



American Humvees being operated by the Afghan security forces against the Taliban in the Panjshir province on 19 August, 2021. AFP

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## Would US Policy Toward Afghanistan Change Under A New Administration?

With Afghanistan only briefly discussed at the recent US Presidential debates, Harris and Trump held opposing positions over the Doha deal and used different rhetoric to refer to the Taliban government.

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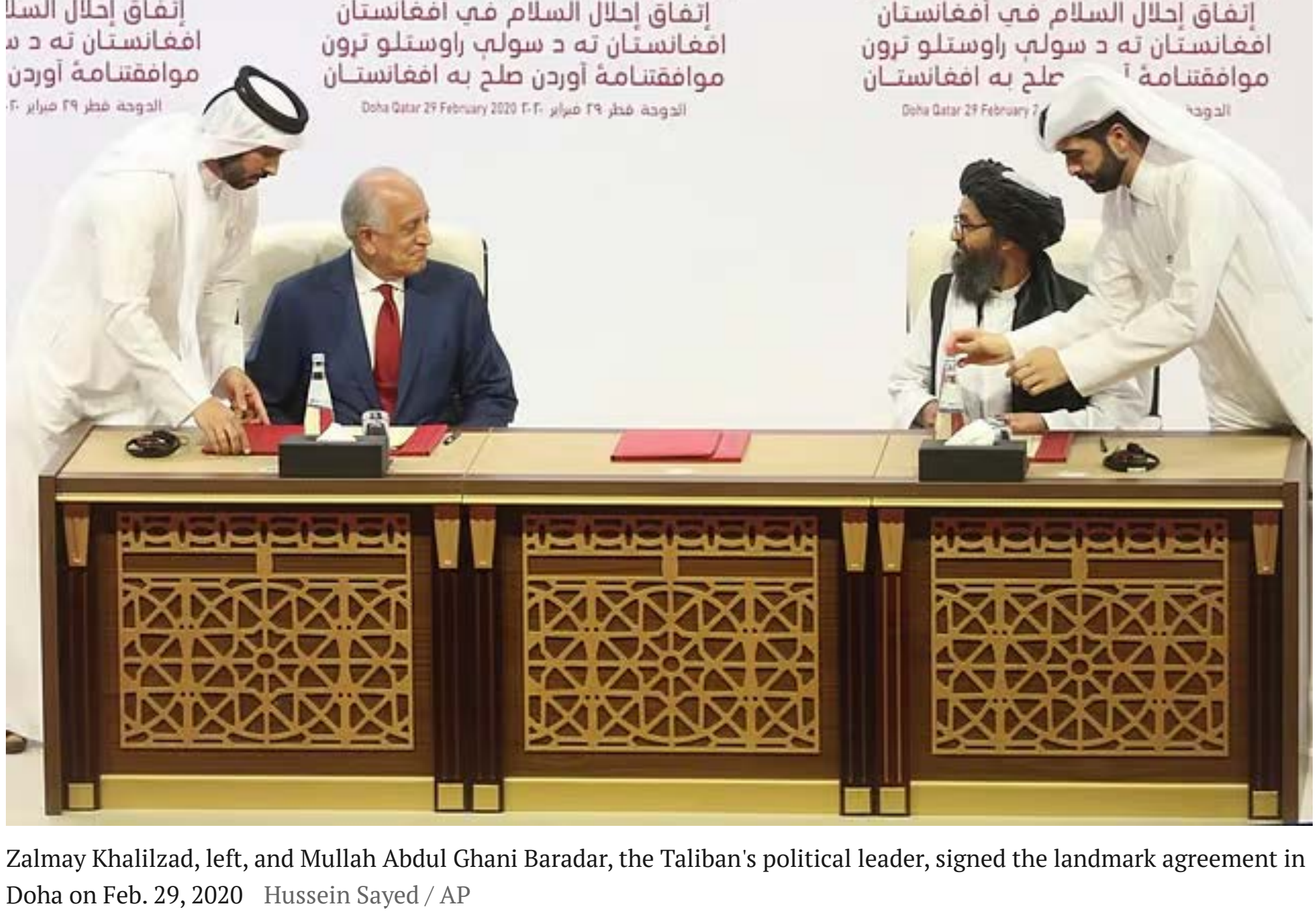
In a brief back-and-forth at the recent US presidential debates, the culmination and end of the United States' War on Terror in Afghanistan came up, involving the shifting of blame between the two candidates. Democratic nominee Kamala Harris claimed the withdrawal was necessary in the context of Trump orchestrating “a weak and terrible” deal in Doha with “a terrorist organization.” In response, former President Trump criticized President Biden’s chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and defended the Doha agreement. Looking beyond the ordinary debate-stage mudslinging, Kamala’s choice (and emphatic) use of the word “terrorists” to describe the Taliban is important—it perhaps signals a policy stance. The United States, of course, has not recognized diplomatically the current Taliban-led government of Afghanistan, despite growing international recognition. A new US president could take a new stance on Afghanistan: one that favors the Taliban or one that continues to alienate them. Does US sentiment over the Doha deal alongside current geopolitical developments in Afghanistan favor one approach over the other?

