

Karzai is part of the problem.

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In December 2011, at a major conference in Bonn attended by ninety foreign ministers, the Taliban were on the verge of accepting US conditions that would allow them to open a political office in Doha. The Americans had held four rounds of direct secret talks with the Taliban that had started in November 2010 thanks to mediation mainly by German diplomats and Qatar.

However, at the last minute, Afghan President Hamid Karzai balked and refused to agree to the terms for opening the Taliban office, citing that he had not been adequately consulted by the US or Germans - which was untrue.

It has taken nearly two years for all the players to get back to where they were at Bonn that cold December and once again try and open a Taliban office in Doha. Yet the latest attempts to do so were shambolic - for which everyone, including the Americans, shares part of the blame.

Once again, it would appear that Mr Karzai is trying to scuttle this latest round of peace talks. Even as he accepted the Taliban terms on offer such as the Taliban denunciation of al' Qaeda, he used their hoisting of a Taliban flag and a nameplate to threaten an end to any future talks even before they had begun. His anger partially reflected the widespread fury among many Afghans who saw the TV pictures of the dreaded Taliban white flag and black turbans in Doha as an affront to their dignity.

Partly, chaos on this issue reflects chaos in Mr Karzai's own office, including among the people he has put in charge on this issue. There is no consensus in his cabinet or in the presidency on negotiating with the Taliban. His top aides are against the idea, float conspiracy theories or they are maneuvering to be the next presidential candidate.

The president has also not fulfilled his role adequately. While speaking of reconciliation with "my Taliban brothers," Mr Karzai has failed to woo the millions of Afghans, particularly the non-Pashtun half of the population and many women who are scared, wary or plain disgusted by any thought of a Taliban return. Building a consensus at home is what the president's primary task should be.

But the recent spat also reflects that Mr Karzai is still little understood by Western players and many Afghans. This is the man who single-handedly since 2004, has insisted to a military-obsessed Washington that only talks with the Taliban could end the war. The Americans - full of hubris at the time - scoffed at him. Yet if Mr Karzai is a peacenik, how to explain his recent statements, pique and anger?

In several past conversations with Mr Karzai, it became clear to me that he did not believe in the conventional wisdom about ending civil wars - reconciliation through a long dialogue process, confidence-building measures on the military front or a strategic plan and talks for eventual power sharing.

He has always envisaged a kind of Taliban surrender to him or a Pashtun meeting of tribes in which the Taliban would acknowledge Mr Karzai as their leader and tie the traditional turban around his head. In his mind all this was do-able because of the Durrani Pashtun tribal grid of southern Afghanistan that the Karzai family and some Taliban leaders shared.

Clearly, none of this is going to happen. Why would the Taliban surrender when they had beaten the US military to a standstill or bow before the Afghan they most despise? Yet Mr Karzai refused to accept anything less. He had no patience for road maps or talking points for negotiations that his frustrated aides would infrequently draw up. So it is the Taliban who are now adroitly savvy about negotiations and want the whole hog of modern reconciliation gambits - a road map, first talks with the US force occupying their country,

followed by talks with “all Afghans” rather than the government alone.

Furthermore, Mr Karzai has never understood or accepted why the US has not put Pakistan on the spot for supporting the Taliban for the past twenty years or at least for giving them sanctuary since 9/11. He rejects the idea of Pakistan being part of the peace process. The truth is that Pakistan - a nuclear power, an unstable state and still a centre for global terrorist training - is strategically far more important than Afghanistan. Despite its links to some extremist groups, Pakistan has to be wooed and won over - not ostracised. You cannot talk to the Taliban without Pakistan’s co-operation because they live there.

In the meantime, what of the Taliban? They trumped the Americans with a smart move - offering to release an American POW in exchange for five Taliban officials being held at Guantánamo. But wait a minute! This is exactly the same confidence building measure the Americans had offered back in 2010 and then failed to deliver on because of objections by the US Congress. Now it’s the Taliban who are making the offer, appearing reasonable and appealing to US public sentiment about the American soldier. Not bad for a group considered to be thuggish and illiterate!

Mr Karzai’s main tasks should be to quash the disarray in his own office and cabinet, start a dialogue with his people explaining why only a reasonable settlement with the Taliban can end the war and secure an Afghanistan without foreign troops in 2014 while helping improve relations with interfering neighbours like Pakistan and Iran.

Mr Karzai has everything to lose by continuing to act the way he is acting and the Taliban everything to gain.