

Is America's "Deep State" Divided over the Taliban Peace Talks?

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Not everyone in America's permanent military, intelligence, and diplomatic bureaucracies ("deep state") is on the same page regarding the ongoing Taliban peace talks, especially when it comes to the official role of increasingly irrelevant Kabul in this process.

Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan [paid a surprise visit](#) to Afghanistan at the beginning of the week where he spoke about the need to include increasingly irrelevant Kabul in the ongoing peace process, which was a reaffirmation of the US' official position on the matter but one which isn't being followed by Special Envoy Khalilzad in his latest peace push with the Taliban. The emerging differences over this topic between the military and diplomatic representatives of the US "deep state" highlight the diverging interests between these two bureaucratic factions when it comes to America's possible withdrawal from Afghanistan and deserve to be explored a bit more at length in order to properly understand their competing visions.

Shanahan represents the military's traditionally conservative approach towards peace talks, which are usually approached with caution and interpreted by this institution as more of a political game than anything else. Over one hundred thousand Americans have fought for Kabul's sake, roughly 20,000 of them have been wounded for it, and over 2,000 gave their lives to protect its writ, which is why it's so humiliating for the military to see the State Department's envoy dealing exclusively with the Taliban and negotiating their country's withdrawal with it instead of with the internationally recognized authorities in the Afghan capital. Although the argument can be made that it's better for America's long-term military interests to "cut and run" from this quagmire, it can't be overlooked how much prestige the military believes that it loses by doing so, especially in the context of a "negotiated surrender" to the Taliban.

As for Zalmay Khalilzad, he's not fazed by any of this since professional diplomats often understand conflicts much differently than their military counterparts do and are more concerned with the "bigger picture" than anything else. That being the case, Khalilzad might rightly believe that America's international reputation can be somewhat improved by finally withdrawing from Afghanistan and responsibly allowing its most popular on-the-ground forces to progressively return to power as part of a "political transition", which would show that "America First" is just as much about reaching pragmatic peace deals with hated foes as it is about increasing the pressure on Great Power rivals. In addition, it would therefore make sense to earn the Taliban's trust in order to protect American investments after the withdrawal.

Concerning the intelligence community, none of their high-level representatives have yet to hint at their stance towards the Taliban peace talks, but that's to be expected since they're only officially supposed to procure, analyze, and disseminate information to their country's military and diplomatic leaders involved in this process than independently try to shape the outcome one way or another. That doesn't mean that a few of them might not "go rogue" and try to subvert the President's plans like some of their colleagues have been doing in other respects such as their nation's relations with Russia, but just that this has yet to be evidenced and might not actually materialize since they're probably more concerned with other operations instead, such as "containing" China.

In conclusion, two of America's three most relevant "deep state" factions are certainly at odds with one another, but the very nature of the diplomat-driven US-Taliban peace talks means that the military doesn't have much of a say in this process. It's not that the institution as a whole wouldn't benefit from a withdrawal, or even that it's entirely against such a move in the first place, but just that they'd prefer for it to be done in what they traditionally view to be a "dignified" fashion by at least going through the motions of involving the increasingly irrelevant authorities in Kabul who America's servicemen fought, died, and were wounded to protect. They needn't worry, however, because Khalilzad will probably rope them into this arrangement sooner than later, though likely only at the tail end for symbolism's sake and under intense pressure to sign a pre-agreed Taliban peace deal.

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