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## A Unified Voice: The US-Taliban Peace Deal

### Abstract

The United States signed a peace deal with the Taliban on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020 that would result in the complete withdrawal of US forces from the country at the end of a fourteenth month period, assuming the Taliban holds up their end of the deal. This would mark the end of one of the longest wars in United States history, lasting nearly two decades. The purpose of this paper is twofold, to determine if there is a presence of bias or misinformation by five major public policy think tanks in the United States and to examine the United States – Taliban peace deal through the analysis of content from the same five public policy think tanks. Those think tanks are the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Heritage Foundation, and the Wilson Center. The findings of this paper show that these public policy think tanks are in relative unity in their opinion and recommendations regarding the peace deal, showing that across ideological lines this peace deal is rushed and unsatisfactory in its current state, and should either be renegotiated or torn up. This unity in both opinion and recommendation also shows that these think tanks are fulfilling their duty to both the public and policymakers by informing them on what is best to help move the United States forward, regardless of ideological pressure or economic benefits to the contrary.

### Keywords

Content Analysis, National Security, Think Tanks

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# **A Unified Voice: The US-Taliban Peace Deal** — *Matthew Feldstein, Gettysburg College*

## **Executive Summary:**

The United States signed a peace deal with the Taliban on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020 that would result in the complete withdrawal of US forces from the country at the end of a fourteenth month period, assuming the Taliban holds up their end of the deal. This would mark the end of one of the longest wars in United States history, lasting nearly two decades. The purpose of this paper is twofold, to determine if there is a presence of bias or misinformation by five major public policy think tanks in the United States and to examine the United States – Taliban peace deal through the analysis of content from the same five public policy think tanks. Those think tanks are the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Heritage Foundation, and the Wilson Center. The findings of this paper show that these public policy think tanks are in relative unity in their opinion and recommendations regarding the peace deal, showing that across ideological lines this peace deal is rushed and unsatisfactory in its current state, and should either be renegotiated or torn up. This unity in both opinion and recommendation also show that these think tanks are fulfilling their duty to both the public and policymakers by informing them on what is best to help move the United States forward, regardless of ideological pressure or economic benefits to the contrary.

The methodology of this paper is based on grounded theory, where content from each of the five public policy think tanks was collected, organized, and analyzed in order to determine the themes found within. A total of sixty articles would be considered to be substantively relevant, and from them came nine thematic codes that would be further encompassed by three major themes. The largest and most prevalent theme throughout the sixty articles would be *Taking the Easy Way Out*, in which the peace deal is seen as betraying our Afghan ally in favor of withdrawing from Afghanistan as fast as possible without answering key questions. Questions such as whether there will be government representation for the Taliban or if the Taliban will accept the inclusion of women's rights throughout all aspects of Afghan society or will insist on enforcing their interpretation of Sharia law. The largest concern across all think tanks and all articles was that the Afghan government had not been present at any peace negotiations prior to the deal being signed and as such could not address any of their concerns. The Taliban had agreed to talks with the Afghan government following the signing of the deal, but at this point, those discussions have been both delayed and called off, with now only limited attempts from the Afghan government to rekindle negotiations.

From the content that has been analyzed, it is clear to me that the US – Taliban peace deal is not only inadequate in its current state but is immoral in its execution. Abandoning an ally who depends on our security in favor of negotiating with the terror organization that has plagued Afghanistan is a mistake. There is time to renegotiate this deal, and if primary United States and Afghani concerns are not met then we must recommit to the fight at hand. A bad deal is inherently worse than no deal at all.

**Introduction:**

Policymakers in the United States are highly dependent on current and accurate information in order to make what they feel are the best decisions for their constituents. This is no less true for the Executive policymaker for the United States, President Donald Trump. And one of the main responsibilities of the President is to determine and make foreign policy decisions that have a wide range of implications for both the citizenry of the United States and individuals all across the world. Bringing us to the main topic of this paper, the United States – Taliban peace deal that was signed on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020 that is one of the largest foreign policy decisions enacted by any presidential administration in the last decade. Even though this decision effectively puts the United States on track to end a war that has lasted nearly two decades at the time that this is being written, it has received what can only be described as limited media coverage by major United States news organizations save for the initial statements and reactions on the week the deal was signed. This can most likely be attributed to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that has placed a stranglehold on the news cycle that most Americans had been accustomed to, with twenty-four hour coverage applied almost solely to information regarding the disease. I in no way intend to mean this as a bad or poor decision, but I feel that even in the face of a global pandemic we cannot ignore foreign policy decisions of this magnitude.

