

# The Intersection Between False Readiness Theory and Negative Hybrid Peace: The Case of Afghanistan

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## Abstract

This article argues that the failure of the intra-Afghan negotiations was due to the interplay between the false readiness of the conflicting parties and negative hybrid peace efforts. Both the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Movement of the Taliban demonstrated insufficient interest in a negotiated resolution to the conflict during the intra-Afghan peace talks. This deficiency in commitment stems from power dynamics and the United States-Taliban agreement signed on 29 February 2020 in Doha, which influenced the parties' approaches to peace. The study deploys "False Readiness Theory" as its main theoretical framework and negative hybrid peace as its central conceptual base to demonstrate their intersection in the context of the Afghan peace process. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources using qualitative approach, primarily through interviews with members of the negotiating team and former officials of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. This article critically exposes the deep connection between false readiness theory and the negative hybrid peace approach in Afghanistan, directly challenging the dominant view that the hybrid peace model best suits conflict-affected societies. It further examines the model's theoretical and practical implications, while highlighting key limitations and offering recommendations.

**Keywords:** Intra-Afghan negotiations, US-Taliban agreement, False Readiness, Taliban, Hybrid Peace

**Research Article** | Received: 22 May 2025, Last Revision: 26 August 2026, Accepted: 7 September 2026

## Introduction

This study examines the breakdown of the intra-Afghan negotiations, attributing it to the convergence of false readiness among the conflicting parties and the adverse effects of a negative hybrid peace framework. Both the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban lacked genuine commitment to a negotiated settlement, a stance shaped largely by power asymmetries and the influence of the United States (US)-Taliban agreement signed in

Doha on February 29, 2020. Framing the analysis within False Readiness Theory and the concept of Negative Hybrid Peace, the article explores how these dynamics intersected to undermine the peace process in Afghanistan. Qualitative data, gathered through interviews with members of the negotiating team and former Afghan officials, supports this argument. By unfolding the critical link between theoretical disengagement and flawed peacebuilding strategies, the article challenges the prevailing notion that hybrid peace is the most effective model for societies in conflict. It concludes by discussing the broader implications of this critique, acknowledging existing limitations, and offering practical recommendations. Given the study's objective, the article examines Afghanistan's Doha peace process, focusing on the Taliban's and the Islamic Republic's commitments to a negotiated settlement during the intra-Afghan negotiations. The article covers the U.S.–Taliban negotiations initiated in 2018 and the subsequent intra-Afghan negotiations, formally launched in September 2020 and continuing until August 2021.

The study further investigates whether or not the conflicting parties' approaches to peace negotiations were influenced by the US–Taliban agreement, focusing on the following research questions: 1) To what extent were the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban committed to achieving a negotiated settlement for the conflict during the intra-Afghan peace talks? 2) In what ways did the US-Taliban Agreement influence the parties in terms of achieving peace?

More essentially, this study argues that both the Taliban and the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan did not demonstrate sufficient genuine interest in a negotiated resolution of the conflict. The US–Taliban agreement influenced both parties in achieving peace. While the Islamic Republic adopted a reactive stance towards the US-Taliban Negotiations (Doha Agreement) and thus made no compromise on a new power-sharing arrangement, the Taliban lacked the motivation to pursue peace talks, believing the agreement undermined the Republic. Consequently, the intersection of false negotiation and negative hybrid peace, marked by external dominance, contributed to the failure of the intra-Afghan negotiations. This article examines the unique intersection of these dynamics in the Afghan case.

To prevent potential ambiguity, this study provides an explicit definition of what constitutes a “genuine interest in peace” in the present paper by identifying specific indicators (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Indicators of Genuine versus False Commitment in Peace

| DIMENSION                           | INDICATOR of Genuine Commitments                                                                           | INDICATOR of False Commitment                                             |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Readiness for Compromise</b>     | Willingness to adjust positions and make concession for progress                                           | Refusing to compromise and holding maximalist positions                   |
| <b>Support for Mediator</b>         | Supportive of an impartial mediator presence in negotiations process                                       | Opposes presence of a mediator, concerned of concealing hidden intentions |
| <b>Seizing of the Time</b>          | Use the negotiation time to explore solution                                                               | Buying time to expand military and political activities                   |
| <b>Approaching the status quo</b>   | Advancing the process via taking concrete steps                                                            | Prolonging status quo                                                     |
| <b>Legitimacy</b>                   | Engages in negotiation to foster an inclusive sustainable settlement                                       | Using negotiations as an instrument to gain political legitimacy          |
| <b>Response to Pressure</b>         | Enters negotiations voluntarily, motivated by the internal incentives and acknowledging local stakeholders | Enters negotiations by pressure, usually from an external player          |
| <b>Behavior during negotiations</b> | Reduces violence; engages cooperatively; respects adversaries' rights                                      | Continues covert or overt attacks; undermines opponents; fosters mistrust |

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative single-case design and draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews<sup>1</sup> and process tracing, complemented by analysis of relevant documents and public statements. Process tracing is particularly suitable for this study, as it enables an in-depth examination of key events and their causal links within Afghanistan's peace process between 2018 and 2021. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between October and December 2024 with former members of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's negotiation team and senior officials involved in the peace process, totaling five participants. Three interviews were carried out in English and two in Persian; the latter were translated into English using back-translation to ensure accuracy. All interviewees provided informed consent, yet with anonymity. Despite efforts to include Taliban representatives, access constraints prevented their participation. While interviews with relevant Taliban officials would have enriched the study, this limitation was mitigated by drawing on publicly available Taliban statements and other credible sources.

