



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report draws on a series of workshops entitled “Anticipating a Political Process in Afghanistan: How Should the International Community Respond?” These workshops brought together some thirty analysts, both Afghans and foreigners, who have spent many years in Kabul, Kandahar, and other parts of Afghanistan.

Participants considered a range of possible scenarios for Afghanistan over the next five years and the drivers of events in Afghanistan, then developed scenarios based on a five-year perspective and constructed along two main axes: the degree of political inclusion and the degree of state capacity and control.

The workshops were held in Kabul, London, and Washington, D.C. in June 2010, supported by the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and facilitated by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). This report also incorporates comments to an earlier version that was circulated as a nonpaper to senior policymakers ahead of the July Kabul conference. The report focuses on examining the role of the international community and the key challenges to a sustainable peace process, creating an inclusive peace process, gauging the interests of parties, identifying actual participants in peace talks, and structuring an agenda for sustainable stability.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Making Peace in Afghanistan

The Missing Political Strategy

Summary

- The proposition that a political settlement is needed to end the war in Afghanistan has gained increasing attention in recent months. Channels for preliminary talks with Taliban leaders have been sought and a High Peace Council created.
- However, despite upbeat military assessments, the insurgency has expanded its reach across the country and continues to enjoy sanctuary in Pakistan. Afghans increasingly resent the presence of foreign troops, and the Taliban draw strength from grievances by ordinary Afghans against their government. External money to supply military bases and pay for development projects often ends up fueling conflict rather than creating stability.
- For their part, President Karzai and many Afghan political elites lack genuine commitment to reform, calling into question the viability of a state-building international strategy and transition by 2014.
- Missing is a political strategy to end the conflict that goes beyond dealing with the Taliban; it must define the kind of state that Afghans are willing to live in and that regional neighbors can endorse. Knowing that such a settlement could take years to conclude does not diminish the urgency of initiating the process.
- Given doubts about Karzai’s ability to manage the situation effectively, the international community needs to facilitate a peace process more pro-actively than it has. To be sustainable, the process will need to be inclusive; women’s rights, human rights, and media freedoms cannot become casualties of negotiations.
- Afghanistan’s international partners should commit to a peace process and lay the groundwork to appoint a mediator. This includes gauging the interests of parties, identifying actual participants in talks, and structuring an agenda. In the meantime, international military efforts must be realigned to avoid action that contradicts the ultimate aim of a peace settlement.

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Every year since 2001, Western leaders have announced a last push or critical event that will turn around the situation in Afghanistan. Each time the underlying assumption is that, with increased resources and the right plan, the weaknesses of the Afghan state can be tackled and stability achieved. Yet despite the latest—and massive—military surge and accompanying “civilian uplift,”¹ the political and security situation has continued to deteriorate. The Taliban have expanded their reach across the country from their strongholds in the south and southeast² while the Afghan public increasingly views the government of President Hamid Karzai as corrupt.³ Even under a reform-minded leadership, a self-sufficient central state that could provide security and justice for the people of Afghanistan would take decades to build up. Within the 2014 Lisbon transition timeline, without basic political stability and in an environment dominated by an increasingly self-serving elite, it is practically out of reach.

In the current Afghan context, reports of preliminary contacts between the Afghan government and the Taliban have become a cause for optimism. A political settlement is needed, but at the same time, an exclusive deal between Karzai and the Taliban would be divisive, alienating civil society, minority groups, and other constituencies. If the international community wants to reduce its role by 2014 without further destabilizing Afghanistan, it will need to work out a political strategy to ensure that it does not become the guarantor of a deal that splits the country—or that sets the stage for renewed civil war.

