ Though security expenditures should decrease following a settlement, Afghanistan will still require significant funding to support recovery, basic government services, and economic development.⁸⁴ Several studies have found that external financial aid can lower the probability of civil conflicts recurrence.⁸⁵ To incentivize intra-Afghan consent, some aid could be conditional on intra-Afghan parties accepting a PKO. Since the Taliban would be part of a post-settlement Afghan state, they will directly benefit from this continued financial support. When this aid is paired with a PKO, it provides donors with an impartial method of verifying their funds are being used as directed.⁸⁶ Therefore, this international financial aid presents a critical tool to incentive intra-Afghan (especially Taliban) consent for a PKO.

Conclusion

Though the Taliban will not likely change their public insistence on the complete withdrawal of all foreign forces in the near-term, this could change in the future. Just as the PDPA maintained power for several years following the Soviet withdrawal, the GOA may prove it can independently maintain relative military superiority without US and NATO forces and continue inflicting large costs on Taliban forces. If this occurs, then the Taliban may be willing to consent to a credible PKO in the short term to reap the long-term benefits from an incentive-compatible settlement. Over the last 20 years, the Taliban have demonstrated an impressive strategic patience and willingness to play the long game.⁸⁷ The Taliban agreeing to a PKO would be an important signal that its leadership generally intend to comply with the provisions of an intra-Afghan agreement, and this signal may be critical in convincing GOA elites to reach a settlement. Though a PKO has not been widely discussed or advocated for by GOA elites, given the information and commitment problems outlined above, it represents a viable mechanism to dissuade Taliban defections.

While the United States has strategic interest in a stable, safe-haven-free Afghanistan, it appears likely that US troops will completely withdraw—potentially in the next year. To prepare for a future Afghanistan without the US military's coercive leverage, Washington needs to support options that bolster an intra-Afghan settlement's probability for success. While financial aid will be necessary

to provide a degree of leverage, it likely will not be sufficient to completely incentivize compliance with a settlement. Repeating Afghanistan's reversion to civil war following the Soviet withdrawal is not an acceptable option. If Afghanistan again becomes a failed state, it poses a direct threat to US and international security interests. Experts have forecasted a massive refugee exodus, which would further destabilize Europe.⁸⁸ Groups like IS-K and al-Qaeda would exploit the chaos to take advantage of the safe haven, recruit new members, and continue exporting violence outside of Afghanistan's borders.⁸⁹ Already filled with tension between Pakistan and India, South Asia's stability would be further threatened, and spillover into Pakistan places that state's nuclear arsenal at risk.⁹⁰ Given these dangers, the United States and international community should seriously consider reasonable measures to support a bargained solution and long-term stability in Afghanistan.

While an Afghanistan PKO may not be viable now, this could change in the future, and analyzing requisite conditions and a PKO's ideal composition is worthwhile, given the high stakes involved. If an intra-Afghan settlement appears possible in the coming years, an Afghan PKO offers a credible mechanism for intra-Afghan parties to attain desired concessions and achieve internal stability. US policy makers should conduct feasibility assessments on a future PKO. US negotiators could begin quietly socializing the possibility of a PKO with intra-Afghan parties, and the Department of State could begin confidential initial planning with the UN DPKO, potential TCCs, and financial backers. While the United States cannot direct other states to contribute to a PKO, Washington can leverage its diplomatic and economic power to identify contributors, secure financial backers, and work toward a UNSC mandate to authorize the mission. If a credible PKO was assembled, then GOA negotiators could bargain for a PKO during negotiations with the Taliban. Contingent on Afghan consent, this option may alleviate GOA uncertainties in negotiations with the Taliban and clear the way for an eventual acceptance and implementation of an intra-Afghan peace agreement. The dangerous prospects of continued fighting in Afghanistan necessitate immediate efforts to support long-term peace and stability. ♣

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Notes

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35. Doyle and Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace*; and Fjelde, et al., "Protection through presence."

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56. The 2020 US–Taliban agreement has similarities to the Geneva Accords' international focus and failure to address internal civil conflict dynamics.
57. Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 268–70.
58. Just as the PDPA quickly collapsed following the Soviet Union's cessation in financial aid, a similar collapse could occur if the United States ended GOA financial aid during negotiations with the Taliban. Rubin, *Search for Peace in Afghanistan*, 10.
59. Walter, "Bargaining Failures and Civil War," 258.
60. While a civilian protection mandate may be permissible, if it is not acceptable to intra-Afghan parties, then it should not be a red-line requirement for the PKO to proceed.
61. Borhan Osman's survey of Taliban fighters suggests that foreign military forces—seen as controlling the Afghan government—are one of the primary motivators compelling the Taliban rank and file to fight. I suggest that a lightly armed and neutral PKO, operating with intra-Afghan consent, may be viewed differently. See: Borhan Osman, *A Negotiated End to the Afghan Conflict: The Taliban's Perspective* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2019).
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Cyprus consists of 1,100. However, there are also examples of large traditional PKOs, like the United Nation's Operations in Mozambique approached 10,000 personnel. See "Troop and Police Contributors," Data Section, United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, accessed on 9 April 2020, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/>.

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