Meeting the mullahs takes more than meets the eye

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Regional expert Ahmed Rashid in Lahore reveals the hidden background of the Taliban talks that made the news this week - and what could make them count

In the past couple of weeks, a corner was turned that eventually could bring the war in Afghanistan to an end through a negotiated settlement. After years of insisting that the Taliban had to be degraded and beaten into submission before any negotiations, the United States and NATO military forces facilitated the arrival of senior Taliban officials in Kabul to hold talks with President Hamid Karzai.

But the media hype and praise that was lavished on U.S. commander General David Petraeus – The Washington Post described him in Caesar-like terms as a "warrior-statesman" – overlooked the long-hidden history of these "talks about talks," not to mention the breathtaking array of hurdles before the slightest progress is made. Talks between the Taliban factions and Mr. Karzai have been going on for the past two years, but have barely moved forward, while involving a dizzying array of countries and characters (see timeline below).

It began in late 2008, when Mr. Karzai started seeking a way out of what looked like a never-ending war. Facing massive criticism at home and abroad for poor government, wasting development aid and running a corrupt regime, he was looking for a coup de foudre that in one stroke would end the war, reconcile the Taliban, thwart Pakistan and restore his reputation. He had given up believing that the U.S. could ever win the war, provide sufficient resources or deal squarely with Pakistan.

Since then, his government has held talks with all three of the main factions of the Taliban, but none has moved toward real negotiations. Today's Taliban is divided into the mainstream group that ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s, led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, and its two allies, the rival networks of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani. All three have been provided sanctuary and support since 2001 by Pakistan's military and/or its Interservices Intelligence (ISI).

The mainstream Taliban remains much what it was before 2001 – a peasant-based, Pashtun movement from the most conservative, backward parts of southern Afghanistan (roots shared by Mr. Karzai). Its limited political agenda still revolves around the imposition of Islamist law and jihad against the foreign occupation.

Mr. Hekmatyar entered talks with Mr. Karzai in 2006, but does not control enough territory or population to be more than minimally significant. And the U.S. has been especially opposed to talks with Mr. Haqqani because he is close to al-Qaeda. But he is the ISI's favourite because of his militant stance against expanding Indian influence in Afghanistan.

Now extremely ill, Mr. Haqqani, 67, has handed over command to his son Sirajuddin Haqqani, who exerts major influence in half a dozen provinces, has terrorized eastern Afghanistan and learned from al-Qaeda the skills of urban terrorism.

The major missing factor until now was American support. The mantra of all three successive U.S. commanders in the first two years of Barack Obama's administration was that all negotiations had to be deferred until the Taliban were weakened and the U.S. could speak from a position of strength.

The U.S. supported reintegration – paying off surrendering Taliban with job offers and aid – but not reconciliation, or power sharing. Reintegration has been part of Mr. Karzai's government's policy since 2005, but he failed to set up a strategy for it or to train Afghans to run it, even though donors promised funding.

The NATO gesture this month was the first step toward what Mr. Obama has to face in his December policy review – whether the U.S. will continue playing a supporting role in Mr. Karzai's negotiations or actually talk to the Taliban themselves. The Taliban are desperately keen to talk to the U.S. directly, and for many Afghans only the direct involvement of the U.S. would give them hope that priorities such as a humane constitution, education and women's rights would not be bargained away by Mr. Karzai to retain a hold on power.

There is now a widespread perception that the Taliban are winning the war, while the Europeans want out and even the U.S. will start withdrawing its forces from July, 2011. So why should the Taliban want to negotiate now, when they could just as easily sit it out until Western powers leave Afghanistan? NATO would like to believe that the Taliban are demoralized, but the truth is more complex.

It's true that the Taliban are exhausted by 32 years of war that includes a major defeat in 2001. They have taken terrible casualties at the hands of NATO forces and in the past three months some 300 commanders have been killed or captured, according to Gen. Petraeus.

Despite their links to al-Qaeda, the Taliban are not global jihadists; they consider themselves as patriotic Afghan nationalists fighting a war against foreign occupation, legitimized by Islam. Indeed, they are fed up with being manipulated by Pakistan on one hand and by al-Qaeda on the other.

Taliban leaders may also realize that they are now at their apogee. They are a nationwide guerrilla insurgency, but they cannot take or control major population centres given NATO's firepower. There is no populist insurrection they can lead against U.S. forces as there was in Iraq – the majority of Afghans do not want the return of a Taliban regime.

Perhaps the most compelling argument is that Taliban leaders know they failed in governance once when they ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s because the international community refused to recognize or help them. And they would fail again if they came to power now. Better, then, to deal with a pro-Western leader such as Mr. Karzai, who would share power with them and keep the aid flow coming.

What would a peace process look like? Clearly there will be no grand conference like the Paris or Daytona meetings that ended the Vietnam and Yugoslav wars. Instead, expect piecemeal negotiations with the Taliban factions and then with factions within the factions, not by one Afghan or Western negotiator but by multiple negotiators from different NATO countries and the United Nations.

Real talks would have to start with a series of confidence-building measures in the provinces between different Taliban groups and Afghan-NATO forces. Providing safe passage to Kabul was one such measure from NATO. To make progress the Taliban would have to respond – perhaps by pledging a ceasefire in one district and in another allowing aid agencies to work. They might promise to cease assassinating Afghan officials. Thus the grounds for real negotiations would be prepared layer by layer. The Americans will not be able to hurry this.

