

THE US-TALIBAN RELATIONSHIP DURING THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND ITS CURRENT IMPACTS¹

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of the Trump administration in the United States, major adjustments have taken place in the global and regional strategies of the United States. The US policy towards the Islamic world presents a complex overall contraction trend and strengthens the focus area. Specifically, the US has rapidly and strategically contracted from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan in an attempt to concentrate its efforts on super-containment and extreme pressure on Iran. The Trump administration has thus accelerated the pace of withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and compromising with the Taliban. This is not only the inevitable result of the strategy of “opposing every Obama policy” since the Trump administration came to power. It is also a rational consideration after evaluating the overall strategic positioning of the Islamic world. As early as the Obama administration, the United States had the willingness to compromise with the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, due to the specific positioning of the US Middle East strategy at the time, such compromises were often unstable, especially with the characteristic of “promoting compromise by force”. The Obama Administration’s “New Afghanistan-Pakistan Strategy” of “withdrawing troops from Iraq and increasing troops in Afghanistan” was introduced in this context, but the actual effect was limited. As the Trump administration has returned to the old focus of the Islamic world strategy, the containment over Iran, its related strategic layout has also undergone tremendous adjustments. In terms of the long-term strategic swings between the Gulf region and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region within the Greater Middle East, the US has focused its military projection and deterrence on the Gulf region; in the Gulf region, the US has focused its military deterrence on Iran and used it to make military deployment adjustments within the Gulf Allies.

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I. THE DEVELOPMENT PHASES OF US-TALIBAN RELATIONS UNDER TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

The peace talks between the Trump administration and the Taliban in Afghanistan were established during the Obama administration. The Obama administration's strategy is to divide the Afghan Taliban into moderate Taliban and extremist Taliban. It is the basic logic of its attempt to divorce the two parties of Taliban by accommodating the moderate Taliban and fighting the extremist Taliban. In 2013, with the US promotion and the help from Qatar, the Afghan Taliban was able to establish a political office in Doha and successively received many Taliban leaders who went there to discuss peace issues in Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban set up this political office to restoring and maintaining a channel of institutionalized dialogue with the United States. The United States has also been looking for channels for dialogue with the Taliban. Qatar has provided a stable and safe environment for US-Taliban contacts due to its active promotion of "small country's diplomacy with powers". The Trump administration has announced that the United States will hold direct dialogue with the Taliban in Afghanistan. After the Trump administration came to power, the relationship between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan has gone through three stages. Despite fluctuations and instability, reconciliation between the US and the Taliban is a joint interest appeal. The Afghan Taliban has been playing two balls alternately: active peace talks and pressures by force, hoping to force the United States to make more compromises in the withdrawal process and even in its attitude towards the Afghan government.

(1) The first stage: policy preparation period (January 2017 to August 2017)

Although the Trump administration has strong dissatisfaction with the Obama administration, it continued the latter's Afghanistan policy when Trump took office. The Afghanistan strategy during Obama's era was the prelude to the "exit strategy" of the United States.⁴ The Obama administration hopes to solve the Afghan issue by formulating a practical political plan, including contacting the "moderate" Taliban and their negotiators. The Obama administration issued the "A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan" in 2009.⁵ The core content of the strategy includes:

⁴ Huasheng Zhao, Comment on the US New Afghanistan Strategy, *Fudan Journal (Social Science Edition)*, 2009(6), p. 1.

⁵ The White House, "A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," March 27, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/03/27/a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

to prevent al-Qaeda from re-emerging or threatening the United States; withdraw troops from Iraq and increase troops in Afghanistan; anti-terrorism and protection of human rights; dialogue with Taliban moderates, etc. This strategy means that the United States has begun to promote reconciliation with the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Obama administration's new Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy laid the foundation for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. In August 2017, the Trump administration officially released the new US strategy for Afghanistan. Trump insisted on withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and said, "We can't be there for the next 20 years. We've been there for 20 years and we've been protecting the country but we can't be there for the next – eventually, they're going to have to protect themselves."⁶ This shows that from the Trump administration's view, the economic and military costs of the United States' long-term investment in Afghanistan have become extremely heavy. In addition, it also reflects the fact that the United States fully realizes all efforts since the 2001 Afghanistan War have failed: that is, the United States not only failed to completely eliminate the Taliban in Afghanistan, but also has to face the fact that the Taliban has made a comeback and occupy half of the country in Afghanistan.

(2) The second stage: the advancing period of the peace talks (August 2017 to February 2020)

At this stage, the Trump administration's Afghanistan policy ensures that the United States "decently" withdraw its troops from Afghanistan and maximize the Taliban's participation in the reconstruction of the country led by the Afghan government, but these two demands are contradictory. After the Trump administration's new Afghanistan strategy was launched, the Afghan Taliban hinted that they could negotiate with the United States. This was what the US wanted. In March 2018, at the high-level meeting on Afghanistan issues held in Uzbekistan, the Afghan government made peace proposals to the Taliban.⁷ In July 2018, senior Afghan Taliban officials stated that American diplomats had face-to-face meetings with Taliban representatives at the Taliban's Doha political office and no Afghan government official was present.⁸ Although the spokesperson of the US State Department did not respond to questions about whether the "secret" talk was held, he did not deny that its diplomats participated in the talk. In August 2018, Trump

⁶ "Trump: Taliban could 'possibly' Seize Power after US Troops Leave, *Aljazeera*, March 6, 2020.

⁷ "Tashkent Conference Backs Afghan Government's Peace Offer," March 27, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-offers-host-talks-taliban-afghanistan/29127849.html>.