A Reality Check

The *inteqal* or transition process endorsed at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Lisbon summit in November 2010 consists of a familiar menu of counterinsurgency and state-building strategies,⁴ and the year-end review of the Obama strategy recommended no major adjustments.⁵ International forces in Afghanistan will continue to rely on a mix of military operations to capture and kill insurgents, training and mentoring programs to hand control of security to Afghan forces by the end of 2014, and an assortment of governance and development efforts aimed at generating popular trust in the Afghan government, particularly in the south and east. Meanwhile, the government itself is increasingly unpopular.⁶ The Taliban have a safe haven in Pakistan and a growing base of fighters⁷ disgruntled with the Karzai government and resentful of the presence of foreign troops.⁸

Missing is a feasible political strategy. Developing one will require a reevaluation of current assumptions, including consideration of the following three propositions: first, that the insurgency shows no signs of subsiding; second, that external resources are fueling conflict through a war and aid economy; and third, that Karzai and Afghan political elites lack genuine commitment to reform, calling into question the international community's state-building and counterinsurgency approach.

Proposition 1: The Insurgency Shows No Signs of Subsiding

The assumption that escalating coalition military operations will force the insurgents to the negotiating table should be treated with caution. So far, the evidence from the field suggests that the military surge has not only intensified the conflict, but also expanded it geographically.⁹ The insurgency continues to enjoy access to safe havens and support in Pakistan despite stepped-up drone strikes across the border.

According to NATO estimates, insurgent numbers have swelled in the five years since 2005, from a few thousand fighters to as many as 35,000. The outrage that many Afghans feel over the actions of foreign troops—including night raids, civilian casualties, and detention—and the predatory nature of their own government continue to swell Taliban ranks.¹⁰ For their

part, the Taliban target government officials, policemen, aid workers, development contractors, and tribal elders in assassinations and assaults; Taliban fighters also lay roadside bombs that kill Afghan civilians. Despite such brutality, the insurgency is gaining momentum far beyond the south and southeast, and beginning to enlist non-Pashtun fighters.¹¹ The map of Afghan government access to districts across the country is steadily diminishing. Many previously stable areas in the north (including Badghis and Faryab provinces), northeast (Kunduz, Baghlan, and Takhar), and central Afghanistan (Kapisa) have become key infiltration routes. The Taliban have delivered night letters—threatening notes left on doorsteps under cover of darkness—even in the central highland region of Hazarajat, until now one of the most stable parts of the country.

On the government side, even the best Afghan army and police units are barely capable of operating on their own and often lack the will to challenge the insurgency.¹² Tribes that have been enlisted to provide security against the Taliban have ended up fighting internally, as in the case of the Shinwari tribe in Nangarhar.¹³ Local power brokers use their links to the international military to settle personal scores by branding their competitors as Taliban, turning potential allies into insurgents.

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) casualties are at their highest ever, up 20 percent since 2009 and fourfold since 2005.¹⁴ The NATO-led coalition has captured or killed hundreds of mid-level insurgent commanders in raids over the last year, but this has not reduced violence; it appears only to have fragmented the Taliban and made local units more autonomous. Experienced analysts have suggested that new commanders tend to be more radical, less prone to compromise, and more committed to jihad against the foreign occupation. They may also be less responsive to direction from Mullah Omar.¹⁵ The ongoing intergenerational transfer of power within the Haqqani network, from Jalaluddin Haqqani to his son Sirajuddin, could have a similar effect in southeastern Afghanistan, as Sirajuddin is involved in a more violent strand of the network, with less respect for traditional authority.¹⁶ At a strategic level such fragmentation could undermine the ability of the insurgent leadership to deliver on a political deal.