The idea of actually negotiating power sharing and structures with the Taliban is still anathema to the U.S., but there will have to be real give and take on both sides. Negotiations could evolve into two parts. The first would be about power sharing in the provinces and the centre, as well as the question of whether the present government would continue and for how long.

The next part would be more difficult – reconciling the deep divisions on social issues. The Taliban precondition is that sharia law must be implemented, while the Afghan government and the international community insist that the modern, democratic Afghan constitution must be upheld. This basic dichotomy involves all the key issues important to Afghans, such as women's rights, education, the justice system and even the idea of representative government and elections.

None of this will be possible unless there is enormous diplomatic effort put into creating regional co-operation to help rather than hinder peace in Afghanistan.

Talk of a grand bargain in which Afghanistan's six neighbors (Pakistan, Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) and its powerful near-neighbours (India, Russia, Saudi Arabia) would agree to end their mutual differences are both unrealistic and unachievable. Instead there would have to be mini-agreements, for example between India and Pakistan, between the U.S. and Iran and between Russia and China, to leave Afghanistan in peace and not use it as a regional competition zone.

The most taxing and violent of these is the rivalry between India and Pakistan. The two cannot resolve their longstanding fights over Kashmir and other matters as part of an Afghan settlement; but they could agree to resolve their differences over influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan cannot wish India away from Afghanistan, with which it has long standing ties. Likewise, India cannot hope to snub or to derail Pakistan's much greater stake in Afghanistan, with which it shares the longest of borders, troublesome tribes and huge economic interests and problems.

If a new reality is dawning in the Pentagon and NATO – that Western forces can fight and talk at the same time – then it has to dawn in the White House as well. In last year's policy review before announcing the troop surge in Afghanistan, the issue of talks did not come up. This December it should be centre stage. Real progress will occur when the surge strategy is refitted around a committed strategy for negotiations. Clearly, war is too complicated a business to be left to the generals.

BEHIND THE SCENES: A TIMELINE

Winter, 2008-2009: Saudi overtures

Afghan President Hamid Karzai appeals to King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia to play a role in hosting talks between his government and the Taliban.

February, 2009: Secret rendezvous

The head of the Saudi intelligence service visits Kabul to discuss providing help. A few weeks later, a gathering of Afghanistan’s clergy, the National Ullema Conference, issues a call for talks and formally asks the Saudis to take the lead. For much of the year secret conversations continue in Saudi Arabia with former or retired Taliban, former Arab members of al-Qaeda and influential Saudi Islamists who oppose al-Qaeda. U.S. diplomats stay in the loop but on the sidelines. There are no breakthroughs.

July, 2009: NATO plays a hand

British Foreign Secretary Ed Milliband, a key U.S. ally, comes out publicly in favour of negotiations with the Taliban in a speech to NATO, spelling out clearly what was in the minds of many of the 40 European countries that have troops in Afghanistan and want to get out. By now officials from international bodies such as the United Nations as well as several NATO countries are also having clandestine meetings outside Afghanistan with low- and mid-level Taliban representatives.

Autumn, 2009: Heavy hitters join in During the fasting month of Ramadan, for the first time active Taliban leaders based in Pakistan also visit Saudi Arabia and talk with Saudi and Afghan officials.

Meanwhile, a second channel opens in Kandahar, where the president’s powerful brother Ahmed Wali Karzai begins secret talks with Taliban leaders based across the Pakistan border in Quetta, Baluchistan, including the Taliban’s veteran second-in-command Mullah Abdul Ghani Brader, who now virtually runs the main branch of the movement. Both men aim to keep the talks well away from the watchful eye of Pakistani intelligence (ISI), which offers the Taliban shelter but also monitors and pressures fighters and their families.

November, 2009: An opening from the insurgents

The Taliban show their first hint of public flexibility. In a 10-page statement, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar – while urging his fighters to continue the war against the U.S. – also pledges that a future Taliban regime would bring peace, non-interference and pose no threat to neighbouring countries.

The inference is that al-Qaeda would not return with the Taliban – a key U.S. and Afghan demand. The Pakistan military now urges the U.S. to talk to the Taliban directly with Pakistan's facilitation, but the Americans refuse, increasing the trust deficit between the CIA and the ISI.

February, 2010: Impatience, arrests, and a setback

Pakistan appears to have had enough of secret talks. In a joint operation with the CIA, the ISI arrests Mullah Brader in Karachi along with 23 other prominent Taliban. Mr. Karzai, furious, demands that Mullah Brader be extradited to Kabul; the ISI refuses.

The Taliban, cowed, cease talks and cut links with Kabul and Saudi Arabia temporarily. When Mr. Karzai visits Islamabad he is asked by Pakistan's military to reopen talks only through them. The ISI encourages Mr. Karzai to talk to the Haqqani faction of the Taliban, but talks flounder, partly because the U.S. adamantly opposes any dialogue with the al-Qaeda-friendly Mr. Haqqani.

Summer, 2010: 15-point plan

Talks continued with a delegation of the Hekmatyar faction of the Taliban, which comes to Kabul with a 15-point agenda. The government also organizes a peace conference in Kabul, with 1,600 delegates summoned from across the country.

September, 2010: Structures in place

Mr. Karzai appoints a 70-member High Peace Council, led by former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, which would ostensibly lead negotiations with the Taliban.

October, 2010: Out in the open

U.S. and NATO forces publicly provide safe escort for Taliban representatives to Kabul for "talks about talks" with the Karzai government.

Lahore-based Ahmed Rashid's seminal book Taliban has just been reissued in a 10th anniversary edition. His latest is Descent into Chaos.