⁸ "US Diplomats Held Face-to-Face Talks with Taliban, Insurgents Say," *New York Times*, July 28, 2018.

appointed Zalmay Khalilzad⁹ as the US Special Envoy for Afghanistan to start negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan on behalf of the US. In October 2018, the US-Taliban negotiations officially began. In the same month, Mullah Baradar, one of the founders of the Taliban in Afghanistan, was “released” by Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban immediately publicly announced a “peace road map” negotiated with the United States, which involved a wide range of issues of common concern to the Afghan people, such as the rights of women and minorities, the ceasefire, the withdrawal of foreign troops and fighters, and the political prospects of Afghanistan.

Since February 2019, the negotiations between the US and the Taliban have stepped on a formal track, and the negotiation process has gone through fierce games and instability since then. The themes of the multi-round negotiations between the US and the Taliban in Doha were troop withdrawal and counterterrorism. The Taliban in Afghanistan required the United States to provide a specific timetable for withdrawal, while the United States required the Taliban to cut off all ties with Al-Qaeda and other international terrorist organizations. Khalilzad’s report stated that the negotiations that began in 2019 were “more productive than they have been in the past,” and a draft peace agreement was reached.¹⁰ The US-Taliban negotiation process is also full of twists and turns: Although the two sides formed a draft in July 2019 on the negotiations’ content, there were significant differences between the Pashto, Dari and English versions. For example, the English version did not mention the core issue of the Taliban’s concern: to require all foreign troops to withdraw from Afghanistan.¹¹ In the subsequent negotiation process, the Afghan Taliban used extreme force to pressure the US. Despite its dissatisfaction, the US still maintained its basic position of compromising. In August 2019, the Afghan Taliban attacked Konduz, an important town in northern Afghanistan. In September 2019, it was close to reaching an agreement between the US and Taliban, but another suicide attack occurred in Kabul, killing 12 people, including an American soldier. Trump immediately announced the cancellation of the talks. However, the Taliban's attack on Afghan government targets has not yet stopped. The Afghan Taliban warned that if the peace talks were cancelled, the US would “have the most to lose”.¹² Trump said, “They thought that they had to kill people to put themselves in a little better negotiating position”, and he

⁹ Khalilzad was born in Afghanistan, he served as the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan after 2001. He has a good relationship with Afghans so that diplomatic negotiations can proceed smoothly.

¹⁰ “Afghan Peace Talks: Taliban Co-founder Meets Top White House Envoy,” *BBC News*, February 25, 2019.

¹¹ “Taliban, Afghan Delegates Agree on Road Map to Peace-- but Texts Differ,” July 9, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-afghan-delegates-agree-on-road-map-for-future-political-settlement/30045149.html>.

¹² “Afghan Peace Deal: Taliban Says US Has most to Lose from Cancelled Talks,” *BBC News*, September 8, 2019.

called the attack “a big mistake.”¹³ On September 18, the Taliban in Afghanistan eased, saying that if Trump decided to resume peace negotiations in the future, “the doors are open”,¹⁴ “So we hope the other side also rethink their decision regarding the negotiation.”¹⁵ The breakdown of the US-Taliban peace talks still reflects the dilemma of the Afghan Taliban’s choice of a path between the nation-state and the Islamic world empire, as well as the US’s response to the dilemma.¹⁶

(3) The third stage: the agreement period (February 2020 to January 2021)

One of the practical obstacles to the fact that the US and Taliban were unable to reach an agreement is that the Afghan Taliban cannot achieve a complete domestic ceasefire. For this sake, the Trump administration adopted the strategy of a seven-day reduction of violence agreement between the United States and the Taliban group, that is, after a seven-day ceasefire and the two sides express mutual trust and sincerity, the peace negotiation agreement can be signed. The US Secretary of State Pompeo said, “This is an important step on a long road to peace.”¹⁷ The Afghan Taliban negotiators said in a statement that they would create a “suitable security situation” before signing this agreement, and they hoped that the agreement would “lay the groundwork for peace across the country with the withdrawal of all foreign forces.”¹⁸ NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed this and added that it was “a critical test of the Taliban’s willingness and ability to reduce violence, and contribute to peace in good faith.”¹⁹ Then Secretary of State Pompeo announced that the first part of the negotiations with the Taliban was underway, stating that “a consensus has been reached with the Taliban to significantly reduce violence in various parts of Afghanistan” and that “upon a successful implementation of this understanding, signing of the US-Taliban [peace] agreement is expected to move forward. We are preparing for the signing to take place on February 29.”²⁰ On February 29, 2020, the US and Taliban signed the “Agreement for Bring Peace” to Afghanistan (referred to as the US-Taliban Agreement) for the first time since the 2001 Afghanistan War.²¹ The US-Taliban Agreement was signed in Doha by the US Special

¹³ “Afghan Peace Deal: Trump Says Taliban Talks are ‘Dead’,” *BBC News*, September 9, 2019.

¹⁴ “Afghanistan War: Taliban Tell Trump Their ‘Doors are Open’,” *BBC News*, September 18, 2019.

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ Ming He, “The confusion of choosing between nation-states and Islamic world empires: Another interpretation of the breakdown of negotiations between the United States and the Taliban”, *Social Science*, 2019(12).

¹⁷ “Afghanistan War: US and Afghan Taliban Start Partial Truce,” *BBC News*, February 21, 2020.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ “Afghanistan War: US and Afghan Taliban Start Partial Truce,” *BBC News*, February 21, 2020.

²¹ “Afghan Conflict: US and Taliban Sign Deal to End 18-year War,” *BBC News*, February 29, 2020.