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the first author's master's thesis in Peace and Conflict Studies at Ankara Social Sciences University (ASBU), for which the interviews received ethical approval from the ASBU Ethics Committee. All interviewees provided informed consent.

To enhance validity, the study focuses specifically on the Doha peace process, encompassing both the US–Taliban talks and intra–Afghan negotiations. Interview data were triangulated with credible secondary sources, including United Nations (UN) reports, relevant US official statements, and international media. Using a structured interview guide carefully aligned with the research questions ensured that discussions remained focused on the research subject, and process tracing strengthened internal validity by establishing the order and connections among key events.

## The Background of the Case

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US requested the Taliban to hand over Al-Qaeda’s Osama bin Laden. The Taliban’s refusal to comply led to the ousting of their regime in 2001. Subsequently, the UN initiated a conference in Bonn, Germany, to establish a new representative political setup for Afghanistan. By excluding the Taliban from this conference, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was established. Shortly after the Islamic Republic formation, the Taliban re-mobilized and began waging a nearly two-decade war. According to the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs (2021), the conflict, involving the Taliban, the Islamic Republic, and the US cost 176,000 fatalities, comprising 52,893 opposition fighters, 46,319 civilians, and 69,095 members of Afghanistan’s military and police, with a \$2.13 trillion cost for the US. Although the US is widely regarded as a hegemonic power exercising global leadership, as Altıparmak and Thies (2025: 28) argue, the case of Afghanistan remains a notable exception. In this instance, the US was unable to fully realize or sustain its superpower role, ultimately leaving behind a landscape marked by political, economic, and social instability. Ultimately, the US concluded that the war had no military solution and that its presence would no longer serve America’s interests. This perception, alongside the US strategic shift toward China and the Russia–Ukraine conflict, prompted Washington to seek an agreement with the Taliban to end its “longest war.” As then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, the withdrawal enabled the US to redirect resources toward emerging challenges, including China and Russia’s war in Ukraine (CBS News n.d.). Accordingly, in 2018, the US appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR) to negotiate directly with the Taliban. These talks took nine rounds, concluding with the signing of the Doha Agreement on February 29, 2020. Though this agreement was reached during the first term of Trump’s presidency, it was implemented by President Joe Biden, resulting in the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

The Doha agreement included four items: 1) preventing the use of Afghanistan’s soil against the US and its allies, 2) establishing a timeline for the United States withdrawal, namely during 14 months following the agreement, 3) initiating intra–Afghan talks, and 4) ensuring that a permanent ceasefire would be on the agenda of the intra–Afghan negotiations. This agreement facilitated the Islamic Republic and the Taliban to engage in direct talks in September 2020 for the first time in their twenty years of war.

The Intra-Afghan negotiation (IAN) lasted around a year. Nonetheless, it failed to produce a peaceful resolution to the conflict, despite being a unique opportunity in the history of peace attempts between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic. Various authors and academics worked on the causes of the talks' failure. For instance, Dostyar and Farahi (2022) argued that parallel structures and leadership issues in the Republic camp were two factors that hindered peace negotiations. Others, such as Ibrahim (2022), Helali (2024), Verma (2021), and Tastemirova, Badloov, and Gabitova (2023), contended that the Taliban strategically used negotiations to achieve their objectives rather than to reach an agreement. These authors emphasized the US–Taliban accord's contribution to the collapse of the IAN by securing the Taliban victory. While these works have provided significant insights into the Taliban's stance and the impact of their agreement with the US during the IAN, they have largely overlooked the Islamic Republic's strategy in the negotiations and the influence of the US–Taliban Agreement on the Republic's position throughout the negotiations.

## **Theoretical Framework: False Readiness Theory and Negative Hybrid Peace**

### **Conceptualization of the Doha Peace Process: Hybrid in Nature**

In peace and conflict studies, hybridity refers to the interaction of local and international actors in peacebuilding (Mac Ginty 2010; Björkdahl and Höglund 2013; Richmond 2021). Rooted in sociology, anthropology, and post-colonial studies, hybridity examines how identities and power structures evolve through cultural and institutional interaction. In peacebuilding, it challenges the dominance of liberal peace by emphasizing locally grounded and inclusive approaches. Hybrid peace combines liberal and local elements to promote more sustainable and just outcomes while recognizing formal and informal actors (Mac Ginty 2010; Richmond 2021). It thus reflects the interplay between global and local forces. It underscores the complexity of peace processes, as in Afghanistan, where external and internal actors intersect in often conflicting ways. According to Mac Ginty (2010: 391), hybrid peace is the outcome of the interplay of the following:

“the compliance powers of liberal peace agents, networks and structures, (2) the incentivizing powers of liberal peace agents, networks and structures, (3) the ability of local actors to resist, ignore or adapt liberal peace interventions, and (4) the ability of local actors, networks and structures to present and maintain alternative forms of peace.”

