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# Time to Negotiate in Afghanistan

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## How to Talk to the Taliban

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*James Dobbins and Carter Malkasian*

**P**ease talks, if not peace itself, may be close at hand in Afghanistan. Over the past few months, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Afghan Taliban have made unexpected strides toward talks. In early May, members of the Taliban and the Afghan government even met in Qatar and expressed real interest in starting official negotiations—a heartening step.

Since 2001, opportunities for peace talks have come and gone. Sometimes, the process has stalled for political reasons, such as the United States' reticence to engage with the Taliban. Other times, discussions have broken down due to miscommunications or a lack of political consensus. It was not until 2010 that the United States fully embraced peace talks as the best way to end the violence in Afghanistan, and even then, progress was slow and halting.

But this time may be different. Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's new president, has placed peace talks at the center of his agenda. Pakistan and China both appear willing to help jump-start the process. And the Taliban themselves have hinted that they may be willing to support an end to violence.

The United States must seize the moment, doing what it can to move the peace process forward. Washington will need to employ a mix of carrots and sticks while remaining committed to Afghanistan's

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security. It should help Afghan forces hold the line on the battlefield, pressure Pakistan to keep the Taliban at the table, and accept that in the end some concessions will be necessary. Most important, it will need to stay flexible on the withdrawal timeline and dedicated to supporting Afghanistan into 2017 and beyond.

Of course, peace talks may not yield a lasting peace. In 2007, the political scientist James Fearon noted in these pages that just 16 percent of civil wars and insurgencies end through a negotiated peace settlement. But even if negotiations are a long shot, they are the best option for Afghanistan and the United States. To stick with the status quo would be to consign Afghanistan to a long war of attrition that would ravage the country, upend regional stability, and strain the budgets of the United States and its allies.

### **ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK**

In December 2001, a group of high-ranking Taliban officials met with Hamid Karzai, the soon-to-be Afghan president, whose own anti-Taliban fighters were then advancing on Kandahar, the Taliban's southern capital. According to the journalists Anand Gopal and Bette Dam, the members of the delegation were willing to lay down their arms in return for immunity. They gave Karzai a letter—possibly signed by the Taliban's supreme commander, Mullah Omar—detailing how the Taliban might step down peacefully. The opportunity never came to anything. U.S. officials denied immunity to Mullah Omar, and U.S. and Afghan forces advanced precipitously on Kandahar City. Whether for these or other reasons, Mullah Omar and the bulk of the Taliban's leadership fled to fight another day. Angered by 9/11 and buoyed by its battlefield victories, the United States did not involve the Taliban in a postinvasion settlement.

In 2002, senior Taliban delegations reached out to Karzai once again. Karzai mentioned the contacts to U.S. officials, only to have the United States strongly discourage his government from negotiating with the Taliban. That same year, U.S. troops even imprisoned the former Taliban foreign minister, Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil, when he arrived in Kabul to meet with the Afghan government. By 2003, the Taliban had shifted their focus to taking territory, and once the Taliban offensives began in 2006, peace feelers fell away.

It was not until the last months of the Bush administration that peace talks regained momentum. Within the Taliban, a moderate



*Partners for peace? Afghan Taliban joining a reintegration program, January 2012*

faction had retained an interest in negotiations, and in 2008, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mullah Omar's deputy, allowed subordinates to meet with Afghan government officials under Saudi auspices. He also began communicating directly with members of the Karzai family, who happen to be his fellow tribesmen. Around the same time, a Taliban delegation began meeting with Kai Eide, then the UN envoy to Afghanistan, in Dubai. But all conversations came to a halt in February 2010, when Pakistani officials detained Mullah Baradar in Karachi, a move widely interpreted as a Pakistani veto on direct negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban. As a Pakistani security official admitted to *The New York Times* in 2010: "We picked up Baradar . . . because [the Taliban] were trying to make a deal without us. We protect the Taliban. They are dependent on us. We are not going to allow them to make a deal with Karzai and the Indians."

