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## *The Perceptions of Robert Jervis: An Appreciation*

*Ken Booth  
and  
Nicholas J. Wheeler*



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# The Doha Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan

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Following nine rounds of discussion, the United States (US) and the Taliban in February 2020 signed a peace agreement in Doha designed to bring peace to Afghanistan. According to the Doha Agreement, the Taliban and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) would temporarily reduce violence and work towards a lasting *cease-fire* among US, Taliban and Afghan forces; the US would withdraw from Afghanistan one-third of its 12,000 troops within the next four and half months, and if the Taliban stuck to their promises, *withdrew* all forces within 14 months; meanwhile, *intra-Afghan negotiations* would start to ascertain what role the Taliban would play in a future government; and the Taliban pledged *counterterrorism assurances*, that is, the Taliban were to sever all ties with terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, and would not allow those groups to use Afghan soil to launch attacks against the US and the allies.<sup>1</sup>

A range of players was directly or indirectly involved in the Doha talks. These players have several interests in Afghanistan. The leading players include the Afghans (the government, the Northern Alliance, the Taliban and ordinary Afghans); The US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies; Afghanistan's 'four big neighbours', namely Pakistan, Iran, China and India; Russia and the Central Asian States; and Saudi Arabia.

As far as their *official* strategies were concerned, all the players involved had a convergence of interests. Indeed, on the day the Doha Agreement was signed, they all supported the 'success' of the talks in Doha because a political settlement was seen as a key to peace, security and stability in Afghanistan and, by extension, the region and beyond.

The IRA welcomed it because a negotiated settlement would allow the IRA's officials to live dignified lives (not 'disgracefully' flee to the United Arab Emirates or the West) in their country, where the Republic (not the Emirate) would continue to play an important part. The Taliban 'seemed' satisfied because US forces were to pull out. The group's rehabilitation as part of power-sharing arrangements would enable the Taliban to modify the Afghan constitution to make it 'compatible with Sharia Law' and more conservative traditional values. The two warring parties working together would enable ordinary Afghans to get what they had been craving for decades: peace and security.

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<sup>1</sup> This opinion piece is based on my research for a paper aimed to be published in journals and later turned into a book.

The US and the NATO allies were to gracefully exit from Afghanistan, knowing they had a regional partner that would not allow Afghan soil to be used by terrorist groups to launch an attack against them. Moreover, most of the hard-earned political, military, economic and social achievements of the past 20 years were to remain intact.

Pakistan was to live next door to a neutral government in Kabul that contained the threat of extreme terrorism, drug trafficking and refugee. The several million Afghan refugees would move back to Afghanistan, including the Taliban and their families. A friendly Afghanistan was to cooperate with Pakistan on trade and water supply. The Taliban's inclusion in the government would minimise India's influence in Afghanistan and the risk of 'encirclement' as well as India's ability to (allegedly) use Afghanistan as a base for 'supporting' anti-Pakistani Baluch and Pashtun groups within Pakistan. Pakistan would further be able to deal effectively with home-grown militant groups, such as the Pakistani Taliban, that posed an existential threat to the secular Pakistan state.

Likewise, the inclusion – and thus 'protection' – of minority groups in Afghanistan, including the Indian friendly groups of the Northern Alliance, was to keep India's influence (and presence) within Afghanistan (and the region). Afghanistan was unlikely to become a safe haven for anti-Indian militant groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, that would again run training camps in eastern Afghanistan. Stability in Afghanistan was likely to enable India to expand trade in Central Asia, Russia and Europe.

The inclusion – and thus 'protection' – of Shai groups and the Northern Alliance, Iran's traditional allies, would also ensure that 'Pakistan and Saudi Arabi's Taliban proxies' did not dominate the regime in Kabul. A neutral Afghan government was to cooperate in fighting extreme terrorist groups, including the People Islamic Movement of Iran. The friendly regime in Kabul would enable Iran to make more economic investments in Afghanistan, including greater reliance on the transit trade through Chabahar. The approximately 3 million Afghan economic migrants and refugees in Iran were likely to return to a stable Afghanistan.

The Taliban's presence alleviated Saudi Arabia's fears of the influence of their main ideological rival, Iran, in Afghanistan and contributed to stability in Pakistan, a crucial Saudi ally. US presence in Afghanistan weakened the US-Saudi security relationship as it fed the perception of a war against Islam. So, the Doha negotiated settlement allowed US forces to withdraw from Afghanistan. Furthermore, weakening democratic values would divert the media spotlight on Saudi Arabia's human rights record.

