

# CURRENT HISTORY

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*“Even if all essential parties are interested in a negotiated settlement, getting to yes is no sure thing.”*

## Afghanistan's Rocky Path to Peace

J ALEXANDER THIER

**I**t is a hallmark of intractable conflicts that the distance between the status quo and the conflict's inevitable resolution can appear unbridgeable. Such is the case with today's Afghanistan.

For the first time since 2001, when the US-led intervention in Afghanistan began, a serious prospect exists for political dialogue among the various combatants, aimed at the cessation of armed conflict. Over the past few months, and highlighted by a conference on Afghanistan held in London on January 28, 2010, signs have emerged of a concerted and comprehensive effort to engage elements of the insurgency in negotiations, reconciliation, and reintegration.

In London, Afghan President Hamid Karzai repeated a previous offer to negotiate with, and reintegrate, not only low-level foot soldiers and commanders of the Afghan insurgency, but also its leadership, including the Taliban chief Mullah Muhammad Omar. Karzai went further by announcing that he would in the spring convene a national peace *jirga*, a traditional Afghan assembly, to facilitate high-level talks with the insurgency. Karzai expressed hope that Saudi Arabia would play a key role in this process.

Eight and a half years after the invasion, amid rising insecurity across Afghanistan and with a continuously expanding international troop presence in the country, the prospect of a negotiated settlement with some or all elements of the insurgency is enticing. However, a successful path toward sustainable peace in Afghanistan remains far from obvious. Fundamental questions persist about the willingness and capability of key actors, inside and outside Afghanistan, to reach agree-

ments and uphold them. Further, the content of an agreement or series of agreements, as well as the process by which any accord would be established, is uncertain. And even if all essential parties are interested in a negotiated settlement, getting to yes is no sure thing.

### PEACE—WHO WANTS IT?

Winston Churchill said “to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war,” but jaw-jaw is not always easier. In Afghanistan, the process is not off to a promising start. Already, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has all but ruled out negotiating with the Taliban's senior leadership. She told National Public Radio in January that the United States is “not going to talk to the really bad guys because the really bad guys are not ever going to renounce Al Qaeda and renounce violence and agree to re-enter society. That is not going to happen with people like Mullah Omar and the like.”

Meanwhile, President Barack Obama took full ownership of the war in a December 1, 2009, speech at the US Military Academy. The president, after having sent 21,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in the first months of his presidency, ordered another 30,000 soldiers into the theater—a place he called the “epicenter of violent extremism,” where “our national security is at stake.” By the summer of 2010, the international presence will amount to about 135,000 troops, with the United States contributing 100,000 of them.

Obama's announcement came nine days before he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, but it was no peacemaker's gambit. Rather, he sent the troops to undergird a robust new strategy aimed at displacing the insurgency from key population centers. While this surge of forces may eventually create more propitious conditions for a negotiated settlement, it may in the near term have the opposite effect.

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Even so, it is time to take seriously the idea of political reconciliation in Afghanistan, to weigh the prospects for arriving at such an outcome, and to consider the obstacles in the way. If we cannot even imagine how reconciliation might be achieved, it will be impossible either to prepare the way or to determine whether the path is worth traveling in the first place.

Is the conflict in Afghanistan ripe for resolution? In a conflict, after all, reaching a settlement can be very difficult even when the key players have decided that they want it. Every war has its own logic—and its own economy.

Peace in Afghanistan will require the stars to align. Several constellations of actors will have to participate to secure a lasting peace. These include the “progovernment Afghans”—that is, along with the government itself, those opposition groups that are not fighting the government; the insurgents (themselves composed of at least three major groupings); the United States and its partners in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF); and regional powers like Pakistan, Iran, India, and China. Also in the mix are several spoilers—groups that likely will never want stability. These include Al Qaeda, Pakistani radical groups in solidarity with the Afghan insurgents, and the drug traffickers who move 90 percent of the world’s illicit opium.

In any case, do the progovernment forces want to reconcile with the Taliban? Karzai, who sees his future and his legacy hinging on a political settlement, has been a strong advocate for such efforts, and he is using his executive power and personal prestige in support of them. He is backed by large segments of an Afghan society that is bone-tired of war and is likely willing to accept significant compromises in exchange for stability.