**Table 2.** Application of Hybrid Peace in the Case of Afghanistan

| Components of Hybrid Peace                                                                                                          | Afghanistan's Doha Peace Process (2018–2021)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Multiple actors (Internationally and locally)</b>                                                                                | <p><b>Phases:</b> US-Taliban Agreement endorsed by the UN resolution 2513 (2020) (UN Press 2020), and Islamic Republic and the Taliban.</p> <p><b>External Actors:</b> US, UN, Qatar, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and Türkiye.</p> <p><b>Local Actors:</b> Government, Taliban, political parties, civil society, and women.</p>                                                                                                             |
| <b>Integration of top- down and bottom-up approaches</b>                                                                            | <p><b>Top-down:</b> Leading role played by the US. It exerted pressure on both sides to enter negotiations (The IAN started based on the US-Taliban agreement).</p> <p><b>Bottom-up:</b> The Doha agreement highlighted that the “determination” of Afghanistan’s people will shape their own future.</p> <p>The negotiation was also attended by representatives from various political parties, social spheres, and civil society.</p> |
| <b>Integration of diverse perspectives (mainly Western-centric and traditional)</b>                                                 | The most contested topics in the negotiations can serve as an example for the presence of diverse perspectives in the peace process, which the parties attempted to integrate them. These most contested topics included the constitution, elections, Sharia, principles of Islamic governance, human rights, and women’s rights.                                                                                                        |
| <b>Incentivizing Power (liberal peace)</b>                                                                                          | <p>The US promised to consider removing name of the members of the Taliban from the UN sanction list with the IAN commencement.</p> <p>The United States committed to “support for the Afghan security forces to deter and respond to internal and external threats.”</p>                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>The Ability of Local Actors to Maintain Alternative Forms of Peace and Peace-making</b>                                          | In response to the peace proposal put forth by the US Special Envoy, the President of Afghanistan announced a three-phase peace plan (Aljazeera 2021). This is in addition to the involvement of Loya Jirga during the process.                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>The Ability of Local Actors to Resist Liberal Peace Intervention</b>                                                             | The Taliban resisted inclusion of the Islamic Republic in their negotiations with the US. Likewise, the Republic rejected a proposal from the US that suggested establishment of interim government (Raphel and Rasikh 2021: 24).                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Power dynamics (criticism): Asymmetry of influence. International actors usually, can overshadow the local perspectives.</b>     | The exclusion of the Islamic Republic from the US-Taliban negotiations highlighted the leading influence of the external actors in the peace process, which latter impacted the Islamic Republic’s leverage in the negotiations with the Taliban.                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Complexity (criticism): managing engagement of diverse actors in the peace efforts potentially led to unpredictable results.</b> | The Taliban, the government, civil society, and domestic political factions, neighboring and regional states like Pakistan and Iran, Russia, Qatar and international actors including the US, UK, Germany, and the UN involved in the peace process. Additionally, existing of different worldviews and ideologies.                                                                                                                      |

In line with Table 2, notwithstanding the hybrid nature of the intra-Afghan peace negotiation, this hybridity failed to bring peace to the country due to external actors' influence over internal actors, suggesting the dominance of the negative hybrid peace model over the negotiation's efforts. This argument will be substantiated with empirical evidence presented in the subsequent sections.

### False Readiness Theory

False Readiness Theory aims to analyze the failure of an ongoing negotiation. This contrasts with ripeness and readiness theories, which primarily focus on the initial phase of a successful negotiation process (Schwartz and Gilboa 2021). False readiness theory examines situations in which conflicting parties initially appear committed to negotiations but lack genuine intent to reach an agreement. In most cases, at least one negotiating party exploits the peace process to pursue its strategic objectives. On the contrary, the existing conflict resolution theories, namely Ripeness and Readiness theories, assume that conflicting parties wish to resolve disputes peacefully if they have crossed the Rubicon—a point that, if reached, the parties will not alter their decision. This term is translated into Mutual Hurting Stalemate in ripeness theory (Zartman, 2000). Yet, according to the false readiness thesis, this is not always true in protracted conflicts, such as Afghanistan, where disputing sides enter negotiations for purposes other than achieving peace. This represents the specific blind spot that false readiness theory is designed to address.

Like readiness theory, two essential components of the false readiness theory are “motivation” and “optimism”. When compared to readiness theory, these notions hold different explanations. In the false readiness perspective, according to Schwartz and Gilboa (2021), “the motivation is to gain a better strategic position for a more effective battle against the adversary”. This contrasts with readiness theory, which defines “motivation” to enter negotiations as a sense that a conflict is no longer functional or because of pressure from a third party (Pruitt, 2005). With respect to the readiness theory, according to Pruitt, “optimism” refers to the conviction that a mutually agreeable solution is achievable. Conversely, a false actor is optimistic and can use deceptive negotiation to gain a strategic advantage.

### Negative Hybrid Peace

Hybridity refers to combining different elements (Dinnen and Kent 2015). In this study, “hybrid peace” describes the integration of liberal and local peacebuilding approaches. Local peacebuilding is bottom-up and emphasizes local actors and ownership, whereas liberal peace is a top-down model centered on democracy, rule of law, and human rights. When international actors undermine local agency and fail to reconcile local and international norms, “negative hybrid peace” emerges. In contrast, Mac Ginty (2010) argues that hybrid peace can produce context-sensitive and sustainable outcomes by combining local and international efforts.

The resistance against liberal peace values and negotiation, combined with local and international factors, fosters a hybrid form of peace that is commensurate with international norms while respecting the local context. This model of peacebuilding seeks “deeper justice and sustainability” (Richmond 2021) and aims to ensure that local agency and context are adequately addressed. Key elements such as inclusivity, ownership, and partnership are expected in this form of peacebuilding, which is termed “positive hybrid peace”. All these goals cannot be achieved without genuine cooperation between local and international stakeholders.

