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Afghanistan–Pakistan Relations

The Prospect of Reviving Taliban Talks

Summary

- There are few viable options for resolving Afghanistan's conflict other than an inclusive peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban.
- For peace talks to proceed, the Afghan and Pakistani governments must put aside their differences and work together to achieve a near-term, cease-fire agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.
- Afghanistan and Pakistan should agree on a strategy that targets any actors opposed to peace talks; the strategy should include close, constant communication of intelligence and be supported by the United States and China.
- An Afghanistan-Pakistan, civil-military contact group, including U.S. and China observers, should also be setup to coordinate action and ensure a unified commitment to engagement.

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Introduction

There is renewed focus on the feasibility of Pakistan-brokered reconciliation talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. At the “Heart of Asia” Ministerial Conference in Islamabad on December 9, 2015, Afghan, Pakistani, and U.S. officials committed to resuming the dialogue that had stalled in late July after leaking of the news of Mullah Omar’s death.

However, the wisdom of reviving reconciliation talks with the Taliban is not universally accepted—and for good reason. Several past attempts have only ended up granting legitimacy to the Taliban, allowing them to present themselves as a political entity on par with the Afghan government while extracting little in return. And yet, there does not seem to be a viable alternative. Battlefield developments in Afghanistan since the summer have only reconfirmed the reality that Afghan security forces and the Taliban are in a hurting stalemate, with neither poised to assume victory.

Whatever the rationale for the talks, achieving a meaningful dialogue will not be easy. The first prerequisite is the willingness and ability of Afghan and Pakistani authorities to put aside their differences and work together. This realization was obvious at the Heart of Asia conference, but so was the acute mistrust between the two neighbors.¹ Afghanistan and Pakistan did find some common ground earlier this year—reflected in Afghan president Ashraf Ghani’s conciliatory outreach toward Pakistan and the country’s positive response—but the mutual blame game since the

breakdown of the summer talks with the Taliban suggests that they continue to have unrealistic expectations of each other on the reconciliation front.

Attempting to revive talks without addressing the key differences in Afghan and Pakistani perspectives will amount to little. At least three relevant concerns require immediate attention: whether Pakistan and Afghanistan can agree on a strategy to tackle those fighting the Afghan state and opposed to talks, how quickly talks will result in a reduction in violence, and the degree of buy-in from Afghanistan's divided government.

Afghanistan's View of Pakistan's Role in Reconciliation

Perhaps the most significant point of divergence is on Pakistan's expected role in the talks. Many Afghans believe Pakistan is supporting the activities of the Taliban and Haqqani network and thus blame Pakistani authorities for any violence these groups perpetrate in Afghanistan. Afghanistan and the United States want Pakistan to take responsibility for helping reduce violence in Afghanistan, cutting support and facilitation for these groups and potentially going as far as military action against them. The Kabul government wants to negotiate with the insurgency, but it would prefer to talk to a weakened Taliban. Pakistan claims that it cannot force a reduction in violence in Afghanistan—even as the world dismisses this claim—and only wants to be held accountable for bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. While Pakistan did promise to pressure the Taliban during the summer talks and threatened consequences if the violence continued in Afghanistan and the Taliban refused to join those talks, the consequences were unspecified and Pakistan would not take responsibility for the failure of talks and did not agree to punish the Taliban for it.²

Despite years of pressure, the world has failed to convince Pakistan to launch a major offensive against the Taliban and Haqqani network. While levels of Pakistani support appear to have waxed and waned, none of the contributing factors are likely to change in the near term to help revive talks. At the same time, talks cannot be sustained for too long if the current violence levels in Afghanistan continue. A middle ground that tackles the levels of violence in Afghanistan by Pakistan-based groups and brings the Taliban leadership to the table—without requiring Pakistan to launch a massive operation against them—must therefore be found.

Afghanistan and Pakistan should have constant, specific, intelligence-based discussions on which groups, leaders, and field commanders may be opposed to talks or acting to sabotage them. Through mutual agreement on a case-by-case basis, Pakistan would commit to acting demonstrably by putting a financial squeeze on, arresting (and possibly handing over prisoners to Kabul), or using force against those operating from its soil. Such a targeted approach could (1) prevent those Taliban or other terrorist groups opposing talks from moving around freely and attacking inside Afghanistan and (2) help avoid actions that simply force them into Afghanistan and pose an even greater challenge to the overstretched Afghan security apparatus. Pakistan would likely be more amenable to this role given that it would only be acting directly against those Taliban leaders in opposition to talks and not engaging in efforts against the Taliban movement at large. The risk of the Taliban turning against the state is a long-standing Pakistani concern. As a quid pro quo for Pakistani actions, Afghanistan would also commit to operating demonstrably against Pakistani Taliban groups known to launch attacks inside Pakistan from Afghan territory.

Achieving early successes will be crucial to sustaining this arrangement. Both sides would need to identify and quickly agree on certain targets and actions. As much as possible, these successes should be made public and used to rally support behind the reconciliation effort.

This protocol would require close coordination between the Afghan and Pakistani intelligence apparatuses. Their mutual antagonism presents an obvious hurdle. To overcome this, outside

actors should be employed as formal guarantors. The United States and China can play this role effectively. They could arbitrate disagreements on specific targets for action, commit to sharing their own actionable intelligence to triangulate or supplement Afghan and Pakistani information, and monitor follow-through by both sides to gauge their commitment to the process.

