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The Options for Getting to Political Reconciliation in Afghanistan

CENTCOM Reachback Questions
Based on NSI I-R-C™ Analysis

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Responses Based on NSI I-R-C Analysis¹

In August of 2018, United States Central Command asked the Strategic Multilayer Assessment Reachback team, *How can the United States best increase the resolve and capability of regional actors to get to political reconciliation in Afghanistan?* This report highlights the results of NSI's Interest-Resolve-Capability (I-R-C)[™] analysis of Afghanistan stakeholder dynamics.²

ACTORS INCLUDED
Central Asian states
China
India
Iran
Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP)
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)
Afghan National Unity Government (NUG)
Pakistan
Taliban
United States
Russia

I-R-C Analysis: A Quick Description

NSI's I-R-C methodology analyzes the interconnectivity of actors' interests, resolve, and capability to assess outcomes in complex, multi-actor security environments. In this study, the outcomes are: (1) a *Brokered Settlement* scenario—an externally-mediated process leads to the negotiated end to conflict via political reconciliation;³ (2) an *Enhanced Governance* scenario—a long-term US commitment increases the National Unity Government's (NUG) zones of territorial control, effectively defeating the Taliban; (3) a status quo outcome, *Hurting Stalemate*; (4) a *Precipitous Withdrawal* scenario—a rapid, large-scale withdrawal of United States' forces from Afghanistan increases the Taliban's zones of territorial control, effectively allowing it to defeat the NUG; (5) a *Civil War* scenario in which the Afghan state fragments, leading to a multi-party civil war.

Figure 1: Actors List

The assessment of these outcomes is based on: 1) the *interests* of actors derived from the core security, economic, domestic politics, and international influence challenges they face; 2) a measure of each actor's *resolve*, or willingness, to accept or reject a pre-defined set of outcomes;⁴ and 3) an actor's *capability*⁵ to influence or control those

¹ The question further specified: "In priority order, please study 1) China, 2) Russia, 3) Iran, 4) India, 5) KSA, and 6) Pakistan."

² The complete report, *Shared Objective, Dueling Visions: An I-R-C Analysis*, is available by request from Dr. John A. Stevenson at jstevenson@nsiteam.com. In-depth information on the eleven actors included in this study including full and referenced descriptions of individual actor interests, comparative interest matrices as well as resolve and sensitivity analyses can be found in *Key Actors in Afghanistan Analyses*, also by request from Dr. John A. Stevenson.

³ Taliban becomes an officially recognized political party with the opportunity to legitimately consolidate regional power through democratic elections.

⁴ It has long been recognized in international relations literature that the resolve, or willingness of a government or organization's leadership to apply all of its resources or to "fight to the bitter end" for an objective or principle, is a critical deciding factor in the outcomes of international conflict. This is the case even when capabilities are lacking. See for example: Zeev Maoz, 1989. Power, Capabilities, and Paradoxical Conflict Outcomes, *World Politics*, 41(2): 239-266.

⁵ We operationalize an actor's overall capability in terms of its ability to impact the outcome of a particular event. Thus, we consider a state's capability as context dependent and, therefore, not a static quantity. We further distinguish an actor's ability to directly cause or prohibit an outcome (what we call *control capability*) from its ability to *influence*, or indirectly impact the outcome. An actor has *control capability* relative to an outcome if it can compel other actors to accede to, or can veto, a particular outcome.

outcomes relative to the capabilities of others. In shorthand, the analytic model is: *Interest + Resolve + Capability = Expectations for Reconciliation*.⁶

Actors’ Resolve and Capability in Support of Reconciliation

The I-R-C analysis reveals a stakeholder preference for some kind of stable political settlement (the exception is the ISKP). However, under current conditions, the analysis also suggests that critical stakeholders are divided between two stability outcomes⁷—*Enhanced Governance* and *Brokered Settlement*. Sensitivity⁸ analyses of stakeholders’ interests ranking reveal that this divide is maintained by the United States as the most resolved and most capable actor in favor of *Enhanced Governance* over *Brokered Settlement*. The United States’ preferences were found to be extremely robust; the key factor limiting the United States support of *Brokered Settlement* is its ongoing, global competition for relative geopolitical influence vis-à-vis China and Russia. For almost all the other actors, a *Brokered Settlement* is the potential outcome most likely to find broad stakeholder support—or at least avoid direct opposition; besides the United States, those resolved against *Brokered Settlement*, such as the ISKP and KSA, lack capability to undermine the outcome.

