

Obama must seize moment for Taliban talks by Ahmed Rashid.

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As the fighting season winds down in Afghanistan for the winter months, the four major players in the Afghan imbroglio - the US, Pakistan, the Afghan government and the Taliban - are involved in a complex game of political and military manoeuvring ahead of what is expected to be a decisive round of peace talks in the spring.

With the [withdrawal of US troops](#) approaching and the Afghan President Hamid Karzai's tenure [nearing an end](#), for once all four parties appear to have an interest in talks.

Even while waiting for a new Secretary of State to be appointed, US diplomats have been visiting the region, talking to allies and urging them to try and bring the Taliban back to peace talks in Qatar that were suspended by the Taliban last March.

Those talks are critical because they hold out the promise of a Taliban front office in Qatar and the possibility that the US could free five senior Taliban commanders from Guantanamo Bay as a confidence building measure. The Taliban have insisted on talking first to the Americans before they hold any dialogue with the Kabul regime.

A game changer in recent months is the Pakistan military's surprising shift of attitude. It has freed Taliban prisoners it has been holding. It has reportedly now told the Taliban and Kabul that it will actively help the process of reconciliation and has been urging both parties to start talking to one another.

The army's change of heart is premised on the hope that reconciliation between the Afghan Taliban, the Americans and the Kabul regime will lead to a reduction in the violence being perpetrated by the Pakistani Taliban in north west Pakistan.

Taliban commanders and fighters have had a sanctuary in Pakistan since 2002 and have been allowed to raise recruits, funds and logistics through Pakistani allies. But now the Pakistani army and its Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) are faced with crippling violence at home that has claimed several thousand lives this year. The government and the army are finding it difficult to cope with two insurgencies, mayhem in Karachi, a moribund economy and a political crisis with elections to be held next May.

However even Pakistan cannot force the Taliban to the table, nor can it change their insistence on wanting to talk to the Americans first. Thus for Islamabad also, restarting the Qatar talks is vitally important if its own initiative of reconciliation is to succeed.

For the Afghan government, which in 2014 faces a withdrawal of US and NATO forces and presidential elections, it is paramount to achieve a ceasefire with the Taliban before that date. A war with the Taliban absent NATO support would overburden the fledgling Afghan army and put the survival of the government at risk.

Thus Afghanistan's High Peace Council, which is tasked with negotiating with the Taliban, has met several times with Pakistan army chief General Ashfaq Kiyani in order to work out a common road map that both can pursue to bring the Taliban to the table. The Council also works closely with the Americans.

In mid-November Pakistan freed nine Taliban officials it had been holding, releasing them to the Afghan High Peace Council saying it would soon free more Taliban prisoners. The ISI is holding at least 100 Taliban leaders

and foot soldiers but is expected to eventually free them all.

Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US are already working closely together through meetings of what is called the core group. However now Pakistan and Afghanistan want to see a much clearer American indication of where the talks should lead before they offer any more concessions to the Taliban.

The key question in everyone's mind in the region is whether [in his second term](#) President Barack Obama will get serious about promoting a political settlement in Afghanistan.

Although he authorised a political process in his first term he never really gave it presidential support. The key question now is who becomes Secretary of State and who is appointed to lead a new team that will deal with AfPak talks and peace making. Most officials in the region are rooting for Senator John Kerry as Secretary of State simply because they know him and he knows the region and its myriad of leaders and warlords well.

However the core group still faces an overwhelming problem: none of the players trust each other. US-Pakistan relations have [deteriorated](#) over the past two years largely because of Afghanistan. They are only now being mended. US officials are still deeply sceptical about whether the ISI and the military are genuinely changing policy towards the Taliban.

Mr Karzai has been at odds with the US over a range of issues including whether the US should have a long term presence in Afghanistan, whether it should hand over all Afghan prisoners to Afghan authorities, and how to map out a common process for peace talks and curbing corruption within the government. Mr Karzai still finds it easier to lambast the US in his speeches than to admit to any faults of his own or to improve governance.

The Taliban of course trust nobody. They blame the Americans for the shut down of the Qatar process and now face tumultuous internal disagreements over whether those talks should be revived or not. The Taliban are dependent on the Pakistanis but loathe the ISI for its past micro management of their affairs and they consider Mr Karzai a worthless American puppet.

Time is now of the essence. Any talks will need months, possibly years, but everyone - even the Taliban - would like to see a ceasefire in the war before 2014 so that the Americans can withdraw and a new political process start in Kabul. Mr Karzai cannot be a candidate for presidential elections in 2014, which offers the opportunity for a new and invigorated Afghan leadership, which the Taliban could accept as a negotiating partner.

The Americans in particular need to appoint a heavyweight diplomat to take the AfPak process forward and Mr Obama needs to personally get engaged. NATO countries need to play less of a waiting game and be more proactive in pushing the US to speed up the talks. Above all the Afghans who have battled outsiders and each other for 34 years need to show maturity and seek a peaceful resolution to their wars.