

## Talking with the Taliban

Security Times, 02/03/2012

By Ahmed Rashid

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 the 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 bloodshed.

The year-long clandestine talks brokered by the Germans, fostered by Qatar and eventually ending 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 is not realistic in the long term, while Karzai's recent policy flip-flops and contradictory statements belie the fact that he was kept in the loop every step of the way by the Germans. The talks will go ahead because there is no other alternative to ending the war.

The metrics of calculating how successful NATO forces have been on the ground combating the Taliban, despite heady announcements by NATO generals, are mired in considerable controversy and doubt. The ability of the Taliban, unlike al-Qaeda, to rebound from severe hits has proved them to be remarkably resistant to 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 which surrounds this landlocked country.

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 a strategic 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 strategic agreement with the US and a reconciliation agreement with the Taliban. The two aims are mutually exclusive.

The recent contradictory policy statements by Karzai on the issue of 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.

Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar will find it hard enough to sell the idea of reconciliation to his fighters. He will find it impossible to sell the idea of co-habitation with the Americans beyond 2014. Many Afghans, including Karzai, want a prolonged presence of foreign troops to guarantee their own safety and security. However a Taliban-Kabul deal can only be agreed when all foreign troops have left. There is not enough consideration in Washington or Brussels of this strategic conundrum.

Moreover the US, NATO and Kabul cannot hope to achieve even a modicum of regional non-interference in Afghanistan if US forces stay beyond 2014 because most neighboring states are opposed to a prolonged US presence. In particular, China, Iran and Pakistan are extremely suspicious of US intentions (for example about US training bases in Afghanistan being used to spy on these countries.)

Here, too, a prolonged US presence would imply that no regional non-interference guarantees are possible. Finally, it is still unclear what Pakistan may demand in return for restoring relations with the US and Kabul and helping the peace process.

The US, NATO and Karzai need a political strategy on several counts. Firstly, a political strategy must start by holding talks with the Taliban that lead to confidence building measures on both sides to reduce the violence so that negotiations on power-sharing between the Taliban and Karzai can take place.

However, the administrations of both Obama and Karzai are deeply divided on talking to the Taliban. The US military would like a longer lead time to mount offensives and degrade the Taliban further, while the State Department sees no way out but talks. Similarly Karzai is surrounded by differing opinions and numerous conspiracy theories among his advisers as to what the talks mean for their political future.

Secondly, a political strategy must entail a dialogue and eventual political agreement among Afghanistan's neighbors to limit their interference in Afghanistan. Apart from India all others - China, Russia, the five Central Asian republics, Pakistan and Iran - are against any long-term presence of US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

Recently intra-regional relations have gotten even worse. In the past six months we have seen the collapse of US-Pakistan relations and the refusal of Pakistan to even meet with US officials until their internal review process is over. 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. The regime sees Afghanistan as a potential battle ground if the US/Israel were to bomb or invade Iran. Attempts at a regional reconciliation have become even more difficult.

Thirdly, 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 post-2014 Afghanistan. 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 grow more belligerent as the Taliban talks progress. Ethnic divisions could explode after 2014. 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, economic panic prevails and investment is reduced. Already businessmen, regime politicians and others who can afford it are moving their families abroad. Tens of thousands of Afghans who presently work for US or NATO forces will be rendered jobless.

At the December conference in Bonn, the Afghans received a commitment from the international community that during the "Transformation Decade" from 2015 to 2024, they will pay for a substantial part of Afghanistan's security and governmental costs. The West, however, has to provide some guarantee now that such sums will be available for several years to come. At a time of global economic recession, the US, NATO and the wider Muslim world must obviously share such a burden.

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. Ideally, Pakistan should be included in any talks; Islamabad should be persuaded to allow Taliban to travel and discuss the issues freely; it should free the Taliban prisoners it is holding, and ultimately it ought to give the Taliban a deadline for leaving Pakistan and returning to Afghanistan. All of these steps would speed up a peace settlement between Kabul and the Taliban. Yet at present Pakistan is far removed from even talking to the main interlocutors.

Finally, there is the plethora of political events in 2014 that at present appear far too many and dangerous for a fledgling Afghan state to cope with. These include a US and NATO troop withdrawal with all its resultant side effects; 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 be found. All this against the backdrop of a loss of public confidence inside Afghanistan and a lack of agreement among neighboring states. Moreover, Karzai may decide at the last moment to hang on to power, citing possible chaos after NATO's withdrawal, in which case political calculations

will be even more muddied.

To cope with all these uncertainties, the US, NATO and Karzai will have to be far more constructive, proactive and flexible in their planning than they have been so far. The outlines of a much wider and deeper strategy should be ready in time for the NATO summit in Chicago in May. They should be made public so that the Afghans and the regional states can draw confidence from such plans rather than continuing to believe in a host of conspiracy theories about US and NATO intentions. Both Afghanistan and the Western alliance still have a long way to go before all the pieces for an Afghan peace and a political exit strategy fall into place.