Table 1: Interest-Based Outcome Rankings

	Central Asian states	China	India	Iran	ISKP	KSA	NUG	Pakistan	Taliban	US	Russia
Brokered Settlement (everyone wins)	Grey	Green	Grey	White	Grey	White	Green	Green	Grey	Grey	Green
Enhanced Governance (NUG wins)	Green	Green	Green	Green	White	Green	Green	White	Grey	Green	Green
Hurting Stalemate / Status Quo (no one wins)	White	White	White	White	Grey	Grey	White	White	White	White	White
US Precipitous Withdrawal (Taliban wins)	White	White	Grey	Grey	White	Grey	White	Grey	Green	Grey	White
Civil War (Everyone loses)	Grey	Grey	White	Grey	Green	Grey	Grey	Grey	White	White	Grey

Best Outcome

Second Best

Third Best

Fourth Best

Worst Outcome

⁶ For a description of the analytic method and theoretical foundations and a complete discussion of analytic results, please see the full report at nsiteam.com/publications, where you can also find an application of the NSI I-R-C analysis to the [North Korean security situation](#), as well as for the [Middle East conflict](#) centered on Iraq and Syria.

⁷ These outcomes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They were selected in consultation with other research groups analyzing potential pathways and outcomes that could unfold within the next two to five years.

⁸ The sensitivity tests entailed preference matrix transformations, and analysis of the effects of different matrices on resolve scores. Tests targeted both interests and outcomes into the matrix, manipulating interests weights, and applying different choice heuristics (weighted normative, expected utility, weighted expected utility, satisficing with different expediencies, lexicographic choice, and elimination by aspects) to determine what might produce changes to three aspects: the simple unweighted normative preference orderings, the satisficing choices, and the range of acceptable outcomes shown in the interest matrices for each actor.

Sensitivity⁹ analyses of stakeholders’ interests ranking (Table 1) reveal considerable regional support for an end to the conflict in Afghanistan: either via political reconciliation (*Brokered Settlement*) or a stronger NUG (*Enhanced Governance*). Apart from the ISKP, all actors have either *Brokered Settlement* or *Enhanced Governance* as one of their top two outcomes; only two actors (ISKP and the Taliban) have either of those scenarios as their worst outcomes. For the Taliban, only *Brokered Settlement* along with *Hurting Stalemate*, satisfied all their interests.

