

How the US Military Subverted the Afghan Peace Agreement to Prolong an Unpopular War

By [Gareth Porter](#)

Global Research, March 18, 2021

[The Grayzone](#) 16 March 2021

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

All Global Research articles **can be read in 27 languages by activating the “Translate Website”** drop down menu on the top banner of our home page (Desktop version).

Appointed in the final days of Trump’s presidency to remove all US troops from Afghanistan, Douglas Macgregor tells The Grayzone how military leadership undermined the withdrawal and pressured Trump to capitulate.

In an exclusive interview with The Grayzone, **Col. Douglas Macgregor**, a former senior advisor to the acting secretary of defense, revealed that **President Donald Trump** shocked the US military only days after the election last November by signing a presidential order calling for the withdrawal of all remaining US troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year.

As Macgregor explained to The Grayzone, the order to withdraw was met with intense pressure from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), **Gen. Mark M. Milley**, which caused the president to capitulate. Trump agreed to withdraw only half of the 5,000 remaining troops in the country. Neither Trump’s order nor the pressure from the JCS chairman was reported by the national media at the time.

The president’s surrender represented the Pentagon’s latest victory in a year-long campaign to sabotage the US-Taliban peace agreement signed in February 2020. Military and DOD leaders thus extended the disastrous and unpopular 20-year US war in Afghanistan into the administration of **President Joe Biden**.

A peace agreement the Pentagon was determined to subvert

The subversion of the peace agreement with the Taliban initiated by the US military leadership in Washington and Afghanistan began almost as soon as Trump’s personal envoy **Zalmay Khalilzad** negotiated a tentative deal in November 2019. The campaign to undermine presidential authority was actively supported by **then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper**.

In February 2020, under heavy pressure to amend the agreement, Trump [ordered Khalilzad to deliver the Taliban an ultimatum](#): agree to a full ceasefire as a prelude to a broader peace deal, including negotiations with the Afghan government, or the deal was off. The Taliban refused the immediate ceasefire with Kabul, however, offering instead a “reduction in violence” for seven days to establish a conducive atmosphere for implementing the peace

agreement that had already been fleshed out in detail. It then [gave the US its own ultimatum](#): if the US refused the offer, its negotiators would walk away from the table.

To salvage the deal, Khalilzad agreed to the Taliban proposal for a one-week “reduction of violence” by both sides. The adversaries [reached further understandings](#) on what such a “reduction in violence” would mean: the Taliban agreed there would be no attacks on population centers and Afghan stationary military targets, but reserved the right to attack government convoys if they exploited the reduction to seize control of new areas.

The [US-Taliban peace agreement](#) signed on February 29 called for a withdrawal of US troops from the country in two stages. First, the US agreed to reduce its troop levels to 8600 within 4.5 months and remove forces from five military bases ahead of a final withdrawal that would take place in May 2021. Second, the US and its allies pledged to “refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Afghanistan or intervening in its domestic affairs.”

The Taliban promised in turn that it would “not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”

Those two commitments obliged US and Taliban forces not to attack each other. The agreement also specified that the Taliban would enter into “intra-Afghan negotiations on March 10, 2020, after the two Afghan parties were to have exchanged prisoners.”

They also required the Taliban to keep al-Qaeda personnel out of Afghanistan – a pledge the Taliban military commission appeared to implement in February when it [issued an order](#) to all commanders forbidding them from “bringing foreign nationals into their ranks or giving them shelter.”

But the pact did not provide for the immediate ceasefire between Taliban and Afghan government forces which the U.S. military and Pentagon demanded. Instead “a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire” was to be negotiated between the two Afghan parties.

With startling swiftness and determination, Pentagon officials and military leadership exploited the open-ended terms of the ceasefire to derail the implementation of the agreement.

Secretary of Defense Esper claimed the peace deal allowed the US military to defend Afghan forces, blatantly contradicting the agreement’s text. He then pledged to come to the defense of the Afghan government if the Taliban began mounting attacks on its forces, setting the stage for American violations on the ground.