Returning to the focus on receiving the best information possible in order to make the best decisions, I analyzed content from five major public policy think tanks that focused on the United States – Taliban peace deal in order to determine two important factors. The first being on the subject of the peace deal itself, whether it was a good deal for the United States and if it should have been pursued. The second was determining whether there was any noticeable bias from these

five major public policy think tanks due to ideological or economic pressures. What became clear after this research was conducted was that there is a relatively unified voice between these five major public policy think tanks, staying consistent across all ideological lines that the peace deal signed between the United States and the Taliban is inadequate in its current state and places undue strain on an ally in the region, the Afghani government, who at this point has still not been present at any negotiations between the United States and the Taliban and have not held any one-on-one talks with the Taliban themselves. A factor most concerning when you realize that this deal invariably shapes Afghanistan's future, and our government has been either unable or unwilling to give them a voice in the decision-making process.

### **Content Analysis of Think Tanks: What We Know So Far**

The purpose of this paper is to determine the presence of bias, or lack thereof, within major foreign policy think tanks in the United States regarding the topic of the ongoing negotiations between the United States government and the Taliban. The importance of this is that these think tanks are influential within both the halls of Congress and the White House, helping to develop United States policy throughout the world. Over the course of this literature review, I will be looking at what content analysis is, the purpose of think tanks, their historical implications on United States foreign policy, and publications on the negotiations with the Taliban and the prospect of peace within Afghanistan.

Gilbert Winham provides the historical context and definition of content analysis which is "the objective and systematic analysis of communications" (Winham 1969, 191). It is most widely used to study and understand the decision-making processes of foreign powers, most notably in decisions to engage in war with another power (Winham 1969). The use of content analysis in research did not start to pick up until the 1960s and was largely pushed by fields that were outside

the realm of political science, most notably in the field of linguistics and psychology where content analysis was used to help determine the intensity or association structure between communications within groups (Winham 1969). The use of content analysis allows for a researcher to provide an in-depth analysis of a foreign policy situation, such as the United States negotiations with the Taliban, and it allows for the testing of generalizations within international behavior (Winham 1969). Given the subject of this research paper, the dominant content that I will be analyzing will be the postings of major public policy think tanks within the United States such as Brookings or the Heritage Foundation in order to better determine the differences in their opinion on the negotiations and how those biases bleed into their overall policy recommendations for the United States government.

Content analysis allows for a researcher to develop a specialized dictionary, also known as thematic codes, where textual items within the content are collected and later placed into separate categories (Dasgupta 1975). This specialized dictionary, once it is created, allows for a researcher to begin making inferences based on the data provided by the content, allowing for both a better understanding of the topic and a greater ability to determine how the author portrays the situation at hand (Dasgupta 1975). Dasgupta brings up the concern from researchers who do not engage in content analysis that it should not be up to the researcher to make inferences or jump to conclusions but rather organize the facts and present them to the reader in order for them to make their own conclusions (Dasgupta 1975). Yet this concern refutes the purpose of content analysis in its entirety, for if the goal was just to organize facts and lay them out neatly for the reader then no research was truly done, nothing was added to the discussion. The inferences brought about by content analysis are what readers and policymakers are looking for, for it can provide new context

and understanding for the issue at hand with the backing that this inference was developed after looking at dozens if not hundreds of literary works (Dasgupta 1975).

Foreign policy think tanks in the United States arose most notably in the 1980s due to increases in globalization, the Cold War coming to an end, and the rise of truly transnational problems (McGann 2010). These think tanks, in particular, are noted with having some of the greatest impact on United States public policy by nurturing the “government’s willingness to rely on the private sector by playing an active role in advising government officials in both the executive and legislative branches” (McGann 2010, 36). These think tanks are capable of providing rapid information and analysis to those policymakers who do not have the relevant experience in the policy field at a critical time in the process, when the legislative agenda is still being debated (McGann 2010). This ability to provide critical information quickly is integral to the effectiveness as a think tank when dealing in the field of foreign policy, for the world of foreign policy constantly has the interests of the United States competing with those of foreign actors. Waiting too long for crucial information that these think tanks can provide could leave the United States in a compromising position and needing to play catch-up with a foreign actor. Even worse though is if the report given by a respected think tank has been muddied by economic or ideological interests, causing policymakers to embrace choices that they would not have otherwise had they maintained their neutrality on the matter, a subject I will go into more detail with shortly. When dealing in the field of foreign policy the choices made by policymakers affect the nation as a whole, and a wrong decision could mean plunging the nation into a conflict that could have easily been avoided had a different avenue been taken. Think tanks ensure that those other avenues are considered by “providing alternative views to administrations and fostering debate on contentious topics” (McGann 2010, 37).