Envoy for Afghanistan Khalilzad and the Taliban political leader Mullah Baradar, with Secretary of State Pompeo as a witness.

According to the version released by the US State Department, the US-Taliban Agreement consists of four parts and is interlocked: 1) Prevent any group or individual from using Afghanistan's land to endanger the security of the United States and its allies. 2) Announce the timetable for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. 3) Under the witness of the international community, the United States should announce the complete withdrawal of foreign troops and issue a timetable for withdrawal; The Taliban should announce that the Afghan territory will not be used to endanger the security of the United States and its allies. The United States does not recognize the regime named "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" used by the Taliban. The internal negotiations between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government (intra-Afghan Negotiations) should begin on March 10, 2020. 4) A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will become an agenda for intra- Afghanistan dialogue and negotiation. Intra-Afghan Negotiations will discuss the date and method of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including a joint implementation mechanism, which will be announced together with the agreement on Afghanistan's future political roadmap. Specifically, the smooth implementation of the first two parts of the agreement will lay the foundation for the latter two parts: 1) Reduce the number of troops: The United States will reduce the number of troops stationed in Afghanistan to 8,600 within 135 days after the agreement takes effect, and the allies will also reduce the number of troops in proportion; 2) Exchange of prisoners: exchange about 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 prisoners from Afghan security forces when the Taliban and the Afghan government start negotiations on March 10, 2020; 3) Sanctions will be lifted: the United Nations will lift sanctions on Taliban leaders within 3 months (as of May 29), the United States will lift sanctions before August 27; 4) Anti-terrorism commitment: the Afghan Taliban will not allow any of its members and other individuals or organizations, including Al Qaeda, to use Afghanistan's territory to threaten security of United States and its allies; 5) Ceasefire: A preliminary ceasefire is only a prerequisite for the initiation of intra- Afghanistan negotiations, and the real ceasefire will be achieved with the completion of the political agreement in Afghanistan.²²

²² US Department of State, "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America,"

After the US-Taliban agreement was reached, the United States began to try to promote negotiations between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government. The main content included the Afghan domestic peace process and framework of construction, including a permanent ceasefire, rights of women and the minorities, and domestic governance. However, a large number of violent attacks occurred within a few days after the signing of the US-Taliban agreement. On March 3 alone, the Afghan Taliban launched 43 attacks on Afghan security forces.²³ In response to this round of attacks, the US military launched an air strike against the Taliban in Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan, warning the Taliban to abide by the peace agreement. Even so, the United States still preserved its aplomb on the Taliban, and Secretary of State Pompeo stated that “it is time to move forward, it is time to reduce violence, it is time to sit down and talk.”²⁴ Trump was also working hard to promote the implementation of the agreement. On March 3, Trump had a telephone conversation with Baradar, the leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan. He was the first US president to have a direct dialogue with a high-level Taliban since 2001.²⁵ Trump stated that he had a “very good talk” with the Taliban leader but that the parties are currently concerned about the future of the agreement aimed to bring peace to Afghanistan.²⁶ The above shows the Trump administration’s expectations for the implementation of the peace agreement. Although the globe is still under the shadow of the pandemic of COVID-19, Pompeo continued his visit to Doha from Kabul.²⁷ The conclusion of the US-Taliban agreement is a milestone transaction that is full of uncertainties. In the future, reconciliation and peace within Afghanistan are the keys. The relationship between the US and the Taliban in Afghanistan will face new tests.

February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

²³ Brie Stimson, Lucia I. Suarez Sang, “US Military Targets Taliban Forces in ‘Defensive’ Airstrike, First Strike since Historic Peace Deal,” *Fox*, March 4, 2020.

²⁴ David Welna, “Despite Bloody Week in Afghanistan, US Pushes Taliban Peace Talks Forward,” *National Public Radio*, March 6, 2020.

²⁵ “Trump President Speak Taliban Leader Phone Call,” *Daily Mail*, March 3, 2020.

²⁶ “Afghan Conflict: Trump Hails ‘Very Good Talk’ with Taliban Leader,” *BBC News*, March 4, 2020.

²⁷ “Pompeo to Meet Taliban in Doha in Effort to Revive Peace Talks,” *Guardian*, March 23, 2020.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF US-TALIBAN RELATIONS UNDER TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

From the reconciliation process between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan, it can be seen that the relationship between the United States and Taliban has gone through ups and downs, and overall there is a trend of mutual compromise for the better. The two sides have carried out conditional cooperation based on adhering to their respective basic positions. It is very helpless for the United States to contact the Taliban in the context of Afghanistan's contraction strategy. The fundamental goal of the US strategy in Afghanistan and the ultimate goal of the Taliban have not changed substantially. The lack of mutual trust and great structural contradictions between the two sides have caused bilateral relations uncertainties. In short, since the Trump administration came to power, relations between the United States and the Taliban have demonstrated three essential characteristics.

First, compromise with each other for better development. The signing of the peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan results from the long-term efforts and appropriate compromise of both sides. The Trump administration's determination to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan has created preconditions for the US-Taliban peace talks. Simultaneously, the Taliban's senior leaders also realize that peace talks with the US are a shortcut to further gaining a favourable position in Afghanistan. To facilitate this peace agreement, the United States selected negotiators with Afghan background and leveraged the joint efforts of the international community to facilitate the conclusion of the agreement. In September 2018, Pakistan released Baradar, the political leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan, at Qatar's request, but it is generally believed that the real decision-maker behind it is the United States.²⁸ This release took place at the time when the US and Taliban started a direct dialogue. The United States hopes that Baradar will help the US and Taliban negotiate smoothly after his release, which shows the pragmatic attitude of the United States that it attaches great importance to the peace talks with the Taliban in order to speed up getting out of Afghanistan. In a statement, Trump urged Afghans to seize the opportunity of peace and create "a new future" for their country.²⁹ The Taliban in Afghanistan also

²⁸ "Afghan Taliban Founder Mullah Baradar 'Released' by Pakistan," *Al Jazeera*, October 25, 2018.