Meanwhile, the idea of a negotiated peace, first championed within the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama by Richard Holbrooke, then Obama's special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Barnett Rubin, one of Holbrooke's top advisers, was

gaining traction in the United States. In May 2010, Karzai visited Washington, and Obama lifted the Bush-era ban on talking to the Taliban leadership. As a result, a month later, Karzai held a *loya jirga*, or grand assembly, to discuss the possibility of peace negotiations. And in September, he created the High Peace Council, which would be the public face of his peace effort, a 70-member body led by former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and filled with Afghan mujahideen commanders and former Taliban members.

Around the same time, the White House encouraged Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN's former top official in Kabul, and Thomas Pickering, a former U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs, to examine the possibility for peace talks in Afghanistan. They led an international group of diplomats that traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan and met with former and active Taliban representatives. They reported back to Washington that the Taliban were interested in the possibility of talks with the United States.

The ball was rolling. In November 2010, U.S. diplomats and Taliban representatives met for the first time, in Germany. In February 2011,

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*Since 2001, opportunities for Afghan peace talks have come and gone.*

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U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the United States was officially ready to begin peace negotiations, although she cautioned that any settlement would have to require the Taliban to lay down their arms, accept

the Afghan constitution, and sever ties with al Qaeda. After some delay, talks between U.S. and Taliban representatives proceeded in late 2011 and continued into the early months of 2012, at which point the Taliban broke off contact, rejecting a request from Washington that they begin negotiating with Kabul.

It was a particularly substantial missed opportunity: a failure to initiate a peace process at the peak of U.S. leverage, as NATO troops were retaking large swaths of the Taliban's heartland in Kandahar, Helmand, and nearby provinces. All parties were to blame. On the Afghan side, Karzai did his best to obstruct a process he feared would marginalize him and demanded that the Taliban speak to his government directly. The Taliban refused to negotiate with Kabul unless they first secured the release of several of their former leaders from the U.S. detention facility in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The United States, for its part, followed up on Clinton's initial offer cautiously,

hindered by lengthy interagency wrangling and indecision. The Defense Department could not agree with the State Department on a variety of issues relating to the negotiations. General David Petraeus, for example, who commanded the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2011, preferred to hold off on peace talks until the surge produced greater military success. Other Pentagon officials balked at the suggestion that the United States should release prisoners from Guantánamo in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. Army sergeant being held by the Taliban. The White House was slow to forge agreement on a way forward, and so the opportunity slipped away.

The “will they, won’t they” saga continued into 2013, when the Taliban sent signals to Washington that they were willing to reopen peace talks and also to meet with the Afghan government. Through intermediaries in Qatar, the Taliban planned to open a political office in Doha dedicated to the negotiations. The initiative foundered at the last moment, however, due to a miscommunication. Taliban leaders knew that U.S. and Afghan officials refused to address them as representatives of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the name adopted by their former government. But they believed, based partly on discussions with Qatari officials, that they could use the title to describe themselves to the outside world. When it opened, the office displayed the flag of the Islamic Emirate and a sign with the name. The United States, having been assured by the Qatari government that the office would not describe itself as part of the Islamic Emirate, demanded that Qatari officials remove the flag and the sign. In response, the Taliban closed the office and cut off all contact with Washington and Kabul.

The experience taught both sides to be more careful when communicating through third parties. In 2014, working again through Qatari intermediaries, the United States and the Taliban were able to arrange the release of Bergdahl in return for the transfer of five former Taliban officials from Guantánamo to Doha, where they would remain for a year. The agreement was not perfect: it sparked a lively controversy in the United States over the legitimacy of the five-for-one exchange rate and whether Congress should have been notified in advance of the deal. But it did demonstrate to each side that the other could deliver on an agreement once reached. Neither side made any attempt to follow up on this success, however, and the momentum for peace talks stalled once again.