Many, however, including some close to Karzai, may be much more ambivalent. Assume for a moment that a deal means conceding to the Taliban control over some part of southern Afghanistan. The people around Karzai who govern these provinces, who operate construction and road-building enterprises, and who profit from the drug trade would under such a settlement lose their power and their cash cows.

Two of the enterprises that generate the most profit are transport—essential for supplying international forces—and private security, in the form of companies that guard convoys, bases, and reconstruction projects. These multibillion-dollar industries would wither rapidly if stabil-

ity were established and international forces withdrew. Other Karzai allies—such as his two warlord-cum vice presidents from the Northern Alliance, Muhammad Fahim and Karim Khalili—represent constituencies that have fought the Taliban since 1994 and are not keen to see them gain any power.

Other potential opponents of a peace deal include civil society organizations that have pushed for human and especially women’s rights in the post-Taliban period. Allowing the return of Taliban-style gender apartheid policies, even in limited sections of the country, would be anathema to these groups and the vocal international constituency that supports them.

## MEN WITH GUNS

And what about the insurgents? The three major groupings—Mullah Omar’s Taliban, directed from sites in Pakistan; the Haqqani network; and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami—are not a monolith, and may treat the prospect of negotiations differently. This differentiation is often seen as a good thing, because parts of the insurgency might split off from the rest. But recalcitrant actors might also try to sabotage the process. Also, even a successful settlement with one group will not under these circumstances end the insurgency.

The harder question, though, is why the insurgency would sue for peace if it believes it is winning and the Americans are preparing to leave. Considering the Karzai government’s continued loss of moral authority, the insurgency’s still largely safe haven in Pakistan, and an ongoing decline in public support for the war in NATO countries, the insurgents might easily decide to wait out the next few years, meanwhile waging a very effective guerrilla campaign.

But several factors could conspire to change their calculus. The first is the war itself. Obama’s deployment decisions will essentially double the number of forces in the country this year. The Afghan security forces are also growing—and some are getting better at their jobs. The bigger force numbers, moreover, are accompanied by a new counterinsurgency strategy, one that looks likely to produce effects more lasting than those generated by the Bush administration’s “economy of force” strategy, which involved too few troops to secure territory won through battle.

NATO also seems finally to have figured out how to reduce Afghan civilian casualties, depriving the insurgency of a key propaganda asset at a

moment when militants are killing more civilians than ever. The United Nations estimates that in 2008 the Afghan and international military forces killed 828 civilians, and the insurgents killed 1,160. In 2009, the numbers were 596 and 1,630 respectively.

The war on the Pakistani side of the border, involving drone aircraft, has also been stepped up, and both the Pakistani Taliban's top leader and his replacement have been picked off in such strikes in recent months. It is unclear whether guided missile attacks have been used against Afghan insurgent targets in Pakistan as yet, but certainly the capability exists.

If all this adds up to a change in military momentum, popular attitudes might change, costing the Taliban support and increasing the number of people willing to inform or even fight against them.

Increased credibility of Afghan and international civilian efforts also could have an impact on public opinion. While most Afghans do not support the Taliban, they have had little incentive to risk their necks for a government widely viewed as corrupt and ineffective. If the Afghan government and its international partners can present a compelling, plausible alternative to the Taliban, backed by significant new investments in delivery of services and good governance, the environment will become less hospitable for the insurgents. The Afghan government and NATO have also launched a massive new reintegration effort intended to lure insurgent soldiers and low-level commanders off the battlefield. If this program succeeds in demobilizing combatants and safely reintegrating them into society, prospects for defeating the rebels would brighten.

## THE PAKISTAN FACTOR

And finally, the insurgency would be dealt a heavy blow if it lost its sanctuary in Pakistan. The Taliban recruit, train, fundraise, convalesce, and maintain their families there. For years, the Pakistani government has denied that the insurgent leadership was present in the country, but this has begun to change. In February, the government arrested Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the operational commander of the Afghan Taliban. The Pakistanis also arrested Mullahs Abdul Salam

and Mir Muhammad, the Taliban's "shadow governors" for two Afghan provinces.