Colin S. Gray states that a think tank is “committed to improving public policy, as opposed to the making of money... devot[ing] itself to the attempted education/persuasions of (a) officials, (b) legislators, [and] (c) the general public (via society’s opinion leaders)” (Gray 1977, 183). Gray recognizes that think tanks are regularly contracted to fulfill studies by clients which could lead to bias or a favoring of one recommendation to another, posing an example of a think tank receiving one million dollars from the United States Air Force to study their role and mission of 1980 to 1990. In this example, the think tank makes the correct assessment by recommending that the Air Force’s strategic air command should be dissolved completely in favor of providing support to submarine and ship-based nuclear cruise missiles to provide an optimal deterrent. By making this recommendation the think tanks would most likely lose the air force as a client because their recommendation would likely go against their wishes, in that no major branch of the military would want to give up power and funding from the government (Gray 1977). This would be detrimental to the think tank as while profit should not be its only goal it rationally has to ensure that it makes enough money to continue to operate without being inhibited. In a similar vein of economic concerns creating biased recommendations, should a President’s administration take on a think tank as a client to analyze the policy implications of a political promise made on the campaign trail, it is quite clear what the Presidential administration is hoping to receive as an answer. Reports that go against what the President had been seeking or portraying to the public as beneficial will undoubtedly strain any future relationship between the think tank and access to the President’s ear. By saying what the President or political administration wants to hear, it helps to ensure that the think tank has continuous access, and therefore power in future policy decisions.

According to Bertelli and Wagner think tanks have proliferated across Washington D.C. due to the “nature of debate in legislative committees” which drive the need for the type of



information that only think tanks seem able to provide (Bertelli & Wagner 2009, 225). Due to the nature of both Congress and the polarization of politics within the United States many think tanks tend to be ideologically aligned to some predetermined set of values determined by the owners or researchers that inhabit the think tank. As such, based on both the values held by the think tank and if anyone commissioned that particular report could help determine the overall policy recommendation prior to any true research being conducted (Bertelli & Wagner 2009). The overall finding of Bertelli & Wagner is that the greater the polarization of Congress the more think tanks are created and supplied to officials in order to better supply research and data that support their legislative agenda (Bertelli & Wagner 2009). Given that today's current political climate has been aptly described by many news outlets as being the most polarized in modern American history it can be safe to say that this effect is also present in the ongoing policy regarding the United States and Taliban negotiations.

Think tanks have had a notable impact on United States foreign policy decisions throughout the decades that they had been created and gained their relative strength and political repertoire. Some notable examples include a change in relations with North Korea, dealing with the crisis in Darfur, and the American military strategy in the Iraq war (McGann 2010). The Heritage Foundation, most notably Richard Fisher, had consistently argued that agreeing to a nuclear weapons freeze in North Korea rather than full disarmament as the United States had done in 1994 would eventually lead to the United States losing any initiative in denuclearizing the peninsula (McGann 2010). When President George W. Bush eventually entered into office his policy towards North Korea followed the outline provided by the Heritage Foundation, including refusing to enter into bilateral talks directly with North Korea while insisting that all nuclear weapons owned by the regime be destroyed through multilateral talks between six other nations (McGann 2010). This

caused criticism to arise from the Brookings Institution, another public policy think tank that argued that by avoiding bilateral talks it was unlikely that the North Korean regime would ever voluntarily disarm themselves, for it did not provide them the respect and recognition they believed they deserved from the United States (McGann 2010). The Hudson Institute argued that Congress should implement sanctions against Sudan due to the humanitarian crisis happening in Darfur, much like the sanctions placed on Apartheid South Africa (McGann 2010). President Bush was unwilling to follow along, however, most notably following the advice given by the Cato Institute that argued for the problem to be solved regionally without American involvement (McGann 2010). Most importantly they argued that any solution should not include the presence of United States ground troops due to the belief that United States forces had already been spread increasingly thin, and at this point in time there has not been any action taken by the United States due to the crisis in Darfur (McGann 2010). A final example was seen in the “surge strategy” advised to President Bush in Iraq by the American Enterprise Institute, which saw an increase of twenty thousand United States soldiers being deployed to the region with most being deployed in Baghdad to provide greater counter-terrorism protection to American assets (McGann 2010). This decision went against a Congressional bipartisan committee, the Iraq Study Group, which advised an overall downsizing of the American presence in Iraq and recommended that American assets be phased into the existing Iraqi defense force so that they could begin to take the mantle of defending their nation themselves (McGann 2010). This last example provides possibly the greatest example of the power and capabilities of think tanks to influence the policy-making decisions taken by the Office of the President. The American Enterprise Institute was able to convince the President to ignore the advice of Congress, the eminent legislative body of the United States.

