

Security vs. Reconciliation: The Afghan Conundrum

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Direct negotiations with the radical Islamists are key to lasting Afghan and regional stability

After eleven years of war, the Taliban's public declaration that they will hold talks with the United States in Qatar is a major breakthrough for the political process, for Afghanistan's internal stability, and for progress toward relative peace that will be needed by the US and NATO in 2014 before they can exit Afghanistan in good order and without too much further bloodshed.

The year-long clandestine talks brokered by the Germans, fostered by Qatar, and now culminating in direct meetings between US officials and Taliban representatives will hopefully lead to a major reconciliation with the Kabul regime. The Taliban's present insistence that they will only talk with the Americans and not with Afghan President Hamid Karzai is not realistic in the long term, while Karzai's recent policy flip-flops and contradictory statements belie the fact that he has been kept in the loop every step of the way by the Germans. The talks will go ahead because the Taliban have expressed their readiness and there is no other alternative to ending the war.

There is considerable controversy and doubt about how successful NATO forces have been on the ground combating the Taliban, despite heady announcements by NATO generals. Unlike al-Qaeda, the Taliban have shown the ability to rebound from severe hits and proven remarkably unfazed by casualties, with a deep bench of commanders, logisticians, recruiters, and administrators for their cause.

In a summer offensive the Taliban can still mobilize some 25,000 fighters—the same figure they had in the 2005-6 campaigns. Taliban survival is directly linked to the sanctuary, support, and logistics they receive in neighboring Pakistan from various elements in that country. The US and NATO are preparing a comprehensive transition strategy for 2014 that entails handing over control of the country to government representatives at the district level and the newly-trained Afghan security forces, who now number some 352,000.

However, an exit strategy is not a political strategy and that is precisely what is lacking to ensure the future stability of Afghanistan and the volatile region that surrounds it.

Presidents Barack Obama and Hamid Karzai are both entangled in a series of strategic conundrums, which so far have not been adequately addressed. Karzai is determined to secure an agreement with the US allowing for the presence of US trainers and special forces in the country well beyond 2014. Washington would like to do the same. But the Taliban are vehemently opposed to any such US-Kabul agreement as it will appear to be aimed at them. Karzai will find it impossible to conclude both a security agreement with the US and a reconciliation agreement with the Taliban. The two aims are mutually exclusive.

The contradictory policy statements Karzai has made in recent months about reconciliation and the opening of a Taliban office in Qatar point to the fact that this reality is now dawning on the Afghan government: Karzai cannot be a partner to both the US and the Taliban and expect the Taliban to buy it. The Taliban have made it clear they expect all US troops to leave by 2014, while US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta has sown confusion in NATO ranks by saying the US will end all combat operations—and presumably speed up troop withdrawal—by 2013.

It is hard enough for Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar to sell the idea of reconciliation to his fighters. He will find it impossible to sell the idea of co-habitation with American bases beyond 2014. Many Afghans, including Karzai, want a prolonged presence of foreign troops to guarantee their own safety and security. However, the Taliban will only agree to a deal with Kabul when all foreign troops have left. There is not enough

consideration in Washington or Brussels of this strategic conundrum.

The US, NATO, and Karzai need a political strategy to ensure that talks can lead to confidence building measures with the Taliban to reduce the violence; only then can negotiations on power-sharing between the Taliban and Karzai take place. However, Both the Obama and Karzai administrations are deeply divided on what should result from talking to the Taliban. The US military would like to degrade the Taliban further, while the State Department wants talks to be the main focus of US political strategy in the endgame in Afghanistan. Similarly Karzai's advisers harbor differing opinions and numerous conspiracy theories about the talks and what they mean for their political future.

Secondly, a political strategy must entail a dialogue and eventual political agreement among Afghanistan's neighbors in which they agree to limit their interference in Afghanistan. Apart from India, all other states in the region—China, Russia, the five Central Asian republics, Pakistan and Iran—are against any long-term presence of US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014. No regional non-interference guarantees will be given by these states if the US retains bases.

In the past six months, intra-regional relations have gotten even worse. We have seen the collapse of US-Pakistan relations and the refusal of Pakistani leaders to even meet with US officials. In addition, the crisis between Iran and the rest of the world over Tehran's nuclear weapons program has further jeopardized any hope of Iran playing ball on Afghanistan. Tehran sees Afghanistan as a potential battleground if Israel or the US were to bomb or invade Iran.

There must be greater internal political cohesion inside Afghanistan. Karzai has failed to create a national consensus on supporting talks with the Taliban, nor has he offered a vision for the country beyond 2014. With many Pashtuns supporting reconciliation with the Taliban and most non-Pashtuns rejecting it, the ethnic divide in the country has widened enormously and will only grow more belligerent as the Taliban talks progress. Ethnic divisions could explode after the NATO withdrawal. Some experts even predict civil war.

In addition, there has been little preparation done by the West or Kabul to prepare for what is going to be a huge economic downturn in the country as aid levels drop precipitously, panic prevails in the marketplace, and investment is reduced.

It is also uncertain what Pakistan—the main regional stakeholder, with the Taliban leadership on its soil—will do given its poor relations with both Kabul and Washington. Pakistan has said it will facilitate the Qatar talks, but nobody, and least of all the Afghans, trusts Pakistani intentions. Ideally, Pakistan should:

- take part in any talks;
- allow the Taliban to travel and discuss the issues freely;
- free the Taliban prisoners it is holding;
- give the Taliban a deadline for reaching a settlement with Karzai, leaving Pakistan, and returning to Afghanistan.

These steps would speed up a peace settlement between Kabul and the Taliban.

Finally, far too many and dangerous political events are scheduled for Afghanistan in 2014. These include a US and NATO troop withdrawal; the test of whether the Afghan army can hold its ground; a presidential election, as Karzai will have to step down and new presidential candidates found. All this against the backdrop of a loss of public confidence inside this fledgling state and a lack of agreement among its neighbors.

To cope with all these uncertainties, all the players will have to be far more constructive, proactive, and flexible than they have been so far. The outlines of a more coherent strategy must be publicly articulated by the May NATO summit in Chicago so that the conspiracy theorists can be thwarted. Afghanistan and the Western alliance still have a long way to go before all the pieces for Afghan stability and a successful political exit strategy fall into place.