In the Quadrilateral Coordination Group meetings, China clearly supported an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation process and respected Afghanistan's independence and sovereignty. It partly did so because its Silk Road Economic Belt strategy would be strengthened by what China wanted: a negotiated settlement that would lead to a 'unified, stable, developing, and friendly' neighbour with which China shared about a 90-

kilometre border and where China had significant financial investments. Such an Afghanistan with an 'inclusive government' would support China's fight against the Uighur separatist group East Turkistan Islamic Movement and prevent the spillover effects to Afghanistan's neighbours, where China had made billions of investments. Importantly, China, Russia, and Iran (and Pakistan, for that matter) would relievedly see the US ending its 'destabilising' presence in Afghanistan and doing so 'responsibly', a presence assumingly aimed at 'encircling' China, Russia and Iran (and Pakistan).

The main challenges faced by Russia and the Central Asian States – the huge inflow of Afghan narcotics and possible spillover of instability and extremism from Afghanistan into Central Asia – would be addressed by a capable, all-inclusive government in Kabul; a government that would be the outcome of what Russia stressed: a negotiated solution accepted by *all* Afghan neighbours. Stability in Afghanistan was to further enable the Central Asian States to reach export markets in South Asia, West Asia and the Gulf.

In short, a political settlement – or a stable, reasonable neutral Afghan government with the Taliban as a junior partner – would have turned every player into a winner. The question then is why did the Doha Agreement collapse, and thus every party became a loser, especially the 38 million Afghan people, as reportedly only '10 per cent' of the population reportedly supported the Taliban? It is so because there was a divergence of interests, including Afghanistan's 'inherent complexities', the nature of an Afghan government (Emirate vs Republic or centralisation vs decentralisation), the issue of prisoners' release, international recognition, the protection of certain rights within the Afghan constitution, withdrawal of US forces, resources (especially water), regional (Indo-Pakistan, China-India, Saudi-Iran) and international (US-Russia, US-Iran, US-China) conflicts, lack of trust, and importantly, a struggle for the degree of influence (or 'strategic depth') within a government in Kabul. As a character says in my soon-to-be-published novel entitled *The Lone Leopard*:

'The Afghanistan conflict is very complicated. Would the Taliban cut ties with Al-Qaeda, stop violence against the Afghan state and accept a constitution that defends liberal values and women's rights? Would they give up their Emirate for a Republic? Would Pakistan, Russia and Iran stop assisting the Taliban?'

Indeed, there were plenty of woulds and hows. Therefore, before the US withdrew all its troops, the IRA, with supposedly 352-thousand security forces, fell to the Taliban in August 2021, effectively marking the death of the Doha Agreement. Today, Afghanistan is back where it was at the beginning of US intervention in late-2001, and the Afghan people are experiencing one of the hardest winters as the humanitarian situation continues to worsen. The international community refuses to recognise (or work with) the Taliban caretaker government. Another 'insurgency seems to be on the rise', this time against the Taliban, led by the British-educated



Ahmad Massoud, the son of the legendary Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. Another protracted civil war has the potential to create a security dilemma for the regional powers that might force them to intervene against their will, especially the nuclear Pakistan and India, and thus could pose a serious threat to regional and global peace.

Indeed, as I write in my book, *America in Afghanistan: Foreign Policy and Decision Making From Bush to Obama to Trump*, a destabilised region would have severe consequences for Europe (and the world): a momentous rise in global terrorism, drug production, illegal immigration, and most frighteningly, nuclear proliferation – escalation in nuclear rivalry in South Asia is capable of triggering war in which Pakistan and India might not hesitate to launch nuclear weapons against each other. At the very least, a destabilised region could feed insecurity in the nuclear Pakistan that could result in a destabilised Pakistan (a country of nearly 230 million population), making it possible for al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic groups to topple the fragile Pakistani government and obtain access to its nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists will be a nightmare for international peace; perhaps a similar terrifying event, if not worse, than Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The possibility of the above frightening situations and ordinary Afghans' decades-long sufferings would have been reduced if the Doha Agreement had succeeded. The Taliban's takeover of the government in Kabul by force was a historical mistake, one that we ordinary Afghans will continue to pay for decades to come.

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