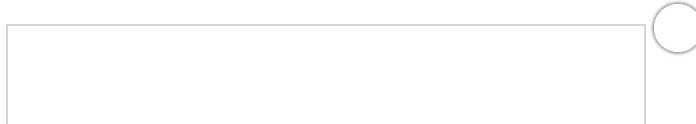




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Putting Peace Out of Reach

The administration will undermine U.S. aims in Afghanistan if it shutter's the Taliban's political office.

By Sameer Lalwani and Stephen Tankel Oct. 27, 2017, at 11:45 a.m.

 **OSAMA FAISAL | AP PHOTO**

The Taliban political office in Doha



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Despite the past week of violence that rocked Afghanistan, including a [wave of major Taliban attacks](#) on Afghan security forces, the Trump administration appears to still be holding the door open for a negotiated settlement. The commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Gen. John W. Nicholson, recently credited President Donald Trump's commitment to an enhanced and open-ended military presence in Afghanistan with [setting the conditions for a peaceful resolution of the conflict](#). And in his first trip to the region, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [reaffirmed](#) the United States would fight the Taliban and pursue "a reconciliation process leading to a peace process and [the Taliban's] full involvement and participation in government."

If this is the case, then the administration's [impending decision](#) – as reported this week – to shutter the Taliban's political office in Doha, Qatar is misguided at best.

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There are several possible rationales for closing the office. One is that the political office gives the Taliban unfounded legitimacy and allows it to conspire with other regional actors. Likewise, it is possible that U.S. and Afghan officials who believe negotiation should begin after the Taliban is weakened militarily see the office as a hindrance. Or perhaps there is simply a sense that "there was little evidence that the office had influence" with the Taliban leadership and, with U.S. forces staying in Afghanistan indefinitely, the office no longer has much utility. Even if all these reasons were sound, they are simply not good enough to countenance the decision.

Keeping the negotiation channels open is critical as the United States enters the next stage in the war in Afghanistan, as State Department officials, including some of its top South Asia specialists [argued recently](#) in an internal dissent cable. Concerned parties within the U.S. Senate have even introduced [legislation](#) to hold the administration accountable to its own strategy of pursuing a "reconciliation peace process."



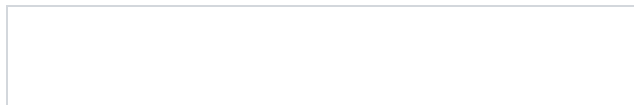
Time to Talk Afghanistan

America needs a real debate about its longest war.

Michael H. Fuchs Sept. 14, 2017



Before senior officials on the National Security Council or at the Departments of State and Defense sign off on recommending Trump close the Doha office, they should consider the problems a closure would create:



Increases difficulty of capitalizing on military successes or mitigate failures. Coercion is more effective when the adversary possesses a clear pathway to avert disaster. Closing the Doha office risks signaling to the Taliban that the United States only seeks a military solution and, therefore, no viable political settlement exists. The absence of an "off-ramp," combined with increased U.S. troops, trainers, and unrestricted rules of engagement, could actually harden the Taliban's resolve. It also makes it more difficult for the Taliban to negotiate, if it still wants to. This would prolong the conflict, possibly creating time and space for negative developments that shift momentum back toward the Taliban or for unforeseen "spoilers" to emerge.

The above assumes sufficient gains against the Taliban, allowing the international coalition and Afghan government to negotiate from a position of greater strength. If this falters, however, then closing the office will rob the United States of a mechanism for switching to a fight *and* talk strategy.

Undermines Taliban diplomacy. [Recent research suggests](#) that pathways to advance relationships with domestic constituents and shape international perceptions, not military weakness, is the key factor that drives insurgent diplomacy in civil wars. Taliban leaders crave international legitimacy. Denying legitimacy to them may seem sensible, but it actually risks empowering hardliners who prefer the movement fight in perpetuity at the expense of moderates who seek to govern. Instead, the United States should be seeking to use the Taliban's desire for legitimacy as leverage in pursuit of a political end game.

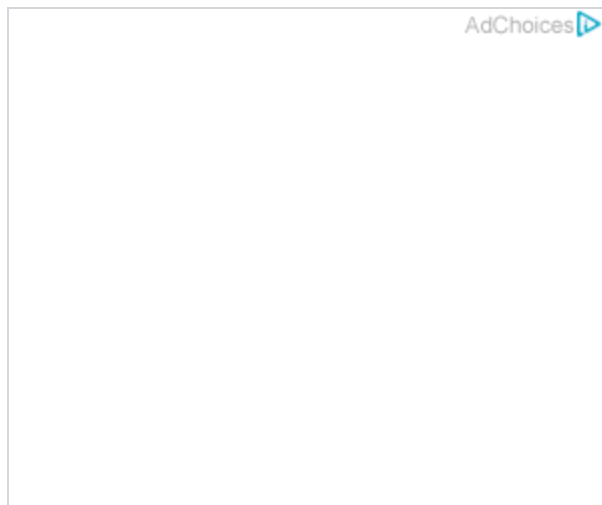


Closing the office also denies the United States an instrument by which to obtain objectives in exchange for graduated recognition of the Taliban. Most of these objectives are likely to pertain to a political settlement, but it is also worth remembering that the United States secured the exchange of Sgt. Bowe Berghdal for Taliban detainees at Guantanamo via the Doha office. Whether or not one agrees with the trade, the office proved its viability as a channel for negotiating with Taliban leadership.

