



SEEKING SOLUTIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN

Third Report on the Abu Dhabi Process



ABU DHABI PROCESS MEETING REPORT

May 2 - 4, 2011

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates



EASTWEST INSTITUTE

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Cover photo: An Afghan labor man takes a rest as he waits to be hired in Kabul, Afghanistan on Thursday, March 10, 2011. (AP Photo/Ahmad Nazar)
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Introduction

The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan have accepted a generous proposal from the government of Abu Dhabi to host a series of meetings facilitated by the EastWest Institute (EWI) to complement existing channels of communication between the two countries. Participants of the Abu Dhabi Process, a select group of senior Afghan and Pakistani politicians and officials, discuss areas of the relationship between their countries they believe will help build confidence, ensure greater stability, and enhance sustainable development in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The meetings are off-the-record, consultative in nature, and governed by the Chatham House Rule. This report summarizes discussions held in Abu Dhabi on May 2-4 2011.

While the recommendations and conclusions of this report reflect positions that were agreed upon by all participants, the report on the debates proper neither reflects a consensus view nor pretends to fully capture all variation of opinions expressed in the discussions. It tries to capture, however, the predominant views of the participants.

EWI is solely responsible for the content as well as any omissions or errors in this report.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I. Build Trust Between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States

This year, the Afghan government and the international community should take bold steps towards a political settlement with the Taliban insurgents. If the transition is to be successfully completed by 2014 as envisaged, it must be complemented by negotiations on a political settlement. **While the backing of the international community for such negotiations (that must be Afghan-led) will be important, Pakistani and U.S. support are crucial for ensuring their success.** Cooperation and unity of purpose of these three countries will be decisive. Currently, however, their relationship is marked by tension and mutual suspicions. Serious trust deficits between all three vital stakeholders persist and even seem to be increasing, largely because Afghanistan, Pakistan and the U.S. have different strategic security concerns.

It is imperative for Afghanistan, Pakistan and the U.S. to come to a better common understanding of the long-term role of the U.S. and the presence of U.S. forces in the region, and the compatibility of strong Afghan-Indian relations with Pakistani security interests, among other issues. The current trilateral dialogue format between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the U.S. has proven unsuccessful in tackling these and other substantive questions. The three countries should aim at a new format for a regular, confidential and substantive dialogue.

II. An “Address” for the Taliban

Since early 2010, participants of the Abu Dhabi Process have strongly recommended establishing an “address,” or standing political office, for the Taliban. **The need for such an address has become more urgent.** It should be located outside Afghanistan or Pakistan. While several countries have been proposed as possible hosts, at this stage **a better option is to let the Taliban choose the location.** By choosing an address, the Taliban would clearly be signaling their commitment to dialogue.

The major objective of such an address would be to allow for the coordination of thus far fragmented efforts for dialogue. It would also allow negotiators to interact with the insurgency to better understand the Taliban’s political position and how well the Taliban interlocutors represent the group as a whole.

Alongside the establishment of an address, the U.S. and the international community should proceed with confidence-building measures, notably further delisting of Taliban members (UN Resolution 1267 and U.S. blacklist). The physical safety of insurgents participating in the dialogue must be ensured. An address outside Afghanistan and Pakistan could also ease such legitimate concerns about the physical safety of the Taliban. But some participants still maintain it would be possible to achieve the same aim by setting up an address inside Afghanistan.

Immediate Steps to facilitate dialogue

The Joint Peace Commission (JPC), which operates under both countries' foreign ministers, must become fully active as soon as possible. **So far largely symbolic, the commission should embark upon a more ambitious agenda and meeting calendar, and agree on substantive, practical steps towards reconciliation.** Abu Dhabi Process participants in particular suggest:

- Ensuring that the core group of the JPC is composed of senior personalities able to deliver and guarantee commitments in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the U.S.
- Establishing a wider Kabul-based international support group to back the Afghan peace process comprised of countries and organizations including, most notably, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Germany, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Japan, NATO and the UN.