Hybrid peace has also received notable criticisms. Millar (2014: 501) challenges the perception that “international actors can plan and administer hybridity to foster predictable social experiences in complex post-conflict states.” He argues that hybrid peace is unpredictable due to its inherently complex nature. Emphasizing the uniqueness of each conflict, Miller asserts that the assumption that international actors can manage and control the hybrid peace to achieve a consistent outcome is not only unrealistic but also overly simplistic. Coşkun (2023: 961) contends that the presence of multiple actors in hybrid peace initiatives can result in a peace process characterized by “complex dynamics, power struggles, and potential challenges in coordination and cooperation” among local and international actors. Nadarajah and Rampton (2015) highlight that hybrid peace can promote the liberal peace principle, which can marginalize local voices. Nadarajah and Rampton (2015) further argue that hybrid peace is overly optimistic about a genuine cooperation between the international and local actors. According to them, power imbalance and conflicting interests hinder cooperation, leading to an imposed peace.

All these critiques converge on the concept of negative hybrid peace, coined by Oliver Richmond. Richmond (2015) argues that hybrid peace theory may reproduce colonial power dynamics when liberal peace principles overshadow local practices. Negative hybrid peace occurs when peace efforts fail to reconcile international and local norms, potentially perpetuating structural violence and creating a form of “outsourced colonial rule.” This term describes externally imposed peace frameworks that neglect local perspectives and emancipation. Richmond emphasizes that durable peace requires genuine collaboration between local and international stakeholders to address these discrepancies.

Another critique of hybrid peace highlights how international actors co-opt local agency to secure legitimacy. According to Richmond and Mitchell (2011), this instrumentalization often produces peace that overlooks the conflict’s root causes and entrenched power imbalances.

**Table 3.** Common Aspects of False Readiness Theory & Negative Hybrid Peace Model

| Aspect                                | Common Points                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Conflict Complexity</b>            | Both highlight the complex nature of conflict and peace processes.                                     |
| <b>Commitment &amp; Collaboration</b> | Emphasize the need for genuine commitment and cooperation; critique superficial peacebuilding efforts. |
| <b>Power Dynamics</b>                 | Stress the influence of power asymmetries in shaping peace processes.                                  |
| <b>Role of External Actors</b>        | Acknowledge significant influence of international actors in peacebuilding.                            |
| <b>Multiplicity of Factors</b>        | Recognize multiple actors, interests, and outcomes; peace is not guaranteed or linear.                 |
| <b>Strategic Use of Peace</b>         | Peace processes may be exploited for strategic gain rather than lasting peace.                         |

Based on the case examined in this study, externally dominated hybrid peace processes are shown to generate mistrust through inadequate cooperation between local and external actors. This dynamic contributes to the emergence of false negotiations and undermines sustained commitment to a substantively negotiated conflict settlement. The relationship between negative hybridity and false readiness thus appears to be mutually reinforcing yet asymmetric. The findings suggest that negative hybridity exerts a stronger influence in shaping and sustaining false readiness than the reverse. It is essential to avoid equating negative hybridity with external involvement in peacebuilding. Instead, it emerges when international actors exert systematic influence over local stakeholders, leading to their marginalization. External involvement does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes when combined with meaningful local engagement and collaboration, as previously discussed in the discourse on positive hybrid peace.

## Discussions and Analysis

Maley and Jamal (2022) argue that the US–Taliban Agreement contributed significantly to the Taliban takeover by creating destructive incentives for domestic and international actors while granting the Taliban diplomatic legitimacy. Their analysis focuses primarily on how the Doha Agreement strengthened the Taliban’s unwillingness to compromise, but does not examine the Afghan Republic’s position, which the present study addresses. Similarly, Ullah, Sultana, and Kokab (2020) contend that the US primarily sought troop withdrawal, while the Taliban aimed to maximize their prospects of gaining power rather than achieving peace. Their study, however, applies Zartman’s bargaining framework, differing from the present research (Zartman, 2005).

Direct talks between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban commenced on September 12, 2020, in Doha, following the US–Taliban agreement. This accord had anticipated the initiation

of the IAN for March 10; however, a dispute over the release of the prisoners for the Taliban and the Afghanistan National Security Forces led to a postponement in the talks. The US–Taliban deal outlined the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners along with 1,000 prisoners from the government. The government, nonetheless, did not give consent on this matter. Ultimately, the Islamic Republic agreed to implement the prisoner exchange deal due to pressure from the United States and with the *Loya Jirga*’s (grand assembly of tribal and religious leaders) approval (Kugiel 2020). The leverage exerted by the US on both sides brought the parties to the negotiations. SRAR Zulmay Khalilzad’s warning regarding an imminent US withdrawal prompted the government to accept the Taliban’s conditions. On the other hand, by threatening to remain in the country and carry out a limited counterterrorism operation, the US pushed the Taliban to engage in negotiations with the Islamic Republic (Singh et al. 2020).

Steve Brooking (2022), who served as the British representative to the Bonn conference in 2001 and was the first diplomat from the United Kingdom (UK) to Afghanistan following 9/11, argued that the Republic leadership showed no required flexibility due to its distrust of the US envoy Khalilzad, overestimating the Republic’s own strength, and underestimating the US intention to withdraw. Another viewpoint on the IAN is provided by Qaane (2020), who criticized the government’s approach to the negotiations. President Ghani, according to him, used the “Pact of Forgetting” model, which disregards the role of war victims. The pact of forgetting is a Spanish model according to which there would be no accountability for thousands of people who died during the Civil War, 1936–39, for the sake of peace (Encarnación 2014).

Lastly, using false negotiation theory, Ibrahim (2022) characterizes the Taliban as a “false negotiator” who attended talks strategically to buy time. While he examines readiness in the peace process, his analysis focuses solely on the Taliban’s interactions with the US and IAN, neglecting the Islamic Republic. He also relies exclusively on secondary data, unlike the present study. Existing literature on the IAN consistently emphasizes the US–Taliban agreement and the Taliban’s role in the negotiations’ failure but overlooks the Islamic Republic and the interaction between parties’ false readiness and hybrid peace efforts. The present study addresses this critical gap.