Pakistan has come under increasing pressure from the Obama administration to confront the Afghan Taliban, with senior US officials reportedly telling the Pakistanis that if they do not act within their own territory, the United States will. Islamabad is also grappling with an internal struggle against militants who are determined to overthrow the state, and it has learned some hard lessons after getting burned by extremist fires that it has stoked in the past. That said, Pakistan is unlikely to abandon its longstanding patron-client relationships with groups that it still considers strategic assets. But it might use its leverage to help force a political outcome in Afghanistan.

The United States, despite some hedging, seems to view an Afghan political settlement that includes the Taliban as a possible element of its plan to draw down US forces. In early 2009, the Obama administration's focus was almost exclusively on "reintegration," or coaxing insurgents off the battlefield, rather than "reconciliation," which implies a broader political settlement with insurgent leaders. According to a March 2009 statement of Obama's new Afghanistan

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and Pakistan strategy: "Mullah Omar and the Taliban's hard core that have aligned themselves with Al Qaeda are not reconcilable and we cannot make a deal that includes them."

It appears that eight months of bad news from Afghanistan, along with declining support for the war among the US public and some soul-searching deliberations, softened the administration's stance toward the prospect of negotiations. In his December West Point address, Obama said, "We will support efforts by the Afghan government to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens." And in January of this year, just days before the London conference, General Stanley McChrystal, Obama's handpicked commander of the ISAF, said, "I believe that a political solution to all conflicts is the inevitable outcome."

Afghanistan's neighbors and other regional powers also have a say in the process—or at least a veto. Pakistan, Iran, India, Russia, and Saudi

Arabia have all contributed to Afghan instability over the past three decades, supporting various warring factions (while also at times supporting peaceful development). Afghanistan is a poor, mountainous, landlocked country with a weak central government, and while it is difficult to control, it has always been too easily destabilized by the predations and manipulations of larger powers. An agreement among regional actors to promote mutual noninterference in Afghanistan's internal affairs would be necessary to secure the peace.

Efforts to reach such an agreement are hampered by regional and international rivalries that drive the desire to intervene. Pakistan, the most significant of the regional players, backed the Taliban in the 1990s in order to end Afghanistan's civil war, open trade routes to the newly independent states in Central Asia, and secure a friendly government in Kabul. This strategy worked for a while, but the Taliban regime proved so odious and extreme that Pakistan found itself, on September 11, 2001, on the wrong side of a great conflict engulfing the region.

The Pakistani security establishment, though it cooperated with the US invasion of Afghanistan, has found it difficult to completely break with its former clients, and has allowed the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan. Thus Pakistan serves simultaneously as the primary supply route for the ISAF and as the base for the insurgent leadership.

## THE INDIAN PRESENCE

Why this untenable balancing act? The Pakistani military and its intelligence apparatus still feel surrounded by India. Pakistan has lost three or four wars to India (depending on how you count them). India's superiority in economic and conventional military strength, combined with Pakistan's unresolved border issues with both India (Kashmir) and Afghanistan (the Durand Line), keeps Pakistan's guard up. Islamabad is also facing a severe domestic militancy crisis that has cost thousands of lives—and, in Baluchistan, a simmering separatist insurgency that, Pakistan charges, receives Afghan-Indo support.

India for its part maintains strong relations with the Karzai government and is training Afghan civil servants and providing hundreds of millions in

aid to Kabul—despite itself having the highest number of poverty-stricken people in the world. Pakistan feels threatened by India's relationship with Afghanistan, and so continues to maintain a hedge in the Taliban.

Many believe, as a consequence, that the road to peace in Afghanistan runs through Delhi. Yet, if Afghan stability is held hostage to a comprehensive accord between Pakistan and India, we can forget about it. In the near term, ways must be found to mitigate Pakistan's concerns about India and Afghanistan. The resumption of comprehensive talks between Pakistan and India—which were tabled after a Pakistan-based extremist group carried out a November 2008 massacre in Mumbai—could provide a critical outlet. Also, because of brutality and overreaching by the Pakistani Taliban and other groups in the past few years, Pakistan's attitude toward the use of militants as a strategic asset in Kashmir and Afghanistan is changing.