An important first step in Afghan–Pakistani trust-building, in the context of putting the Joint Peace Commission into action, could be the transfer of insurgent prisoners in Pakistani jails to Afghanistan. In addition, the Pakistanis should develop a timetable for Taliban leaders in Pakistan to relocate to either Afghanistan or a third country.

III. Leadership by the High Peace Council

The High Peace Council (HPC) has successfully worked for the support of neighboring countries, notably Pakistan, in pursuing its mandate for reconciliation. Interacting with Pakistan will remain highly important as the HPC continues with its work. **Identifying a core group in Pakistan to serve as a regular counterpart for the HPC is recommended.** The major task of the HPC is to establish a national consensus on reconciliation. To that end, it is urgent to **strengthen the interaction between the HPC and the provincial-level leaders in Afghanistan.** Province-wide inclusion

of tribal leaders and the use of tribal structures can be very effective in achieving political consensus. The tribes are able to prevent conflicts and effectively bring provincial Taliban councils to the negotiating table.

To make any dialogue on political settlement sustainable, **serious efforts need to be undertaken to counter the culture of violence that has developed in the past decades in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.** There is a crucial role for the Ulema of both countries, as respected Muslim legal scholars, to communicate and coordinate a counter-violence narrative.

More precisely, radicals' narratives and perceptions of both countries as occupied, with the Islamic faith under attack and the dignity of their people neglected, need to be changed. This will be a mid-term and long-term process that will require strong civil society involvement and developmental efforts, but it must accompany the peace process leading to 2014 and beyond.

IV. A Successful Transition

A successful transition process will need to accompany peace talks. So far, the transition has been strongly focused on military matters, with the looming 2014 deadline for the handover of authority to Afghan security forces. But the civil transition also requires attention, particularly the challenge of improving bad governance. **There must be more emphasis on developing good governance and rule of law, and on addressing the grievances that fuel the insurgency.** So far, there has been little if any progress in that regard.

Discussion Report

I.

Since participants of the Abu Dhabi Process last met, in Kabul in October 2010, an international consensus to seek peace through a negotiated settlement with the Taliban insurgency has developed. In her February 2011 remarks, Secretary Clinton publically declared that the U.S. is part of that consensus and is equally prepared to seek peace via a political process. In the Lisbon NATO summit in November, the year 2014 was accepted as the target date for a full handover of responsibility for Afghanistan's security to the government in Kabul.

In 2011, the international community seems at its peak in terms of manpower and resources committed to Afghanistan. It should use this period of intense engagement to set the stage for a political settlement that is in line with its own long-term strategic and security interests, the respective interests of regional countries and the aspirations of the Afghan people. A negotiated settlement will have to be part of a more comprehensive process of reconciliation grounded in a broad based national consensus in Afghanistan.

Reconciliation must be "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" and it requires a broad national consensus to be sustainable. The creation of the High Peace Council (HPC) through the National Consultative Peace Jirga (NCPJ) of June 2010 has established a mandate, a mechanism and an official channel to pursue reconciliation. Under the chairmanship of Professor Rabbani, the HPC will have to ensure that this is done in a comprehensive, non-fragmented and consultative manner that includes all stakeholders. In its Jeddah meeting, the International Contact Group supported Prof. Rabbani's outline of steps envisioned by the HPC to that end.

II.

Envisioning a process towards political settlement – a road map that ensures progress and is sustainable – requires recognition of the following factors:

- The Karzai government, a national counterpart of the insurgency in any final settlement, is weak, dependent on international support and so far has not been accepted by the Taliban as a legitimate interlocutor;