## **Exclusion of the Government from the US–Taliban Talks**

Negotiations between the Taliban and the US served as the critical juncture of the peace process in Afghanistan. This stage had a determinant role in the outcome of the IAN. The Republic was excluded from this pivotal phase of the process. Exclusion of the government from the US–Taliban negotiations led to discontentment of the Republic with an increasing skepticism about the peace process. Hamdullah Muhib, national security advisor to the President, stated in an interview with Face the Nation (n.d.) that: “This exclusion of the government and not being transparent led to the collapse. During the negotiation, we were not allowed to carry out offensive... We were not receiving support anymore from the US.”

During the talks between the Taliban and the US, the Islamic Republic had doubted the intention of the SRAR, Khalilzad. The government was concerned of formation an interim administration as a result of these negotiations, according to Muhib: “The perception in Afghanistan and the people in the government think, perhaps all this talk is to create a caretaker government of which he [the US envoy] will then become the viceroy” (CNN 2019).

The concern expressed above by Muhib came later true, as the Doha Agreement envisioned a new Islamic government derived from the intra-Afghan negotiations. Envoy Khalilzad, in a hearing session before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the US House of Representatives, acknowledged that he and Secretary Blinken pursued “an Afghan Peace Government plan in early 2021 which would have given the Taliban essentially an equal share of power with the legitimate Afghan government...” (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2023).

In an interview with Amu (n.d.), the SRAR revealed that the Afghan President aimed to secure a second five-year term and integrate the Taliban into his administration, expecting the US to make this a condition in any agreement. He also expected that the SRAR would avoid meetings with other political leaders during visits to Kabul, yet the SRAR regularly consulted both the government and various political actors. He states that President Ghani was unhappy that the continuation of his term was not a condition of the US-Taliban agreement for the US withdrawal. He expected the US to make the Taliban accept this condition. Ghani believed that the Taliban joining his government was not acceptable for the Taliban. Ghani expected me to meet him, not with other politicians. (Amu, n.d).

Why was the Islamic Republic excluded from the US–Taliban negotiations? The responses varied among participants of this study. One of the interviewees told that:

“The US concluded that the Republic lacked a genuine commitment to peace. Additionally, the US shifted its priorities, and its military casualties during the conflict with the Taliban increased. The Taliban’s refusal to acknowledge the Islamic Republic also played a crucial role in the Republic’s exclusion from the talks.” (Interviewee 1, December 7, 2024)

Another interviewee echoed the interviewee 1, noting that the US doubted an agreement between the Republic and the Taliban if government involvement was required (Interviewee 2, October 7, 2024). Prioritizing withdrawal, the US pursued a narrow objective, overlooking a peaceful settlement, while perceiving both sides as unwilling to make concessions, which prevented the preconditions for the talks.

Another interviewee stated that the government’s exclusion from US–Taliban talks resulted from US appeasement of the Taliban. He also cited internal divisions within the Republic, excessive reliance on the US, and Pakistan’s influence in steering US–Taliban talks as contributing factors:

“The US appeasement policy toward the Taliban was a reason to negotiate with the Taliban in the absence of the government. Despite the Afghan Government’s opposition to this idea, this was the game of Pakistan deceiving the US, and the US’s mistake. In short, it was the US decision, weakness and division among the Afghan government and the influential political leaders, too much dependency of the government on the US support, and the regional and global geopolitical landscape that impacted the whole scenario.” (Interviewee 3, December 29, 2024)

The evidence above suggests that the Taliban’s refusal to include the government in US talks, combined with US uncertainty regarding both parties’ willingness to reach a peace agreement, led Washington not to insist on the Republic’s participation as a precondition. This scenario highlights the limited commitment of both parties to make substantial concessions following the US withdrawal.

### **Stance of the Government and the Taliban during the Intra-Afghan Negotiations**

The participants of this study view the commitments of the Taliban and the government to a negotiated settlement through varied lenses. While some explicitly stated that neither side demonstrated a genuine interest in a negotiated resolution, others attributed greater responsibility for the failure of the peace talks to the Taliban. The interviewee 1’s comment below not only confirmed the lack of interest in either party but also revealed a deceptive tactic used by the Taliban through a fabricated narrative:

“The Taliban’s negotiating team came up with an appealing narrative that included women’s rights, people’s political rights, cooperation with the international community, and comprehensive political participation from all political and ethnic groupings. People and the international community began to think that the Taliban had evolved and genuinely wanted peace. In one scenario, we could argue that the Taliban were lying and exploiting this narrative to deceive the populace and achieve their aim. The [Taliban] negotiation team, on the other, might have believed this, in my opinion, but they lacked the power to make a decision since decisions were being made somewhere else [by their leaders]. In summary, both parties were somewhat unprepared for a negotiated resolution of the conflict.” (Interviewee 1, December 7, 2024)

The following perspective is aligned with the argument made by the previous interviewee concerning the lack of commitment in the parties to a negotiated resolution:

“Ashraf Ghani was not interested in a settlement that did not secure his role as head of state and hence adopted a deliberate strategy of stalling and delaying talks. The Taliban were clearly not interested in the direct negotiations because they had already secured the US exit in the Doha deal. The Taliban had a very clear strategy of running out the clock, so the US/NATO forces get close to the withdrawal deadline. Both parties were not ready for these talks but were forced to sit across from each other by the US.” (Interviewee 4, December 3, 2024)

