

Engaging Taliban – a realistic initiative

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The Taliban's resistance has proved that it is an irrefutable force in Afghanistan. The foreign combat troops failed to defeat them. The future mapping of Afghanistan without Taliban's involvement would be an unrealistic and impracticable initiative. The recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate force by the international community would have a constructive impact on the peace building process in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration reiterated on numerous occasions after the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011, that the withdrawal of its armed forces would start in July 2011. Simultaneously, the NATO and ISAF forces would also complete their withdrawal process from Afghanistan by 2014. The withdrawal of US, NATO-led ISAF forces is a risky affair for the ruling elite in Kabul. In reality, the present government of Afghanistan or political system, would not survive after the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. The withdrawal of foreign armed forces would create a power vacuum

in Afghanistan, most likely, to be filled by the Taliban.

The possibility of the Taliban returning to Kabul in the anticipated post withdrawal period, compelled the United States and its like-minded allies to change their strategy in Afghanistan. Instead of rejecting the Taliban, they decided to engage them. Admittedly, engaging the Taliban is fraught with challenges. It is because both sides have rigid stances. For instance, the Taliban leader Mullah Omar publicly insisted that they would not discuss peace until all 130,000 foreign troops leave Afghanistan. Conversely, the Americans remained stuck to their mantra of 'the good' and 'the bad' Taliban. Second, Washington desires to avoid the repetition of its late 1980s mistake i.e. to completely abandon Afghanistan.

The political trends show that even when the international forces leave Afghanistan, peace in the country would remain a distinct reality. However, the intra-state conflicts in the 'AFPAK theatre' could hinder the peace building processes. Hence, it is important to chalk out a strategy to protect the country from the scorches of a devastating civil war.

It is an established fact that the protracted warfare in Afghanistan cannot be concluded without a political settlement which needs dialogue between the warring adversaries. A consensus among all the stakeholders is

essential for a genuine peace in the country. This necessitates chalking out a new policy. The Afghans, presently, are passing through a very difficult and important period. Despite the numerous negativities, the optimistic factor is that the confidence building process has started in recent weeks among the stakeholders. It is very much in line with Secretary Hillary Clinton's speech to the Asia Society in February 2011. In the speech she flagged a shift in American policy, i.e. to drop a longstanding American demand that there be certain preconditions to talks with the Afghan Taliban. The following are four confidence-building measures that generate optimism about the end of war and a better future for Afghanistan.



First, on June 17, 2011, the United Nations Security Council voted to split the joint international sanctions regime which blacklisted the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Both were included under Resolution 1267, passed in 1999 when the Taliban controlled more than 80 percent of Afghanistan. This split happened with the adoption of two

resolutions—a new blacklist of individuals and organizations linked to al-Qaeda and another of those connected with the Taliban whose activities focus on Afghanistan. It was an attempt to ease the Taliban in the direction of talks about reconciliation. It reveals that in future, the international community would treat Afghan Taliban as a separate entity from Al Qaeda, each having a different agenda. More precisely, the Taliban and Al Qaeda should not be treated as one in the future.

Second, the international community acknowledged the Taliban's significance in the affairs of Afghanistan. On June 18, 2011, Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai confirmed that the United States and other foreign countries were in contact with the Taliban. He claimed that, *"Talks with the Taliban have started...the*



talks are going on well. Also foreign forces, especially the US, are carrying out the talks themselves." In addition, the United States Secretary for Defense Robert Gates also admitted that they were in contact with the Taliban. On June 19, 2011, in his interview at CNN, he said: *"There has been outreach on the part of a number of countries, including the United States. I would say that these contacts are very preliminary at this*

point.” Indeed, even the preliminary nature of contacts contains concrete ingredients for establishing peace in Afghanistan.

Third, the Taliban will be invited by foreign mediators in their future conferences. Recently, a four-member delegation of German parliamentarians expressed their desire to invite the Taliban to the second Bonn Conference. It was reported that Germany will invite Taliban representatives in the second Bonn Conference to be held in December 2011.

Fourth, President Karzai during his recent visit to Islamabad inaugurated a joint peace commission. The establishment of a joint peace commission underscored Islamabad’s seriousness to help the Karzai government to restore peace in Afghanistan.

Islamabad has always endeavored to convince the United States and like-minded nations that without engaging Taliban in the peace process in Afghanistan, the desired objective would not be achieved. Unfortunately, Washington was not ready to admit to this reality, instead relying on its military might. The technological sophisticated armed forces did extricate the Taliban government from Kabul, but dejectedly failed to establish President Karzai’s government’s writ out of the periphery of Kabul, particularly in southern Afghanistan.

To conclude, a durable and sustainable peace in Afghanistan is only possible when all the Afghan groups are taken into confidence. Peace negotiations with selective groups are an unrealistic and impractical approach. Hence, engaging the Taliban is a right step in the right direction for ending protracted warfare in Afghanistan. It will certainly facilitate the smooth withdrawal of international troops and restore a sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

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<http://www.qau.edu.pk/betaqau/index.php>

Clinton image:

<http://www.dawn.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/hillary-senate-Afpak-AP-543.jpg>

Karzai image:

<http://ummatenglish.com/wp-content/themes/ummateng2.2/timthumb.php?src=/img/2011/06/HamidKarzai.jpg&h=&q=90&w=300&h=200&zc=1%22>