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Proposition 2: External Resources Are Fueling Conflict

Allocating additional money for development programs—with pressure to spend it fast in pursuit of security objectives—and supplying international military bases across Afghanistan has unintentionally produced a war and aid economy. Donor programs delivered in an environment of state weakness, warlordism, racketeering, and rent seeking create conflict and popular disappointment, rather than winning hearts and minds.¹⁷

Among contractors, client networks, villages, and tribes, competition for development projects is intense; for Afghan political elites, the conflict has become a lucrative enterprise, and with hundreds of millions of dollars hanging in the balance, there is little economic incentive for political power brokers to end it. Those in power control the mechanisms of government for their personal gain, and instead of promoting stability and good governance, they reap rewards from the development and military contracts that follow the fighting. The construction, trucking, and private security contracts that come with the presence of international military forces thus are plagued by extortion and clientelism. Often a single network or actor becomes dominant. Matiullah Khan controls all the highway security contracts in Uruzgan, while the president's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai towers over private security, real estate, and contracting in Kandahar.¹⁸ A U.S. Senate inquiry links U.S.-paid private security contractors to murder, kidnapping, and bribery, as well as to the Taliban.¹⁹

Proposition 3: Karzai and Afghan Political Elites Lack Genuine Commitment to Reform

A lack of real commitment to reform among Afghan leadership calls into question the international community's entire state-building approach. Technical and financial support to institutions cannot substitute for political will.

Karzai has not held to his expressed commitments to cleaner government. Instead, the state has been captured and manipulated by various factions and powerful business and political figures, with a confusion of institutions with private interests. Less than a month after anticorruption undertakings made at the Kabul Conference, Karzai intervened personally to release an aide who had been arrested in connection with an investigation into a *hawala* money transfer business, through which billions of dollars were leaving Afghanistan. He also dismissed the deputy attorney general, Fazel Ahmed Faqiryar, who had authorized the arrest, and took more direct control of the task force that was carrying out the investigation.²⁰ The government has rejected offers for a transparent audit of Kabul Bank after a bailout of several hundred million dollars.²¹ Shareholders include another of the president's brothers, Mahmood Karzai, and a brother of the vice president, Haseen Fahim.²² Chief executive Khalilullah Fruzi was senior financial advisor to Hamid Karzai's 2009 reelection campaign.²³

Most reforms remain at the level of empty policy debates and government appointments are bought, sold, and distributed to family and close allies to ensure the loyalty of critical appointees.²⁴ This includes senior police and customs officer posts, as well as local government offices. While important freedoms and progress have been achieved since the end of Taliban rule, abuses by police and other local government officials have eroded public trust. The social breakdown and lawlessness that preceded the Taliban takeover is being repeated in many parts of Afghanistan, enabling a comeback in some provinces. In Wardak, the Taliban have set up a parallel administration across the province and people look to the shadow governor, district chiefs, and judges for administration and justice. Unlike official government courts, Taliban courts are known for swift decisions, harsh punishments, and not soliciting bribes.²⁵

For its part, the international community has become hostage to its own rhetoric of Afghanization and an Afghan lead, and is unwilling or unable—despite a massive financial and military commitment to Afghanistan—to pressure the government to deliver what it has promised. Although few believe Karzai to be a reliable partner,²⁶ placating him has become a central plank of the international strategy. Karzai still feels betrayed over the 2009 elections, in which foreigners supported the exclusion of more than one million fraudulent votes, denying him a first-round victory. He has delayed inauguration of the newly-elected Parliament, bringing the country to the brink of constitutional crisis. Karzai also has become a vocal critic of the NATO-led military effort.²⁷ This leaves the international community in a conundrum. Karzai is the elected leader, with a mandate until 2014, and no obvious political alternative. Yet with Karzai as a partner, a counterinsurgency approach, which relies on the government winning the trust of the Afghan people, is unlikely to succeed. The only option for a responsible withdrawal of foreign troops—one that does not leave behind the poisoned seeds of renewed civil war—is a negotiated peace settlement that has broad-based support.

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Toward a Sustainable Political Settlement

Based on the above propositions, the international community's main investment should be in facilitating a sustainable political settlement. A peace deal will take time to conclude—perhaps several years. That talks will not be a quick fix, however, should not take

away from the urgency of laying out a framework for a political process. There are at least three levels at which solutions need to be sought: internally, among Afghans; with the Taliban; and with regional stakeholders to undergird any deal that emerges. The following sections consider the elements that can contribute to a sustainable settlement and a role for the international community.