- Both the Afghan government and the international community suffer from the vagueness of their strategic vision of what a final settlement should look like, at what cost it should be achieved (in light of the past decade's achievements in Afghanistan relating to democratic process, modernization and national unity) and questions about how well their Taliban counterparts represent the views of the insurgency;
- The international community, in particular the U.S., has to reconcile its desire to cut down human losses and the tremendous financial costs –about \$320 million a day for the U.S. budget– with its commitment to engaging in a solution that is morally acceptable and politically favorable. Such a solution must not only prevent Al Qaeda from once again launching terrorist attacks from Afghanistan, but also prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a hub of instability in the region and the wider international community. It must also contribute to preventing further instability in Pakistan, which could increase the risks of radical elements gaining access to Pakistan's nuclear weapons.
- It is difficult to imagine that a final settlement can be achieved without greater clarity on the future of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. The Taliban and others in the region like Iran strongly oppose a permanent U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.
- More emphasis on transition beyond security issues is needed. Good governance in Afghanistan must be substantially strengthened. The lack of good governance is the most decisive factor fueling instability in Afghanistan. Currently, it is unlikely that the necessary capacities in the Kabul government for dependable security and governance can be achieved by 2014, as was foreseen in the NATO Lisbon summit. Substantive engagement of the international community in Afghanistan will be necessary well beyond that date.

III.

The desired end state of a final settlement will remain unclear for some time. However, it is a positive sign that the HPC is seeking to achieve a national consensus on an established working strategy for interaction with the insurgency – one that aims to address major concerns of the Afghan population based on their experiences during the rule of the Taliban, notably:

- No return of an Islamic Emirate;
- No ban on women's education, and;
- No violence in the name of Sharia law.

The HPC will also have to take into account that the Afghan constitution, while clearly defining Afghanistan as an Islamic country, mandates a parliamentary system that has been so far opposed by the Taliban.

To achieve these aims, **the HPC must prioritize reconnecting the wider Afghan public with the government on the issue of reconciliation. This, beyond mere information about policy, will require a nationwide outreach to civil society, including at the provincial and district levels.** At the provincial level, tribal elders must develop ownership of the reconciliation process carried forward by the HPC and actively participate in it. Until now, the efforts of the HPC have fallen short, particularly in Pashtun areas.

The Taliban insurgency is not simply a “Pashtun” issue. Even if Taliban members are often ethnic Pashtuns, they represent not just a tribal but a national ideology that has to be dealt with wherever it has gained a foothold. Of course, those promoting the reconciliation process must make special efforts to win over the people in Pashtun areas where the Taliban have been traditionally strong.

Given the fact that Taliban support among the population is often the result of grievances about the lack of good governance, the push for reconciliation needs to include concerted efforts to address those issues. In other words, reconciliation is not simply a matter of getting both sides to put down their arms. **The Afghan authorities, with international support, must focus on delivering better results in their public services to markedly improve the daily life for the Afghan population.**

For a national consensus on reconciliation to emerge, therefore, the Afghan authorities need to interact with the civil society nationwide; promote efforts to involve tribal elders, particularly in Pashtun areas; and deliver much-improved governance.

IV.

Reconciliation must be Afghan led and Afghan owned. This requires the conviction of Afghan people that reconciliation will produce a better future for Afghanistan, both in terms of its domestic situation and position in the region. So far, however, Afghan leadership of this process has been weakened by the absence of support from the political opposition and much of civil society.

While Afghan ownership remains key for sustainability of any settlement, the peace process relies heavily on coordination and cooperation of outside powers, in particular Pakistan and the U.S. In previous meetings, members of the Abu Dhabi Process were supportive of the idea of finding a

mediator to facilitate talks with the Taliban. But in light of the tight calendar for transition and troop withdrawal, they no longer believe that mediation would be an effective mechanism to that end. After the apparent shift in U.S. policy on reconciliation, they believe that **cooperation between the U.S., Pakistan and Afghanistan needs to be the focus of all international efforts towards a settlement with the insurgency.**

In that context, the worsening of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship throughout 2011 is a cause of great concern. The two countries should try to overcome their mutual mistrust, which has been particularly evident in the past few months. Both governments need to avoid the kind of mutual recriminations that recently have characterized the relationship, and they should try to calm public opinion rather than incite it.

The question of the future U.S. military presence in Afghanistan must be addressed with great prudence. Currently, Washington and Kabul are discussing what will happen to U.S. military bases in that country as part of a long-term strategic partnership. This is not only an Afghan issue, since it can have regional implications that will affect Afghanistan's relations with its neighbors, and further complicate the already difficult process of domestic reconciliation or even derail it entirely. Given the Taliban's demand for a withdrawal of foreign troops as part of any negotiated peace, participants of the Abu Dhabi Process have consistently advocated the search for alternative solutions to the ISAF/U.S. presence—for example, the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force, composed of troops from Muslim countries.