Donald E. Abelson's article focuses "on the origins of several prominent foreign affairs and defense policy think-tanks and to reveal, drawing upon selected case-studies, how a small group of American think-tanks has become active and vocal participants in the policymaking process" (Abelson 2014, 126-7). Abelson notes that current American think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, have resources that are explicitly used to influence policymakers and public opinion on a wide range of issues (Abelson 2014). As such, the way that think tanks work and produce quality research is focused on getting their message out quickly to their primary audience, policymakers (Abelson 2014). Congress and the White House, unlike university scholars who can take their time researching a specific subject, is typically a reactive force, especially when dealing in the realm of foreign policy (Abelson 2014). As such when dealing with the ongoing negotiations the information and policy recommendations are being presented as soon as more information is being received, and the cost that these negotiations may wreak might be too high for some think tanks as compared to others. If the goal of these think tanks is to either promote these negotiations or attack the content of the peace deal in question to sow public dissent they have to ensure that their readers and audience have that information as soon as possible. Once, the policy has already been implemented the think-tanks shift to not whether or not it should be but how this new policy will affect the United States.

The current negotiations with the Taliban have been shrouded in relative secrecy, with no relative details being provided, save for that if the deal is signed it will result in a controlled troop withdrawal from Afghanistan to occur over a number of years (Mashal et al. 2020). The current state of negotiations involves only the United States and Taliban representatives in the city of Doha, Qatar. This has brought up significant issues within Afghanistan as the current Afghanistan government has no representatives present due to their unwillingness to work with and trust the

Taliban (Finnegan 2019). Given that the Afghan government is one of our primary allies in the region it damages our relationship if we abandon them after negotiating an independent peace deal that does not include them. The major arguments that have promoted these peace deals are that it could limit international terrorism that threatens the United States as the Taliban have agreed to prevent other groups from using Afghanistan as a center to launch their own terror attacks (Kleiner 2014). It is also meant to spur a more active peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban, with an aspect of the deal supposedly contingent on the agreement that the Taliban will enter into bilateral peace talks with the Afghan government, who have essentially been fighting an ongoing civil war since the United States invasion back in 2001 (Kleiner 2014). The prospects of this occurring have become less and less likely due to the ongoing political crisis that has crippled any unified response in Afghanistan due to disagreements on who the actual President of Afghanistan is (Kaura 2020). The United States recognizes Ashraf Ghani as the legitimate President of Afghanistan but the country's chief executive Abdullah Abdullah swore himself in as President at a rival ceremony, with both men claiming victory in the last election cycle (Kaura 2020). The crisis has reached such a fever pitch that the political leaders of the Taliban have reached out to try and remind both men of their responsibility to try and continue these peace talks, even though the Taliban actually recognizes neither men as being Afghanistan's ruler (Kaura 2020). This is because they believe that any man claiming that title is nothing more than a puppet of the United States as the Afghan government in its current state was formed following the United States invasions that removed the Taliban from power back in 2001 (Mashal et al. 2020). A more politically motivated reason is that the President has stated that he wants to get American troops home prior to the 2020 Presidential election as a promise to his constituents (Baker 2019). Political promises not kept can be the death of any first-term presidency, which is what the Trump

Administration finds itself in currently (Aragonès et al. 2007). I would not be surprised if both the President and his advisors remember the infamous promise President George H.W. Bush made to the American public that he would implement no new taxes, only to suffer from an economic downturn during the end of his first term causing him to go back on his word (Klein 2018). The breaking of that promise led the Republican party in Congress to break ranks with the President against the budget deal that saw those taxes be implemented and would later hamper Bush during his reelection campaign to the point that he would lose to Bill Clinton (Klein 2018). The Trump Administration surely wants to avoid a similar fate to that of President Bush's re-election campaign, and at this point, they may feel locked into this decision-making strategy of pursuing peace with the Taliban in order to not be attacked politically in the 2020 presidential election cycle by their Democratic opponent.

How these arguments are presented, both by policymakers and by think-tanks is incredibly important, for they shape how the American public views our place and responsibility in the region. The United States involvement in Afghanistan has been our longest-running war, going on for almost two decades at this point. It is important to know what resources provide unbiased and critical research that our policymakers can rely on, biased propaganda should have no place in our modern institutions, especially when considering the costs that could be paid in the form of American soldiers' lives. Public policy think tanks across the United States have a responsibility to provide recommendations based on fact and not based on their personal interests. Along with this, policymakers have the responsibility to make decisions based on the best information available to them, and as such are heavily dependent on these public policy think tanks.

