

Options for Violence Reduction in Afghanistan

Afghan Peace Process Issues Paper

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By Deedee Derksen

Summary: As peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban proceed, this paper discusses possible confidence-building measures that could help reduce violence in Afghanistan.¹ It starts by laying out considerations that could inform what steps are feasible and the purposes they might serve. It then lays out options for the measures themselves. Violence-reduction measures could increase the level of trust between parties and improve prospects for successful talks. They could also provide an opportunity for both sides to reduce harm to fellow Afghans and bolster popular enthusiasm for and confidence in the talks. It is, of course, critical that the parties themselves develop, refine and reach agreement on confidence-building measures. This paper offers ideas in that spirit.

Factors to Consider

Several factors particular to the Afghan conflict are relevant for potential confidence-building measures (CBMs) aimed at reducing violence.

Progress in talks is critical: The best way to reduce violence will be to make tangible progress quickly in the intra-Afghan talks. The Taliban see their military capability as their main source of leverage. They are unlikely to agree to any measures that they see as eroding that leverage without progress in talks. Initial violence-reduction measures should thus aim primarily to reduce harm to civilians rather than to change the balance of power between the parties. The set of acceptable measures will likely change over time if the parties resolve questions of political and military power sharing in a future state.

Mistrust: Relations between parties suffer from a low level of trust. CBMs are critical to helping build trust, but likely require an incremental approach, starting with less controversial steps. For example, the Afghan government may find delineation of territory, even for temporary purposes, hard to swallow notwithstanding its calls for a ceasefire. And, Taliban leaders are unlikely to agree to violence-reduction measures that might undermine the movement's military prowess. Proposing controversial measures

early on could prove counterproductive, fueling suspicion and fear that either side seeks to use negotiations to weaken the other or cement their own authority rather than reach a compromise. This could impede agreement on future violence-reduction measures.

Existing communication channels: In many peace processes, CBMs aim to increase communication between warring parties. In Afghanistan, Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and Taliban commanders are already in touch with each other, even if their communication mostly involves insults and threats. In some sense, the war is intimate: Local commanders often know their enemies well. Such existing contacts could provide a basis for local CBMs, though leaders would need to sanction any measures.

Evolving mindsets: Recent interviews with a handful of Taliban and ANDSF commanders in contested areas around Kabul reveal a shift in their attitudes toward a peace process compared to a few years ago (more interviews would be needed to confirm this pattern elsewhere). Many appear to be anticipating a cease-fire and have even started thinking about options for life after war. There may well be grassroots support for CBMs among commanders from both sides, but they will only offer this support if their leaders consent.

Informal collaboration: The Afghan government and the Taliban informally collaborate on service delivery and development projects in Taliban-controlled areas. The Afghan government tries to provide basic services to Afghans regardless of where they live. For its part, the Taliban often allows aid workers to enter and regulates the delivery of basic services like education and health care in areas under their control. Existing informal collaboration on education, health care and construction could serve as the basis for building further cooperation and trust on the ground.

Humanitarian crisis: A large number of Afghans experience food scarcity and cannot access schools or clinics, in large part due to violence and the use of these facilities by warring parties for military purposes. The Afghan government and the Taliban express public support for the humanitarian principle of civilians' access to education and health care, which could provide further basis for CBMs that reduce violence. Parties' expressions of support for managing the COVID-19 pandemic could help gather momentum for such CBMs.

Foreign involvement: Outside parties often help with the design and implementation of CBMs. Striking the right balance between foreign involvement and local ownership will be critical. In the talks themselves, no third party is present who could help negotiate measures between the parties. Moreover, Taliban commanders in the provinces oppose any involvement of the United States or its partners in the implementation of CBMs. Both sides regard regional involvement frostily, but might support a neutral Islamic country, like Indonesia, helping out.

Trust in local elders: Commanders from both sides claim to trust local elders' judgment. While such elders' authority has eroded in past decades, they continue to play an important mediation role (for example, in arranging the release of fighters held by the other side). They could participate in the design and implementation of CBMs alongside other civil society actors, including urban-based organizations.

Ten Ideas for Reducing Violence During Peace Talks

The process for developing ideas for CBMs is important. A top-down element remains crucial; for CBMs to contribute toward building trust, opposing sides' leaders have to negotiate and sanction them. At the same time, engagement with groups from all corners of society, including local commanders, elders, women's groups, human rights organizations, parliamentarians, journalists and businesspersons, in the design and implementation of CBMs could provide a grassroots element that could improve the likelihood of their success. Workshops involving these groups in Kabul and in the provinces could feed into negotiations between the two sides' teams. Leaders and negotiators could even sit in on some of the workshops through video link.

The implementation of CBMs can be gradual and incremental. When leaders are open to certain ideas but are not yet fully on board, they could test them in pilot areas. This could allow them to weigh advantages and disadvantages before agreeing to roll these measures out more widely. Moreover, starting with noncontroversial and nonmilitary CBMs may pave the way for more far-reaching measures. That said, the most important factor for reducing violence remains the peace process itself and that leaders sense it is moving in the right direction.

Options that parties could consider include:

1. Access to schools and clinics

In their negotiations, the Afghan government and the Taliban could revisit the commitments both have made publicly to humanitarian principles such as civilians' safe access to schools and clinics, especially in light of the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis. They could examine how to better protect facilities, personnel and civilians using these services. Agreements could include commitments to stop attacking schools and health clinics, to refrain from using them for military purposes and to stop fighting in their vicinity. The two sides could agree to halt the use of indirect fire (mortars, rockets and grenades) in populated areas. Such measures could improve not only civilians' access to schools and clinics but also the quality of services—international organizations would, for example, be better able to improve the provision of supplies to clinics. They could also win both sides popular support.