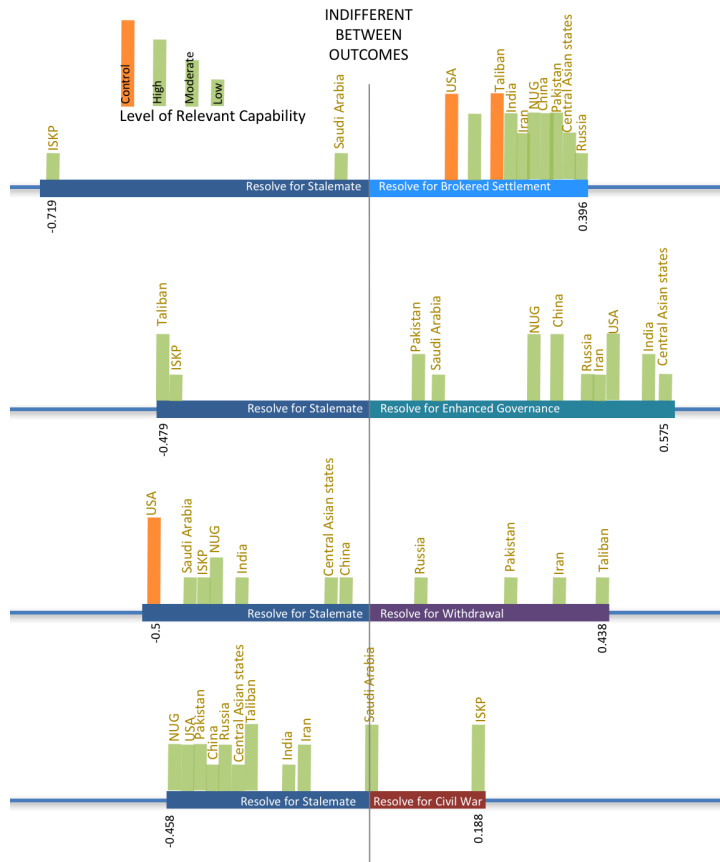


Figure 2: Resolve for Stalemate v. Other Posited Outcomes

Figure 2 demonstrates that Resolve scores follow a similar distribution to the interest rankings. Most actors are resolved in favor of either *Brokered Settlement* or *Enhanced Governance* relative to *Hurting Stalemate*. The strongest resolve and capabilities are arrayed in favor of *Enhanced Governance*, yet *Brokered Settlement* is the outcome most compatible with the interests, resolve, and capabilities of the major stakeholders.

Enhanced Governance and *Brokered Settlement* represent two distinct pathways to a settled Afghanistan (Figure 3). When compared against each other, rather than against the status quo, the underpinnings of support for *Enhanced Governance* or *Brokered Settlement* becomes apparent (Figure 3). Two actors with high influence capability—the United States and the Taliban—are resolved oppositely, whereas three equally capable actors, namely China, Russia, and the NUG, are indifferent between *Enhanced Governance* and *Brokered Settlement*.

Enhanced Governance threatens a key stakeholder’s fundamental interest: self-preservation. Not only is *Enhanced Governance* the clear worst-case outcome for the Taliban, the Taliban is also one of the actors with the greatest capability to affect the implementation of *Enhanced Governance*. The Taliban possesses high influence capability (including its military ties with Pakistan and its ability to frame threats to its organizational capacity as an attack on Pashtuns) to undermine movement toward *Enhanced Governance*.

⁹ The sensitivity tests entailed preference matrix transformations, and analysis of the effects of different matrices on resolve scores. Tests targeted both interests and outcomes into the matrix, manipulating interests weights, and applying different choice heuristics (weighted normative, expected utility, weighted expected utility, satisficing with different expediencies, lexicographic choice, and elimination by aspects) to determine what might produce changes to three aspects: the simple unweighted normative preference orderings, the satisficing choices, and the range of acceptable outcomes shown in the interest matrices for each actor.

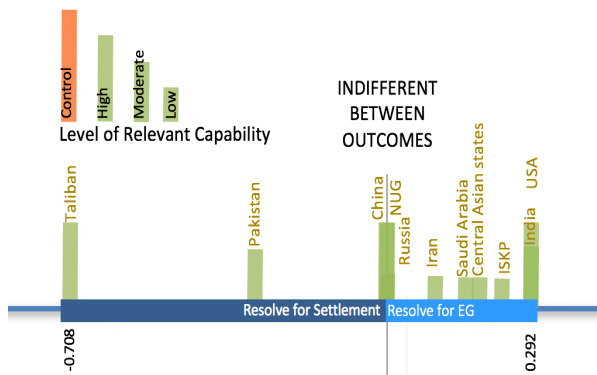


Figure 3: Resolve for Brokered Settlement v. Enhanced Governance

The Taliban's opposition to *Enhanced Governance* explains its strong support for *Brokered Settlement*. A stronger, more powerful, settled Afghan state is far more attractive if the Taliban will be part of the regime running that state, than if Taliban are to be the enemies of that state. In fact, in contradistinction to the prevailing wisdom that the Taliban is a key opponent of political reconciliation, the I-R-C analysis reveal the United States as the key stakeholder actor whose resolve and capability are arrayed against *Brokered Settlement*.

