

## The time to talk to the Taliban is now

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by Ahmed Rashid

*The US wants to see the surge bear fruit before negotiations begin. They may be unwise to wait.*

In the lead-up to this week's international conference in London, remarks by the commander of US and Nato forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, and the US defence secretary, Robert Gates, have given a boost to those who would like to see the Taliban engaged in a political settlement. The prevailing view in Washington is that many Taliban fighters can be won over, but that the current US troop surge has to roll them back first, reversing Taliban successes and gaining control over the population centres and major roads. According to the American strategy, the US -military has to weaken the Taliban before -negotiating with them.

General McChrystal has both a special fund of \$1.5bn to provide incentives and other forms of support for Taliban fighters who put down their arms, and a group of British and American officers who are drawing up plans to win over Taliban commanders and fighters as the troop surge tilts the battlefield back in favour of the US. General McChrystal told me in Islamabad in early January that he is confident that many Taliban will be won over in the field. This US reconciliation effort would be led by President Karzai, who for several years has called for talks with Taliban leaders.

There is another way of looking at the crisis. Despite their successes, the Taliban are probably now near the height of their power. They do not control major population centres - nor can they, given Nato's military strength and air power. There are no countrywide, populist insurrections against Nato forces as there were against the coalition forces in Iraq. The vast majority of Afghans do not want the return of a Taliban regime despite their anger at the Karzai government and the general international failure to deliver economic progress. Many Afghans believe that as long as western troops remain, there is still the hope that security can return and their lives change for the better.

Thus the next few months could offer a critical opportunity to persuade the Taliban that this is the best time to negotiate a settlement, because they are at their strongest.

Talking to the Taliban requires more than just secret co-operation among intelligence agencies, or the CIA handing out bribes to Taliban commanders to change sides - as it did with the Northern Alliance in 2001. There is an urgent need for a publicly promoted strategy involving concrete efforts to build political institutions and provide humanitarian aid in ways that do not require intrusive western control - a strategy that could attract many members of the Taliban, reduce violence, and placate Afghans who are opposed to such compromises. Obama officials have talked up the need for such a strategy but accomplished little during his first year. Yet such goals are of paramount importance.

There are a number of steps that should be taken before talking to the Taliban. Almost all these points have theoretically been accepted by the US and Nato, but none has been acted upon.

First, convince Afghanistan's neighbours and other countries in the region to sign on to a reconciliation strategy with the Taliban, to be led by the Afghan government. Second, allow Afghanistan to submit to the UN security council a request that the names of Taliban -leaders be removed from a list of -terrorists drawn up in 2001 - so long as those leaders renounce violence and ties to al-Qaida. Obama has not tried hard enough to extract this concession from Russian leaders.

Third, pass a security council resolution giving the Afghan government a formal mandate to negotiate with the Taliban - and allow the US, Nato, and the UN to encourage that process. Fourth, have Nato and Afghan forces take responsibility for the security of Taliban and their families who return to Afghanistan, enlisting the help of international agencies to assist these returnees. Fifth, provide adequate funds, training, and staff for a reconciliation body, led by the Afghan government, that will work with western forces and humanitarian agencies to provide a comprehensive and clearly spelled-out programme for the security of the returning

Taliban and for facilities to receive them.

Sixth, encourage the Pakistani military to assist Nato and Afghan forces in providing security to returning Taliban and their families and allow necessary cross-border support from international humanitarian agencies. Encourage Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to help the Taliban set up a legal political party, as other Afghan militants have done. This would be a tremendous blow to al-Qaida and the Pakistani Taliban, and it would give concrete form to Obama's repeated pledge that he is ready to reach out to foes in the Muslim world.

Finally, the Taliban leadership should be provided with a neutral venue such as Saudi Arabia, where it can hold talks with the Afghan government and Nato. The US should release the remaining Afghan prisoners held at Guantánamo and allow them to go to either Afghanistan, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia.

Unless such publicly announced policies are carried out, the Taliban may well conclude that it is better and safer to sit out the next 18 months, wait for the Americans to start leaving, and then, when they judge Afghanistan to be vulnerable, go for the kill in Kabul - a move that would lead only to a renewed civil war.