

## Peace talks come at critical time for both Afghan president and Taliban

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They have been five years in the making – with the spilling of much blood and a dozen failed peace initiatives – but finally last week, more than two decades after the Taliban appeared on the scene, formal peace talks between the movement and the Afghan government began.

In a government guesthouse in Murree, 50 miles north of Islamabad, the three-man Taliban delegation representing both the mainstream Taliban and the feared terrorist Haqqani network met six carefully chosen representatives from the Afghan government, who reflected all the major ethnic and political groups in the country.

Most significantly, Pakistani and Afghan officials told me, both sides pledged to meet again in mid-August and discuss mutual confidence-building measures that would include steps to reduce the violence in Afghanistan.

Diplomatic figures involved in the meeting said that the Taliban had raised their priority concerns. They want their leaders to be taken off the US and UN terrorism lists, their prisoners freed from Afghan and foreign jails, direct talks with the Americans and a quick withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country (there are still some 13,000 US and Nato personnel training the Afghan army).

The main focus of the government delegation was how to achieve a reduction in the violence that could eventually lead to a ceasefire – although it is unlikely that the Taliban will quickly agree to a ceasefire.

The talks, brokered by Pakistan's military after [months of speculation, promises made and broken and delays](#), came none too soon for the beleaguered Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani. Last year, Mr Ghani staked his political future on mending ties with Pakistan, which once supported the Taliban but now promises to help deliver them for talks. He faces a chronic economic, political and constitutional crisis at home quite apart from facing off against the heaviest summer offensive the Taliban have ever launched.

Less obvious is that they also come at a critical juncture for the Taliban, who for a decade boasted of being a coherent political and military force under a single leadership, but today face fragmentation. Looming over them and all Afghans is the shadow of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (or Isis), which is challenging the Taliban leadership and poaching their fighters.

Several Taliban factions that were not represented at the table declared their anger at their own leaders and at Pakistan for holding a meeting with unauthorised representatives of the movement. Many Afghans are still [deeply suspicious of Pakistani intentions](#). However, both delegations insisted that they were authorised by their leaders to talk to one another, while there was fulsome praise from the Chinese and US officials who were observers for an honest dialogue and the achievement of a breakthrough.

The Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar has not been seen since 2001 – leading to anger and frustration among Taliban fighters and field commanders – but after the meeting Afghan and Pakistani officials declared that Mullah Omar's acknowledged deputy Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansour had nominated the Taliban delegates and authorised the talks.

The future is still fraught but there are now at least possibilities for a peaceful outcome, especially with the pledge to meet again in mid-August. There is much still to agree upon before talks can focus on power sharing, integrating the Taliban into the government and necessary constitutional changes.

The Taliban's first task will have to be to resolve their internal differences, persuade all the factions to accept the talks, strengthen the peace lobby within the movement and hold off the influence of Isis, which is now bound to try to sabotage the talks by trying to kill senior Taliban figures.

A diplomat deeply involved in the talks reminded me that during the UK government's negotiations with the IRA in Northern Ireland the terrorist group had to spend more time talking and resolving differences with its own members than with the British delegation. The Taliban is in a similar situation today.

How Pakistan conducts itself will be critical in building trust among both Afghan delegations. As a long-time sponsor of the Taliban war machine, Pakistan must now help the movement's leadership to bring all factions into the fold. It must do nothing to convey the impression that it has favourites among them or that it has an agenda for influencing the outcome.

[The factions include](#) hard-line Taliban led by Mullah Mansour's rival, the former Guantanamo Bay prisoner Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir; a Taliban group based in Qatar who until this meeting were the only ones authorised to hold talks with foreigners; and those Taliban who have joined Islamic Front.

Meanwhile, Mr Ghani has to more aggressively tackle his multiple domestic crises, which give the impression to Afghans and the Taliban that he is a weak and vulnerable leader. Nobody ever won peace by appearing to be weak. One of the most positive signs at the talks was the presence of US and Chinese officials, who have worked closely in recent months to develop a common strategy for peace. The Americans especially seem to have become more diplomatically engaged – something that President Barack Obama has refused to do since the bulk of US troops withdrew last year.

International support and guarantees of non-interference by neighbouring states could do wonders to speed up the peace process and bring the Afghans — who have known nothing but war for 37 years — finally a modicum of peace.