## **A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY**

After a period of radio silence, the opportunity for peace talks reemerged suddenly in February of this year—and this time, the prospects of success may be better. That month, Pakistan's army chief, General Raheel Sharif, went to Kabul and told the newly elected Afghan president that the Taliban would be willing to begin official meetings with the Afghan government as early as the next month and that the Taliban were being told by Pakistani officials that it was no longer acceptable to carry on the war. Although months passed as Taliban moderates and hard-liners worked out what to do, in early May, ranking members of the Taliban met openly and unofficially with members of the Afghan High Peace Council in Qatar. During the meeting, the Taliban participants stressed their interest in peace talks and in reopening their Doha office.

A variety of factors make this particular opportunity more promising than the ones before. The first is new leadership in Kabul. Karzai had an embittered relationship with the United States. He was nearly a decade ahead of Washington in seeking to reach out to the Taliban, but by the time U.S. officials came around to his view, he no longer trusted them. Convinced that the United States wanted to cut a separate deal with the Taliban that would divide Afghanistan, Karzai sought to monopolize any talks with the group. He began to believe that the United States was deliberately sabotaging negotiations in an attempt to prolong the war and keep a U.S. military presence in the region. Other governments, such as France and Japan, tried to foster intra-Afghan dialogue, but Karzai objected to these forums, which he felt reduced his government to simply another Afghan faction.

Ghani, who succeeded Karzai as president in late 2014, promises to be a different sort of leader. Both he and Abdullah Abdullah, the country's chief executive officer, campaigned on their support for a negotiated peace, and unlike Karzai, they appear willing to make concessions and work with other governments to get there. During a trip to Beijing last October, Ghani encouraged other governments to support his country's reconciliation process, implicitly endorsing China's desire to help launch peace talks. Ghani went on to discuss the peace process with representatives from China, Pakistan, and the United States.

The second promising development is Pakistan's positive attitude toward negotiations. Since 2002, Pakistan has offered the Taliban

sanctuary, a place to rest, regroup, and hide. Pervez Musharraf, who served as Pakistan's president from 2001 to 2008, has admitted that his government purposely helped the Taliban in order to secure his country's interests in Afghanistan and counter Indian influence in the region. In recent years, Pakistan's civilian and military leaders have pledged to end the practice, but little has changed. And although Pakistan has occasionally played a positive role in the reconciliation process—releasing Mullah Baradar, for example—it has never brought key Taliban leaders to the table.

That seems to be changing. True to Sharif's word, since February, Pakistani officials have been meeting with Taliban leaders and encouraging negotiations. Although Pakistan's leadership is divided over how hard to pressure the Taliban to seek peace, Islamabad appears to feel that it has more of a stake in a peaceful Afghanistan than originally thought. Without a plan for a negotiated peace, the departure of U.S. troops cannot end well for Pakistan. The drawdown might give the Taliban the opportunity to seize more ground, which would increase Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. But the Afghan government would then almost certainly turn to India for money and arms, leaving Pakistan to fight a long-term proxy war against its rival—or, worse, accede to an Indian protectorate over northern Afghanistan. For Pakistan, this is debatably a worse outcome than a neutral Afghanistan committed to staying out of the Indian-Pakistani rivalry.

Taliban battlefield successes might have other drawbacks as well. The extremist threat to Pakistan could grow. Emboldened by such successes, the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban might start collaborating more, and safe havens for Pakistani terrorists could emerge on the Afghan side of the border, a long-standing fear of the Pakistani government. That risk was underscored on December 16, 2014, when the Pakistani Taliban attacked the Army Public School in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar, killing 132 schoolchildren.

If Pakistan is beginning to realize that it has more to gain from an Afghanistan led by Ghani than one led by the Taliban, the new

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Afghan government deserves part of the credit. Whereas Karzai let the Afghan-Pakistani relationship sour—in 2011, he even signed a strategic partnership agreement with India—Ghani has made an effort to reassure Islamabad, going so far as to take military action against the Pakistani Taliban and cancel a weapons deal with India. Still, it is too early to tell if Pakistan will stand fully behind peace. Not all Pakistani officials and military officers agree that rapprochement with Afghanistan is the best way to secure their country against India.