2. Construction projects

Another option might be for parties to formalize cooperation on construction projects ranging from building village roads, wells, schools and clinics to dams and other large infrastructure projects in Taliban-controlled areas. The Taliban already reportedly provide security for such construction. This role could be formalized and they could, in addition, be hired to work as laborers. This could offer foot soldiers benefits, keep them busy as fighting slows down and potentially even provide them with alternatives for the future. The Taliban would not have to demobilize units: fighters could remain with their commander and could easily mobilize again. The government could gain greater control over such projects, for example, by officials regularly checking on progress, something that now is often impossible. Again, both parties would win popular support if civilians see them working on projects that improve local conditions.

3. Local civilian peace teams

Parties could consider each appointing a specific number of elders, religious figures and other key personalities to provincial or even district peace teams. The mandate of these teams could evolve during the peace process as needs change (though clarity on what they are supposed to do at all times would be key). They could, for example, help monitor CBMs, a cease-fire or other arrangements, or prevent and resolve disputes around those measures. Many of the likely members of such teams already mediate between commanders from opposing sides, and between them and the local population.

4. Local events

Local events around sports or culture could bring together commanders from both sides. The purpose would be to engage commanders and their followers in an activity that does not involve conflict. A sporting or cultural event that appeals broadly—a poetry gathering, for example—could help to remind commanders and fighters of their common heritage and encourage them to start a constructive dialogue. These local events could take place around another short cessation of hostilities, similar to the previous ones around Eid.

5. De-escalation “hotlines”

Existing local communication channels between Taliban and ANDSF commanders could be formalized and refocused on de-escalation. For example, local hotlines could provide commanders a way to pass on information about force movements, particularly when patrols and convoys are not meant for offensive actions, or even to seek an explanation as to why an attack has taken place before launching a counterattack. Parties would have to agree on exactly how such hotlines would be used and the information commanders could relay. To complement local hotlines, the parties could agree to add ANDSF officials to the existing military-military channels between the United States and the Taliban, or to create their own channel.

6. Joint monitoring commissions

Joint commissions, including representatives from the two sides, could support the implementation of measures (such as those described below) and themselves serve to build confidence. Such commissions require communication and collaboration. Elsewhere in the world, they have included third parties to provide neutral assessments, technical support and possibly to smooth communication between the two sides in the event of disputes. Local elders or organizations working locally with technical knowledge on arms and arms and ammunition management, such as HALO Afghanistan, might play these roles. During many peace processes, foreign officials have also been involved, either as part of joint commissions or in separate monitoring bodies. Parties would, however, have to agree on whether this would be acceptable and if so which countries’ participation they would permit. There may also be security challenges to foreign monitors joining patrols, especially at the beginning. Setting up joint commissions immediately after talks start might be too soon as they require close cooperation; they could potentially follow measures like local de-escalation hotlines.

7. Disengagement zones

Defunding of the Afghan Local Police (ALP)—the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund for the ALP runs until the end of this year—could provide an opportunity to reduce violence. The parties could agree to keep their forces out of areas where the ALP operates. This could benefit both parties. The Taliban would win by seeing the removal of a local force they fiercely oppose and by securing a guarantee that the ANDSF

or other pro-government militias will not move in to take its place. Kabul would also win, in that the Taliban would agree not to insert themselves as local police demobilize. The government would not have to use scarce manpower to assume the ALP's role. This step would not necessarily facilitate the ALP dismantling itself, but would aim to take advantage of the existing demobilization process. Reintegration packages for former ALP personnel would help to reassure the Taliban that they will genuinely demobilize.

Such packages would also provide relief to locals, who fear that defunding the police will lead to extortion by former ALP personnel to make up for lost earnings. Generous reintegration packages would also dissuade former ALP personnel from joining the insurgency. Donors could consider funding such reintegration support.

8. Tactics

The parties could refrain from using certain weapons or units or from attacking certain locations. While the Taliban are unlikely to agree to measures that jeopardize their military power, the parties may still be able to reach agreement on avoiding tactics that cause particularly egregious civilian suffering. One option could be that the Taliban stop using improvised explosive devices and the government stops aerial attacks, both tactics that kill and harm civilians. Another might be for the Taliban to refrain from attacks on provincial and district centers, while the government withdraws local forces or other ANDSF personnel from other areas. Parties could, of course, limit such agreements to certain parts of the country.

9. De-escalation by freezing forces in place

Parties could freeze their forces in place and adopt a more defensive posture, again possibly only in certain areas. This could serve as an interim measure, before they decide on withdrawing their forces from specific areas altogether. With forces still in close proximity, clashes would remain a risk. But such an option would allay the fears of fighters who leave the front lines to return home, and keep supply lines and local funding opportunities intact in the early stages of talks.

10. Zones under special regimes

Finally, the parties could establish special zones with restrictions on the presence of fighters or use of weapons. In a maximum scenario, zones would be fully demilitarized with no weapons allowed. Parties could, however, also agree to permit only light weapons or coordinate with each other on their armed presence. Such zones act as buffers between the parties, separating forces and limiting the risk of clashes. They could be especially useful in areas where the forces of both sides are "marbled."

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About the Author: Dr. Deedee Derksen has been researching options for demilitarization in Afghanistan for more than a decade, including for the United States Institute of Peace. She holds a Ph.D. from the Department of War Studies at King's College London, and was a post-doctoral fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and visiting scholar at Columbia University. Deedee is currently an associate at TrustWorks Global. She worked at the United Nations Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, including on Afghanistan. Deedee started her international career as a foreign correspondent for the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*.

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