²⁹ "Trump urges Afghans to seize opportunity for peace," *BBC NEWS*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51684190?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Binforadio%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D>.

sent a high-profile delegation to participate in negotiations with the United States. In October 2018, after Pakistan announced the release of Baradar, the Afghan Taliban appointed him as a representative to participate in the negotiations in Doha. Although the negotiation process between the US and the Taliban and the implementation process after the signing of the agreement are full of twists and turns, the relationship between the two parties is actually “fighting without breaking”. In the long run, the overall relationship between the US and the Taliban is developing positively.

Second, the contacts between the two sides have not broken through their respective basic principles and positions. The improvement of US-Taliban relations is based on a series of subjective and objective conditions. Limited cooperation has fundamentally restricted the in-depth development of the peace talks, and has also led to uncertainties in the two sides' relations. In general, the United States' main goal is to withdraw troops from Afghanistan to reduce investment, but it also hopes to prevent the Taliban from seizing power. Therefore, the US government gradually tightens its military investment in Afghanistan and increases pressure on the Afghan government to further tie-up with the United States politically, to curb the spread of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan. Therefore, vigorous pressure on the Afghan government and moderate contact with the Taliban has become an option for the United States. The mutual contact and compromise between the US and the Taliban do not mean any changes in each other's core principles and bottom line. The United States only promises that the US military will withdraw from Afghanistan to end the war in Afghanistan. It is by no means the United States withdrawing from Afghanistan. The United States is only trying to change its way of existence in Afghanistan: to work with the international community to advance the peace process in Afghanistan under the premise of the “America First”. The Afghan Taliban insists on their independent status in negotiations with the United States, that is, striving to maintain their independent status and autonomy when negotiating with the United States, and always emphasizes that the Taliban will formulate specific countermeasures based on the US withdrawal situation. The Afghan Taliban also made it clear that the Afghan government is a “puppet” of the United States and continues to refuse to hold direct negotiations with it, stressing the withdrawal of all foreign troops, reviewing the Afghan Constitution, removing the Taliban from the sanctions list and releasing all Taliban prisoners currently detained by the Afghan government.

Third, the relationship between the US and the Taliban is full of uncertainty. The United States is currently in a period of contraction in Afghanistan. With the introduction of the Trump

administration's "Indo-Pacific Strategy", Afghanistan's strategic position has declined. The United States seeks to negotiate and engage with the Afghan Taliban is only a helpless and proactive choice of the United States. The Afghan government's weakness and its military have become a prerequisite for cooperation between the United States and the Taliban. Even so, the United States' fundamental interests are still closely linked to the Afghan government, and its attitude towards the Afghan Taliban is unlikely to undergo subversive changes. It can be seen from the background and negotiation process of the US-Taliban peace talks that although violent incidents occur from time to time, the atmosphere of relaxation and compromise in Afghanistan is on the rise. Although the content of the agreement to stop violence and withdraw troops is a significant achievement reached by the United States and Taliban since the start of the war in Afghanistan, this is only a compromise and concession within the controllable range of the United States and Taliban. The internal differences in Afghanistan are still coupled with the military friction between the United States and Taliban, showing that the relationship between the United States and Taliban is still very fragile. After the Eid al-Fitr ceasefire ended in June 2020, the Afghan Taliban resumed their attacks on Afghan security forces, and then the US forces launched airstrikes against the Taliban.³⁰ The uncertain relationship between the two parties hindered the peace talks' implementation and led to tensions in the security situation in Afghanistan.

In summary, the relationship between the US and the Taliban in Afghanistan during the Trump era shows an overall positive development trend. Although the contact between the two parties is limited, in adhering to their positions and maintaining flexibility in the negotiation process, the alternate use of direct political dialogue and limited means of force has deepened the understanding of each other's bottom line and demands. How to promote the contract's implementation will be a further test for the fragile mutual trust between US and Taliban.

³⁰ Xin Chen, Delu Zou, "US forces in Afghanistan killed 16 Taliban in air strikes", June 5, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-06/05/c_1126080293.htm.

III. MOTIVES FOR THE ADJUSTMENT OF US-TALIBAN RELATIONS DURING THE TRUMP ERA

Since the Bush administration launched the war in Afghanistan in 2001, the United States has worked hard in Afghanistan for nearly 20 years. Since then, the United States has gradually embarked on reconciliation with the Taliban, which has primarily obscured the original goal of the war in Afghanistan. The long-term asymmetry of input and output in Afghanistan has forced the United States to reconsider its investment. After the Trump administration came to power, in the context of real interests and significant changes in international relations, the US policy in Afghanistan has focused on the “decent” withdrawal of troops and peace talks with the Afghan Taliban, hoping to get out of Afghanistan quickly.

Although the United States sent troops to Afghanistan in the name of fighting terrorism in 2001 to overthrow the Taliban regime and deprived the “Al-Qaida” organization of its main shelter, after several years of dormancy and recovery, the Taliban made a comeback in Afghanistan. Since then, Afghanistan has been in trouble for a long time. Terrorism is rampant, warlords divide the country, tribal conflicts continue, and humanitarian crises and refugee issues need to be resolved urgently. The 19-year history of the Afghanistan War has made the United States deeply aware that Afghanistan’s strategic goals are challenging to achieve. The Trump administration no longer regards the Afghanistan issue as the most urgent or major national security challenge faced by the United States. Instead, it is targeting Iran’s “threat”. In this context, the United States needs to be more proactive in adjusting relations with the Taliban in Afghanistan to respond to changes in the Middle East and the international situation.

