

# Trump's deal with the Taliban set the stage for the Afghan collapse

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History will mark Aug. 15, 2021, as the date that the Afghan government collapsed and the Taliban retook control over this troubled and war-torn country. But the real date that the Taliban's victory was assured is Feb. 29, 2020, the day the Trump administration signed what it characterized as a "peace" deal with the Taliban. Once this agreement was signed — the tragic collapse we witnessed this weekend was inevitable.

Of course, the agreement was not, and could not possibly have been, a "peace" deal since one of the parties currently at war — the Afghan government — was not a signatory. Rather, this was a "withdrawal" agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban that set the terms for the complete departure of American troops from Afghanistan by May 2021.

What did the United States gain in exchange for this withdrawal, for which the Taliban had been fighting for 20 years? Nothing but vague, unenforceable promises that the Taliban would not engage in hostilities against the departing U.S. troops and would "send a clear message" to al Qaeda that it "had no place" in Afghanistan. So eager Trump was to withdraw, we did not even hold out for a clear, firm commitment that the Taliban would not provide aid, safe harbor or weaponry to al Qaeda and like-minded groups. The agreement contained no enforcement mechanisms and included no penalties on the Taliban for failing to comply with its terms.

Once the agreement was signed, the fate of the Afghan government was signed, sealed and delivered — the Taliban had practically won the war. There was no way that the government could possibly survive.

The fact that the United States entered into negotiations and then an agreement with the Taliban, without even inviting the Afghan government to the table, undercut the power and legitimacy of the government. The citizenry, including those in the national armed services and police, could plainly see that its own government was being ignored, a helpless bystander in critical discussions about the country's future. After we had cut the legs out from under this government and rendered it a paper tiger, it is no wonder that when those serving in the Afghan army and police were asked to fight, most said, "No, thanks."

The agreement also did absolutely nothing to attempt to bring about a peaceful settlement of the war between the Afghan government and the Taliban. A genuine peace deal would have made our withdrawal contingent on the progress of peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. But it did not. Trump agreed unconditionally to bring down U.S. troop levels to 8,600 by mid-July 2020 and totally withdraw by May 2021.

The agreement anticipated there would be peace negotiations, but in August, Trump voluntarily cut troop levels down to 4,500, even more quickly than required by the agreement, even though negotiations had not even begun. This was a clear signal there would be no linkage between withdrawals and peace, contrary to what U.S. diplomats were telling the parties. This signal was received loud and clear by the Taliban. They balked at starting negotiations until December, and even then, had zero incentive to make any concessions since Trump had already announced that there would be only 2,500 troops in Afghanistan by the time he left office, the smallest U.S. force in 20 years. It was clear to the Taliban that the Americans were quickly headed for the exits.

When the fighting season began again this year, the only hope for the Afghan government was to show that it could stand up to the Taliban even with reduced American support to gain leverage at the bargaining table. But results on the ground were just the opposite. The Taliban gobbled up territory more quickly than it had in years. As the Taliban's power increased, it had even less reason to engage in peace negotiations.

To stem the Taliban's momentum on the ground this spring, the Biden administration would have had to not only abrogate the Trump withdrawal agreement but also deploy more troops and get them more deeply involved in the fighting. This would have breached Biden's campaign commitment to end the war in Afghanistan and ran against the strong bipartisan public support for withdrawal.

The Taliban reads statements from American politicians and likely watches poll numbers. They could not have been surprised when, in April, Biden reaffirmed the American commitment to a complete withdrawal of troops, albeit on a somewhat slower timetable.

The Taliban knew it had won the war once Biden's predecessor had signed the troop withdrawal agreement — now it was only a matter of time.