**Methodology:****Table 1:**

<b>Name of Think Tank:</b>	<b>Total Results</b>	<b>Facially Relevant:</b>	<b>Substantively Relevant:</b>
Brookings	60 Articles	31 Articles	18 Articles
Center for Strategic & International Studies	70 Articles	50 Articles	12 Articles
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	15 Articles	11 Articles	6 Articles
Heritage Foundation	47 Articles	24 Articles	10 Articles
Wilson Center	39 Articles	22 Articles	14 Articles
<b>Total: 5</b>	<b>231 Articles</b>	<b>138 Articles</b>	<b>60 Articles</b>

The sources of the content being analyzed for the purpose of this piece were articles, podcasts, interviews, and videos produced by five different public policy research think tanks within the United States. Those think tanks specifically were the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Heritage Foundation, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. These think tanks were selected purely based on the fact that they were the top five rated public policy think tanks listed by the University of Pennsylvania. Articles that were recovered from these sources were organized into non-relevant, facially relevant, and substantively relevant categories based on the subject matter found within.

Non-Relevant articles were those pieces that had absolutely nothing to do with the subject matter of this paper, namely the peace deal that has been negotiated and signed between the United States and the Taliban. Specifically, when reading or listening through the pieces there was absolutely no mention of the peace deal, most did not even have the words the “Taliban”, “negotiation”, or “peace deal”. Facially relevant articles were those pieces that either only mention the peace deal briefly, one sentence, up to the point where the entire subject of the article is on the peace deal. Lastly, substantively relevant articles were those pieces where a significant portion, at

least fifty percent if not all of the article, is focused on the peace deal between the United States and the Taliban.

The process of finding and collecting data from each of the think tanks was performed the same way. Firstly when entering each of the think tanks' respective websites I immediately signed up for e-mail updates if they were offered by the institution. Second, I used the Boolean search term “Taliban” in each of the think tanks search bars. The results, most of which numbered in the hundreds, were further reduced by applying a filter of a specific time range. That time range is from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 up to March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 where the most recent articles had been released by the time of this section being written. This time frame was chosen based on finding relevant articles and to aid in the completion of this piece. Given that the subject of the peace deal is a recent event, in terms of United States policy, it becomes increasingly unlikely that any articles would be found that would be substantively relevant before January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019. On the other side, given that the subject of this paper is a Capstone that is needed to be completed over the course of one college semester, had I increased the number of articles needing to be analyzed by increasing the time range decreases the chance of either this paper being completed or having a well-researched piece.

The total number of results from using the Boolean search term “Taliban” across all five think tanks from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 to March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 was 231. The totals were split as follows: the Brookings Institution had 60 results, the Center for Strategic & International Studies had 70 results, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace had 15 results, the Heritage Foundation had 47 results, and the Wilson Center had 39 results. The total number of articles considered to be facially relevant across all five think tanks was 138 and were split up as follows: the Brookings Institution had 31 facially relevant articles, the Center for Strategic & International Studies had 50 facially relevant articles, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace had 11 facially relevant

articles, the Heritage Foundation had 24 facially relevant articles, and the Wilson Center had 22 facially relevant articles. The total number of substantively relevant articles came out to 60 articles which were split up as follows: the Brookings Institution had 18 substantively relevant articles, the Center for Strategic & International Studies had 12 substantively relevant articles, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace had 6 substantively relevant articles, the Heritage Foundation had 10 substantively relevant articles, and the Wilson Center had 14 substantively relevant articles.

The basis of my coding methodology for this content analysis was in grounded theory, which is “a set of systemic inductive methods for conducting qualitative research aimed toward theory development” (Charmaz 2006). The 60 articles determined to be substantively relevant were analyzed again and organized based on the major themes found within. This process, known as axial coding, was used to relate the found articles across all five think tanks to determine similarities, differences, and find possible sources of political bias. Those major themes were then analyzed within the frame of the collected articles to determine if more specific and less generalizable themes were present in the articles. For example, if theme one was present in multiple different works but the Brookings Institution viewed it as a positive while the Heritage Foundation viewed it as a negative then those articles were placed in them 1a and 1b respectively.