First, the reason from the perspective of the United States is the Trump administration's strategic adjustments and the clear understanding of the situation in Afghanistan. The important factor that prompted the United States to engage with the Taliban was not only the need for a strategic shift for the United States but also the continuous ravages of terrorism in Afghanistan that severely harmed US interests. Also, the advancement of the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” makes it necessary for the United States to resolve the Afghan issue as soon as possible to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan. In 2018, the US military deployed 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan, and

the annual financial investment in Afghanistan is approximately 45 billion dollars.³¹ As of 2019, nearly 3,500 US and NATO troops and tens of thousands of Afghans have been killed.³² As of the fiscal year 2019, the United States had spent approximately 900 billion dollars on direct war and reconstruction costs. Trump is determined to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Besides, the Trump administration intends to divert domestic conflicts in preparation for re-election. After Trump took office, the domestic political differences in the United States became more serious, but the decision to "end the US war in Afghanistan" was generally supported. According to American opinion polls, people from all walks of life in American politics and society hope that the war in Afghanistan will end.³³ Simultaneously, the departure of the major members of the Establishment Camp in the US military gives Trump more room for policy adjustments.³⁴

Second, the reason from the perspective of the Taliban in Afghanistan is the optimization of its internal structure and the accurate grasp of the United States' basic intentions. The domestic situation in Afghanistan is conducive to the rapid changes for its own and the change in the United States' attitude, prompting the Taliban leaders to fully consider their relationship with the United States and formulate a more active policy toward the United States. The internal adjustments of the Afghan Taliban also make it more confident to negotiate with the United States. The Afghan Taliban's internal vertical leadership system is more complete, centralized and adequate to adapt to environmental changes in a flexible and diversified manner; it has become increasingly mature in foreign exchanges.³⁵ It is conducive to open peace talks with the outside world. It is reported that the Afghan Taliban may be more united than outsiders guessed.³⁶ After the Taliban's former leader, Mullah Mansoor was killed by the US military in 2016, Haibatullah Akhundzada succeeded him. Under the latter's leadership, the Afghan Taliban's level of strategic planning and coordinated operations has been greatly improved, and some critical military victories have been achieved, making the Taliban more cohesive than in the past.³⁷ From the Trump administration's

³¹ Jamie Crawford, "Top US Military Officer Says Taliban 'Are Not Losing'," *CNN*, November 17, 2018.

³² "Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 1 January to 31 March 2019," *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan*, April 24, 2019.

³³ "National Tracking Pol: January04-06, 2019," *Morning Consult*, 2019, p. 114.

³⁴ Haiqi Zheng, "The Motivation and Prospects of the Trump Administration's Strategic Adjustment in Afghanistan", *International Forum*, 2019(5), p. 46.

³⁵ Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction, and Future," No.160, March 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/pw_160-taliban_fragmentation_fact_fiction_and_future-pw.pdf.

³⁶ Thomas Johnson, "Analysing the New Taliban Code of Conduct (Layeha): an Assessment of Changing Perspectives and Strategies of the Afghan Taliban," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.31, 2012(1), p.77-91.

³⁷ Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: A Figment of Your Imagination?" *War on the Rocks*, September 4, 2019.

determination to negotiate with the Taliban and the negotiation process and results, it can be seen that the Taliban is not a loose organization, but an organization with a relatively vertical command structure centered on leaders.³⁸ In 2019, Mullah Baradar, a leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan, was appointed as the director of the Doha political office. He ensured the continuous unity within the Taliban and negotiated with the United States on behalf of the Taliban. So far, the Taliban have achieved their goal of capturing most of the territory in southern and eastern Afghanistan, and are marching to the north. The leadership of the Taliban is establishing a parallel administrative organization to cover the nationwide logistics support and manage the intelligence network,³⁹ and gradually improve the ability of strategic planning and coordinated operations.

Third, the United States, the Afghan government, and the Taliban have a common need to deal with the threat of terrorism. The United States, the Afghan government, and the Taliban have a consensus on facing a common security threat--the raging "Islamic State" issue. The three parties are worried about the Afghan branch of the "Islamic State" and other extremist organizations in Afghanistan. Since its establishment, the "Islamic State" organization has been attacking cities in Iraq and Syria and setting up branches in various countries, and Afghanistan is one of them. The "Islamic State" has frequently launched attacks in Afghanistan and has seized control of Logar and other places, which used to be the territory of the "Al-Qaeda" and the Taliban. This has grammatically offended the Taliban. Since 2016, the United States has begun to strike against the Afghan branch of the "Islamic State". Concerns about the expansion of the "Islamic State" in Afghanistan have made the United States hesitate to withdraw its troops after the war in Afghanistan. The cooperation of the Taliban, the United States and the Afghan government forces will help combat terrorism. The three parties continue to carry out comprehensive and targeted operations to hunt down senior leaders of regional terrorist organizations and destroy terrorist networks. In January 2020, the US military pointed out in a report that the continuous US airstrikes, the ground armament of the Afghan security forces, and the Taliban's ground operations have all contributed to the continued defeat of the "Islamic State".⁴⁰ Trump pointed out, "The US military killed thousands of militants in Afghanistan. Now is the time to let others do it, and that is the

³⁸ Yuhong Fu, "A Comparative Analysis of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Taliban in Pakistan", *International Political Science*, 2014(1), p. 50

³⁹ Gilles Dorronsoro, "The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace," 2009, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/taliban_winning_strategy.pdf.