### Critiques of the Doha Deal

In early 2020, the US signed the Doha Accord, or the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan. As Harris duly noted, the negotiation process did not involve the then-Afghan government (led by Ghani) but instead involved the Taliban. As part of the deal, US troop and military base numbers drastically reduced, as did NATO forces. Not only that, but restrictions on engagements between the Taliban and the US were stipulated. In the wake of the agreement, insurgent attacks on Afghan troops dramatically increased, and it’s widely believed the deal led to the final destruction of Afghan security forces.

Critics of the Trump administration-orchestrated agreement cite the destruction of Afghanistan’s military as proof of the deal’s failure. From the very start of the negotiations, they argue, the US was setting up the Afghan government for failure by not involving them—the Afghan military morale reportedly dropped, and lack of transparency enabled the Taliban to convince the Afghan government that the US had conceded territory (which it really had not). Insurgents certainly increased, and new rules over US airstrikes prevented the US from taking action as effectively.

As a result of the Doha Accord, international forces withdrew and honored the agreement, but the Taliban did not. No inclusive government was formed by the Taliban, and instead a gender apartheid was established.



Zalmay Khalilzad, left, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban’s political leader, signed the landmark agreement in Doha on Feb. 29, 2020 Hussein Sayed / AP

### Trump's Defense

Harris’s camp blames the Accord for dealing first with the Taliban and worsening the situation, forcing the ugly withdrawal of US troops in 2021. Trump, meanwhile, holds that the US under the Biden administration should have enforced the agreements set in Doha. The poorly orchestrated and quick withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan has long been deplored by Republicans. Just weeks ago, on September 8th, a new investigative report by House Republicans held the Biden Administration responsible for the withdrawal.

Trump’s defense of the Doha deal is shaky. The US’s ability to properly enforce the agreements seems hampered by the very terms of the agreement itself, which involved the withdrawal of US forces. The US’s side of the deal sacrificed leverage over the Taliban in return for an easier exit (which turned out to be not so easy).

In a recent interview by Andrew North with Zalmay Khalilzad, formerly the US envoy for Afghanistan and architect of the Doha deal, Kahlilzad held that the deal was created to avoid forcing America to stay in Afghanistan rather than creating a secure future. Because of that, America didn’t want to enter into an agreement with both the Afghan government and the Taliban. We didn’t want to be tied down,” Khalilzad admitted, a statement that seems to imply that the US should *never* have been involved with the Taliban under those conditions.

### The Future of the US-Afghanistan Relationship

With the War on Terror in the history books, public US sentiment is conflicted. On the one hand, a national trauma over the withdrawal reminds many that Afghanistan is a quagmire, and on the other hand, concerns over human rights abuse and terrorist groups in the country still make headlines. Would either administration prefer to see engagement with the Taliban-led government of Afghanistan? Would either party care to bring the region to the public’s mind anymore? An isolationist policy towards South Asia might ordinarily be seen as a stereotypical Trump policy, but Harris might be in the same boat, given her explicit condemnation of the “terrorists” in the recent debates. Neither administration could feasibly entertain military intervention, but both parties could pressure international instruments like the UN. Harris, for her part, could be forced to take a definite stance against international recognition of the Taliban, and a Trump administration might cut aid to the country.

Either way, Afghanistan is an unresolved chapter of American history. Both internal US investigations and international developments will force it to the US policy stage. A bipartisan group called the Afghanistan War Commission, made up of former U.S. government officials with experience in Afghanistan, is probing the conflict. Its report is slated to be released in 2026. Legacy media largely ignores developments in Afghanistan, besides occasionally expressing outrage over women’s rights abuse. Nevertheless, attacks across Afghanistan by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and other anti-Taliban groups have increased. Infrastructure projects in the region and regional trade deals promise (at least on paper) to give an economic boom to Kabul. And internal rhetoric within the Taliban expresses growing ambitions on the international stage: the supreme leader of the Taliban, in a speech delivered in a northern province of Afghanistan, announced his commitment “to implementing Sharia on the land of Allah.” Taliban-controlled Kabul is set on becoming an international player and has already achieved minor success. Either a Trump administration or a Harris administration will be forced to reckon with Afghanistan. American policy regarding Afghanistan is also largely shaped by its relationship to China. Although Afghanistan may not have as many notable Chinese investments as Pakistan, Chinese companies dominate the country’s mining industry and spearheaded international recognition of the Taliban earlier this year by recognizing their ambassador. On the other hand, Beijing’s notorious repression of ethnic Uyghurs causes contention in plenty of Central Asian countries. Although Kabul currently chooses to ignore Uyghur persecution in China (despite Afghanistan’s *own* ethnic Uyghur community), that could change. Washington could stand to gain from reestablishing some diplomatic foothold in Kabul by providing a counterbalance to Beijing. But the wound of the 2021 withdrawal might be too fresh for that to happen.

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