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Afghan Perspectives on Achieving Durable Peace

Summary

- Afghans across different groups see the United States as a key party to the conflict whose direct participation in a peace process is crucial to its success, and therefore question the effectiveness of U.S. emphasis on an “Afghan-led” reconciliation strategy.
- The U.S. must engage directly in negotiating a settlement because of its control over the issue of withdrawal of NATO forces. The Taliban demand for full withdrawal prior to talks appears to be an opening position. A challenge will be linking a structure for drawdown to necessary steps by insurgents to allow a cessation of violence and prevent Afghanistan’s use for terrorism.
- A settlement process will entail discussion of the composition and future of the Afghan National Security Forces, and the current “transition” strategy of a large army and expanding local defence initiatives will almost certainly need re-examining during such a process.
- The conflict is not only a struggle for power and resources; it is also a legitimacy crisis stemming from a system of power and patronage that feeds conflict. From this perspective, a settlement should address the concentration of powers in the presidency through incremental reform to appointments, elections, or farther-reaching changes to the structure of government over time.
- There is a tension between reform and using political appointments to accommodate power-sharing demands. A durable settlement will need to involve political and social agreements among Afghans taking into account the views of a range of stakeholders. To manage this tension, the intra-Afghan peace process should be oriented toward broad inclusion of non-combatants while balancing the secrecy required to make progress.

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Introduction

While momentum in pursuit of a peace settlement for Afghanistan increases, ambiguities remain in the U.S. strategy, and there are questions about the ability of the Afghan government to successfully lead a process and the insurgents’ interest in one. A burgeoning body of commentary focuses on international and U.S. strategy, but to be durable a settlement will need to incorporate political agreements that take into account the views of a range of Afghan stakeholders.

This Peace Brief reviews findings from 122 interviews with Afghan leaders in political, military, economic and social arenas about the conflict and the issues that a peace process must address. This work represents part of a project by three leading international institutions to identify and

clarify realistic options for Afghanistan to achieve durable peace.¹ Ongoing work analyzes the issues framed by Afghan stakeholders more deeply and draws on comparative experience.

Understandings of the Conflict

Afghan stakeholders have diverse views of the conflict, but several prominent themes have implications for crafting a successful peace process. While the conflict is driven by external and internal factors—including longstanding issues of regional politics and factional competition—grievances resulting from the presence and actions of NATO troops and the deep legitimacy problems of the Afghan government have become increasingly important. Afghans across different groups perceive the United States as a party to the conflict with its own interests. They identify a contradiction between the U.S. and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) claim that they are not fighting for themselves but supporting the Afghan government on one side, and the government's apparent eagerness for a peace settlement on the other. For many Afghans, including but by no means limited to the Taliban, this contradiction calls into question the effectiveness of the U.S. emphasis on an "Afghan-led" reconciliation strategy. In addition, ambiguity over the "withdrawal" timetable and divergent signals from different U.S. officials and agencies on the objective of "reintegration" of lower level fighters, indicate the need for further clarification of U.S. policy. The result is lingering distrust of U.S. claims to support a political solution, and skepticism about the viability of an "Afghan-led" peace process.

The poor quality and predatory behavior of the Afghan government is almost universally acknowledged as a driver of the conflict, and a core issue that a peace process must confront. There is a crosscutting perception that the benefits of government are captured and divided among a small elite who are appointed through political deals based on their past roles and who act with a combination of ethnic, factional, economic and criminal motivations. Both regime insiders and outsiders believe that this system generates interests in continuing the conflict that may challenge a peace process.

The lack of transparency and the illegitimate manner through which some have gained power allow leaders of all ethnic groups to stoke perceptions that others are benefitting disproportionately. Such perceptions exist across all groups, feeding increasingly ethnic and "negative-sum" politics. The 2010 National Assembly elections and the discourse of "political reconciliation" of the government have heightened these ethnic readings, deepening cleavages that the Taliban exploit and exacerbating the potential for ethnic conflict.

The Military Dimension of a Peace Process

The U.S. must engage directly in negotiating a peace settlement because it has control over a central issue that such a settlement must address: the withdrawal of most or all NATO forces in return for the Taliban's agreement to cease violence and prevent terrorist activities. While some Afghan leaders see negotiation as undesirable and military action as the only option until the Taliban are significantly weakened or defeated, many believe that elaborating a clear framework for NATO withdrawal or changes to military posture linked to steps by the Taliban on the prevention of terrorism may offer possibilities within a peace process. Even some leaders of vulnerable groups such as minorities and women with the greatest concern over a deal with the Taliban acknowledge the need for NATO withdrawal to bring peace.

Evidence on the Taliban suggests that full withdrawal of international forces may not be necessary for a process to begin. Ex-Taliban and Hezb-e Islami leaders suggest that changes to operational patterns, ceasing aerial attacks, legal recognition and timetables for changes to military

posture could form part of a settlement. For their part, several operational insurgent commanders in both the north and the south suggest that two interrelated conditions—an agreement on NATO withdrawal and a ceasefire order from Taliban leader Mullah Omar—would be necessary for a decision to cease fighting, and that they would welcome such an order. One agreed to stop fighting in return for local limits on NATO operations. The implication is that the Taliban precondition of withdrawal of foreign forces may be an opening position for peace negotiations. The challenge will be to leverage the presence of NATO forces by linking the possibility of a structured drawdown to necessary steps by insurgents. At the same time, to balance Pakistani interests with Taliban autonomy, the U.S. should support and participate in channels with both.