Sensitivity analysis shows the United States' preferences to be extremely robust and are among the more difficult preferences to shift toward *Brokered Settlement* away from *Enhanced Governance*. Shifting interest weights and outcome likelihood did little to change the United States' preference for *Enhanced Governance*. In fact, manipulating the rankings of four interests (relating to energy security, the economic growth of, and state capacity of allies, and the United States' absolute levels of influence in Afghanistan) only increased its acceptance of a *Hurting Stalemate*. Through elimination, the interest preventing resolve in favor of *Brokered Settlement* is the United States' interest in countering Russian and Chinese influence. This suggests that the United States' geopolitical concerns about Russian and Chinese influence complicates its pursuit of more traditional security interests relating to counter-terrorism and partner state stability.

Increasing Stakeholder Resolve and Capability for *Brokered Settlement*

Every stakeholder except for Russia finds continued *Hurting Stalemate* acceptable. These results indicate that one of the enduring challenges of pursuing political reconciliation will be sustaining the resolve to move away from *Hurting Stalemate*; no combination of manipulation eliminated *Hurting Stalemate* completely as an acceptable outcome for stakeholders. Given overlapping regional stakeholders' interests in economic and energy development, and the broad opposition to further fragmentation in Afghanistan, the United States can "lead from behind" through a *Brokered Settlement* by providing its guidance and support to its geopolitical rivals (China and Russia), as well as tactical partners (such as Pakistan and KSA), to intensify those actors' resolve in favor of reconciliation for Afghanistan.

Pushing on an Open Door: China, Pakistan, NUG, and Russia Already Support Reconciliation

China, Pakistan, the NUG and Russia already support political reconciliation as their best preferred outcome (Table 1), and are resolved in favor of *Brokered Settlement* to *Hurting Stalemate*. Being only moderately resolved in favor, these actors will likely sustain, but not jumpstart, movement toward a *Brokered Settlement*. The United States efforts to maintain consistent diplomatic ties with the Taliban and Pakistan, sustained kinetic pressure against the ISKP (as a part of ongoing operations against ISIS and its affiliates), signaled willingness to let China be the face of a multilateral diplomatic process, and support for Russia to be the new face of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotic operations in Afghanistan would deepen these actors' resolve for *Brokered Settlement*.¹⁰ Empowering China to be the economic face of a

¹⁰ Cultivating Chinese and Russian support for a *Brokered Settlement* would not necessarily require solving the deeper geostrategic disagreements between the United States and these countries. Just like the United States and Russia cooperated, if somewhat uneasily, in Syria to degrade ISIS' capability, so too could the United States and Russia, and well as the United States and China, coordinate on Afghanistan-specific objectives and processes without issue linkage to other ongoing challenges between the sets of countries.

move toward *Brokered Settlement* may increase China's resolve to sustain a *Brokered Settlement* by helping them secure their own visions for an interconnected Central Asian energy market, and more developed transportation and energy infrastructure.

The Taliban: Opportunities for Legitimation and Power Consolidation

The Taliban's current preferences align in favor of *US Precipitous Withdrawal*. Sensitivity analysis shows the Taliban's preferences are reasonably malleable toward prioritizing *Brokered Settlement* over *Withdrawal*.¹¹ Surprisingly, removing *Withdrawal* as an outcome did not shift *Brokered Settlement* to become the most preferred outcome. The Taliban's preference ordering changed only when the Taliban is empowered to achieve legitimization and consolidation goals without enhancing the power of the NUG to defeat them prior to the political reconciliation of a *Brokered Settlement*. These chances also increased acceptability of *Hurting Stalemate*, portending a danger that the Taliban's commitment to political reconciliation will wane as it makes gains. Other actors with high influence capacity in a *Brokered Settlement*, especially Pakistan and China, may be necessary partners in continuing to bolster the Taliban's resolve for *Brokered Settlement* as it begins to achieve key objectives in Afghanistan.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Limit Qatar's Influence in Afghanistan