Iran's potential role also remains ambiguous. Tehran has supported the Karzai government, provided some development assistance near western Afghanistan's border with Iran, and was a strong foe of the Taliban. It has also acted consistently to combat the opium trade, which has helped create an estimated 4 to 5 million Iranian addicts—a massive public health crisis.

On the other hand, Iran is encircled by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it faces continuing confrontation with the United States over its nuclear program. A settlement in Afghanistan would allow the United States to concentrate more on dealing with Iran, and would free up US military assets as well. Tehran might prefer to see America bogged down in a costly conflict.

## ART OF THE DEAL

Prevailing on key parties to agree to a peace deal will depend heavily on the shape of the deal itself. Last year some starting positions were aired, but both sides effectively demanded the other's capitulation. The Afghan and US governments called on insurgents to reject Al Qaeda, lay down their arms, and accept the Afghan constitution. The insurgents demanded withdrawal of foreign forces, removal of the Karzai government, and revision of the Afghan constitution to create a "true" Islamic republic.

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Each of the three primary parties—the Afghan government, the Taliban, and the United States—would enter negotiations with their political survival depending on one condition. For Kabul, the condition for survival is just that—survival. In other words, the Karzai government will not make a deal requiring it to step down or hand over power. Such a prospect appears to Kabul far worse than the status quo; in addition, the likelihood of the government's catastrophic collapse seems distant enough to ignore.

For the Taliban leadership, the condition is the withdrawal of foreign forces. The Taliban's success today relies not on ideology, but rather on resistance to foreign occupation and Karzai's corrupt puppet regime. It would be hard for the Taliban, perhaps impossible, to accept some sort of accommodation with Karzai—but it is nearly unimaginable that the Taliban would accept any agreement that does not include the fairly quick withdrawal of foreign forces from the Taliban heartland, and their timeline-based withdrawal from the entire country. Between this Taliban demand and the US desire to withdraw, a pleasing symmetry exists. But Afghanistan's fragility and that of neighboring Pakistan—a country that

to the United States represents an even greater national security concern—will make pulling out entirely a risky endeavor.

For the Obama administration, the one completely sacrosanct condition for a peace deal with insurgents is a firm, verifiable break with Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda was the reason for going into Afghanistan to begin with, and this issue will prevent US withdrawal until it is addressed. But *can* the Taliban break with Al Qaeda? The two entities grew up together, and so did their leaders—fighting the Soviets, ruling Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, and since 2001 returning to the fight, against the Americans. They have shared foxholes, and reportedly have established family ties through marriages.

The Taliban have made an effort to suggest they would rule without Al Qaeda. In November 2009, they released a statement claiming that the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan wants to take constructive measures together with all countries for mutual cooperation, economic development, and [a] good future on the basis of mutual respect.” But would a ban on Al Qaeda in Taliban-controlled territory be verifiable? After all, international terrorist cells continue to operate in Pakistan, where



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the United States has resorted to an all-but-official drone war because of the lack of local cooperation and the inaccessibility of the territory.

## UP FOR DISCUSSION

Aside from these core conditions, everything is to some extent negotiable. Some groups in the “progovernment” camp have for years supported changes to the 2004 constitution and to Afghan law that would increase power sharing, decentralization, and strengthening of Islamic strictures. Many conservative political leaders, mostly former mujahideen figures, would love to see an increased role for Islamic law, or sharia. A political and legal map that allows for regional variation might make sense in such an ethnically and geographically segmented country.

Meanwhile, a process of political reconciliation with the Taliban could be used not only to mollify the insurgents, but also to address tensions still lingering from the civil war, as well as perceived inequities among Afghanistan’s regions and ethnicities, which continue to cause conflict. Addressing these tensions and inequities should be a key focus of the upcoming peace jirga.

The United States, its Western allies, and the UN would come under serious political fire if a deal with the Taliban meant abandoning Afghan women—whose privations under the Taliban have served to rally international support for the intervention since 2001. But any legal changes that threatened Afghanistan’s gains in human rights would likely be limited and subtle, at least on paper. Since we are not talking about a deal that would put the Taliban in charge of the national government—in the near term, at any rate—little danger exists that the constitution would be changed to ban outright girls’ education or women’s access to employment.