Views on reintegration and the Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Program (APRP) vary from suspicions that it is a patronage device to doubts about its impact due to the Afghan government's inability to provide security and address the presence of foreign forces. At the same time, there are concerns about the morale of Afghan security forces while reconciliation initiatives are ongoing. A peace process will likely entail discussion of the composition and future of the Afghan National Security Forces, and will require a framework of demobilization or integration that can satisfy the concerns of large groups of insurgents while not provoking remilitarization by others. Regardless of the mechanism, the current "transition" strategy of very large national armed forces and expanding local defense initiatives may need re-examination during a settlement process. Discussions of any longer-term U.S. presence will also have to carefully consider the aims of a peace process, perhaps through monitoring of the prevention of terrorism or guaranteeing the provisions of a settlement.

The Political Dimension of a Peace Process

The conflict in Afghanistan is seen not only as a struggle for power and resources – it is also a legitimacy crisis stemming from a system of power and patronage. These viewpoints are often expressed in terms of the lack of any system to appoint "worthy" individuals into government positions through some legitimate criteria.

From this perspective, a settlement must address reform to be sustainable. Most suggestions focus less on large-scale institutional restructuring of the state than on balancing an over-centralized presidency and increasing the legitimacy of appointments. While different criteria for leadership appear—experience and skills, national feeling, or moral and religious virtue—a recurrent theme among diverse interviewees is that when political deals and opaque reasons determine appointments, the nation suffers. As expected, there are constituencies for decentralization and a parliamentary system of government within minority ethnic parties and the political opposition, but these also emphasize incremental reform such as stronger roles for local councils and election of governors, or a more effective parliament.

Taliban reform proposals are vague and focus on the alleged un-Islamic character of the state, and tend to suggest interest in "reform" rather than just participation in an illegitimate system of power-sharing. Justice and defense institutions are mentioned, including changes to the model of the security forces from large paid forces coupled with militias to a conscript-based army. One ex-Taliban official said that the Taliban view of an Islamic regime can correspond to a presidential system, but needs a mode of consultation or guardianship to protect the Islamic nature of the system.

Most stakeholders believe that constitutional reform should not be a barrier to peace, but also that it is not the most pressing issue. The Taliban themselves have not publicly identified detailed demands regarding the constitution, and some former Taliban officials predictably underplay their views on constitutional change before a foreign audience. Analysts suspect they may wish to create new institutions and alter certain provisions in ways that would risk human and women's

rights, but may agree to more modest and non-constitutional adjustments to institutions such as the Ministry of Haj or educational curricula. Some ex-Taliban suggest that articles of the constitution that enshrine both Islamic and human rights could be preserved to build confidence.

This implies that a negotiation might occur between those favoring local devolution as an opening for Taliban inclusion, and the Taliban interest in changes to national structures. It also suggests that a settlement might not involve a radical restructuring of the state. A range of actors may find common ground in their diagnosis of lack of balance in the presidential system and corruption, suggesting a negotiating agenda around oversight and procedures to address how people receive power and privileges. An early step might be to clarify the crucial elements of the constitution, and consider the process for amendments among other political arrangements on the negotiating agenda.

There is a tension between reform and using political appointments to accommodate power-sharing demands. To manage this tension, the intra-Afghan peace process could be oriented towards broader inclusion of non-combatants, and identification of cross-cutting interests, while balancing the secrecy required to avoid getting bogged down. Exploring multitrack diplomacy, civilian commissions, ombudspersons, national dialogues and other means of inclusion should be a priority. The High Peace Council is widely seen as unsuited to mediate an intra-Afghan process, nor is it likely to be empowered as a government delegation, and may best play a role advising and generating proposals.

Getting to a Settlement

Specific mediation and logistical arrangements seem less important to stakeholders than are their mutual acceptance by the parties, in keeping with Afghan customary practice. Elections are still quite widely considered a necessary mechanism—including by some operational Taliban – for transitioning from interim to long-term arrangements, though there are problems with the electoral system and indirect methods such as that used in the Emergency Loya Jirga also enjoy legitimacy.

These findings raise questions for combatants and interested third parties to consider in identifying what kind of peace processes might succeed. These questions also point to where further research, discussion, and the experience of other conflicts could help.

- How can the U.S., the Afghan government, and the Taliban develop and communicate military proposals and counter-proposals about withdrawal and short and long-term measures to prevent terrorism?
- How can a negotiation encourage independent Taliban decision-making on Afghan issues, while balancing the interests of Pakistan?
- What are workable options for interim and longer-term arrangements in the security sector that will be acceptable to different parties?
- What scenarios for international support—whether financial, monitoring, verification or enforcement—are possible?
- What methods of promoting inclusion of non-combatants, women, minorities and vulnerable groups will neither compromise negotiating progress nor cause the marginalization of these groups?
- How should the peace process manage the transition from interim measures to a longer-term consensus on reform, possibly including constitutional change?

Any understanding of the conflict in Afghanistan will form only one part of a multifaceted story. Yet, a peace process must necessarily reduce these complexities to a discrete set of issues,

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Hamish Nixon coordinates a joint project of the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), on durable peace in Afghanistan. This brief outlines key findings from the first phase of research on Afghan stakeholder views on the conflict. The author worked in Afghanistan for the World Bank and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit from 2005-2010, and has researched governance and peace processes in Southeast Asia, Central America and Afghanistan.

agreements and assurances. To succeed, and to be durable, it must take into account the diversity and depth of Afghan views on what will bring peace to their country.

Endnote

1. More detailed discussion of the research project and findings can be found in Hamish Nixon, *Achieving Durable Peace: Afghan Perspectives on a Peace Process*, PRIO paper (Peace Research Institute Oslo/United States Institute of Peace/Chr. Michelsen Institute: Oslo, May 2011). The paper is available for download at <http://www.prio.no/News/NewsItem/?oid=651456> or at <http://www.prio.no/Research-and-Publications/>.



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