⁴⁰ "ISIS Loses more than Half Its Fighters from US Airstrikes and Taliban Ground Operations," *Military Times*, February 27, 2020.

Taliban." ⁴¹ When terrorist organizations such as the "Islamic State" continued to erode Afghanistan's land, the Taliban began to re-examine the United States, believing that the United States can become an ally in the fight against terrorism. Although the three parties have common interests in counterterrorism, there are still many deep-seated contradictions between the United States and the Taliban, which is difficult to coordinate.

Fourth, the joint force formed by the international community's common appeal and the strategic adjustment of the United States. The international community generally adheres to the "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" inclusive reconciliation process for the Afghan issue, and major countries are also committed to promoting the political settlement of the Afghan issue.⁴² The Trump administration also hopes that China, Russia, India and other countries will play a more significant role to share the pressure of the United States in Afghanistan. Pakistan has long been regarded as an "Afghan spoiler", but it supports the Trump administration's peace talks plan. Pakistan expressed its hope that "all parties in Afghanistan shall seize the historic opportunity and reach a comprehensive and inclusive political solution for the realization of lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan and the region."⁴³ In December 2018, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov convened multiple countries in Moscow to participate in the peace talks in Afghanistan, and the Afghan Taliban also sent a delegation to attend. In June 2019, the Afghan Taliban delegation led by Baradar visited China. The two sides discussed the ongoing Afghan peace process and other security-related issues. China worked hard to promote the Taliban's acceptance of the Afghan peace process negotiations. In September 2019, the Afghan Taliban visited Russia again to discuss the peace process.⁴⁴ The United Nations also fully supports the end of the war in Afghanistan and the start of the peace process as soon as possible. Secretary-General Guterres called this an opportunity that "can't" be missed.⁴⁵ In short, the US-Taliban peace talks are in line with the common expectations of the region and the international community for the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan.

⁴¹ Mujib Mashal, "Taliban and US Strike Deal to Withdraw American Troops from Afghanistan," *New York Times*, February 29, 2020.

⁴² Haiqi Zheng, "The Motivation and Prospects of the Trump Administration's Strategic Adjustment in Afghanistan", *International Forum*, 2019(5), p. 46

⁴³ "Five Things to Know about Emerging US, Taliban Peace Deal," February 23, 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/484149-five-things-to-know-about-emerging-us-taliban-peace-deal>.

⁴⁴ "Taliban Delegation Visits Russia after Trump Says Talks 'Dead'," *Al Jazeera*, September 14, 2019.

⁴⁵ Assad Hashim, "'We Can't Miss This Opportunity': UN Backs Afghan Peace Process," *Al Jazeera*, February 18, 2020.

IV. THE ACTUAL EFFECTS OF US-TALIBAN RELATIONS DURING THE TRUMP ERA AND ITS SUBSEQUENT IMPACTS ON THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Although the United States and the Afghani Taliban have reached a peace agreement, the international community has doubts about the Trump administration and the Taliban's willingness to comply with the agreement. In particular, the Taliban took the US-Taliban agreement as a new starting point and launched new attacks targeting the Afghan government. As an important shaper and intervener of the situation in Afghanistan, the United States has made concessions and compromises on the Afghan issue for the sake of its own interests, which has improved the relationship between the United States and Taliban to a certain extent and produced multiple effects. However, the Trump administration "treated the symptoms but not the root cause". The Afghanistan policy of the Trump administration still left many hidden dangers for the future situation in Afghanistan.

(1) The actual effects of US-Taliban relations during the Trump era

First, the initial reconciliation between the United States and the Taliban has promoted the peace process in Afghanistan. In the context of the US "Indo-Pacific strategy" and the reduction of investment in Afghanistan, the goal of US policy in Afghanistan is not to completely eliminate the Afghan Taliban and its armed forces, but to unite the Taliban with conditions and continue to assist the Afghan government. Since the signing of the US-Taliban agreement in February 2020, although there have been violent attacks, the two sides have been able to maintain the basic framework of the agreement as a whole. After the signing of the US-Taliban agreement, the Afghan government expressed strong dissatisfaction, believing that the US and the Taliban bypassed it to reach agreement, which greatly harmed its rights, but a few months after the signing of the agreement, it also began to try to establish mutual trust with the Taliban and release signals for peace talks. A spokesman for the National Security Council of Afghanistan stated that the Afghan government planned to release 100 Taliban prisoners every day starting from April 8th, hoping that this move would eventually lead to the realization of lasting peace in Afghanistan.⁴⁶ The spokesperson of Afghan President Sediqqi also stated that the decision to release prisoners is

⁴⁶ "Afghanistan Government to Release 100 Taliban Prisoners in Bid to Save Peace Deal", *The Defense Post*, April 8, 2020.

to show goodwill to the Taliban in order to ensure that the peace process can proceed steadily.⁴⁷ The Afghan Taliban also responded positively, not only implementing a ceasefire during the Eid al-Fitr, but also releasing Afghan government personnel after the Afghan government released the Taliban detainees. Afghan national security spokesman Javid Faisal said that the government would release 900 prisoners on May 27, which will bring the number of Taliban prisoners released by the Afghan government to 2,000.⁴⁸ Suhail Shaheen, the political spokesperson of the Afghan Taliban, confirmed in the Doha office that the Afghan government had made good progress in releasing 900 hostages. The Taliban had previously released 240 prisoners and now planned to release more government prisoners.⁴⁹ Although there is a certain gap between the number of prisoners exchanged between the two sides and the number in the provisions of the US-Taliban agreement, the Afghan government and the Taliban are working hard to achieve internal compromises. Especially after Afghan President Ghani and former government Chief Executive Officer Abdullah signed a decentralization agreement, the Afghan government achieved reconciliation internally and formed a united front in relations with the Taliban.