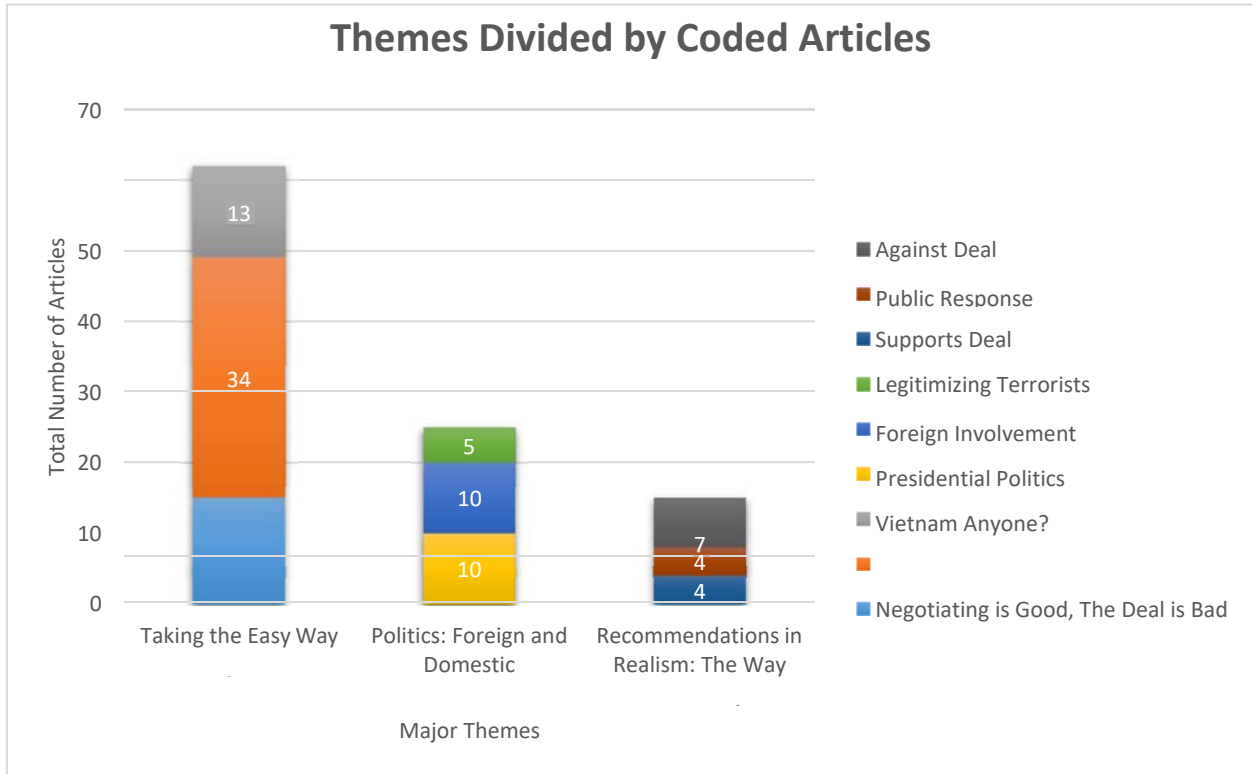
This content analysis on the subject of the US – Taliban peace deal will help determine if these major public policy think tanks are holding themselves to the standards laid out in both their mission statements and their overall purpose of providing unbiased policy research and recommendations or if they have been pursuing a greater ideological change through biased policy recommendations. This process was pursued on the basis of grounded theory and axial coding to appropriately determine the subject matter and overall purpose of the respective pieces. The results



of this methodology will be laid out in the following section detailing what was found in each of the 60 substantively relevant articles.

**Discussion of Results:**

**Graph 1:**



The content analysis of the five public policy think tanks, the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic & International Studies, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Heritage Foundation, and the Wilson Center, revealed that there is an overall consensus between policy experts on the United States – Taliban Peace Deal. This goes against my initial assumption which was that across five public policy think tanks of various political ideologies that reports and policy recommendations would vary wildly in the field of foreign policy. This fact is quite comforting, in that it shows that these think tanks whose purpose is to help inform and provide recommendations on various policies to both policymakers and the American public as a whole. In regards to the specific policy, the US – Taliban Peace Deal, three major themes appear from the

analysis of the substantively relevant articles: *Taking the Easy Way Out*, *Politics: Foreign and Domestic*, and *Recommendations in Realism: The Way Forward*. A majority of the articles all express similar views, that the peace deal unequivocally betrays our ally, the Afghan government, leaving them at the mercy of falling back into a civil war with the Taliban which at best would leave them back into a crisis so severe they would become increasingly dependent on international support and aid and at worst would be destroyed entirely, leaving the Taliban the sole organization in Afghanistan able to effectively lead and operate the country.

As noted in Graph 1, the three major themes are further divided by three smaller thematic codes that were present in the respective articles. *Taking the Easy Way Out* was formed by combining the smaller thematic codes: *Negotiating is Good*, *The Deal is Bad*, *What About Afghanistan?*, and *Vietnam Anyone?*. *Politics: Foreign and Domestic* was formed by combining the smaller thematic codes of *Presidential Politics*, *Foreign Involvement*, and *Legitimizing Terrorists*. *Recommendations in Realism: The Way Forward* was formed by combining the smaller thematic codes of *Supports Deal*, *Against Deal*, and *Public Response*. These smaller thematic codes are an integral part of the content analysis process, as they are what allowed me to build back up to my major inferences and conclusions.