Saudi Arabia is very weakly resolved for a *Brokered Settlement* relative to *Enhanced Governance* (-0.167) and a *Hurting Stalemate* (-0.083). The KSA, with respect to Afghanistan, has been most motivated by its prestige interests; since their rival, Qatar, has been hosting the Taliban political office, the Kingdom has been actively supporting opposition to the Taliban. Only limiting Qatar's support increases KSA's resolve.

Pakistan: Prevent the Defeat of the Taliban or the creation of an Indian Ally

Pakistan's preferences are robust (e.g., hard to manipulate to change to favor *Brokered Settlement*) because of the high priority it places on foreign policy orientation of the regime in Afghanistan. Pakistan is highly resolved to prevent the emergence of a pro-Indian government in Kabul. The United States can aid Pakistan in securing one of its key geopolitical interests simply by letting Pakistan support the Taliban, functionally taking *Enhanced Governance* off the table in a credible way.

Iran: Protect Indian Investments around Chabahar

Iran's pathway to supporting a *Brokered Settlement* lies through its interests in energy connectivity and development. To wit, Iran would be satisfied if its Afghan-based energy projects continue undisturbed. Specifically, the analysis isolates Iran's preference that a Taliban-endorsed *Brokered Settlement* would protect and nourish Indian-based investment around Chabahar. The Taliban's diplomatic closeness to Pakistan complicates Iran's resolve for *Brokered Settlement* because of India and Pakistan's ongoing competition for influence over post-conflict Afghanistan's foreign policy alignment. Would an empowered Taliban in a unity government protect Indian investments? Even though such an outcome is difficult to imagine, it is not impossible. To make itself more acceptable to regional stakeholders, the Taliban has been more forthright about touting its commitments to continued regional economic connectivity.

India: Increase Opportunities for Indian Geopolitical Influence, Energy Security, and/or Economic Growth

India, like the United States, has strongly resolved, robust preferences in favor of *Enhanced Governance*. This stems from its concerns about empowering the Taliban or allowing the creation of a pro-Pakistani government in Kabul. Since India also possesses moderate capability to incentivize *Enhanced Governance* over *Brokered Settlement*, India is a key regional stakeholder whose support is necessary for *Brokered Settlement*. India's resolve for political reconciliation and acceptance of the Taliban can increase through

¹¹ The NSI team consolidated interests to cause *Brokered Settlement* to emerge as the top normative choice. The interest "Political Control" absorbed the other interests that related to legitimization and cohesion strategies, such as "Nation-Building", "Rebel Diplomacy", and "Recruitment."

either one of two ways: (1) if the process of creating *Brokered Settlement* increases its ability to pursue prestige interests and greater geopolitical relevancy or (2) if a stable Afghanistan increases its potential for energy security and internal economic growth. Accommodating Indian prestige interests would require a nimble approach as much of its conception of its prestige is relative to its positioning vis-à-vis China. However, if India's prestige interests are not accommodated, and China increases its opportunities to gain influence through a *Brokered Settlement*, then India's resolve for political reconciliation will wane.

In conclusion, the United States can increase key stakeholder's resolve in favor of political reconciliation in Afghanistan by prioritizing a *Brokered Settlement* more than geopolitical influence competition. Our analysis suggests that the United States will still possess high absolute levels of influence capability, though its levels of influence capability relative to Russia and China may be less asymmetrically in its favor. In other words, a cooperative approach which nourishes the rise of other stakeholders' levels of influence may counter-intuitively better preserve sustainable (and more affordable) options for long-term United States' influence in the region beyond a two to five-year window.