Second, the anti-terrorism consensus between the United States and the Taliban is conducive to a coordinated attack on the “Islamic State”. The US attitude towards the Taliban in Afghanistan has changed from negative to positive to a certain extent following the rapid expansion of terrorist organizations such as the “Islamic State” in Afghanistan. Around the Doha negotiations between the United States and Taliban, the United States’ counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan went smoother. In February 2020, the Afghan branch of the “Islamic State” lost more than half of its fighters due to US airstrikes and the coordination of ground armed operations by the Afghan Taliban.⁵⁰ The United States has publicly acknowledged the role of the Taliban in Afghanistan in combating the “Islamic State” and stated that the “Islamic State” was also defeated in Nangarhar under the continued pressure from the United States and the Taliban.⁵¹ Thanks to the improvement of US-Taliban relations, the cooperation in combating the “Islamic State” has improved the

⁴⁷ Xuezheng Ding, “Afghanistan peace and reconciliation process is advancing hard”, *People’s Daily*, June 5, 2020, p. 16.

⁴⁸ “Afghan Government Releases Hundreds of Taliban Prisoners as Part of Peace Deal with US”, *Military Times*, May 25, 2020.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ “ISIS Loses More than Half Its Fighters from US Airstrikes and Taliban Ground Operations,” *Military Times*, February 27, 2020.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

internal security situation in Afghanistan. The common interests and cooperation between the Taliban and the Afghan government in the coordinated attack on the “Islamic State” are also conducive to advancing the reconciliation process between the two sides. On April 4, 2020, the head of the “Islamic State” Afghanistan branch was arrested by the National Directorate of Security and 19 other terrorists.⁵²

Third, the historical memory of the Taliban’s rule in Afghanistan has caused widespread concern among the people. The signing of the US-Taliban agreement did not make the general Afghan people feel optimistic. On the one hand, most Afghan people are skeptical about the purpose of the United States in peace negotiations and highly doubt the Afghan government’s ability to unify the country. On the other hand, the distrust towards the Taliban makes people believe that Afghanistan’s future is unpredictable. In the face of the fragile security situation in Afghanistan, many Afghans believe that the United States is for “their own peace and their own interests” and that the peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban are at the expense of the Afghan people’s own interests,⁵³ and that the US withdrawal is at the expense of Afghanistan’s future peace.⁵⁴ In the process of American withdrawal from Afghanistan, civilians have been attacked frequently. From June 1 to June 3, 2020, civilians were hit by bombs in Afghanistan, causing many deaths and injuries.⁵⁵

(2) Subsequent impacts on the Biden administration

First, the domestic situation in Afghanistan will continue to be tense. Domestic political reconciliation in Afghanistan is the key to the peace process. The Trump administration’s strategy of advancing the Afghan peace process in stages is to get rid of the “burden” of Afghanistan first, and will not consider how to solve the political, economic, and social problems and complicated issues that the Afghan government and people will have to face for a long time in the future. The United States has been trying to rebuild Afghanistan by the Western model politically. Although it has achieved certain results, it still has structural contradictions with the Afghan government,

⁵² “Leader of ISIS in Afghanistan Arrested, Security Officials Say,” *Stripes*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/leader-of-isis-in-afghanistan-arrested-security-officials-say-1.624897>.

⁵³ “America’s Surrender: What Afghans Think about US-Taliban Peace Talks,” *Vox*, October 21, 2019.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ Xin Chen, Delu Zou, “Two roadside bomb attacks in Afghanistan cause 20 casualties”, June 2, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-06/02/c_1126066003.htm; “Nine people killed by roadside bomb attacks in Southern Afghanistan”, June 4, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2020-06/04/c_1126073831.htm

and the positions between the United States and Afghanistan are not wholly consistent. The United States bypassed the Afghan government to have direct dialogue and negotiation with the Taliban, which also affected the Afghan government's trust in the United States. There are many conflicts between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The Afghan government tries to include the Taliban in the political process, but the Taliban does not recognize the legitimacy of the Afghan government, and eventually overthrew in August 2021. Before the capture of Kabul by Taliban, Afghan government and the Taliban were currently in contact with each other regarding the prisoner issue, there were constant quarrels on the specific issue of the release of prisoners. The Taliban insisted on the Afghan government to release its 5,000 members in exchange for the approximately 1,000 Afghan soldiers and government personnel it has detained, but the Afghan government hoped to reconsider this issue in negotiations with the Taliban. Then President Ghani said, "Freeing Taliban prisoners is not [under] the authority of America but the authority of the Afghan government and there has been no commitment for the release of 5,000 prisoners. The issue could be discussed during peace talks but not as a precondition for them."⁵⁶ This shows that deep-rooted mistrust and mutual suspicion between all parties have always existed, and the domestic situation in Afghanistan remains sensitive and fragile. This long-term confrontation between Afghan government and Taliban ended with the exile of President Ghani and the restoration of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan".