Similarly, the U.S. must come to a clearer understanding of if, how, and under what ground rules will the Haqqani network be part of any peace negotiations. The U.S. views the Haqqani network as a highly dangerous foe, and it will be difficult to balance the ongoing military actions with parallel negotiations. It is especially difficult to imagine a political settlement dictated by military means alone. If the Haqqani network is considered crucial for any peace deal, Washington will need to tailor its military approach accordingly.

V.

In light of the crucial role of trilateral cooperation between the U.S., Pakistan and Afghanistan, participants of the Abu Dhabi Process **strongly urge a core group of senior officials of these three countries to deliver on all commitments** undertaken in the reconciliation process. This core group **should be fully supported by a broader Kabul-based group of representatives from other countries** and international organizations –

most notably, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Germany, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Japan, NATO and the United Nations.

An important task for the core group must be to tailor international support for the transition in Afghanistan until 2014, both in terms of the security and economic needs of the country. Reconciliation must be supported by investment and general economic development. The U.A.E. and other Gulf Cooperation Council member states (GCC) can play a particularly useful role in that regard. Reconciliation can only succeed if it is not limited to a power-sharing agreement and becomes the catalyst for a broader development process.

VI.

The bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is the vital component for any reconciliation to succeed. While this relationship has improved considerably, it is still not at an adequate level. Many Afghans still believe that Pakistan is critical of reconciliation, and, at a minimum, wants to control the process. Afghans also continue to be concerned by what they view as Pakistan's direct or indirect support for the insurgency.

While reconciliation involves many national and international stakeholders, it is particularly important that the Joint Peace Commission spearhead government-to-government exchanges and improve relations between the two countries on issues relating to reconciliation and the fight against militancy. **It is imperative that the JPC become fully operational and set itself a substantive not symbolic agenda, including a more ambitious calendar of meetings.** This is particularly important given the proliferation of other international meetings on Afghanistan in 2011, notably the regional meeting in Istanbul in November and the Bonn Conference at the end of the year.

The JPC must build on the recent positive developments in the relationship and facilitate the peace process in ways that address critical perceptions of Pakistan's role in the past. As pointed out repeatedly by the participants of the Abu Dhabi Process, the two countries could take a big step forward by agreeing on the transfer of Afghan Taliban prisoners from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

A fundamental task for those engaged in the reconciliation process will be to identify interlocutors from the insurgency, contacting and consulting them. This is an exercise that needs to be conducted with great discretion not to allow "spoilers" to derail these efforts.

The JPC also faces issues of cross-border movement of militants and criminals that affect both countries. **Strong opposition to reconciliation is**

to be expected from groups such as the drug mafia that have been benefiting from the war economy that has developed in the border region. Despite improvements in recent years, it will still be a daunting challenge to reach a level of **effective border controls**, which is another important element for sustainable reconciliation.

The JPC has been established to develop issue-based practical solutions relating to reconciliation. It allows for regular working level contacts between the relevant intelligence, military and diplomatic institutions of both countries. The JPC must make full use of those tools to fulfill its mandate.

VII.

There is great need for the government-to-government interaction to be complemented by the work of the High Peace Commission. **There should be a partner in Pakistan to deal regularly with the HPC. There is an argument to be made for the establishment of a Peace Commission in Pakistan as well.**

Participants of the Abu Dhabi Process see great urgency for the Ulema in both countries to work together to counter the narrative of the militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They need to counteract the appeal of a young generation of militants in both countries that is increasingly radical in its ideology and methods. This will have to be a long term effort that must begin now, complementing reconciliation well beyond 2014. As part of that process, the HPC should maintain a dialogue with its Pakistani counterparts, working closely with them whenever possible.

Trust building between Afghanistan and Pakistan is needed to complement reconciliation in Afghanistan. People-to-people exchanges, particularly involving media representatives and parliamentarians, should be encouraged. Participants of the Abu Dhabi process also continue to call for a revival of the bilateral peace Jirga of 2007.