Terms such as “deliberately stalling”, “delaying”, “running out the clock”, and “buying time” as well as references to US pressure, characterize both the government and the Taliban as false negotiators. Interviewee 2 (October 7, 2024), however, described the Taliban as stalling while the government remained committed: “The IRA was very committed to a negotiated settlement... but the Taliban showed little interest or urgency to resolve the conflict politically.” As stated by another interviewee, each party sought peace on its own terms:

“The Taliban gained a dominant advantage of their deal with the US, which weakened the Republic’s negotiating power. One significant mistake was the omission of any mention of the Islamic Republic in the agreement. Consequently, each side sought peace on its own terms, particularly the Taliban. It is now clear that they were not prepared for a negotiated settlement; they believed that the United States had granted them what they desired, despite all the efforts made by the Republic side toward progress.” (Interviewee 3, December 29, 2024)

To conclude, except for one member of the Islamic Republic’s negotiating team, who clearly insisted on the government’s commitment to peace, the perspectives among the rest of the interviewees, either explicitly or implicitly, suggest that both sides can be identified as false negotiators.

### **The Impact of the US–Taliban Agreement on Achieving Peace in Afghanistan**

The agreement legitimized the Taliban, undermined the legitimate government, impacted the morale of society and the National Security Forces, according to the interviewee 3. He further argues, as cited below, that the conditions set forth in the agreement concerning the Taliban were insufficient to ensure a ceasefire. As a result, this led to a situation where the Taliban acquired a dominant position and subsequently became uninterested in continuing negotiations with the government:

“The influence was significant on both sides, but in different ways. The agreement negatively impacted the morale of society, and the security forces further weakened the government’s position. The terms on the Taliban side in the contract were specific and time-bound, while the conditions the US negotiated were vague and not measurable. The conditionality was not strong enough to guarantee peace. It only guaranteed withdrawal.” (Interviewee 3, December 29, 2024)

Interviewee 2 (October 7, 2024) contends that the US–Taliban agreement has limited the overall leverage of the government by saying “The Doha deal limited the space within which the Republic would negotiate a peace deal. It gives up key leverage of the Afghan government ahead of the actual two-sided negotiations. e.g., prisoners’ release.”

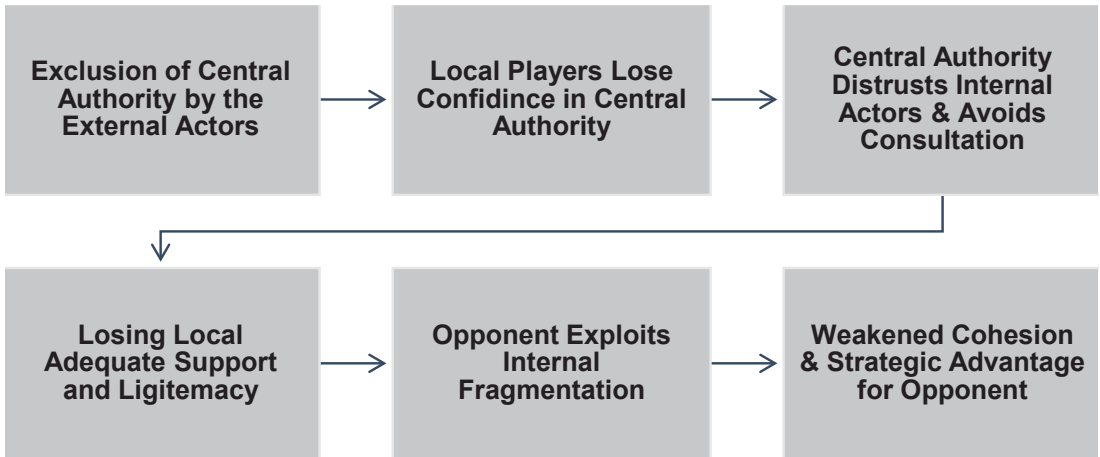
Interviewee 4 (December 3, 2024) confirmed this view, noting that after the Doha Agreement, the Taliban showed no willingness to negotiate with the Republic: “For the Doha Deal, the Taliban had no interest in talking to the Republic and said so during the face-to-face meetings. The Republic lost leverage over the Taliban after the Doha deal since the US already committed to leaving and forced the Republic to release 5,000 prisoners.”

Interviewee 5 (October 15, 2024) echoed this assessment, asserting that the principal mistake of the government was to accept the US–Taliban agreement as the basis for the intra-Afghan negotiations.

“The gravest mistake of the Islamic Republic was to accept this agreement as the foundation for the intra-Afghan talks. This agreement, on the one hand, ensured the victory and gained power for the Taliban. On the other hand, it eroded the morale of the national security forces of Afghanistan, thereby making the negotiations complex.”

Overall, the Doha Agreement significantly elevated the Taliban’s political standing while eroding the government’s bargaining power, thereby remarkably altering power dynamics. The Republic’s exclusion from this agreement led the President to perceive it as a direct threat to his power and to doubt its intentions. Consequently, he opted for a largely reactive posture, which manifested in limited flexibility during the intra–Afghan talks.

**Figure 1.** Conceptualization of the Exclusion of Local Actors from the Peace Process



**Source:** This diagram is compiled by the authors.

The Doha Agreement, by excluding the Afghan government (or central authority), created incentives for rival local political actors and factions, opposing the President, to advocate for an interim administration, as the incumbent president was perceived to have diminished leverage and legitimacy. Conversely, the government viewed these political actors as potential threats, suspecting that they might compromise with the Taliban. Thus, the President centralized decision-making, lost his trust in key internal players and withheld authority from their affiliated institutions in the government, such as the High Council for National Reconciliation, led by his political rival Abdullah Abdullah, no to make any decision in negotiations. This combination of exclusion and internal distrust effectively enabled the Taliban to exploit political fragmentation within the political elite.