Second, the game in the surrounding areas of Afghanistan has become more intense. The improvement of the relationship between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan has a certain degree of negative impacts on the regional security situation. Afghanistan is located at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, and these three regions are all characterized by deep-level security confrontations. The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan will create new conditions for geo-stakeholders to intervene in Afghanistan or on the Afghan issue. As far as Pakistan is concerned, it has played an important role in Afghanistan for a long time. The breakthrough in US-Taliban relations will benefit Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan and effectively check and balance the former Ghani regime and current Taliban regime. For India, its regional influence will be affected, and tremendous changes in the domestic situation in Afghanistan will pose a serious challenge to India geographically. Since the signing of

⁵⁶ "Trump's Afghanistan Peace Deal just Hit Its First Major Obstacle," *Vox*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/2/21161198/afghanistan-peace-deal-prisoner-exchange>.

the US-Taliban agreement, India has also been adjusting its policy towards Afghanistan and improving relations with the Taliban. For Central Asian countries, although they can promote economic cooperation with Afghanistan, the deterioration of border security issues will continue to bring great challenges to them. Russia is also increasing investment in Afghanistan. In September 2019, after a setback in peace talks with the United States, the Afghan Taliban sent a delegation to Russia to discuss the prospect of the United States withdrawing troops from Afghanistan.⁵⁷ In the complex interaction between the Taliban and the United States, the Afghan Taliban not only pays attention to the actual attitude of the United States but also attaches more significant importance to the positions of Russia, China, the UK, France, Germany and other countries, and is good at using the game between other countries to maximize their interests. Changes in the relationship between the United States and Taliban in Trump era brought greater variables to Afghanistan and neighboring countries, and regional competition and the game between major powers will become increasingly fierce in Biden era.

Third, the interactive environment between the Taliban and the Biden administration may become more complicated. Party switching in the United States can affect the continuity of policy implementation. It is highly possible that the peace agreement reached by the Trump administration and the Taliban will be confronted with conducting risk during Biden's peisidency. The peace agreement actually compresses the room for maneuver of Biden's Afghanistan policy. On the one hand, a hasty military withdrawal can promote the growth of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and even stimulate the recurrence of terrorism-related activities. One the other hand, tearing up the peace agreement signed between the Trump administration and the Taliban will undoubtedly worsen the contradictions and conflicts of the Taliban with the Biden administration, it can reduce global credibility of the US and accelerated the withdrawal of the US troops. In fact, since taking office, Biden has not urgently embraced the Trump administration's Afghanistan policy, but accelerated the pace of adjustment. In late January 2021, the Biden administration said it will review the peace deal that the former president Trump made with the Taliban.⁵⁸ In March, a "Transitional Peace Government" solution was put forward by the US, which suggested that the Afghan government and the Taliban jointly form an interim government and the United Nations take the lead in convening an international conference on Afghanistan issues to reach a final

⁵⁷ "Afghan Taliban Send Team to Russia after US Talks Collapse," *Reuters*, September 14, 2019.

⁵⁸ "Biden Administration will Review Deal with the Taliban: White House", *Reuters*, January 23, 2021.

Afghan peace plan.⁵⁹In April, Biden announced that the May 1 deadline for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan would be postponed to September 11, 2021.⁶⁰ After taking the presidency, the Biden administration's Afghanistan policy is different from that of the Obama administration. Biden largely continues Trump's "America First" mentality, focusing on carrying out a strategic contraction from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Biden stresses that the US will withdraw its troops in a safe, deliberate and responsible way⁶¹, which implies that when and how US troops will withdraw have not been finalized yet. Whether the US will fully pull out troops is a core factor that can influence the internal peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The delaying tactics, such as "reviewing" and "postponing", can hardly solve the core problem, meanwhile, they are very likely to stretch the Taliban's patience to the limit and stimulate the Taliban to respond with military offensive. Difficulty of future US-Taliban relations will inevitably increase and Afghanistan will once again face a high degree of uncertainty.

V. CONCLUSION

The easing of relations between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan during the Trump era is crucial for the United States to advance its new strategy in Afghanistan. The United States urgently needs the cooperation of the Taliban in withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. Although the United States and the Afghan Taliban differ greatly in their attitudes towards the Afghan government and the possibility of direct negotiations between the Taliban and the government, the United States, as an important third party that maintains direct contact and interaction with the Afghan government and the Taliban at the same time, is very important. The evolution of the relationship between the Afghan government and the Taliban will still have a significant influence. After the Afghan Taliban rose to power and established national power in the 1990s, the United States began direct contact with it, and there was limited and active interaction between the two sides until after 9/11 when the relationship between the two sides

⁵⁹ Elise Labott, Robbie Gramer, "In Race against Time, Biden Officials Launch New Afghan Peace Drive", *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2021.

⁶⁰ Steve Holland, Idrees Ali, Phil Stewart, "Biden Set to Withdraw US Troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11", *Reuters*, April 13, 2021.

⁶¹ Terri Moon Cronk, "Biden Announces Full U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan by Sept. 11", U.S Department of Defense, April 14, 2021.

broke down due to their fundamental differences in the attitude towards the leadership of the “Al Qaeda” leader Bin Laden.⁶² Although the current US-Taliban relationship has initially resumed, the deep-seated contradictions remain, and the relationship between the two sides will continue to fluctuate in the future. The Afghan Taliban have a good understanding of Trump’s basic demands for a “decent” withdrawal from Afghanistan based on the US-Taliban agreement and continue to pressure the United States by sporadically provoking the Afghan government and occasionally reaching certain compromises with the Afghan government. Trump’s defeat in the election has added new uncertainties to US-Taliban relations. The next trend of the US-Taliban relationship is closely related to the degree of US protection over the Afghan government during the Biden administration and the shaping of the US presence in Afghanistan. Besides, the Taliban’s ultimate goal of restoring the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” has not yet fundamentally changed. This was demonstrated in August 2021.

⁶² Song Niu, “The Transformation of the International System and the US-Taliban Relations”, *South Asian Studies Quarterly*, 2010(2).