China has also played a role in galvanizing Pakistani support for peace talks. After Ghani's visit to Beijing, the Chinese government hosted Taliban delegations and offered Pakistan additional aid to encourage the Taliban to join the peace process. China's requests carry weight in Pakistan. The two countries have enjoyed a long and close bilateral relationship. China, for its part, has a strong interest in a stable Afghanistan, since it wants to prevent extremism from spreading to its western region of Xinjiang, which contains a large Muslim population. China also has mineral and energy investments in Afghanistan, and so it would lose out if the country were torn apart by a civil war. More broadly, as China grows into its status as a global superpower, it has been willing to play a greater role in promoting regional stability, especially as the United States steps back.

### **WHAT THE TALIBAN WANT**

Of the various players, the Taliban themselves may be the most reluctant to negotiate. A moderate faction, including members of the Quetta Shura (the movement's central organization) and influential religious leaders, wants to put an end to years of bloodshed. But other Taliban leaders, such as Mullah Omar's current deputy, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, have taken a harder line. Having observed the Taliban's post-2001 comeback, Mansour believes the movement has a chance of outright victory in a protracted war. News reports suggest that it is this internal divide that has slowed the Taliban's coming to the table.

Whether moderate or hard-line, the Taliban have not stopped fighting, nor are they likely to do so before any negotiations are concluded. In 2014, the Quetta Shura launched its biggest offensive in years, pushing back Afghan forces in the southern province of Helmand and striking the provinces of Kandahar, Kunduz, and Nangarhar. Our

contacts in the Taliban say they expect to take more ground this year and next, including provincial capitals. If outright victory on the battlefield seems feasible, Taliban leaders will be unlikely to negotiate. Pakistan and China may have leverage over the Taliban, but the Quetta Shura will be sure to resist foreign pressure that it sees as outside its interests.

If the Taliban do decide to participate in peace talks, the next question will be how much they will concede. According to some Afghanistan experts, such as Thomas Ruttig, Michael Semple, and Theo Farrell, the Taliban may be willing to meet the most important of the three U.S. conditions for peace: the renunciation of al Qaeda. Plenty of Taliban leaders have denied any desire to wage international jihad, and in 2009, the Quetta Shura announced that if foreign forces left Afghanistan, the Taliban would not seek to attack other countries, nor would they let outside terrorist groups use Afghanistan as a base of operations. The Taliban have also made clear, however, that they will officially renounce al Qaeda only once they have gotten what they want out of a peace deal.

A bigger sticking point involves the Afghan constitution. For many in the Taliban, the demand that they accept it is untenable, since doing so would force them to cede the legitimacy of what they see as a puppet regime. The Taliban will also want to elect a new government, in which they will expect to participate. In this sense, a peace agreement would mean not merely a cease-fire but also a reconceptualization of the Afghan state.

The Taliban's other major demand is likely to be the removal of all U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Foreign occupation is a major reason the Taliban's rank and file fight. At the May meeting in Qatar, Taliban participants allegedly said that they would accept a cease-fire only after the withdrawal of all foreign forces. Given the salience of this issue, there can be little doubt that the initial Taliban position in any negotiations will be that all U.S. troops must leave.

Of course, hard-liners within the Taliban—or even within outside groups, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, or ISIS—could always take matters into their own hands. If extremists assassinated Mullah Omar, for example, negotiations would collapse. Although the Islamic State currently has little influence in Afghanistan, the death of a leader such as Mullah Omar could allow the group to gain a foothold, win over extremists, and carry on an even more violent and vicious war.

## **WAR AND PEACE**

A tiny window of opportunity for a negotiated settlement has opened up, and the United States should take advantage of it while it can. Although all sides agree that the talks should be led by Afghanistan, at least three outside powers—China, Pakistan, and the United States—will be directly or indirectly involved. The United States, for its part, can take five concrete steps to keep the negotiations moving forward.

First, it must do its best to prevent large-scale Taliban military victories. Peace begins on the battlefield: if the Taliban capture more ground, particularly provincial capitals, the Quetta Shura will see little reason to bargain, believing that an Afghan government defeat is imminent. The summer fighting season will be particularly critical to Taliban decision-making, as the leadership will take note of successes and failures on the battlefield to decide whether war will be more profitable than peace. A strong performance by the Afghan army could therefore deal a serious blow to the Taliban's confidence, pushing the peace process forward.