Opening Up the Political Space

A sustainable political settlement for Afghanistan is not only about doing a deal with the Taliban or with Pakistan. It is about defining a state that Afghans are willing to support. While the actual negotiations should be kept quiet, there needs to be a broad-based consultation of Afghans to establish the parameters of an acceptable settlement.

Grievances that are fuelling the insurgency—such as corruption, injustice, warlordism, and marginalization of various tribal and ethnic groups, political actors, economic and business elites, and civil society—are costing the government support. Women’s groups, human rights advocates, and ethnic minorities are concerned that the discrimination and abuse that Afghans experienced under the Taliban regime of the 1990s will return.²⁸ A number of prominent ethnic leaders and senior army commanders are also staunch opponents of negotiating with the insurgents and of giving Pakistan a role in Afghanistan’s security.²⁹ All these groups need to be sufficiently involved in the process to be able to seek and receive guarantees. Given research findings that a quarter of all civil war settlements collapse within five years,³⁰ it is important to reach a political settlement that is widely accepted across all segments of society.

Rather than diplomats determining red lines for negotiations on human rights and women’s rights issues, the Afghan public should have a voice in establishing the parameters of an acceptable settlement ahead of any negotiations with the Taliban. A broad-based consultation that engages Afghans across the country in a debate over the future of their state could, in itself, create political pressure for upholding core principles. The peace *jirga* was an exercise for Karzai to seek a mandate from his own base, and had merit as such, but it was not the nationwide consultation it was sold as. Karzai-appointed governors carefully orchestrated the list of invitees, and major Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek leaders stayed away, as did those affiliated with the Taliban.³¹

Ideally, a carefully balanced and representative government-appointed group would carry out the consultation, along the model of the selection committee for the 2003 constitutional *loya jirga*. In the absence of such an initiative by the government, donors could support alternative methods of bringing Afghans from all thirty-four provinces into the debate. One possibility would be funding televised debates and radio call-in programs. This would give Afghans a voice and begin building up a constituency for a peace settlement.

Talks with the Taliban

President Karzai has been preparing the ground for talks with the “upset brothers,” as he calls the insurgency, activating backchannels at various levels, mainly through family connections.³² Enticements to come over to the government side include a reintegration decree that offers amnesty to Taliban fighters who want to leave the battlefield, on condition that they accept the Afghan constitution and break ties with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The peace *jirga* in June 2010 resulted in proposals for the release of Taliban prisoners and for the lifting of UN sanctions on blacklisted individuals. In September, Karzai announced the creation of a seventy-member High Peace Council as the formal interface for talks with the Taliban. Other political signals have been the replacement of the Tajik intelligence chief

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Amrullah Saleh with Rahmatullah Nabil, who is Pashtun, as well as the promotion of two Pashtun generals to the crucial posts of chief and deputy chief of staff of the army, both replacing Tajiks.

The political intention to reintegrate Taliban fighters and persuade them to swap allegiances has been translated into the complex and costly Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program, launched at the Kabul conference in July 2010. The program, underwritten by \$250 million in international pledges, is built on the assumption that lower-ranking fighters join the Taliban to earn an income and can be persuaded to switch sides with promises of work and development projects for their communities. So far there have been few takers, perhaps because the program fails to respond to the political grievances that fuel the insurgency and does not offer credible security guarantees to Taliban who choose to reintegrate. Those who have joined the reintegration program—a few hundred to date—are predominantly former Jamiat fighters and bandits from Herat, Badghis, and the northeast, rather than actual Taliban.³³ In the absence of a broader peace process, the program is likely to continue to lack appeal.³⁴

None of the above activity means that a peace deal between Karzai and the Taliban is imminent. There are three main flaws in the preparations undertaken so far. The first is the perception that Karzai is giving in too easily to demands by the Taliban and Pakistan; this is alienating to much of the rest of Afghanistan, especially to non-Pashtuns in northern and central Afghanistan. At worst, an exclusively negotiated Karzai-Taliban deal could lead to collapse of the government, with non-Pashtun ministers and much of the army walking out.