The trust deficit between both countries cannot be overcome without an understanding about the role of India in Afghanistan that is acceptable for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This will require sustained political and diplomatic efforts to clarify both countries' legitimate strategic and international interests with regard to India. Such an understanding should in the end pave the way for a constructive trilateral relationship. This will require a long-term process, the success of which is closely interlinked with successful sustainable reconciliation and stability in Afghanistan. It is therefore advisable to bring India into the dialogue already underway between Afghanistan and Pakistan. With that in mind, the Abu Dhabi

Process participants favor the participation of India in the upcoming regional meeting in Istanbul this fall.

VIII.

There is considerable speculation about the Taliban's views on reconciliation but very little clarity. The Taliban's narrative sees Afghanistan as an occupied country, its Islamic religion under threat by foreign countries and the dignity of the Afghan people violated by military operations. The Taliban have been continuously and consistently arguing that all foreign forces must leave Afghanistan as a prerequisite of any settlement.

But what would reconciliation mean for Afghanistan with regard to other issues? Many Afghans are understandably concerned about not jeopardizing the constitutional process, the protection of human rights, and, in particular, women's rights. **Any return to the Taliban policies of the 1990s, including their attempts to banish female education, would be a recipe for disaster.**

Ironically, some of the older Taliban leaders, who are committed to a largely nationalist agenda, may be less militant on these issues than the "neo-Taliban," the younger generation of Taliban leaders. This emerging group appears more closely aligned with a global jihadist approach, as championed by Al Qaeda. It may be easier to strike a deal with the Taliban now, while the old leadership is still in place, than with their successors.

To explore what may be possible, it would make sense to pursue a probing strategy via a suitable back channel. The aim would be to ascertain what the Taliban is really ready to negotiate. Any such informal contacts will be highly complicated, since they are likely to be accompanied by continued fighting, and there are likely to be conflicting signals and numerous setbacks on the intention of participants from both sides. .

Now that the HPC has been set up and given the mandate by a broad-based national consultative process (the National Consultative Peace Jirga of June 2010), it can serve as the official body to reach out and engage with the insurgency. In order to start negotiations, the establishment of an "address" for the Taliban is urgently needed. This has been a major recommendation of the members of the Abu Dhabi Process since early 2010. Such an office, most likely situated outside of Afghanistan, could represent them and allow for transparent face-to-face interaction. **Setting up such an address appears all the more urgent as it would pave the way to tackling several issues that are crucial to establishing a proper process for negotiations:**

- Coordination of reconciliation efforts has been a major challenge in Afghanistan for some time. Numerous governments and international

organizations have undertaken individual efforts towards reconciliation, often implying disregard for the Afghan leadership of the process, and with a lack of understanding of the local complexities involved, leading to much confusion about the process and its direction. An address for the Taliban would funnel reconciliation efforts currently underway into one channel.

- The face-to-face interaction possible via such an address would allow for clarity about Taliban positions on all relevant issues and concerns. It would allow the Afghan government and HPC, as well as the international community, to hold the Taliban responsible for commitments made and confidence building measures being implemented.
- Several countries have offered to “host” such an address - so far, without any result. At this stage it appears to be the best option to let the Taliban decide where to situate themselves. A Taliban proposal would effectively give proof of their interest in the political process.

The Taliban have consistently made it clear that the physical safety of participants in a peace process is a vital precondition for any negotiations. While the UN Security Council has agreed to at least temporarily remove Taliban members participating in negotiations from the UN sanctions list, further steps are needed. In particular, the State Department should revise its sanctions list and rescind offers of rewards for information leading to the death or capture of senior Taliban leaders. Other important confidence building measures would be the providing of assurances for the safety of family members of Taliban members detained by U.S. forces, and the release of Afghans held in Guantanamo for over a decade, specifically those who could play a serious role in the peace process.

The Abu Dhabi Process

In light of their deliberations in Abu Dhabi, participants will continue to focus on addressing the trust deficit between Afghanistan and Pakistan in their future meetings. They will advocate for widening government-to-government contacts, with the overall aim of supporting reconciliation in general and the efforts of the HPC in particular.

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