As noted from just a cursory glance of Graph 1, the largest and most prevalent theme present throughout all of the think tanks articles was *Taking the Easy Way Out* with a total number of 62 articles expressing the smaller thematic codes within. Those wondering how it is possible that 62 articles were expressing this theme when only 60 total articles were being analyzed must remember that my methodology allowed for each article to express multiple thematic codes. This means that one article could encompass all three thematic codes present in the major theme and be counted all three times. Quite simply this theme expresses the author's frustration or concern about

either the negotiated language of the peace deal, the lack of certain guarantees that put United States interests or moral standing at risk, or historical similarities to similar US policy action in the past in favor of getting US troops out of Afghanistan as quickly as possible regardless of the consequences. Those articles that were coded as *Negotiating is Good, the Deal is Bad* expressed support for the United States engaging in peace talks with the Taliban but were against the peace deal in its current state. These concerns tended to focus on the disagreement between the United States and the Taliban that would allow for the presence of a counter-terrorism taskforce to remain in Afghanistan. This would be to help enforce that no international terrorism will spread from Afghanistan or the fact that it was an incredibly short time frame implemented between signing the deal and the complete withdrawal of all United States forces. Those articles that were coded as *What About Afghanistan?* expressed concern over the fact that the Afghan government has not been included in the negotiating process between the US and the Taliban and that no major Afghan issue, such as government representation for the Taliban or the inclusion of Women's rights has been included in the peace deal, allowing for the US government to dodge the hard issues. The final code, *Vietnam Anyone?*, include those articles that express the historical similarities between this situation and the situation of the US declaring peace and victory in Vietnam before leaving in a mass exodus, allowing Vietnam to descend back into a civil war and our ally, South Vietnam, being conquered by the North. If the United States is simply declaring peace and leaving, we leave our long-standing ally, the Afghanistan government, at the mercy of the Taliban without us being able to support them.

The second major theme, *Politics: Foreign and Domestic*, encompassed a total of 25 articles after tabulating how many articles included the smaller thematic themes of *Presidential Politics*, *Foreign Involvement*, and *Legitimizing Terrorists*. This theme encompassed those articles

that looked at the peace deal from a purely political angle, whether that be from the Trump Administration to those foreign governments who are watching the peace process with hawkish eyes. Those articles coded as *Presidential Politics* expressed concern over the actions of the Trump Administration in its pursuit of this peace deal. The biggest concern or critique was that this peace deal was being negotiated with a purely political timetable in mind, with the President not shying away from stating that he wanted all US troops out of Afghanistan by 2020, a crucial election year. Negotiating with the basis of a political timetable inherently weakens the United States' negotiating position from the beginning, as the Taliban knows that the longer they hold out before signing a deal the better the deal gets for them as the President will grant more and more concessions to ensure his political time table stays intact. Those articles coded as *Foreign Involvement* examined the peace deal from either the perspective of a foreign government or examined the actions of foreign actors in regards to the pursuit of peace in the region. The most notable examples include the influence of Pakistan in the negotiations, with Prime Minister Imran Khan having met with President Trump, given that Pakistan has been a long-standing advocate for negotiating a political settlement with the Taliban (Azfal 2019). Along with this includes statements from both Russia and China that were issued jointly with the United States in promoting the peace process in Afghanistan (Mohan 2019). The fact that Russia was involved raised some concerns given the Soviet Union's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s and is seen as Putin's attempt to pivot back into the region with a more positive image (Mohan 2019). Finally, articles coded as *Legitimizing Terrorists* expressed concerns over the fact that the United States was granting the Taliban increased power and legitimacy by addressing them as equal partners. This legitimacy helps cement the Taliban as an irrefutable part of Afghanistan's political future and helps promote the spread of their terrorist tactics to other groups who will see this as

proof of concept that terrorism is not only a viable strategy but that it can even bring superpowers to their knees.

The last major theme, and surprisingly the smallest, was *Recommendations in Realism: The Way Forward* with only 15 articles falling under this category. The purpose of this theme was to express both the author's or public's opinion on the peace deal and what that should mean for the process as a whole. Those articles coded as being both *Against Deal* and *Support Deal* are the simplest thematic codes to explain throughout the whole piece. Quite simply, any article that is coded as being *Against Deal* sees the author as being against the peace deal and the prospect of a peace deal with the Taliban to be the completely wrong decision and policy action for the United States. It differs from a previous thematic code, *Negotiating is Good, the Deal is Bad* in that these authors don't disagree with the content of the peace deal they disagree with even having one with the Taliban due to moral, economic, or military concerns. On the other side, those articles coded as *Support Deal* are both for pursuing a peace deal with the Taliban and for accepting it in its current state as they believe that prolonging the peace process or constantly renegotiating will lead to a worse deal in the future. Those articles coded as *Public Response* include reports on both the American and Afghanistan's public reaction to the peace deal and how they feel about the contents within. The American public overwhelmingly has expressed concerns about the peace deal, with 82% of respondents to a Brookings Institution poll not supporting signing a deal with the terrorist organization (Telhami & Kopchick 2020). Similarly, an independent poll presented by the Wilson Center showed that 41% of Afghans, a plurality in this poll, did not support the need for a peace agreement with the Taliban (Rahim 2019). While this was not a prevalent focus of these five think tanks, the lessons learned within still inform both policymakers and stakeholders that peace in

Afghanistan will not be an easy sell to each nation's respective populace, causing an additional political cost.