The second concern is that, despite a flurry of press reports about contacts between the government and the insurgency, the Taliban may not be ready to talk just yet. It is likely that some elements of the movement are tired and looking for an exit. It is also possible that a part of the Quetta Shura is interested in power sharing. However, it is not clear that the contacts that have been reported since September 2010 amount to substantial preliminaries for negotiations. Presumed high-level discussions with Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, the Taliban second-in-command, facilitated by NATO, turned out to be a sham.³⁵ Channels have always existed between the insurgents and government to discuss prisoner releases and other deals, but it does not appear that the Quetta Shura has authorized broader political discussions.

The third concern is that much of the activity from Karzai's side is symbolic and appears aimed at fragmenting the insurgency and making a closed deal that allows him to stay in power. The High Peace Council includes many unlikely peace negotiators, and it remains to be seen whether the former Taliban represented on the council can provide a meaningful conduit for talks. Its membership is heavily weighted toward the same factional leaders who have been fighting the wars of the past thirty years and whose lawless rule paved the way for the Taliban to come to power in the 1990s.³⁶ They are where the armed power, increasingly coupled with economic and political power, of Afghanistan lies, and the leaders have little incentive to share that power. The Taliban have publicly responded by characterizing the High Peace Council as impractical and doomed to fail.³⁷

The more Karzai moves toward a genuine national peace settlement, the more power he would have to give, both to the Taliban and to the political opposition, Pashtun and non-Pashtun. At the moment, Western support is shielding Karzai's government and personal networks from having to share power and propping up a false political equilibrium. This has prevented Karzai from having to reach for deals that he would otherwise be compelled to strike. However, as ISAF contributing nations are increasingly looking for the exit, the pressure to satisfy various constituencies will grow.

Exploratory dialogue about a peace settlement has also started between Karzai and Pakistan's army and intelligence chiefs as Pakistan seeks to secure its interests and the

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loyalty of a future Afghan state.³⁸ Pakistan has an undeniable role in any future negotiations. Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's intelligence agency, has deep links into the insurgency, including both the Taliban and Haqqani networks, and may even participate in meetings of the Quetta Shura, the Taliban leadership council.³⁹ Yet this influence should not be exaggerated; the Afghan Taliban are increasingly driven by indigenous factors and it seems unlikely that Pakistan would have sufficient control to shut down the insurgency even if it wanted to. Together with the problem of Taliban leadership fragmentation due to the killing and capturing of mid-level commanders by international military forces, it is hard to envisage an early or smooth negotiating process. Still, enlisting the unambiguous and firm support of Pakistan is critical to any sustainable political settlement.

Agenda for Talks

Despite the challenges, talks are needed to end the insurgency. Even if, at present, prospects for a settlement are still remote, groundwork to prepare a political process should begin in earnest. The Afghan government has yet to develop its negotiating position beyond calling on the insurgency to respect the constitution and lay down arms. For the international community, the key requirement will be for the Taliban to sever all links to al-Qaeda. As for the insurgency, an eventual negotiation would need to address a wide range of motivations, among them the presence and actions of foreign forces, including night raids, civilian casualties, and detentions; the desire for a more rigorous application of sharia law by the state; the predatory nature of the government, especially the bribe-taking prevalent in the police and justice institutions; perceived ethnic or tribal bias in the distribution of gains from reconstruction activities; and economic vulnerability, which may motivate lower-level fighters.⁴⁰

Both the Afghan government and the Taliban have yet to develop a positive vision of their long-term aspirations for Afghanistan. The Taliban platform does not go much beyond the slogan of forcing out foreign troops along with what they consider to be the puppet government of Karzai, while the Afghan government is inclined to see the root causes of the conflict as exogenous to itself, blaming Pakistan, the United States, and other international players. The government's mindset needs to shift. In reality it is the significant deficit in governance that continues to undermine the emergence of a credible Afghan state and, in turn, loyalty of Afghans to it. Without addressing the grievances that have enabled the insurgency to step up its recruitment, it will be insufficient to entice low-level Taliban from their leadership through the reintegration program.