Esper’s promise of continued US military support, [made public in Congressional testimony](#) days later, gave the Afghan government a clear incentive to refuse any concessions to the Taliban. Afghan **President Ashraf Ghani** [promptly refused to go ahead](#) with a promised prisoner exchange until formal negotiations with the Taliban had begun.

The Taliban responded by initiating a series of attacks on government troops at checkpoints in contested areas. The US military command in Afghanistan responded with an airstrike against Taliban forces engaged in one of those operations in Helmand province. US officials [said privately](#) that the airstrike was “a message to the Taliban” to continue what they

described as the “reduction in violence commitment they had agreed...”

The combination of Esper’s assurance to the Afghan government and the US airstrike showed the hand of the Pentagon and military leadership. It was clear they had no intention of passively accepting a deal to withdraw the remaining US personnel from Afghanistan, and would do whatever they could to unravel it.

Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the head of Central Command, further highlighted the Pentagon’s opposition to the deal when he [declared in congressional testimony](#) that troop withdrawals would be determined by “conditions on the ground.” In other words, it was up to the judgment of military commanders, rather than the terms of the agreement, to determine when U.S. troops would be withdrawn.

Shaping a false narrative on the agreement

The military’s plan to sabotage the agreement hinged on creating the false impression that the Taliban had reneged on its commitments. This ruse was advanced mostly publicly by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Esper.

[In an interview with CBS News](#), Pompeo mentioned “a detailed set of commitments that the Taliban have made about the levels of violence that can occur...” But that was a deliberate obfuscation. Though the Taliban had agreed to the seven-day “reduction in violence,” it did not apply to the peace agreement signed on February 29, 2020.

On March 2, Esper [told reporters](#), “This is a conditions-based agreement.... We’re watching the Taliban’s actions closely to assess whether they are upholding their commitments.” That same day, US commander in Afghanistan **Gen. Scott Miller** [stated through a spokesman](#) on Twitter, “The United States has been very clear about our expectations — the violence must remain low.”

Once again, the Pentagon and the US command were dictating conditions to the Taliban outside the actual written terms of the peace agreement.

The Pentagon and military command’s ploy was advanced through [a story leaked to the New York Times](#) and published on March 8. Below the headline, “A Secret Accord With the Taliban: When and How the U.S. Would Leave Afghanistan,” the story referred to two “secret annexes” to deceptively suggest that the agreements reached with the Taliban were not fully reflected in the publicly available text.

The Times’ ploy recalled the national hysteria the paper triggered last summer when it [legitimized an Afghan intelligence fraud](#) by publishing a series of lengthy articles claiming Russia had paid Taliban fighters bounties for dead American service members. Indeed, the “secret annexes” story was simply the latest political deception deployed by the Pentagon to torpedo plans for a US withdrawal.

Despite the article’s assertion that the two documents “lay out the specific understandings between the United States and the Taliban,” the only specific reference in the story to any such understanding mentioned “commitments from the Taliban not to attack American forces during a withdrawal.” However, that explicit commitment was missing from the actual terms of the published accord.

As the Times acknowledged in its article, when Esper and Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Mark

Milley appeared before the House Armed Services Committee just three days before the agreement was signed, both were asked about any “side deals with the Taliban.” Neither said they were aware of any unpublished agreements. Pompeo, who also denied the existence of any “side deals” with the Taliban, referred to them as “military implementation documents.”

The evidence clearly indicated that the so-called “secret annexes” were, in fact, internal US documents on US policy related to the agreement.

In April 2020, the Taliban [accused the United States](#) of flagrantly violating the deal, citing 50 attacks by US and Afghan forces between March 9 and April 10, including 33 drone attacks and eight night raids by Special Operations forces. By the summer, as the Taliban stepped up attacks on government checkpoints in areas bordering territory under their control, US forces in Afghanistan and the Defense Department [informed the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction \(SIGAR\)](#) that the orders to Afghan government forces allowed them to preemptively strike Taliban positions.