To beef up Afghan military capabilities, the United States and its allies should continue to provide financial and material support until a settlement is reached, and possibly beyond. Obama made the right decision in March, when he granted Afghan requests to slow the drawdown of U.S. troops from the country, promising to maintain a force of 9,800 through the end of 2015. He should be just as flexible when it comes to drawdowns in 2016 and 2017. Obama should also continue to grant U.S. forces the authority to carry out limited special operations and air strikes, both of which give the Afghan army and police a strategic edge. Strikes against Quetta Shura members in Afghanistan and Pakistan should not be ruled out, especially so that additional pressure can be brought to bear in the course of the negotiations, if needed.

Second, the United States should weigh in behind the scenes to help Ghani and Abdullah form a disciplined government, capable of the executive action necessary to wage war and broker peace. So far, the Afghan government has been a model of indecision. It took Ghani and Abdullah seven months just to choose their cabinet. Such gridlock, whether over cabinet posts or military policy, emboldens the Quetta Shura. A weak, disjointed government will undermine peace talks. The United States, along with the rest of the international community, should continue to press both camps to work together more effectively.

The third area in which the United States can help involves Pakistan. Washington should do what it can to ensure that Islamabad keeps the Taliban at the bargaining table. The United States has many interests in Pakistan—including securing Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and working with Islamabad to weed out al Qaeda—that have distracted it from focusing on ending Pakistan’s support for the Taliban. Luckily, the drawdown in U.S. forces will largely eliminate one of these interests: the U.S. military’s dependence on Pakistani ports and roads to support its presence in Afghanistan. Washington should condition its substantial military and civilian assistance on Pakistan’s agreeing to support the peace process and deny a safe haven to the Taliban.

Fourth, the United States must accept that a workable peace settlement will have to include a new Afghan constitution or institutional arrangements that allow the Taliban to become a legitimate part of the Afghan government. In fact, Washington should assume that a settlement will provide for a *loya jirga* in which representatives of the Taliban, the Afghan government, and civil society come together to amend the current constitution or write an entirely new one. In such a restructuring, certain civil freedoms, particularly women’s rights, would be endangered. The Taliban hold deeply conservative views on women, to put it mildly. Prior to any cease-fire, therefore, the United States should seek to secure from all parties a commitment to leave current civil rights protections unchanged in a new constitution.

The fifth step will come if and when a settlement is reached. At that point, the United States may need to keep troops on the ground only until the constitutional debate is over and any subsequent election has taken place. But even when its troops have departed, the United States should remain committed to a strategic partnership with Afghanistan and continue to provide a base level of military aid. Otherwise, the balance of power may shift to the Taliban, undoing the peace.

Most Afghanistan experts believe that the war will continue for years to come. They generally agree that the Afghan government will stay in power only with continued U.S. economic and military assistance, without which violent militant groups will reign freely. The peace process offers an alternative future, one that the United States should pursue with determination and patience. Success is far from guaranteed—in fact, it’s a long shot—but the attempt is worth the effort.

The alternatives would be costly. One is to keep paying for the Afghan security forces, at between \$2 billion and \$5 billion a year, and let the war go on. In this scenario, an outright government victory would be unlikely, even if the Obama administration left military forces in Afghanistan past 2016. Another option is for the United States to get out of Afghanistan, cut off funding, and accept the attendant Taliban resurgence in Kabul. In either case, the United States might be tempted to bet that the mutual interest of the Afghan government, Pakistan, and China in avoiding regional instability will ultimately bring peace. That would be quite a gamble. Without U.S. pressure on all players, negotiations may never happen, and a full-blown civil war may become inevitable. In that event, extremism would grow: there is little evidence that the Taliban would unilaterally break from al Qaeda or be able to stop al Qaeda or the Islamic State from operating in Afghanistan. And if Iraq is any lesson, even total withdrawal may not prevent the United States from being sucked right back into the morass. 🌐