To be sure, an accommodation with the Taliban might accelerate the steady erosion of rights that Afghan women have experienced in recent years. Indeed, the democratically elected parliament passed a family law last year—signed by President Karzai—that sanctioned, among other things, marital rape under certain circumstances. And if, after the ink dried on an agreement, the Taliban imposed an unofficial ban on female employment in provinces that they controlled, no ISAF offensive would likely be triggered, even if such a ban

were in contravention of the constitution or the terms of the peace agreement.

There is also a real possibility that combatants on all sides of the conflict who have committed war crimes and atrocities will not be brought to justice. Evidence from many conflicts suggests a sustainable peace is unlikely without such reckoning.

Even so, the real issue in negotiations is not likely to be the rules themselves, but rather who makes and enforces them. Power sharing is the firmament of all peace processes, and changing the Afghan political system will have to involve sharing power. What exactly would a power sharing arrangement look like? Would the Taliban (and other groups) be given control over certain provinces? Would they help fill out the ranks of the Afghan national security forces? Would they be guaranteed a number of ministries or seats in the parliament? Or would they simply be allowed to compete for such things in a (quasi) democratic process?

Peace accords that have been reached in Bosnia, Burundi, and Northern Ireland, to name a few examples, spell out such arrangements in great detail. In the end, it is even more difficult to implement such complex provisions than to agree on them.

Neighboring countries will also be looking for certain guarantees. Pakistan wants its allies to succeed, and wants to be a key player in the peace process itself. Afghans, including perhaps the Taliban, will resent a strong Pakistani role in the process, but no process will take place without Pakistan. And unless Pakistan nudges the Taliban to the table by denying them sanctuary, the insurgents can always, if the pressure gets too high in Afghanistan, retreat into Pakistan, where they can go to ground and wait out the United States for a few more years.

Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian states for their part will want guarantees that the Taliban and other groups will not harbor or export militancy. All the neighbors are likely to agree on one thing—that Afghanistan should be neutral, eschewing alliances with any of the regional powers.

## CAN IT HAPPEN HERE?

Even if all the parties are willing to negotiate, and sufficient space exists to reach a viable agreement despite all the red lines, achieving resolution

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will still be enormously challenging. Between and among the various actors there is a fundamental lack of trust, and talks this year will occur amid an intense military campaign. It is unclear whether either the Karzai government or the insurgent leaders have the wherewithal to discipline their own constituencies. Strong leadership will be needed on all sides both to craft an agreement and to achieve buy-in for unpopular concessions.

The profusion of players, motivations, conditions, and potential spoilers seems to cast serious doubt on prospects for a negotiated peace. But the status quo cannot hold either. Obama has already signaled that the Afghan mission has the full support of his government until July 2011. At that point, if the trajectory of the war has not changed appreciably, US strategy will. Nobody knows what that means. It could mean abandonment of the counterinsurgency strategy, with increased focus given instead to the sort of counterterrorism strategy reportedly advocated by Vice President Joseph Biden in 2009, with few troops on the ground and heavy reliance on drones and special forces to strike at terrorist targets. A new strategy could entail the replacement of the Karzai government.

Perhaps the most important issue affecting chances for a negotiated outcome is whether, to the various players, such an outcome looks more attractive than the alternatives. If the Taliban think they can run out the American clock without losing the war, they will do so. If the Karzai government and the Americans think they can beat the Taliban and stabilize Afghanistan without a deal, they will try. If the Pakistanis think that a weak, unstable Afghanistan that brings billions into their coffers is better, they will undermine a deal. So will the Iranians, if they decide the better alternative is a weak and unstable Afghanistan that pins down American forces.

But all of these factors might cut in more than one direction. Paradoxically, it is conceivable that the prospect of a US surge and departure could make a negotiated outcome more attractive to all parties—that is, negotiations might appear preferable to the risk of collapse and failure.

Do the Afghan people get a say? After 30 years of war they are among the poorest and most traumatized people on earth. But they are possessed of endurance and an indomitable spirit. If the indigenous, neutral leadership that supports a just peace could find its voice, that might spur a movement that presses the parties to reconcile. ■



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