Heightens U.S. dependency on local actors. The United States opened the Doha office to create a mechanism for U.S. and Afghan officials to talk to the Taliban directly. A chief goal was to reduce reliance on Pakistan, whose ongoing provision of sanctuary and support to the Taliban is a major factor in prolonging the insurgency. Closing the office would give Pakistan even more leverage than it already has to end the war on its own terms. Anyone paying attention to the conflict knows that making the U.S. exit strategy from Afghanistan even more conditional on Pakistani terms is a bad idea.

Talking to the Taliban in Kabul, which is often proposed as a relocation site for the Taliban office, is not an attractive alternative. Afghan elites have historically manipulated external powers to advance their interests or fulfill vendettas. The political economy of the conflict is such that some of them have personal incentives to perpetuate the war, or at least do not have any sense of urgency to resolve it. Because the Trump strategy eschews timelines, there are no

coercive levers left to pressure Kabul into making the kinds of concessions to promote peace or political reforms to improve governance and military effectiveness. One of the few pressure points left to get Kabul's attention is our direct contact with the Doha office. Foreclosing that option binds our hands and exacerbates Kabul's moral hazard problem. It also feeds conspiracy theories fostered by other Afghan elites, [including former President Hamid Karzai](#), who argue that it is the United States that is perpetuating the war in order to profit from it.



Trump's Afghanistan Moment

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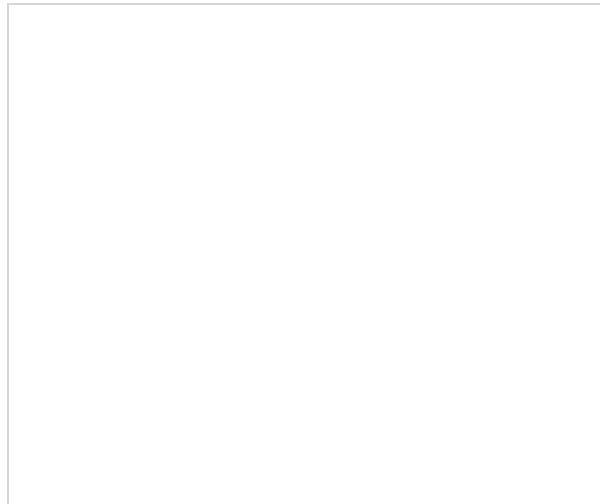
Peter Roff Aug. 24, 2017



Encourages regional states to undermine U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Russia, Iran and China are wary of U.S. strike capabilities on their doorstep. These concerns, combined with fears of a growing Islamic State group presence, have

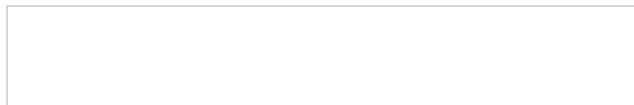
already led Moscow and Tehran to increase support to the Taliban. Separately, Moscow and Beijing have sought to play a bigger role in shaping negotiations and to exert political influence among the Taliban.

The involvement of regional actors in any negotiating process is not necessarily unwelcome, provided the United States remains the predominant external actor driving the process. Closing the Doha office makes this more difficult. It also reinforces perceptions that the United States intends to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan in perpetuity. Consequently, these regional actors may double-down on their efforts to undermine the U.S. mission in Afghanistan.



Empowers regional states to seize control of the settlement process. The fact that war will end with a political settlement is one of the few points of agreement shared by key stakeholders in the conflict. Closing the Doha office would constrain America from directly engaging with the Taliban, and potentially allow for other states to dictate terms of any peace process. It would also stoke the worst fears of all actors in the region, thereby fueling the conflict and making it more difficult for the United States to secure its interests and turn towards other pressing challenges.

Any administration that puts America first should be loathe to surrender such initiative and undermine U.S. autonomy.



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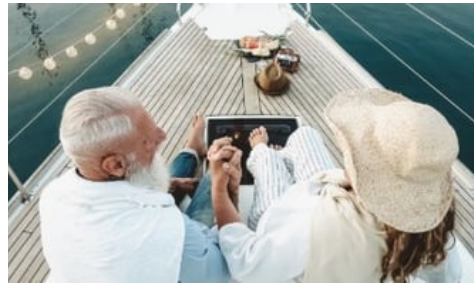
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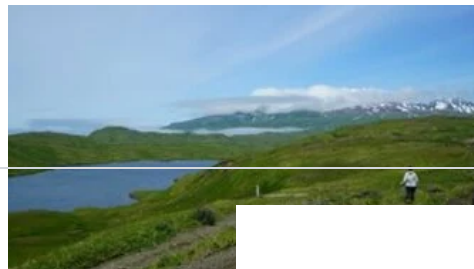
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