This research helps to address the overall concerns that many Americans and people all over the world have been facing in recent years, and that is ensuring they are receiving news and information from reliable and trustworthy sources. The fact that these five major public policy think tanks expressed similar reasoning on concerns on the US – Taliban Peace Deal across ideological lines proves that they put informing the public and policymakers over the pursuit of any particular political agenda. In regards to the policy in particular this research shows that there is a nearly unified voice regarding how this peace deal is viewed and the consequences that will occur because of it. Peace is an admirable and respectable goal to pursue, but no peace is worth leaving our allies to suffer and fall apart for political and economic gains. Afghanistan currently finds itself locked out of the conversations that will determine its future, with the Taliban refusing to enter into direct talks due to their view that the government is just mere puppets of the United States. The United States granting more and more concessions to ensure a quicker withdraw with relatively little guarantees that the Taliban will honor its end of the deal echoes the images of helicopters flying off of embassies in Vietnam. Should this peace deal fall apart after the United States has already left the area it sends a message to both our allies and our enemies? To our allies, it shows that relationships built over decades can be thrown away when it is politically beneficial or it becomes too expensive for the United States government to maintain its commitments, a worrying prospect for any future diplomatic agreements that include military support. To our enemies, it shows that the United States is capable of being beaten as long as you are able to hold out, for if you are able to survive long enough that you are no longer the most concerning factor

for the United States you have no reason to surrender and give yourself in. In any case, it is most certainly a message that the United States should not be projecting to the world stage.

### **Policy Recommendation and Future Research:**

Future research possibilities and opportunities arise from the fact that public policy think tanks across the United States should always be held to a standard that ensures they are providing unbiased information to both the public and policymakers. This content analysis looked at only five public policy think tanks out of the hundreds that are providing advice and recommendations to policymakers every single day across the United States. Further content analyses on other groups of public policy think tanks can help paint a picture for both the public and policymakers on where these groups lie on the ideological spectrum and help to show whether or not they suffer from any implicit biases that would make their recommendations in certain situations needed to be taken with a grain of salt. On the subject of the US – Taliban peace deal itself, should the deal continue in its current state there will be research opportunities to see the actual effects the deal has for both the United States and Afghanistan. Its effectiveness, or lack thereof, will certainly be a point of research and discussion in the coming years as the full effects of this deal are played out.

The recommendation for the United States is simple, get a better deal that addresses the concerns of the Afghan government and helps secure our vital interests in the region or reassign a large amount of military resources to continue the fight until we achieve victory. A bad deal is inherently worse than no deal at all, and what we have right now, based on the content presented by these five public policy think tanks is a bad deal. I recognize of course that the recommendation is simple to say, but one that in reality will be incredibly difficult to put into effect with short notice. Trying to renegotiate a deal that has already taken years of bilateral talks and was recently signed will almost surely raise tensions both with the Taliban and with the political structures of

the United States. The Trump Administration has already spent a large amount of political capital in the pursuit of this deal and in their mind this may be a problem that can be readdressed following the 2020 election campaign, where they don't have to worry about a reelection campaign. Or if they lose in 2020 and a Democratic President takes office then it is a problem that is no longer theirs to solve, being able to pass the buck on as it were. Should the United States decide instead to pursue a military victory against the Taliban it would require the influx of a massive amount of military equipment and personnel the likes of which haven't been seen since the first Persian Gulf War to ensure the greatest chance of success. This of course is also unlikely because of the political and purely logistical restraints that such an operation would face. The war in Afghanistan has already lasted nearly two decades, and over that time we were unable to defeat the Taliban and have been consistently downsizing the total number of United States forces in the country. To authorize such a conflict of this scale would almost certainly need some type of support from Congress, and supporting the continuation of America's longest war is a title that many members of Congress would quickly try to avoid.

What has to be recognized is that the right choice is not always the most popular, and leaving Afghanistan with the deal in its current state will cause complications for the United States in the region for the duration of generations. Seeking the end of this war is an admirable and right way to move forward, and a peaceful resolution is of course preferable to a continuation of America's longest war. But by committing to this peace deal with the Taliban we leave our ally, the Afghanistan government, to suffer alone and possibly watch their nation descend into a Civil War should they not be able to succeed in developing their own peace deal. The pursuit of peace at such high of a cost to our national interests and international standing is not peace but is a surrender.



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