Some of the issues that the Taliban would look for on the agenda would include foreign troop withdrawals; an expanded role of Islam in national life; power sharing at the provincial and local levels; the release of detainees; and a say in civil service, police, and justice appointments.⁴¹ For the time being, the option of altering the Afghan constitution has been taken off the table; casualties of a more conservatively drafted constitution might include the rights enshrined for women, the role of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, and the freedom of the press. That said, it may be possible to give sharia a more prominent role in law making without bargaining away fundamental freedoms. Similarly, the powers of governors and provincial councils could be enhanced without altering the constitution. Beyond severing ties to al-Qaeda, the principal red lines for any negotiated solution should come not from foreigners but from Afghan constituencies, including civil society actors, that are informed of and included in the process.

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Capacity to Negotiate

Groundwork to prepare a political process will need to address key questions about who specifically would be negotiating and the preparedness of the various parties to engage in a long and complex political negotiation. Setting up the High Peace Council does not seem like the real answer from the Karzai administration's side. It is too unwieldy to be more than a formality. The insurgency also lacks the capacity and political structure needed for peace talks. There is a role for diplomats to advocate for a realistic negotiating team that includes legitimate representatives of Afghanistan's various ethnic, social, and political groups, including women, as well as to build up the capacity of such a team to engage in talks. There may also be a role for a regional actor to support the development of insurgent capacity for talks. Karzai has suggested a possible role for Turkey in providing an office that Taliban negotiators can use.⁴²

The next stage of preparations should focus on the issues of capacity to engage in peace talks, as well as identifying the interests of the main players.⁴³ All the main insurgent groups will need to be accepted as interlocutors, along with all key political groupings. The challenge is to ensure that all Afghans who need to be included are included and that underlying principles are adhered to. Genuine political debate about acceptable compromises is needed. Otherwise there is a real danger that women, human rights, and media freedoms become victims of botched negotiations, and that a just peace remains elusive. Other core principles that need safeguarding include a commitment to a functioning Afghan state that fulfills its constitutional obligations toward its citizens as well as its international obligations, maintains normalized relations with regional neighbors and globally, and undertakes not to harbor terrorists. Many of these issues can best be explored through informal contacts, so that all parties can prepare their constituencies ahead of formal negotiations.

Regional Talks

A peace settlement among Afghans would need to be underpinned by a carefully designed regional framework for stabilizing Afghanistan. Neighboring countries could pull Afghanistan apart in a proxy war, such as that seen in the 1990s, or contribute to its stability. The key question is whether it is possible to overcome the mutual distrust among regional actors in favor of even minimally coordinated regional engagement. A stable Afghanistan is ultimately in the interests of all of its neighbors, although each may have its own view of what stability means and may be tempted to fall back on cultivating old client relationships. The thorniest issue in designing a regional strategy is finding a way to move Pakistan and India away from their confrontational positions over Afghanistan.⁴⁴

China has a clear strategic and economic interest in an Afghanistan that is safe for natural-resource extraction and able to tackle Islamist extremism. It may be able to exert constructive pressure based on its close ties with Pakistan. Russia and the Central Asian countries on Afghanistan's northern border are concerned about spillover effects, with a particular concern for links to the latent conflicts in the Ferghana Valley. At the same time, while Russia does not want the Taliban in power in Kabul or elsewhere, it cannot help but savor the prospect of the United States also failing in Afghanistan. It may find it difficult to resist cultivating local allies based on former Northern Alliance and Communist commander networks, which could make a national-level political settlement harder to achieve.