The Pace and Substance of Reconciliation Talks

The defining factor in reducing insurgent violence in Afghanistan will be the outcome of the talks themselves. As long as a decisive defeat by Afghan security forces is implausible, the Taliban are unlikely to cease violence without a guaranteed quid pro quo. It is therefore crucial to agree on, at the earliest, the minimum prerequisites for a cease-fire. Multiple rounds of dialogue may be a luxury this process can no longer afford, especially in light of Taliban leadership succession disputes. Afghan and Pakistani authorities cannot be sure that the Taliban representatives at the table can actually control the fighting in Afghanistan until their commitment to a cease-fire is empirically tested. Moreover, the pressure on Ghani after returning to Pakistan as a broker implies that he will also require quick gains to sustain his policy for a reasonable period.

Afghan and Pakistani authorities must agree to short and relatively firm timelines for moving the reconciliation talks along—the outer limit should be set well before the start of the 2016 fighting season in Afghanistan. The next round of dialogue should focus specifically on the terms of a cease-fire. Pakistan must pressure the Taliban to come to the table with realistic expectations and demands. The Afghan authorities, on their part, must remain equally realistic. As talks progress, Pakistan should commit to keeping the pressure on the Taliban so the group negotiates sincerely and honors its commitments. At the same time, Afghan and Pakistani authorities should be clear on each other's limits and arduously avoid any moves that may cause either to pull out.

Pakistan's Concern about Divided Decision Making in Afghanistan

Pakistan's approach to reviving and sustaining reconciliation talks will be influenced by lessons learned in brokering talks this past summer. The biggest takeaway seems to be that Ghani was unable to control his country's military-intelligence apparatus and his political opposition—both of which the Pakistani security establishment alleges played “spoiler” roles despite Ghani's directions to work collaboratively with Pakistan. Allegations against spoilers in Afghanistan include premature leaks about initial meetings with the Taliban in late 2014, instant accusations against Pakistan following virtually all major terrorist attacks inside Afghanistan, and lack of progress on Pakistani Taliban sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Most significant in Pakistani eyes however was the leaked Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency and National Directorate of Security (NDS); the MOU envisioned their direct coordination on counterterrorism but was subsequently opposed by NDS leadership and former president Hamid Karzai.³

Regardless of the causes of the tensions, Pakistan will most likely demand some guarantees from Ghani that he can command authority over those who remain opposed to Pakistan-brokered talks.

Ghani and his Pakistani counterparts must prevent any leaks about backdoor negotiations and talks, as well as avoid public mudslinging, which worked well until the breakdown of the summer talks. More broadly, Ghani should keep Afghan expectations of Pakistan's role and of the pace of negotiations realistic.

The acute distrust between NDS and ISI will also need to be addressed. Ghani and Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif could set up a contact group that includes them, their foreign ministers (or equivalent), national security advisers, and military and intelligence chiefs. All agreements and arrangements would be made through this mechanism to avoid allegations by the intelligence services

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief discusses three concerns highly relevant to the prospect of successful reconciliation talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Within this discussion, Afghanistan and Pakistan relations and the central role of international actors are explored. Moeed Yusuf is the director of USIP's South Asia programs.

that their counterparts are playing spoiler. U.S. and Chinese representatives should be kept informed of the group's decisions and be invited to any meetings as observers.

Beyond this, Pakistan must temper its own expectations of Afghanistan. Failure of the summer talks caused Ghani tremendous political damage, and Afghanistan's political and economic challenges have only compounded since then, leaving Ghani with little maneuvering space. He cannot be expected to stand successfully in the face of anti-Pakistan sentiment unless Pakistan's efforts on reconciliation show tangible results for him to hold up to his people.

The Role of the Guarantors

While Afghan and Pakistani authorities will take the lead on reviving reconciliation talks with the Taliban, outside actors like the United States and China must remain proactive in helping them overcome their many problems. Washington and Beijing leaders should arbitrate any disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan as the process advances. They should also play the role of guarantors for intelligence cooperation and of observers for the leadership contact group. Their pressure could also ensure that both sides commit to and observe the short timelines for future rounds of talks. China could offer to host some of these rounds, giving greater confidence to skeptical voices within Afghanistan. Perhaps the most important task for the United States and China will be keeping the talks from falling apart due to setbacks or misunderstandings, which will inevitably surface.

Given the deep mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan, one cannot be sanguine about the prospects of meaningful reconciliation talks. However, if talks are to occur, they must be structured to offer the best chance of success. It will be crucial to address key divergences in Afghan and Pakistani perspectives in the three areas highlighted here.

Notes

1. "Afghan, Pakistani Leaders Hold Firm at Heart of Asia Conference," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 9, 2015, www.rferl.org/content/ghani-islamabad-conference-pakistan-india/27415683.html.
2. Kamran Yousaf, "Spring Offensive in Afghanistan: Pakistan Warns Taliban to Shun Violence—or Else," *Express Tribune*, May 25, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/891809/spring-offensive-in-afghanistan-pakistan-warnstaliban-to-shun-violence-or-else/>.
3. "Govt to Review Controversial NDS-ISI MoU," *Tolo News*, May 24, 2015, www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/19671-govt-to-review-controversialnds-isi-mou; and Mir Abid Joeynnda, "Karzai Says He Is Distancing Himself from NUG," *Tolo News*, June 5, 2015, www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/19859-karzai-says-he-is-distancing-himself-from-nug.



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