

Afghanistan: Tense times for delicate US-Taliban talks

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Delicate negotiations between the US and the Taliban must be allowed to flourish if peace in Afghanistan and the wider region is to be achieved, guest columnist Ahmed Rashid writes.

The US and Nato have acknowledged that they cannot withdraw successfully from Afghanistan, or effect a transition to Afghan forces by 2014, without an end to the civil war and a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Such an agreement must also include an understanding with the neighbours of Afghanistan and other countries in the region.

For this reason, and following President Barack Obama's plan for a limited withdrawal of 33,000 US troops by September 2012, the on-going talks between the Americans and the Taliban have become centre stage - even as the war intensifies and the Taliban retain their safe havens in Pakistan.

There have been three rounds of direct talks between the Americans and the Taliban since last November.

Two took place in a village near the German city of Munich and the third in the Qatari capital, Doha. The Germans have played a key role in facilitating the talks while Qatar has also taken part at the request of the Taliban.

However, recent leaks by government officials in Washington, Kabul and London could undermine the talks and endanger the lives of the participants, including the Taliban interlocutors who have been named in some news reports.

It is vital that the international media and governments allow these talks to succeed, and the only way to do that is to respect the participants' need for secrecy.

At stake is not just peace for Afghanistan, but the entire region including Pakistan which is teetering on the edge of a melt down.

The US-Taliban talks are still at a preliminary stage as both sides test each other to build up confidence and trust. Full negotiations are yet to start and they would clearly also have to involve the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and at some level Pakistan, which is already accusing the Americans of leaving it out of the process.

Major boost

Nevertheless, confidence measures between the two sides are taking place.

President Karzai has freed several Taliban prisoners from detention in Kabul, which the Taliban had asked for.

The Taliban have also asked the Americans to free several of their leaders held at Guantanamo, including three top military commanders who have been held since 2001 - Noorullah Noori, Mullah Fazel and, most significantly, former Taliban Interior Minister Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwa.

Afghanistan's High Peace Council - the 70-man body set up by President Karzai to negotiate with the Taliban - has also asked for Khaikhwa's freedom to participate in peace negotiations.

However, they cannot be released from Guantanamo Bay because of a recently-passed law by the US Congress preventing terrorism prisoners held by the US to be moved away from the US detention centre in Cuba.

Nevertheless, the US has facilitated other measures.

On 17 June 2011, in a major step forward, the UN Security Council accepted a US request to treat al-Qaeda and the Taliban separately in relation to a list of global terrorists the UN has maintained since 1998.

There will now be two separate lists, and UN sanctions on al-Qaeda members will not necessarily apply to the Taliban, making it easier to take the Taliban off the list - a major boost to the dialogue process.

This was a concrete outcome of the secret talks.

At the same time, US President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and outgoing Defence Secretary Robert Gates have spoken favourably about the recent talks.

And, quietly, the US is allowing Taliban interlocutors to travel with safety guarantees to the Gulf and Europe so that the talks can continue.

President Karzai has been fully briefed after each round of talks, and has supported the Taliban's desire to hold separate talks with the Americans, even as his government continues its own talks with the Taliban at several levels.

Pakistani leaders have also been recently briefed about the talks, although they have expressed sharp reservations about not being included.

Challenging talks

Pakistan and Afghanistan are pursuing a separate talks process, in which Kabul is expecting Islamabad to allow the Pakistan-based Taliban to participate.

The most recent round in this dialogue, which took place in Kabul at the end of June, failed to yield major results because the Pakistanis are still unwilling to allow Afghan government officials to meet Taliban leaders based in Pakistan.

Nor is Pakistan willing to free Mullah Brader and his associates. Brader, the deputy leader of the Taliban movement, was arrested by Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI, a year ago and has not been freed despite repeated appeals by Karzai.

Pakistan has become doubly suspicious of both the Afghans, the Americans and the Taliban because it feels snubbed by the Americans for reaching out to Taliban interlocutors and bypassing the Pakistanis.

The talks between the US and the Taliban are a major step forward, but it is now important that all parties to the conflict come together and adopt a common policy to try and end the war. In the meantime, it is also imperative that President Karzai builds a political consensus at home for the talks to succeed.

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