Iran has ambitions to be a regional heavyweight and views Afghanistan largely through the lens of its relations with the United States. Despite a relatively small investment, it wants to maximize its influence over a future Afghanistan and minimize the influence of its enemies, particularly the United States and Saudi Arabia. In line with the former, it is supporting all sides: providing financial support to Karzai's and Abdullah Abdullah's election

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campaigns and maintaining links to the Northern Alliance and small groups of the insurgency that have been trained in Iran. Iran would not want to see a Taliban government in Kabul, but it wants to keep the United States embroiled in the south; it may be positioning itself to be a spoiler to a peace process. Gaining Iran's support for a political settlement might require assurances that there would not be permanent U.S. military bases in Afghanistan. Yet in the short term Iran may have rather mixed feelings about the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Hasty troop withdrawal would likely result in an internal shakeout in Afghanistan and, thus, increased instability in Iran's neighborhood. Iran would also lose the leverage it has in being able to hurt U.S. troops, and therefore view itself as more vulnerable to U.S. attacks against its nuclear assets.⁴⁵

While Iran's interest in Afghanistan is limited to ensuring that it is not Taliban dominated or a Western satellite, India and Pakistan are using Afghanistan as a battleground in their broader conflict. India is increasingly assertive in its diplomacy and wants to reduce Pakistan's ability to determine events in Afghanistan. Its financial investment in infrastructure and development and its large diplomatic presence, including four consulates in addition to an embassy, signals its intention to stay a long time. India has also been keen to accelerate the development of Iran's Chabahar port, which will give it access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without needing to go through Pakistan. It has already built the Zaranj-Delaram road through Afghanistan's Nimruz province to connect to Chabahar.⁴⁶ The July 2011 date for the beginning of U.S. withdrawal has led to hard-line debate in the Indian strategic community over a backup security plan, with some suggesting the reestablishment of links with Northern Alliance commanders.

Pakistan has been positioning itself as a main broker in talks with the Taliban. Diplomacy between Karzai and Islamabad intensified in 2010, with multiple visits to Kabul by General Kayani and intelligence chief Shuja Pasha. Pakistan envisions an Afghanistan without an Indian presence and with an Afghan government that is not pro-Indian, and will seek to use the insurgency to pressure the government into a deal that offers it a pivotal role in shaping Afghan politics in exchange for closing down sanctuaries. However, Pakistan's ability to control the insurgency is often overstated, and the Taliban's dislike for the ISI is understated. Also, Pakistan recognizes that it is interested in a stable and therefore ethnically balanced government structure in Kabul, and the context for Taliban rule no longer exists.⁴⁷

Given the distrust among the states in the region, it is difficult to conceive of a formal multilateral negotiating process that could deliver a regional consensus, at least not without a preparatory round of bilateral dialogues and deals. To start with, basic principles should be agreed upon to raise the level of confidence between Afghanistan and its neighbors. At their simplest, these principles should include respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, commitment to the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of neighbors, and prevention of the use of Afghanistan's territory for hostile activities against its neighbors. Some observers have called for unblocking progress on Kashmir to allow for a solution on Afghanistan to be developed. This would substitute one Gordian knot for another, but even some incremental movement or confidence building measures between India and Pakistan would clearly help.

International Role in Talks

So far, the international community has distanced itself from the anticipated political process by stressing that talks with the insurgency will be conducted under an Afghan government lead. This is partly due to incomplete policy formulation within the United States, where there continues to be nervousness about talking to the Taliban. However, ultimately the countries with troops on the ground will need to engage in peace talks. Neither Karzai

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nor the newly established High Peace Council has control over many of the issues at stake. With U.S. troops leading the anti-Taliban fight, there are guarantees that only the United States can offer. Similarly, the Afghan government can request the United Nations to review the Resolution 1267 terrorist sanctions list, but will have little control over action that is taken. Negotiations can only be successful if all major players take part.