This dynamic is illustrated by President Ashraf Ghani’s dismissal of the Moscow conference as “talks with no weight,” questioning its legitimacy and the authority of participants to negotiate peace in the absence of his government (TOLONews n.d; Amiri 2019). He argued that outcomes would remain symbolic unless ratified by the Afghan government and suggested that certain participants supported an interim government to undermine his authority (Ariana News 2021).

## The Interplay of False Readiness Theory and Negative Hybrid Peace in the Context of the Doha Peace Process

The intra-Afghan negotiations within the Doha Peace Process demonstrate the core tenets of both False Readiness Theory and Negative Hybrid Peace theory, highlighting a peace process that was externally driven, strategically manipulated, and ultimately unsuccessful due to a lack of genuine local ownership and trust. Table 4 summarizes this interplay.

**Table 4.** The interplay between False Readiness & Negative Hybrid Peace in the Doha Peace Process

| Theme                          | Key Points                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Lack of Cooperation</b>     | Poor coordination among Afghan government, Taliban, and the US<br>Ghani underestimated US withdrawal threat.<br>Taliban lacked genuine commitment.<br>US prioritized exit over sustainable peace.  |
| <b>Mistrust Among Actors</b>   | Government excluded from talks → distrusted both US & Taliban.<br>Taliban believed military victory was assured.<br>US distrusted local actors → didn’t condition withdrawal on intra-Afghan deal. |
| <b>Strategic Self-Interest</b> | US: Exit war.<br>Taliban: Gain time & legitimacy.<br>Government: Preserve power, resist compromise.                                                                                                |
| <b>Failed Expectations</b>     | Talks delayed (March → Sept 2020).<br>Violence reduction unmet.<br>No inclusive govt formed as planned.                                                                                            |
| <b>Co-opted Local Agency</b>   | Government pressured to release Taliban prisoners.<br><i>Loya Jirga</i> used to justify decisions.<br>Government-NATO declaration aimed to lend legitimacy.                                        |
| <b>Power Imbalance</b>         | US shifted focus to Russia/China.<br>US-Taliban deal boosted Taliban power.<br>Government resisted stepping down.                                                                                  |
| <b>Top-Down Peace Pressure</b> | Peace talks driven by US pressure.<br>Both sides unprepared but forced to negotiate.<br>Taliban emboldened; Government disillusioned.                                                              |

One of the most evident failures of the Doha Process was the lack of effective cooperation among the Afghan government, the Taliban, and the United States. President

Ghani's administration underestimated the seriousness of the US withdrawal, preferring the status quo over compromise. Meanwhile, the Taliban showed minimal willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue, and the US was primarily focused on securing a safe exit from Afghanistan. The absence of coordination among these stakeholders laid the foundation for the process's breakdown.

Central to both theories the element of mistrust, which permeated relations between all parties. The Afghan government felt sidelined after being excluded from US-Taliban talks, which fueled suspicion about the intentions of both its international partner and its domestic adversary. The Taliban, emboldened by their agreement with the US, viewed negotiations as a formality rather than a path to genuine reconciliation. The US, for its part, distrusted the capability of either Afghan party to reach an agreement, leading to a withdrawal plan that was not conditioned on intra-Afghan peace.

This lack of trust led each actor to pursue its own strategic objectives. The US achieved its immediate goal of ending its involvement in Afghanistan, the Taliban gained time and legitimacy, and the Afghan government resisted any compromise that would threaten its hold on power. These diverging agendas reveal the parties' false readiness to enter negotiations without a genuine commitment to peace.

The Negative Hybrid Peace Theory is reflected in the process's top-down structure, with international actors dictating terms and timelines. Pressure on the Afghan government to release Taliban prisoners and the symbolic role of the *Loya Jirga* illustrate how local institutions were co-opted to serve external interests. The US-Taliban agreement, signed without government participation, created a power imbalance favoring the Taliban, undermining negotiation dynamics and the process's legitimacy. This asymmetry was further reinforced by shifting US priorities toward global concerns such as Russia and China, making its involvement increasingly transactional and marginalizing the peace process.

Lastly, the forced nature of the negotiations—without genuine readiness or inclusivity—produced a top-down, negative hybrid peace, lacking local legitimacy or sustainability. As interviewees noted, both sides were compelled to engage without preparation or real intent—confirming that externally imposed processes, especially those driven by great-power interests, fail to deliver lasting peace. In conclusion, the Doha Peace Process illustrates the interplay of false readiness and negative hybrid peace: structurally flawed, externally dictated, and predictably unsuccessful.

## Key Findings and Conclusion

The study argues that both the Afghan Republic and the Taliban lacked genuine commitment to peace, as the US-Taliban Agreement shifted power dynamics and fostered a negative hybrid peace. These findings support False Readiness Theory, highlighting how parties may appear committed to negotiations while pursuing strategic objectives.

