



BULLETIN

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Prospects of Talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan

by Piotr Krawczyk

Prior to the presidential elections in Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai attempted to initiate negotiations with the Taliban, an idea that was greeted with distrust by the opposition, by some of Afghanistan's neighbors and by the NATO countries participating in the ISAF operation. The Taliban, however, continue to insist on pre-conditions that are impossible to fulfill. The absence of agreement among all the interested parties on the subject of the talks could intensify political rivalries in Afghanistan, undermining the legitimacy of ISAF and US actions and weakening the cohesion of the international coalition.

The meeting that took place in Mecca in September 2008 between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban with the mediation of Saudi Arabia stimulated the discussion about the rationale of talking with the Afghan armed opposition. A signal that preparations for such talks were under way was provided by the visit to Kabul on 15 January 2009 of Bin Abdel Aziz, the head of the Saudi secret services. It remains to be decided, however, who will represent the parties during the talks, under what conditions they should take place, and what results they should produce.

Domestic Situation in Afghanistan. Factors of importance in Afghanistan's internal situation include the approaching presidential election planned for 2009 and the growing rivalry between the President and the opposition. Karzai, deprived of a political base and uncertain of international backing, is interested in mobilizing and winning over the Pashtun community prior to the elections. A significant portion of the armed opposition is made up of Pashtuns and hence the President—himself a member of this largest Afghan ethnic group (about 40% of the population)—is hoping that working for a dialogue with the Taliban will increase support for his candidacy among the Pashtuns. President Karzai would also like to present himself to Afghans of other ethnic groups, who are increasingly resentful of the presence of foreign troops in their country, as a politician capable of adopting a position different from that of Afghanistan's NATO partners. By initiating talks with the Taliban, Karzai wants to win the approval of countries that support such an option (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan), which is important given the United States' growing impatience with his policies. President Karzai also wishes to calm down the situation in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. If inadequate security were to impede significantly presence at the polls of the Pashtuns residing there, this would undermine the government's mandate to hold power and could make Karzai's re-election more difficult.

The presidential plan of talks with the Taliban could also be an attempt to divide the armed opposition by reaching an understanding with its most moderate elements and by isolating its extremists. Those Afghan Taliban who have no ties with Pakistan and the international terrorism network (Al-Qaeda) are more inclined to reach an understanding with the Afghan authorities.

The possibility that the Taliban might gain more influence over the country's main political current gives rise to great anxiety among political opposition groups from the north of the country, such as the National Front (NF) and representatives of the Hazara community. Those two groups actively opposed the Taliban and they now fear a return to the situation observed under Taliban rule and a further marginalization of their own political and economic influence in the country.

Sustaining the debate about negotiations with the armed opposition is favorable for the Taliban, as such a debate shows that they are not only a terrorist group, but a political one as well. The inclu-

sion in such a discussion of countries involved in Afghanistan also increases the Taliban's political significance on the international stage, although the demands they put forward as prerequisites for starting talks—withdrawal of foreign troops and change of the present political and social order—cannot be met. The fact that Afghanistan and NATO countries more and more often consider the possibility of establishing dialogue with armed groups indicates the weakness of the Afghan government and of the international community behind it. This, in turn, reinforces the Taliban's image as a strong and important entity, signalling to society that armed opposition might regain its influence over the functioning of the state in future, especially at the local level.

International Situation. Afghanistan's neighbors and out-of-area states involved in the country differ in their views on the possibility of initiating dialogue with the Taliban. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are among its most active supporters. They are seeking to increase the influence in the Afghan government of groups that are friendly to them, including the Taliban faction, whose representatives have been present in the Afghan authorities since 2001. Any possible talks with the Taliban will make it easier for Pakistan to conduct similar dialogue with the Pakistani Taliban. The mediation of the Saudis in turn reinforces their position in the Muslim world and is an element of their rivalry with Iran.

At various international forums, including the UN, Iran and Russia have been opposing such talks. The Taliban regime was hostile towards Iran and for this reason Teheran supported the Northern Alliance forces during the war. At present, Iran fears that dialogue with the armed opposition could increase the influence within the Afghan authorities of groups that it deems unfriendly, while reducing the representation therein of Iranian allies, such as the NA. The inclusion of the armed opposition in the government could also embolden the Sunni fundamentalists active in eastern Iran. In Iran's view, it is undesirable for Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which maintain relations with the Taliban, to increase their political influence in Afghanistan. Iran is also interested in maintaining America's involvement in fighting the partisans in Afghanistan.

Russia in turn fears the impact talks with armed opposition could have on the situation in Central Asia and in Russia itself. Talks with the Taliban could encourage Islamic fundamentalists in the Caucasus and in Central Asia, which worries the leaders of countries in the region. This could pose a challenge to Russian influence, while a possible return of Chechen fighters, presently active in Afghan–Pakistani border areas, could threaten the stability of the Russian part of the Caucasus. Russia is not interested in Afghanistan's full stability, as this would consolidate the position of the United States in the region and undermine Russia's influence in Central Asia, because a more stable Afghanistan would mean enhanced contacts between this region and Southern Asia. In addition, in Afghanistan itself the position of Russia could be weakened as a result of a further marginalization of NA politicians, who enjoy good relations with Russia.

The United States, the most important country involved in Afghanistan, has yet to define precisely its position on talks with the Taliban, although it has revised some of its views on the subject in the last few months. The positive effects of the dialogue conducted with armed groups in Iraq have given rise to a debate in the US on using a similar approach in Afghanistan. This represents a fundamental shift in comparison to the previous US position, which ruled out any talks with the Taliban. However, the Americans continue to be against the participation of the armed opposition's leaders in the talks and see a possibility for discussion with lower-level commanders only. This is inconsistent with President Karzai's oft-repeated invitations directed towards Taliban leaders and Hezb-e Islami. The US also stresses that any talks have to be accompanied by the Taliban's full recognition of Afghanistan's constitutional order and the presence of international forces there.

Great Britain, in turn, is a moderate supporter of talks with the armed opposition. The British are present in those Afghan provinces where the Taliban are most active. Great Britain holds the view that excluding the Taliban from the country's political life and excessive reliance on military measures will not improve the situation in Afghanistan.

Conclusions. Without an elementary degree of consensus between the principal internal and external players in Afghanistan, the initiation of talks with the Taliban could lead to intensified rivalries between various Afghan political forces and other countries present there, which would only deepen the country's destabilization. Contacts with the Taliban could also undermine the legitimacy of ISAF and US actions, weakening the cohesion of the international coalition. The positive effects of any potential understanding with a part of the armed opposition are no guarantee of stability, because groups with ties to Al-Qaeda will not accept a compromise.

Given the scale of the foreign military involvement in Afghanistan and the region where foreign troops are stationed, the question of contacts with the armed opposition also concerns Poland. The initiation of this type of talks requires coordination with the Afghan government and NATO allies in order to avoid Poland's involvement in any rivalries between various Afghan political forces or in a political dispute with other NATO countries.