For talks to be meaningful, the international community will need to facilitate them—not to determine the specific shape of a political settlement, but to help structure the process so that what emerges is sustainable. Despite the recent hype, as mentioned above, a political settlement could take years to conclude and there should be no rush to begin formal negotiations. This does not detract from the urgency of undertaking informal preparations. A mediator or team of mediators and analysts, with at least a minimal mandate, could begin to identify the various stakeholders and analyze their interests, through engaging regional actors and the range of Afghan constituencies, with a view to proposing a structure and format for multilevel negotiations. Such a mediator could also explore ideas for a range of incremental and reciprocal confidence-building measures.

Further down the line a more formal process will be required. Given the Afghan government's testiness about foreign involvement, it will eventually take the United States, as the most powerful actor, to broker agreement over a mediator. The United States itself cannot play this role for lack of impartiality, but whoever is appointed must have U.S. support at the highest level. Successful negotiations will require an exceptionally knowledgeable mediator with a clear plan and the ability to maintain support and coherence among the international actors, as well as sufficient authority to conduct regional diplomacy and bring the parties to a peace conference. This could be a role for a UN mandated envoy, although not for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan; its reputation for impartiality has been weakened among Afghans due to its mandate requiring a close relationship with the Afghan government and its handling of the 2009 elections.

If the end to the conflict in Afghanistan requires a peace settlement, it also follows that the international military forces should orient their strategy to support agreed-upon political ends, rather than vice versa. Within U.S. military and political circles, some argue that intensified capturing and killing of insurgents is driving the Taliban to the negotiating table. Most analysts who have spent longer periods of time in Afghanistan tend to disagree.⁴⁸ A less combat-oriented international military posture across the country, covering not only the planned transition of security responsibilities from NATO to Afghan security forces in more benign districts, could create the political space for genuine negotiations. A first step toward talks could be agreeing to a reciprocal and incremental set of confidence-building measures. These might include deescalating hostilities or localized cease-fires, prisoner releases, and delisting insurgents from target lists and the UN sanctions list.

Talks will not result in peace overnight. Crafting a political deal that parties to the conflict accept and regional neighbors endorse will take time and a sustained commitment of foreign troops to back it up. This has consequences for the speed of troop withdrawals. Even Afghans living in Kandahar who have no fondness for foreign troops worry that an ill-considered rush to the exits would make matters even worse.⁴⁹ At best, skillful and patient diplomacy leading to a political settlement might result in a tenuous peace that can be consolidated over time. The requirement of maintaining a military presence to underwrite a peace deal should be considered early on to maintain confidence in the process.

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Conclusion

The politics of a potential grand bargain between Karzai and the Taliban, underwritten by Pakistan, are divisive. Leaders of the Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek communities are opposed,

as are many Pashtuns—at least without further clarification of what the end goals and their roles in the process are. To be sustainable, a political settlement must be acceptable to a broad range of Afghan constituencies. It must also be supported by regional actors, including those who are backing various factions within Afghanistan. Such a settlement may be years away, but the way ahead needs to be prepared urgently. This means designing a negotiation with a genuine consultation process to give Afghans a say in the kind of state they are willing to support, facilitated by an international mediator to keep talks on track and ensure a decent outcome.

The international community must not become the guarantor of a deal that results in deeper internal conflicts and greater regional instability, under the slogan of Afghanization and an Afghan lead. There are significant security interests at stake, as well as a moral obligation not to leave behind a country that is worse off now than it was before the international intervention began. An exit of NATO combat troops by 2014 is only feasible if the NATO-led military effort falls firmly behind a peace process; before that can happen, however, a political strategy for the country, missing up to now, must be developed.

To be sustainable, a political settlement must be acceptable to a broad range of Afghan constituencies.

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