First, after securing the Doha deal guaranteeing US troop withdrawal, the Taliban viewed no real need for compromise with the Afghan government. Their military confidence grew, bolstered by the agreement's lack of conditionality and the cessation of US support for the Republic. This perceived inevitability of victory led them to stall the intra-Afghan negotiations and reject the government as a legitimate counterpart, framing the talks broadly as 'intra-Afghan' to dilute Kabul's authority. Their rhetoric promised change but aimed to manipulate perceptions rather than signal true transformation—illustrating how external actors like the US can enable false negotiators to mask their intentions. The following statements suggest the Doha Agreement shifted the balance of power toward the Taliban and shaped their willingness to pursue peace talks. Interviewee 3 (2024) stated:

“The main issue was the fragile nature of the Doha agreement, which focused primarily on troop withdrawal. This agreement was signed while the Republic was excluded from direct negotiations between the United States and the Taliban. As a result, the Taliban gained a dominant advantage, which weakened the Republic's negotiating power and eroded its international legitimacy and influence. One significant mistake was the omission of any mention of the Islamic Republic in the agreement. Consequently, each side sought peace on its own terms, particularly the Taliban. It is now clear that they were not prepared for a negotiated settlement; they believed the United States had granted them what they desired, despite all the efforts by the Republic to advance progress.”

This interpretation is further reinforced by the following statement of the US Envoy—who drafted and signed the agreement with the Taliban—made during a debate at the Global and National Security Institute (n.d.): “...agreement [US-Taliban] does not say ‘the negotiation between the Taliban and the government,’ rather it says that ‘the Taliban and the other Afghan sides. So, there are still Afghans who negotiate with the Taliban according to the agreement (this is an opportunity).”

Together, these statements show the Doha Agreement reshaped negotiations in the Taliban's favor by sidelining the Republic and prioritizing US withdrawal. This weakened the Republic's leverage and legitimacy while letting the Taliban treat the deal as a victory rather than grounds for compromise—encouraging instrumental talks and reducing incentives for genuine settlement.

Second, the Afghan president resisted any peace formula that might remove him from power, favoring co-optation of the Taliban over inclusive dialogue. The US-Taliban deal deepened his distrust of Washington, and pressure from local politicians for an interim setup heightened his fear of marginalization—driving a defensive, reactive posture that undermined genuine cooperation in the intra-Afghan talks.

A major example of strategic maneuvering was the President's insistence on holding the 2019 election despite widespread calls for delay (Ahady 2019). By securing re-election, he solidified his legitimacy and made himself the sole decision-maker on peace, blocking

proposals for an interim government. This move not only intensified mistrust with political rivals and international actors but also hardened positions, further reducing prospects for compromise.

Similarly, interviewee 4 stated to the authors that:

The Republic needed leverage while sitting across the table, and a government without popular support would not have had that. The US position was to rush the government into talks, and all political figures sought a share of power and opposed Ashraf Ghani. The push to postpone elections was seen as an attempt to remove Ashraf Ghani from power, so he became more aggressive and pushed to hold the elections. If the government had been included in the US-Taliban talks, there could have been a realistic possibility of postponing the 2019 presidential elections if it meant getting closer to a negotiated settlement.

This further underscores the Republic's reactive posture after Doha: excluded and under-leveraged, it responded defensively rather than shaping the process. The rushed timeline, internal fragmentation, and opposition to Ghani pushed the government to prioritize electoral survival and consolidating power over strategic flexibility, hardening its stance against exclusion. Inclusion in the US-Taliban talks might have enabled a more coordinated response—potentially even postponing elections to advance a settlement.

The US Special Envoy also confirmed that the President of the Islamic Republic strongly opposed the use of the term “new Islamic government” in the US–Taliban Agreement (Global and National Security Institute, n.d.). In this context, the term referred to the interim administration envisioned to emerge from intra-Afghan talks—an idea unacceptable to the incumbent president, since it implied a transfer of power. Both parties used the peace process tactically: the Taliban gained legitimacy and time to consolidate, while the president used it to retain authority and fend off political threats. This reflects the intersection of false readiness and negative hybrid peace—both sides appeared engaged yet were driven by conflicting power interests with no shared vision for peace.

The intra-Afghan peace process was undermined by the asymmetrical power dynamics of the Doha Agreement, exclusionary practices, and strategic manipulation. The findings highlight the risks of externally driven peacebuilding and engaging actors lacking genuine readiness, emphasizing the need for inclusive, balanced, and power-sharing mechanisms.

This study marks only the second application of False Readiness Theory, following its initial use in the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo negotiations (Schwartz and Gilboa 2022), and offers key theoretical contributions to peace and conflict Studies. It positions the theory as a viable alternative to traditional frameworks like Ripeness and Readiness Theories (Schwartz and Gilboa 2021).

This research challenges Mac Ginty's (2010) view that hybrid peacebuilding inherently promotes sustainable peace, arguing that its success is highly context-dependent. Hybrid

peacebuilding works best when local actors have enough cohesion and leverage to negotiate with international actors—conditions Afghanistan lacked. From Geneva to Bonn to Doha, international actors repeatedly undermined local ownership through exclusion. These asymmetries weakened legitimacy, eroded trust, and hindered reconciliation—showing hybrid peacebuilding can freeze conflict rather than resolve it.

This study highlights key theoretical and practical lessons for structuring peace negotiations. Effective processes require credible mediation, temporary ceasefires, informal dialogue, and mechanisms preventing strategic manipulation. The intra-Afghan talks were hindered by escalating violence, a lack of neutral mediation, and the exclusion of key local actors—compounded by the flawed US-Taliban Agreement, which shifted power dynamics and reduced incentives for compromise. Sustainable peace requires local ownership, inclusive participation, internal legitimacy, and genuine power-sharing. Rather than relying primarily on international intervention, future peace efforts should prioritize transparent processes, trust-building, and meaningful concessions by all parties to break Afghanistan’s cycle of conflict.

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