The war thus returned to the situation that prevailed before the agreement was signed and the peace deal was effectively shattered.

Meanwhile, the US military continued to accuse the Taliban of failing to adhere to the agreement. In July, the US government-run Voice of America [reported](#) that McKenzie had “told VOA the Taliban has not kept up their commitments agreed to in the U.S.-Taliban peace deal, leading to one of the ‘most violent’ periods of the war in Afghanistan.”

Reversing a presidential order for withdrawal

Following Trump’s defeat in the November 2020 presidential election, and after fashioning the strategy to sabotage the Afghan peace agreement, Esper, McKenzie, and Miller agreed on a [memorandum from the “chain of command”](#) warning Trump against further withdrawal from Afghanistan until “conditions” had been met. These terms included a “reduction in violence” and “progress at the negotiating table.”

Trump reacted to the memo with outrage, swiftly firing Esper on November 9. He replaced him with **Christopher Miller**, the former head of the US counter-terrorism center who agreed with Trump on withdrawal from Afghanistan.

That same day, Trump asked **Col. Douglas Macgregor** to serve as Miller’s “senior adviser.” Macgregor was an outspoken advocate of withdrawal from Afghanistan and a harsh critic of other US wars in the Middle East, from Iraq to Syria. During a [January 2020 interview](#) with Tucker Carlson on Fox News, Macgregor blasted Pentagon leadership for its failure to find a path out of Afghanistan.

Once inside the Pentagon, Macgregor immediately took on the task of enabling a rapid and complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. Just how close Trump came to withdrawing all US troops before leaving office had not been reported until now. Macgregor recounted the episode to The Grayzone.

According to Macgregor, he met Miller on November 10 and told him that a pullout from Afghanistan could only be accomplished by a formal presidential order. Later that day, Macgregor dictated the language of such an order to the White House by phone.

The draft order stated that all uniformed military personnel would be withdrawn from Afghanistan no later than December 31, 2020. Macgregor told the staffer to get a National Security Presidential Memorandum from the White House files to ensure that it was published in the correct format.

Macgregor's White House contact informed him in the morning of November 11 that Trump had read the memorandum and immediately signed it. On November 12, however, he learned that Trump had met with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley, national security adviser Robert O'Brien, and Acting Secretary Miller. Trump was told that the orders he placed in the memorandum could not be executed, according to Macgregor's White House contact.

Milley argued that a withdrawal would harm the chances of negotiating a final peace settlement and that continued US presence in Afghanistan had "bipartisan support," Macgregor was informed. Later that night, Macgregor learned that Trump had agreed to withdraw only half of the total: 2500 troops. Trump had once again given in to military pressure, as he did repeatedly on Syria.

The maneuvering by the Pentagon to obstruct the Trump administration's initiative to end an extremely unpopular war in Afghanistan was just one example in a long-established pattern of undermining presidential authority over matters of war and peace.

When he was vice president, Joe Biden witnessed first-hand the [pressures the Pentagon brass](#) imposed on Barack Obama to escalate the war in Afghanistan. With the peace agreement's May 1 deadline for final US withdrawal just weeks away, Biden is certain to face another round of maximum pressure to keep US troops in the quagmire of Afghanistan, supposedly as "leverage" on the Taliban.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist who has covered national security policy since 2005 and was the recipient of Gellhorn Prize for Journalism in 2012. His most recent book is *The CIA Insider's Guide to the Iran Crisis* co-authored with John Kiriakou, just published in February.

Featured image: Retired Colonel Douglas Macgregor (Photo credit: US Army / public domain)

The original source of this article is [The Grayzone](#)
Copyright © [Gareth Porter](#), [The Grayzone](#), 2021

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Gareth Porter](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca