



DIIS REPORT

TALIBAN TALKS

PAST, PRESENT AND PROSPECTS FOR
THE US, AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

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DIIS REPORT 2013:06

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Cover photo: © Shawn Baldwin/Corbis
Layout: Allan Lind Jørgensen
Printed in Denmark by Vesterkopi AS
ISBN 978-87-7605-550-9 (print)
ISBN 978-87-7605-551-6 (pdf)
Price: DKK 50.00 (VAT included)
DIIS publications can be downloaded
free of charge from www.diis.dk
Hardcopies can be ordered at www.diis.dk

*This publication is part of DIIS's Defence and
Security Studies project which is funded by
a grant from the Danish Ministry of Defence*

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Abbreviations

ANA	The Afghan National Army
ANP	Awami National Party
APRP	Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Programme
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
HPC	The High Peace Council
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OIC	The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
PTS	Programme Tahkim-e Solh/ Programme for the Strengthening of Peace
TTP	Tehrike Taliban Pakistan

Abstract

This report* takes stock of the burgeoning efforts to achieve some level of reconciliation with the Taliban after more than 11 years of war. It deals with the recent history of initiatives to engage with the Taliban, outlines the challenges to these initiatives and derives some recommendations for how to move forward with the peace processes.

The first part written by Mona Kanwal Sheikh gives a brief background to, and status overview of the different initiatives that the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan have taken in order to initiate a peace process with the Taliban. Quoting extracts from recent interviews with experts from Afghanistan and Pakistan who have followed the different initiatives on peace and reconciliation closely, the second part identifies the challenges to the present situation and initiatives. The final part, written by Afghanistan analyst Tim Foxley, puts forward some thought-provoking recommendations on how to create a communication environment that can serve as a foundation for a viable peace process.

* We owe special thanks to Thomas Ruttig from the Afghanistan Analysts Network for providing much appreciated feedback on an earlier draft of this report. The editors of this report remain responsible for the final version of this report.

Where are we now? Reintegration, reconciliation and negotiation with the Taliban

Mona Kanwal Sheikh

Any hopes of a military victory over the Taliban in Afghanistan have long been abandoned – both by the US and its allies in Pakistan, and by the Karzai-led government in Afghanistan. That the Taliban enjoy some kind of legitimacy or represent segments of popular sentiment is becoming the point of departure in some of the discussions about how to deal with them. At the dawn of 2013 we are starting to see the beginning of an end to a war for the US and its allies that, surprisingly, ended up lasting more than a decade. Yet, for Afghanistan, this will probably not mean the end of violent conflict within the country.

Until the combat forces are pulled out in 2014, the aftermath of the NATO-led mission must be expected to stay on the international security agenda. The question of how to initiate a lasting peace process is a troublesome one for Washington, Islamabad and Kabul, and for a range of other national, regional and international actors, including the Afghan population, for whom the process has lacked transparency, a clear direction and strategy. This part illuminates this by providing a brief overview of the different initiatives to engage with the Taliban that have been taken by three main actors: the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Though I outline timelines for different initiatives taken by these three aimed at opening up for communication with the Taliban, this does not suggest that a grand strategy has been followed to gradually improve relations with the Taliban. Rather there have been parallel tracks of initiatives that have been very poorly coordinated, if at all.

One of the challenges in understanding the status of initiatives aimed at engaging with the Taliban is that there are many terms, confusing and sometimes confused, being used to describe different aspects of the initiatives. *Reintegration* does not, for instance, include negotiations but designates an attempt to make the Taliban foot soldiers lay down arms by giving them financial incentives to do so. *Negotiation* implies compromise from both sides and, until now, there have been no real negotiations between the US and the Taliban, only attempts – all failed – at confidence-building measures. The term *reconciliation* typically covers the national reconciliation process within Afghanistan. Even though there are moves in the direction of widening the

understanding of national reconciliation to include a broader array of social and political actors in Afghanistan than just the government of Afghanistan on one side and the Taliban on the other, the term still typically refers to the contacts between the Karzai-led government and the Taliban. The challenge for the policy community remains to broaden the concept of national reconciliation in order to avoid that only the present government of Afghanistan and the Taliban are considered to be the stakeholders of Afghan society.

Reconciliation sometimes also refers to a peace process that involves the Taliban on one side and the US on the other, though most observers look at this process as tactical more than reflective of a genuine wish for reconciliation between the two parties. For the US, a political agreement with the Taliban is part of an exit strategy that would allow the pullout of the military forces in 2014 by providing a narrative about a settlement.

Peace deals is a term that is mostly applied in the Pakistani context, and involves the Pakistani government on one side and the Pakistani Taliban on the other. These have implied some level of negotiation and agreement between the Taliban and the government, but mostly they have meant short-term ceasefires. Though the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban are two different movements that share religio-political interpretations of divine law, the latter rather a conglomeration of movements, this chapter still includes the peace deals between the Pakistani government and the Pakistani Taliban. This serves to illustrate the different contexts of peace talks and the challenges for Pakistan in balancing the new threat from the Pakistani Taliban and its old friendship with the Afghan Taliban. In any case, understanding the dynamics of Pakistan remains important, both because of the country's ties to the leadership of the Afghan Taliban, but also because of the fact that instability in Pakistan must be expected to have a profound impact on the stability of Afghanistan in the future.

When we talk about the peace process in Afghanistan it is important to see it as a *multifaceted process*: Pakistan started already in 2004 but with a process that was oriented towards peace with the Pakistani Taliban. With this the Pakistani government hoped to steer the attention of the Pakistani Taliban towards Afghanistan. Afghanistan started in 2005 with reintegration initiatives that were aimed at Taliban fighters at the 'ground level'. The US showed its first sign of willingness to consider

talks with moderate elements of the Taliban leadership in March 2009, only a few months after Barack Obama replaced George Bush as US president.¹ While Pakistan's greatest challenge in this context has been its internal security and the threat from the Pakistani Taliban, for the Afghan government avoiding a new civil war when the foreign forces pull out in 2014 is the key driving force. For the US, the main concern is to get out of Afghanistan with a relatively successful narrative.

Even though this report mostly focuses on the governmental level, the peace process should also be regarded as a *multilevel process*, where initiatives that are taken on other levels than the governmental level are also granted importance. Policywise, there is not enough focus on the sub-governmental processes that include civil society. Also, track II dialogues, like those convened in Paris and Kyoto in 2012, are important processes.² A more comprehensive strategy towards peace in Afghanistan after 2014 must therefore be more oriented towards initiatives among civil society actors.

There are regional attempts at talks, but these are muddled up in power games playing out between the US, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which are about securing most influence over the future of Afghanistan and ensuring their own domestic stability. These power games call for separate analysis,³ but a few of the latest dynamics between the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan need to be mentioned here. Standing up against US influence, Pakistan and Afghanistan, for example, recently called for an Afghan-led peace initiative free of foreign intervention at the third annual Pakistan–Afghanistan–Iran trilateral summit in February 2012. At the same time the latest Peace Agenda of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) also signals the importance of increased cooperation between Afghanistan and

¹ Helene Cooper and Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Obama Ponders Outreach to Elements of Taliban", *New York Times*, 7 March 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/us/politics/08obama.html?pagewanted=all> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

² The Paris conference (20–21 June 2012) was attended by representatives of Afghanistan's largest political factions, the High Peace Council (HPC), parliamentarians and members of civil society, and was organised by the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS). The Kyoto meeting (27 June 2012) was organised by the Doshisha University Graduate School of Global Studies and was a rare occasion for HPC head Masoom Stanekzai to meet face to face with active Taliban representatives, as well as Hizb-e-Islami Hekmatyar representatives. See Omar Samad, "Afghanistan's Track II rally", *Foreign Policy*, 28 June 2012, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/06/28/afghanistans_track_ii_rally (retrieved 22 January 2013).

³ On the regional context of Pakistan's domestic challenges see "Pakistan: Regional Rivalries, Local Impacts", *Danish Institute for International Studies Report 2012:12*. Edited by Mona Kanwal Sheikh, Farzana Shaikh and Gareth Price, <http://diis.dk/sw123940.asp> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

Pakistan. Despite tensions between the two countries Pakistan and Afghanistan have, thus, lately signalled a higher degree of cooperation and this seems to reflect increased overlap between the agendas of the two countries than was earlier the case – both want to downsize US influence on the national reconciliation process. As diplomatic relations have deteriorated significantly between Pakistan and the US during the past years, the US government has kept Pakistan at arm's length in their talks with the Taliban. Meanwhile, the US government has been negotiating with the Afghan government over the terms of a bilateral security agreement that would lay out the US role in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of combat forces by the end of 2014; a process that in turn fuels uncertainty in Pakistan. However, parallel to this agreement the US and Afghan governments have bickered over control and access to the Taliban representation in Doha, Qatar.⁴

The Taliban established a political office in Doha in January 2012.⁵ Even though it is not an internationally recognised representation of the Afghan Taliban, Doha has unofficially been the stage for attempts at confidence building between the US and the Taliban representatives, and the mere existence of the political office does reflect a change in attitude and policy of both the Taliban and the US.

Added to this, a report on Taliban perspectives on reconciliation published by the Royal United Services Institute in September 2012 points to areas where representatives of the Mullah Omar-led Quetta Shura have shown willingness/openness to negotiation.⁶ It also suggests areas that might prove counterproductive for fruitful talks e.g. insisting upon acceptance of the current Afghan constitution as a precondition for talks. Mullah Omar's message issued on the occasion of *Eid ul-Fitr* in 2012 has also been seen by experts as hinting at room, though very gradual, for change in Taliban attitudes and policies, particularly when it comes to female education and the rights of women in general. Overall there are signs that there is a pragmatic segment of the Taliban leadership who are willing to enter into talks on some issues. At the same time there are signs that the

⁴ See Thomas Ruttig, "Qatar, Islamabad, Chantilly, Ashgabad: Taleban Talks Season Again?", Afghanistan Analysts Network blog post, 31 December 2012, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=3169> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

⁵ Chris Zambelis, "Negotiating an Endgame in Afghanistan: Qatar Hosts the Taliban", *Terrorism Monitor* 10(4) 2012.

⁶ Michael Semple et al. "Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation", *Royal United Services Institute Briefing Paper*, September 2012, http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Taliban_Perspectives_on_Reconciliation.pdf (retrieved 22 January 2013).

issue of entering dialogue with the US and with the Karzai-led government has split the Taliban movement, or at least some of its rank and file.

As Taliban expert Rahimullah Yusufzai indicates in the interview cited in the second part of this report, there is intense debate within the Taliban movement about whether compromising steps should be taken or not. This division and disagreement between what is sometimes described as the difference between the military (against negotiations) and the political (in favour of negotiations) wings of the Taliban points at one of the central challenges of any peace process in the region: namely will the Taliban leadership represented by the Quetta Shura be able to convince its fighters in the case of an agreement?

A related question hangs over the extent to which the Taliban representation in Doha is representative of Mullah Omar and the Taliban insurgents, including the Haqqani Network. Also, how should other insurgent groups that could be potential spoilers of a peace process such as the Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar or the Tora Bora Mahaz be dealt with? Even if some settlement was negotiated there is very little guarantee that all insurgents would lay down their arms. On the contrary, one might expect an intensification of violence in those periods when peace talks take place, since those who are opposed to peace talks should be expected to demonstrate their continued resistance, as they have done until now.

Another crucial question is how to open up for negotiations and a political settlement in a way that can lead to change in a status quo characterised by deadlock? Tim Foxley focuses his recommendations put forward in the third part of this report on this particular question. However overall, if one pays attention to what some influential representatives of the Taliban are saying, then it is clear that they are trying to separate the issue of negotiations into two different tracks – one concerning their relations with the US, and one concerning their relations to the present Afghan government and other political groups in Afghanistan. As Sohail Shaheen, a member of the Taliban negotiation team in Qatar, explained in an interview after the suspension of the negotiations with the Americans, one of the reasons why the Doha process was suspended was that the US put a condition on the trust building measures (that primarily revolved around the question of prisoner exchange) and wanted the participation of the Karzai government. In the same interview, when asked whether this signalled that the goal of the Taliban is to revive their old administration (implying not to share power), the Taliban

spokesman replied, “No, it is not in that sense. Our goal is, as I said... I never said to revive government as you referred to. We want a government; an Islamic government participated by all people, reflecting the aspirations of all Afghan people, of all ethnic groups and independence of the country. So, it is not in that term but it is an Islamic government participated by all Afghan people”.⁷

Although it can certainly be discussed how representative and truthful this comment ultimately is, such an attitude might, however, be an entry point to a reconciliation process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The Taliban’s suspension of the talks has been seen by some observers as a lack of willingness to enter into dialogue with the Karzai-led government and other parties in Afghanistan.⁸ There is, of course, no doubt that the Karzai-led government and the Taliban are historical adversaries and deep tensions remain between the old Northern Alliance and the Taliban (though presently there are members of the Karzai government whose religious views might be every bit as conservative as those of the Taliban). However, it can be challenged whether the Taliban attitude is one of complete rejection of speaking with the Karzai-led government. Rather it seems to be a part of their strategy to separate the two different tracks/processes of negotiation: to get the foreign troops out of Afghanistan and to talk with the government of Afghanistan.

Nevertheless it *does* make sense to separate the two processes, because US facilitation of Afghan-to-Afghan talks will complicate the national reconciliation process, which the Afghans should have ultimately ownership over, and the US is obviously not a neutral facilitator. Hence, for the US, a more fruitful approach and way forward might be to initially minimise the number of issues that are put on the negotiation table with the Taliban. As proposed in the next section, there are other – and perhaps more suitable – facilitators of a more comprehensive approach to the negotiation process with the Taliban.

Questions of delisting Taliban leaders from the UN blacklist,⁹ allowing safe passage, prisoner exchange, and US military presence post-2014 are issues that concern

⁷ “Exclusive Interview with Top Taliban Leaders”, *NHK World*, 9 November 2012, <http://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/english/tv/todayscloseup/index20120911.html> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

⁸ Read more: “Peace deal hopes after talks with the Taliban”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 November 2012, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/peace-deal-hopes-after-talks-with-the-taliban-20120910-25of6.html> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

⁹ In July 2011, the UNSC’s al-Qaeda and Taliban sanctions committee removed 14 former Taliban members from their blacklist, as part of a move to induct the group into talks with Kabul.

the US–Taliban talks, while debating the questions of the status of sharia in the constitution and political representation should be a process that belongs to the Afghans. This is a process that can be expected to be long and painful, as we have seen most recently in Egypt, where the Islamists in power and secular parties have been engaged in debates over the design of the new constitution and the role of sharia. In the Afghan case, the role of religion and sharia together with the political institutional setup and ethnic representation in governmental bodies would be the expected main areas of controversy.

The US–Taliban talks

As documented in *Forbidden Truth* (2002) written by Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquié, both the Clinton and Bush Administrations negotiated with the Taliban to get them to widen their government as well as to look favourably on US companies' attempts to construct an oil and gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. A UN mission was also officially mandated to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, however it was dissolved after the USS Cole attack in 2000.

The US contacts with the Taliban in the late 1990s were sporadic, and mostly made by US oil companies. However, even after the Al-Qaeda attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, some degree of contact remained. In the first half of 2001 the White House even stepped up efforts to communicate with the Taliban, and in March 2001 several Taliban officials, including Sayed Rahmatullah Hashimi, one of Mullah Omar's ambassadors, were invited to Washington. The agenda included discussions over Bin Laden as well as facilitating American companies' access to oil reserves in central Asia. When those talks stalled in July 2001 it is reported, a Bush administration representative threatened the Taliban with military reprisals if the government did not go along with American demands. The last known meeting between the US and the Taliban representatives took place in August 2001, only five weeks before the September 11 attacks, when US Assistant Secretary of State for Central Asian Affairs, Christina Rocca, met with the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaef.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquié, *Forbidden Truth: US–Taliban Secret Oil Diplomacy and the Failed Hunt for Bin Laden*, Nation Books, 2002.

Immediately after 9/11 2001, former US President George W. Bush said, “no nation can negotiate with terrorists,” and the invasion of Afghanistan was effectuated. The echo of this notion remained until March 2009, when the newly elected president, Barack Obama, proposed the then controversial notion of reaching out to moderate elements of the Afghan Taliban in an interview to the *New York Times*.¹¹ In 2010 the US began supporting initiatives that were aimed at reintegrating Taliban foot soldiers into Afghan society when international donors asked for money to strengthen their efforts. The early US strategy was thus to provide financial incentives for the lower-ranking Taliban loyalists and fighters to disarm.¹² Reintegrating Taliban foot soldiers was perhaps more of a counter insurgency tactic to undermine the Taliban than part of a genuine peace initiative. Then in 2011 the Eid message of Mullah Omar was interpreted as a window of opportunity to go one step further – Mullah Omar seemed to show openness towards talks. During 2010–11 the US widened its focus from *reintegration* of foot soldiers to *reconciliation* with the Taliban leadership.¹³ This was possible for Obama because, unlike his predecessors, his narrative on Afghanistan and the Taliban has never been ideological.

The direct contact between the US and the Taliban that the public now knows about began in November 2010 when US officials met Tayyab Agha, a representative of Mullah Omar in Munich. The then secretive talks were brokered by German officials and the Qatari royal family. Subsequently, in 2011 two rounds of preliminary meetings were held in Doha and in Germany before the Taliban’s political office was unofficially established in Doha in January 2012. The preliminary talks were mainly about prisoner exchange; five Guantanamo detainees in exchange for one American soldier, Bowe Bergdahl. Since the US declined (according to the US because the Taliban refused to certify that the Guantanamo inmates would not re-enter the fight against US troops in Afghanistan, but also because this happened during the US election campaign when there was staunch resistance in the US Congress to the idea of prisoner release),¹⁴ the talks broke down in March 2012 and have since been on ice. Even though the US is

¹¹ “Obama Ponders Outreach to Elements of Taliban”, *The New York Times*, 7 March 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/us/politics/08obama.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (retrieved 22 January 2013).

¹² C. Christine Fair, “Obama’s New ‘Af–Pak’ Strategy: Can ‘Clear, Hold, Build, Transfer’ Work?”, *The Afghanistan Papers no. 6*, The Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2010, http://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/Afghanistan_Paper_6.pdf (retrieved 22 January 2013).

¹³ See also “President Obama Goes All In on The Taliban”, *US News*, 2 May 2012, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/05/02/president-obama-goes-all-in-on-the-taliban> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

¹⁴ “US–Taliban talks collapsed over Guantánamo deal”, says official”, *The Guardian*, 8 October 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/08/us-taliban-talks-guantanamo> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

reportedly keen on re-opening the negotiations with the Doha office of the Taliban, they simultaneously continue to offer 10 million dollars as reward for information leading to the capture or killing of Mullah Omar. However, now Barack Obama has been re-elected fresh moves from Washington are expected, including a reconsideration of the prisoner exchange for the captured American soldier. The balance the US is treading is full of challenges: on one side the US is hitting Taliban leaders hard through its drone campaign (e.g. the killing of the Pakistani Taliban commander Mullah Nazir, loyal to Mullah Omar, in Pakistan's Tribal Areas in January 2013), which increases the Taliban fragmentation and opposition to talks.¹⁵ On the other side the US is pushing an agenda to reopen negotiations with the Taliban in order to end the war with some degree of reconciliation, and hence also to be able to leave the war with a relatively successful narrative about its exit.

Brief overview: US–Taliban talks

- *March 2009.* Obama proposes the notion of reaching out to moderate elements of the Afghan Taliban.
- *November 2010.* Direct contact between the Taliban and US officials begins in Munich, Germany, brokered by German officials and Qatari royals.
- *February 2011.* Preliminary talks in Doha between the Taliban and the US about the release of five Guantanamo detainees, including three senior commanders, in exchange for an American soldier.
- *May 2011.* Preliminary talks in Germany between the Taliban and the US.
- *January 2012.* The Taliban meets with American officials in Qatar to discuss preliminary trust-building measures, including a possible prisoner transfer. The Afghan and Pakistani governments are not directly involved but have reluctantly accepted the negotiations.
- *March 2012.* Negotiations between the US and the Taliban break down, among other reasons due to disagreement over whether the Taliban commanders released from Guantanamo would remain under supervision in Qatar or not.

¹⁵ About the Taliban divisions on the issue of talks see "How Afghan Peace Talks Are Splintering the Taliban", *The Daily Beast*, 13 February 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/02/12/how-afghan-peace-talks-are-splintering-the-taliban.html> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

The Afghanistan–Taliban initiatives

Whereas the presidential change in the US ushered in change in US policy towards the Taliban, Hamid Karzai embraced the idea of reintegrating the Taliban shortly after he was elected in the 2004 presidential elections. Already in April 2003 he said that a clear line “has to be drawn between the ordinary Taliban who are the real and honest sons of this country and those who disturb peace and security in the country”.¹⁶ When a former Taliban sub-commander of the Paktika province, Mullah Haji Jilani, stood forward and renounced violence against the government of Afghanistan on August 2005 – probably motivated by the financial incentives involved – the Afghan government’s initiative to reconcile with former Taliban loyalists gained publicity. Sebghatullah Mujadidi, the Al-Azhar educated scholar and leader of a group of mujahideen during the Soviet era, ran the reconciliation initiative named Programme Tahkim-e Solh (PTS), which Jilani joined. As a result of Jilani’s decision to enrol in the programme, another 12 former Taliban loyalists came forward in that province seeking more information on the programme. However, the PTS, also known as the Programme for the Strengthening of Peace, largely failed because of corruption among its administrators and the lack of sufficient political support.¹⁷ An attempt was made to revive the initiative in May 2010, when among others a peace assembly, or peace *Jirga*, of tribal elders and powerbrokers was held to address reconciliation. This initiative also died out without any substantial gains; however it did point at the willingness – at some level – to engage in a reconciliation process.

In October 2010 the PTS was officially replaced by the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme (APRP) – a programme that was now administered under the High Peace Council (HPC) which was established at the same time.¹⁸ The APRP has also been fraught with problems, most notably because the HPC

¹⁶ Cited in “Afghan CSOs fail in making Peace Building efforts”, Paper presented at a Regional seminar (organized jointly by CSAS, GPPAC and RCSS), Kathmandu, October 23/24 2011 and published by *the Telegraph Nepal*, <http://www.telegraphnepal.com/views/2011-11-10/afghan-csos-fail-in-making-peace-building-efforts> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

¹⁷ See Thomas Ruttig, “The Other Side - Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors – and Approaches to Talks”, *Afghanistan Analysts Network Thematic Report*, July 2009, p. 26, <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=114> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

¹⁸ For a detailed description of the APRP see the ICG report “Talking About Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan”, *Crisis Group Asia Report* no 221, 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/221-talking-about-talks-toward-a-political-settlement-in-afghanistan.aspx> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

was initially led by the former Afghan President (1992–1996) and leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance Burhanuddin Rabbani, who was deeply mistrusted by the Taliban, few of whom could be expected to be willing to reconcile in a programme under his command.¹⁹ Although the APRP did manage to establish a series of contacts with mid-level Taliban loyalists, Rabbani was assassinated in September 2011. All negotiations were suspended and only slowly resumed. There was, for example, informal contact and dialogue at a conference that month in Kyoto in Japan, where both a Taliban representative and Masoom Stanekzai from the Afghan High Peace Council participated.²⁰ The assassination of Rabbani had a negative impact on Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, since Pakistan was accused of providing safe havens to the Haqqani network that was allegedly behind the assassination.

Yet Pakistan and Afghanistan have made some considerable moves towards each other during 2012; at the least they have sent strong political signals that they share an interest in a stable Afghanistan post 2014. For example the two countries agreed to form a joint peace commission to reach out to Afghan Taliban insurgents in North Waziristan in 2012.²¹ Another strong signal was, as already noted, sent at the third annual Pakistan–Afghanistan–Iran trilateral summit in Islamabad (February 2012), where Pakistan and Afghanistan stood shoulder-to-shoulder calling for an Afghan-led peace initiative free of foreign intervention. This signal was a continuation of Karzai’s initial reaction to the US talks with the Taliban in 2010, where he said that the Americans cannot negotiate on his behalf and called upon Saudi Arabia or Turkey to host a competing set of talks, which however never materialised. He even recalled his ambassador to Qatar (14 December 2011) in protest over the US–Taliban talks.

In December 2012, Pakistan and Afghanistan held talks in Turkey. Here they, among other issues, discussed the details of the so-called “Peace Process Roadmap to 2015”

¹⁹ For a thorough evaluation of the APRP and the challenges to its implementation, see Deedee Derksen, “Peace From the Bottom-Up? The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program”, *PRIO Paper*, 2011, <http://www.prio.no/Publications/Publication/?x=4953> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

²⁰ “US–Taliban talks collapsed over Guantánamo deal, says official”, *Ibid.*

²¹ “Dialogue with Taliban: Joint commission for Afghan peace”, *The Express Tribune*, 31 July 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/415279/dialogue-with-taliban-joint-commission-for-afghan-peace/> (retrieved 1 March 2013)

drafted by the Afghan High Peace Council.²² In this Pakistan was given a central role in facilitating the peace process. Some media read the roadmap as an opening towards the idea that the Taliban could govern parts of Afghanistan and that senior insurgents could become cabinet members and provincial governors.²³ However the document does not go that far, although it does basically hint at a greater will to reach out and start a process of dialogue with the Taliban. Most of all, the document promises an intensification of peace initiatives during 2013.

In the same month – December 2012 – the Paris-based think tank, the *Foundation for Strategic Research* organised some informal track II talks between members of Hizb-e-Islami, members of the Afghan opposition, members of the Karzai government and the Taliban (represented by Shahabuddin Delawar). This event did not initiate formal talks but again signalled that there is a burgeoning willingness among Afghanistan's different factions to enter into a dialogue with each other.

Brief overview: Afghanistan–Taliban initiatives

- 2005. The reconciliation initiative programme Tahkim-e Solh launches.
- 2010. Afghanistan's High Peace Council is formed among other objectives to initiate peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme (APRP).
- September 2011. Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of HPC, is assassinated. Negotiations are suspended and only slowly resumed in June 2012.
- February 2012. The third annual Pakistan–Afghanistan–Iran trilateral summit called for an Afghan-led peace initiative free of foreign intervention.
- June 2012. The Taliban dispatches officials to track II meetings in Paris and Kyoto. The Kyoto meeting is also attended by Masoom Stanekzai from the Afghan High Peace Council.
- December 2012. Launch of "Peace process roadmap to 2015".

²² The High Peace Council Peace Process Roadmap to 2015 (2012): http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/121213_Peace_Process_Roadmap_to_2015.pdf (retrieved 22 January 2013).

²³ "Taliban 'could govern parts of Afghanistan' under new peace deal", *The Telegraph*, 10 December 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9735539/Taliban-could-govern-parts-of-Afghanistan-under-new-peace-deal.html> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

The Pakistan–Taliban peace deals

When part of the Afghan Taliban escaped into Pakistan (and Pakistan hesitated to crack down on them) it immediately put Pakistan in a paradoxical situation because of Pakistan's equivocal siding with the US in the War on Terror. The tensions were only reinforced by the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban, namely the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007, which declared war on Pakistan's army and government.²⁴ The task of securing stability in the face of this internal threat became one of the top priorities of Pakistan, and Pakistan's peace efforts on this front have, since then, mainly been aimed at reducing the domestic threat level stemming from the TTP. From a strategic perspective, keeping good relations with the Afghan Taliban was seen to be helpful in containing the national threat level in Pakistan. However, this does not mean that Pakistan still considers the Afghan Taliban to be their only political option in Afghanistan. On the contrary, a Taliban-dominated Kabul could strengthen the domestic influence of the Pakistani Taliban that considers a democratic Pakistani government to be illegitimate.

When the Taliban government was toppled in Afghanistan, Pakistan's military went after Al-Qaeda and those Pakistani groups that defended them in the tribal areas. Pakistan never went after the central leadership of the Afghan Taliban since creating more enemies at that point was not in the interest of Pakistan. Rather the TTP, after the relatively successful military campaign against al-Qaeda in the tribal areas, became the main terrorists in the eyes of the Pakistani military, because they were the ones causing the internal instability by targeting the Pakistani military and other symbols of the political establishment. Periodically Pakistan has negotiated peace deals with the TTP. However none of the deals have been lasting. When the Mullah Fazlullah-led Taliban faction (a branch of the TTP) managed to gain control over the Swat valley between 2007 and 2009 – an area not far from Pakistan's capital – the army initiated a large-scale military operation to oust the Taliban from the area. The army is still present there today in order to prevent the Taliban from returning to an area that is only 160 kilometres from Islamabad.

²⁴ On the TTP see Qandeel Siddique, "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, An attempt to deconstruct the umbrella organization and the reason for its growth in Pakistan's North-West", *Danish Institute for International Studies Report* 2010:12, <http://www.diis.dk/sw102221.asp> (retrieved 1 March 2013). See also Mona Kanwal Sheikh, "Disaggregating the Pakistani Taliban: Does the Good, the Bad and the Ugly Taliban Distinction Represent a Failed Policy?" *Danish Institute for International Studies Policy Brief*, 2009, <http://www.diis.dk/sw84539.asp> (retrieved 1 March 2013).

Since the formal peace deals of 2004, 2005 and 2008 there have been a couple of attempts to hold/call for exploratory peace talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government but they never translated into any formal agreement.²⁵ Most recently, in January 2013, the TTP offered a ceasefire to Pakistan's government, and earlier in December 2012 Hakimullah Mehsud, the present leader of TTP, released a video claiming that his group would be open to talks with the government. This came on top of an earlier attempt by the government to strike a peace deal, which was then rejected by the TTP.²⁶ This time, however, the peace offer was rejected by Pakistani government officials, arguably because it came in the immediate wake of attacks on an airbase inside Peshawar airport, the murder of a leading figure of the secular ANP party and the hostage-taking of 22 Pakistani soldiers.²⁷ The peace deals on Pakistani soil have potential repercussions for the militant activity in Afghanistan. This is because the peace deals can be instrumental in re-orienting the attention of the Pakistani Taliban towards Afghanistan. In periods of ceasefire the Pakistani Taliban can be expected to concentrate on the purpose of fighting the invading forces in the neighbouring countries. Hence the peace deals in Pakistan concern the reconciliation process related to the Afghan Taliban, and should not be treated as if there are no dynamics between the two countries and their processes.

What then about Pakistan's more direct role in the reconciliation process in Afghanistan? According to its own narrative Pakistan has been sidelined by the US in the reconciliation process with the Afghan Taliban. The US explanation is Pakistan's half-hearted facilitation of US interests, while Pakistan accuses the US of violating Pakistan's sovereignty among others through the continued drone attacks in the Tribal Areas (FATA). The tensions between the two countries continued and increased after General Pervez Musharraf was replaced with a democratically elected civilian government in 2008. The Bonn conference that was supposed to facilitate a common standpoint between the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan in December 2011 was boycotted by Pakistan because of the "Salala incident", where US-led NATO airstrikes killed 24 Pakistani soldiers at two military checkpoints on the Pakistani

²⁵ For the unwritten peace deals see Daud Khattak, "Reviewing Pakistan's Peace deals with the Taliban", *CTC Sentinel*, 26 September 2012, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/september-2012> (retrieved 1 March 2013).

²⁶ "Pakistani Taliban reject peace talks with govt", *Dawn*, 26 November 2012, <http://dawn.com/2012/11/26/ttp-reject-peace-talks/> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

²⁷ "TTP ready for peace talks with govt: spokesman", *Dunya News*, 27 December 2012, <http://dunyanews.tv/index.php/en/Pakistan/151098-TTP-ready-for-peace-talks-with-govt-spokesman> (retrieved 22 January 2013).

Brief overview: Pakistan–Taliban peace deals

- *April 2004.* The Shakai Peace Agreement between the Taliban loyalist Nek Muhammad Wazir and the Pakistani government. In exchange for releasing insurgent prisoners and paying compensation to tribesmen for property damage as a result of its military operations, Nek Muhammad agreed to register foreign militants and stop cross-border attacks into Afghanistan.
- *February 2005.* The Sararogha Peace Agreement between Baitullah Mehsud (late leader of the TTP) and the Pakistani government. In exchange for compensation for homes damaged during military operations and promising not to target Baitullah Mehsud or his supporters, Baitullah agreed not to attack Pakistani targets and to refuse shelter to foreign militants.
- *May 2008.* The Swat Agreement between the provincial government (of Khyber–Pakhtunkhwa) and the Swati Taliban led by Mullah Fazlullah. A 16-point agreement involving the release of prisoners and withdrawal of troops on the government side and disarmament on the Taliban side.

side of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. At the same time US officials and high-ranking military have occasionally accused Pakistan of playing a ‘double game’ in its counter terrorism initiatives. The lack of transparency regarding Pakistan’s relationship with the Haqqani Network (based in North Waziristan) attacking US soldiers in Afghanistan, and with the Mullah Omar-led Quetta Shura has been the main basis for the accusations.

As described in the section on the Afghanistan–Taliban initiatives, Pakistan and Afghanistan have taken some considerable steps towards each other during the last year. In the strategy paper by the Afghan government (“Peace Process Roadmap to 2015”), Pakistan is envisioned as a facilitator of direct contact between the High Peace Commission/Afghan Government and the Taliban leaders.

Added to this, in November 2012 Pakistan first released nine and then eight Taliban detainees (in December 2012), including two former ministers under the Taliban regime, in a bid to facilitate peace talks between insurgents and the Afghan government. The official rationale behind this was that senior Taliban leaders held in

Pakistan could help bring militants to the negotiating table. Pakistan's further role in the national reconciliation process is still to be seen, however one should remember that the top priority for Pakistan will remain its own internal stability i.e. the challenge from the Pakistani Taliban. At the same time Pakistan's politics toward Afghanistan should not be addressed in a vacuum, since the geopolitical landscape has changed since the end of the Cold War. As some of the experts quoted below point out, this means that Pakistan no longer considers the Afghan Taliban to be its only option in Afghanistan. Hence, in one way the link to the Afghan Taliban is increasingly troublesome for Pakistan and the Pakistani government's closer cooperation with the Afghan government could be seen in this light. At the same time it is also true that Pakistan's relationship to the Afghan Taliban has been instrumental for attempts to reorient the attention of the Pakistani Taliban away from Pakistan towards the battle against foreign troops in Afghanistan and, moreover, not least for securing itself maximum influence over a transition phase, where the unique link and access to the leadership of the Afghan Taliban is a good card to play vis-à-vis the US and Afghan governments.

The reconciliation process in review

Mona K. Sheikh & Maja T. J. Greenwood

While the previous part provided an overview of the status of different reconciliation or peace initiatives, the present one seeks to zoom in on the challenges to the status quo. The following are selected extracts from interviews with eight experts. The interviews were conducted in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the autumn of 2012. The citations drawn out below particularly highlight the current status of and challenges facing the reconciliation process with the Afghan Taliban, and Pakistan's role herein. The final part summarises in brief some of the challenges that can be derived from the observations of the experts. It should be noted that the citations below only reflect the opinion and analysis of the interviewees, and not of the editors of this report or of DIIS.

Expert views

Khalid Rahman, Director General, Institute of Policy Studies (Islamabad)

"There is so much uncertainty about what will happen after 2014 and how many foreign troops will stay. Some reports say up to 20–30.000 troops and that the US will keep their bases in Afghanistan. It is contradictory of the Americans to talk about an exit while at the same time signing a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan that ensures the presence of US troops over the next 10 years. Added to this the opposition movements, particularly the Taliban, don't want the existing constitution, while the US wants to protect it and the present Afghan government. And the ANA is still not in a shape to fully take over the security tasks and nobody knows who will fund the ANA after 2014. If we imagine a scenario where all foreign forces are pulled out and there is some kind of national reconciliation, then there would be room for optimism, but right now the situation looks quite the contrary".

"Many efforts have been made to invite the Taliban back into Afghan politics, but the most recent talks ended because the US didn't fulfil their promises. Still, the Americans don't have any other option but to continue the talks, and, for a sustainable solution, it is very important that they bring Pakistan and Iran on board as well, because the negotiations will not be successful if the regional players are not involved".

“It is doubtful whether the Taliban are ready for power-sharing, but they have shown that they are willing to come to the negotiating table, and if they see sincere efforts then it may be possible to move forward. The most crucial element is that all the different power holders in Afghanistan and the regional powers should be involved. If America keeps playing alone, the talks will be a failure”.

“The least painful way out of this war is that the Americans focus their objectives on peace in the region rather than control. Also we need a two-level approach: a national reconciliation between all Afghan players, and communication between the regional players. The UN would be ideal for taking the lead in facilitating this”.

Kate Clark, Senior Analyst, Afghanistan Analysts Network (Kabul)

“I think the endgame is largely about political exclusion and about getting a seat at the table, which means that it should be easy to resolve. There is some political disagreement in terms of ideology but there are also elements in the Karzai government which are just as conservative as the Taliban”.

“There are people in the Taliban movement, who do favour a military settlement, and there are those who favour a political settlement, but all of them would want a piece of the pie in Kabul. And like any negotiations, the main issue is to fight or not to fight. There are certainly quite radical voices coming out of US Special Forces and CIA about having ‘a light footprint’ in terms of targeted killings, detentions and drones, so it is useful to look at pragmatic individuals on both sides”.

“The war will continue until there is a negotiated settlement. Neither side can win militarily and neither side can lose, but admitting this and taking the next step is not necessarily easy. The problem until now is that reconciliation has been based on the Taliban surrendering, but like the Americans they have a very big sense of honour and losing face is not an option for them. I think the Afghan government’s position is slightly different in that it doesn’t really have to do anything; the Afghan government doesn’t really own the war”.

“There comes a point in any serious peace process when the enemies have to become partners; you have a common aim and you have to decide how to get there. That’s what happened with the IRA and the British government. The British government had to

do things that it would not naturally do, but which helped the IRA to persuade its radical wing that it was worth negotiating. There were people on the radical republican wing who were outside of the peace process and the IRA then became the group who knew who those people were. I can very well see the Taliban in that role because the Americans do not have the capacity to deal with those people”.

“A problem for the Taliban is that they have very few negotiating cards. Their main one is that Mullah Omar controls the jihad brand. They have the threat of violence and for the people they are the legitimate callers of the jihad, which they can turn off but they can’t turn it on very easily. And beyond that, what do they offer? I guess you can say they have done quite well on justice and corruption, but that is not very tangible. They don’t have a lot of prisoners for example, so the normal way that you would end a civil war is quite lopsided here”.

Rahimullah Yusufzai, Resident Editor, The News International (Peshawar)

“The Afghan government has been desperate to talk to the Taliban but there is no face to face contact right now. The only known process with some hope, the Qatar talks, has been suspended by the Taliban. Maybe the Americans wanted to take the Qatar talks further and to have a proper peace process, but the Taliban objective from the talks was only the release of five important Taliban prisoners who have been in Guantanamo for 11 years. The Taliban leadership is under pressure from its rank and file and the families of the prisoners to secure their release. The Taliban have this trump card that they are holding the one American soldier, but Obama couldn’t do a prisoner exchange in an election year [2012]. The upside is that the Taliban have only suspended the talks rather than ended the process, so they do hope to revive it in the future”.

“There has to be some new effort into reconciliation, and my experience is that if you sit down and talk to someone, even if he is very radical, you can bring him around to some solution. It is not easy, but if you talk to the Taliban or Hekmatyar [leader of the Hizb-e-Islami] they might see that there are gains for them in that process and join it. For example, because the Taliban need to move from being an armed group to a political movement, one of their demands is to be accepted as a legitimate political movement like Hezbollah and Hamas, who have both a political and a militant wing. It was a part of the Qatar process that they would establish a political office in Qatar

where Taliban negotiators would be able to travel to even if their names are on the UN blacklist. So you build confidence by delisting them from the UN blacklist, releasing some of their people and allowing them to operate legally, and then you can demand something in return like stopping attacks on schools and teachers, or: 'the Guantanamo prisoners will be released but you guarantee they will only operate legally as politicians'. The UN has demanded that suicide bombings should stop but the Taliban would not agree at this stage because this is one of their major weapons. But this way it can be discussed".

"There is no problem in talking to a friend, the problem is in talking to the enemy, but you have to talk to them to know their mind, what they want, and what either side can offer. When you talk, you recognise the strength of the other party, so by talking to the Taliban in Qatar the Americans acknowledged the Taliban's strength. It is like saying, 'We tried to defeat you but we couldn't so now we realise we must talk'. The Taliban was saying earlier that they wouldn't talk to anybody until the foreign troops had left Afghanistan, but now they are talking to the Americans, the British and the UN while the foreign troops are still there, so that is a big change. Similarly the Americans were saying that there were three conditions for talking to the Taliban: 1) That they stop fighting, 2) that they disassociate from al-Qaeda and 3) that they accept the Afghan constitution. In a speech in February last year [2011] Hillary Clinton said that now these three conditions have instead become the objectives we will try to achieve through talks. That is how talks became possible; you don't place conditions, when you talk".

"Though the Taliban is saying that they will only talk about the prisoner exchange, they would eventually want to talk about other things. But they want to do it step by step. Because many field commanders previously were opposed to talking to the Americans and they need something to justify the talks. If the Taliban leadership can secure the release of the five prisoners, it will show the rank and file that it can achieve something through talks. Similarly, if the Americans can secure the release of their soldier, Obama can show that achievement to his people. It is easier for the Taliban, though, which is an armed movement controlled largely by one man, Mullah Omar. It is not a democratic movement where public opinion counts".

"I don't expect there will be any power-sharing easily because it isn't easy for Afghans to share power. Almost all Afghan groups want absolute power, so Taliban sharing

power with Karzai or the components of the former Northern Alliance is going to be very difficult. But I think that even if it looks very difficult to make progress in the peace process, one must keep trying for reconciliation. That is the only way out because of the failure of the military solution and the lack of other options”.

“The neighbouring countries can’t facilitate the peace talks because they interfere too much, it can’t be the West because it is a part of the conflict, it can’t be the OIC because it has never done this kind of mediation and has little credibility, so it has to be the UN, even though the Taliban is sceptical about the UN’s mentality”.

Zubair Popalzai, Deputy Head of Research, Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (Kabul)

“The Taliban showing willingness to negotiate is a welcome sign. This shows that the Taliban leadership has recognised that only a negotiated political settlement is the ultimate solution. The Taliban understand that they cannot capture the whole of Afghanistan. Afghanistan today is not the same as in the 1990s, people’s perceptions and expectations have changed and increased and the nature of support the Taliban were receiving has diminished and changed. The Taliban’s biggest supporter, Pakistan, is seriously affected by its own homegrown Taliban and suffering from acute economic and political crises. The Taliban understand that unless they reach a negotiated settlement their leaders will be killed by US drones even if they succeeded to capture Afghanistan or Kabul again. However, this can change if the US withdraws from Afghanistan leaving a very weak Afghan state with unsupported and fragile political and military institutions. President Obama seems determined to wrap up the war effort in Afghanistan by 2014 so he can be remembered as the president who brought two wars (Iraq and Afghanistan) to their conclusion”.

“In negotiations, I think the Taliban will insist on the complete withdrawal of foreign troops and major amendments if not complete refusal of the constitution. They will insist on such amendments that conform to their interpretation of the sharia law. I don’t think they will maintain the same position on women’s education or work, though. In fact, they never said they were against girl’s education or women working even when they were in power. What they stressed was separate work and study environments for men and women and boys and girls, which they said they could not

provide for lack of necessary technical and financial resources. With international support and encouragement, that issue could be resolved”.

“Success of peace talks will depend on a range of factors with prospects for strategic as opposed to tactical victory being the most important. Then there is a need for genuine political will. It seems unrealistic to expect that the Taliban will accept a peace deal that falls short of their expectations at a time when NATO is due to withdraw soon. Since prospects for a strategic victory for the US and its allies are dim, the pull-out presents an opportunity for the Afghan government to build intra-Afghan consensus for talks with the insurgents. At the moment, northern Afghan circles are not fully supportive of peace with the Taliban not only because of political and ideological differences but also because the Taliban coming to power in the way they want will affect the power position and hold on resources of many leaders who have previously fought or opposed the Taliban”.

“Mullah Omar still has considerable influence over the Taliban and it would be a mistake to exclude, kill or fragment the Taliban leadership. A fragmented Taliban will mean having to negotiate with several insurgent groups as opposed to one. It will make it almost impossible to build trust and create consensus. If we have a single leadership council as we do now, it is much more likely that they would be able to convince the rest to follow suit in negotiations”.

“Unfortunately the Americans caused a breakdown of the previous talks over the prisoner exchange issue. There are many players each one with their own interests. A fine balance will need to be found that satisfies everyone. While there seems to be recognition that a negotiated settlement is the best option, the blueprint for peace is lacking”.

Amina Khan, Research Fellow, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (Islamabad)

“Right now the Taliban are just waiting for the US to withdraw. When they do, we are back to square one because the Taliban is still there, and bringing them to the political table just goes to show that the war was an exercise in futility. Pakistan has been saying from day one that it is necessary to speak to the Taliban and Karzai has been offering political reconciliation to the Taliban since 2004 but the US did not

show interest. Germany, Turkey and Qatar have tried to facilitate talks but there are now so many actors with varying motives under the garb of the Taliban that do not follow a fixed agenda. So who actually matters? I think the Quetta Shura does”.

“There are people within the Taliban who do want some sort of settlement. The Taliban of 10–12 years ago are not the same Taliban of today; it is a new breed. They know that their callous attitude and their callous version of Islam is not going to work. Michael Semple and colleagues had apparently interviewed four senior Taliban interlocutors in 2012 and it is interesting to note that they were willing to let girls go to school, and even to let the Americans stay provided they are only there for stability and to serve the interests of Afghanistan”.

“The Taliban have been sticking to their two principle demands: changes to the constitution and the withdrawal of foreign forces. I think both can be politically abridged and some sort of power-sharing structure can be achieved. I think they will compromise somewhat on the constitution, and they have indicated that they are open to having elections. If the people vote for them you can’t deny them that space. We have to call a spade a spade; the Taliban are a legitimate part of the Afghan population and the past 11 years have proved that they have to be recognised and brought into the political process”.

“There is a lot of pressure on Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the table, but can Pakistan actually do that? The Taliban feel betrayed by Pakistan – mostly because we joined the war on terror and it is doubtful whether Pakistan still holds sway over the Taliban at this current juncture. I don’t think Pakistan is the right country to facilitate the talks; because of the history we have with the Taliban, the Northern Alliance will never trust us. Pakistan is damned if it does, damned if it doesn’t. I think it is more possible to have the UN or the OIC facilitate some sort of peace deal. The OIC hasn’t really done much else so now they can do something productive in Afghanistan”.

“I think the biggest danger in Afghanistan is not just the Taliban but the internal conflict that is brewing. The Northern Alliance is against any kind of reconciliation with the Taliban. We tend to underestimate the ethnic divide. Also a pivotal question is whether the Afghans will be able to take responsibility for maintaining security? Not only are the Afghan National Security Forces inadequate, the ANA for example;

the majority of the recruits are not Pashtun which is a major problem because if you send Tajiks or Uzbeks to a Pashtun area that will not work. “

Ashraf Ali, Director, FATA Research Centre (Islamabad)

“We need to engage people to implement the decisions and promises given. The war can only be solved by stakeholders coming to the negotiating table with an open and sincere mind. There is a realisation among the Taliban that negotiations are the only solution and that it is not a 1994-like situation where everyone ended up in favour of the Taliban. They don’t have the same strength, power or legitimacy now. Mullah Omar’s last Eid message clearly says that he wants to talk to the other groups in Afghanistan. Sohail Shaheen [a member of the Taliban negotiating team in Qatar] also said clearly in an interview that they are ready for negotiations. The Afghans should consult each other about the formation of a broadly-based Islamic government based on the aspirations and will of the people so everybody will feel they are represented in the government”.

“The negotiations are important because they can give the Taliban political ownership. However, a viable peace process demands that the US withdraw all its combatant forces and support the war-torn country through development activities. If you take one step towards them they will take two. The Taliban are willing to share power. They have realised that Pakistan and the regional powers are not supporting them as they did. They do not have community support like they had in the old days and the Northern Alliance has grown into a powerful challenge to them”.

Muhammed Amir Rana, Director, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (Islamabad)

“The Taliban in eastern Afghanistan is quite difficult to negotiate with because they have connections with al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, so right now the Quetta Shura remains open and has more potential. We have reached an agreement with the US that Pakistan will facilitate talks and provide the passage for the Quetta Shura to participate. Whether Pakistan facilitating is a good idea depends on how it is utilised and whether the real US objectives are reconciliation or to create divide”.

“Pakistan doesn’t know what interest it has in Afghanistan, except that India is there and could provoke the separatist movements in bordering provinces as it did in the

60s and 70s, but Pakistan sees Afghanistan as a liability. An unstable Afghanistan will affect Pakistan, not only in economic and political terms but also in security; if the Pashtuns have more participation in the Afghan power structure then reliance on Pakistan will decrease and many problems for Pakistan will be eased.

Khalid Aziz, Chairman, Regional Institute of Policy Research and Training (Peshawar)

“I don’t believe the Karzai administration has any faith in the Peace Commission, because Rabbani [the late head of the HPC] and his son and successor Salaudin Rabbani are personae non gratae with the Pashtuns because of their Northern Alliance past – so how do you get the Peace Process going?”

“The first step before peace talks can begin is to build more confidence by taking the Taliban’s negotiators off the UN blacklist. Also, negotiations should make use of Afghanistan’s own institutional structures like the Loya Jirga, that could employ moral pressure. Karzai is already using former Taliban members like Arsalan Rahmani Daulat, Habibullah Fawzi, Sayeedur Rahman Haqani and Faqir Mohammad who are members of the Afghan High Peace Council and have reconciled with the Afghan government”.

“Presently the Taliban have a single command under Mullah Omar. They do not have a political wing that would undertake protracted negotiations like other insurgent movements. However, the Taliban have understood that they would have to compromise on some of the views that they have held during the last 12 years of war. They also recognise that the final agreement must have the support of the other ethnic groups in Afghanistan”.

“President Karzai must convene a Loya Peace Jirga that works in tandem with the HPC and lends it the moral support emanating from a structure representing traditional Afghan historical response to national crisis”.

“The peace talks with the Taliban are likely to have more chances of success if some other parties like the UN or the OIC are introduced. The US is seen as a protagonist against whom the Taliban have claims. These can best be settled by a third neutral party”.

Key challenges

From the expert interviews cited above it appears that there are still significant challenges to starting a viable process of peace and national reconciliation in Afghanistan. Some of the key challenges that become visible and need to be considered in future attempts to develop a strategy and direction for the peace and reconciliation process are:

- To inject more clarity about the different facets of the peace process in Afghanistan and the stakes the neighbouring countries hold. The regional talks – talks between Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Iran in particular – should be seen as separate but parallel processes to the national reconciliation project that are, nonetheless, crucial to its success. The dual processes should, exactly, be kept as *parallel* processes rather than linked in, because the regional power games risk spoiling the process of national reconciliation. This means that the two tracks of talks should be convened on different platforms. This also means that the national reconciliation process requires the symbolic support, but not control, of Pakistan and other regional powers.²⁸
- To facilitate a *wider* national reconciliation project, that includes the broader array of political actors in Afghanistan and not only the present Afghan government and the Taliban.²⁹ At the same time a *deeper* reconciliation process should include the civil society level and move away from the government-centric approach. If such efforts fail there is a real risk that Afghanistan could return to a civil war in which neighbouring countries would play an active part, either directly or through proxies.
- Restarting the Doha process demands investing efforts into confidence building. The US should consider its willingness to release the five Taliban prisoners in Guantanamo (as requested/demanded by the Taliban), officially condoning the establishment of a Taliban political office in Qatar, removing top Taliban negotiators from the UN blacklists and allowing them to travel. There is a clear inbuilt tension in listing potential negotiating partners as terrorists and combating

²⁸ For this point, see also Matt Waldman: “Dangerous Liaisons with the Afghan Taliban: The Feasibility and Risks of Negotiations”, *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report, October 2010. <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/SR%20256%20-%20Dangerous%20Liaisons%20with%20the%20Afghan%20Taliban.pdf> (retrieved 27 February 2012).

²⁹ For this point see also Thomas Ruttig: “The Battle for Afghanistan Negotiations with the Taliban: History and Prospects for the Future”, National Security Studies Program Policy Paper, *New America Foundation*, May 2011.

them militarily, while at the same time investing efforts in confidence building and initiating peace talks.

- To engage a third party mediator to facilitate future talks. Neither the US nor the regional powers should be regarded as neutral or suited for taking on a mediating role. Finding a neutral facilitator is particularly important for the national reconciliation process. The UN is a frequently-mentioned option, but it is crucial that all parties involved acknowledge this third party as neutral.³⁰
- To consider ethnic identities and tribal divisions as an important and particularly sensitive factor in the national reconciliation process. Claims of discrimination or unfair distribution of resources or power are a major potential cause of social unrest and violence post 2014, and an inclusive process should prevent this. The conflict between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance only represents one challenge to power-sharing in this regard; the imbalance of ethnic representation in the ANA with an under-representation of the Pashtuns represents another.
- To understand the Taliban movement of today. Changes in the new generation of the Taliban and the new context mean that the Taliban of 2013 should be expected to be a different organisation than that of the 1990s. There seems to be recognition among parts of the movement that power-sharing and a higher degree of pragmatism in relation to their political claims will be an unavoidable premise for them in case they want access to government in the future. There is, therefore, a need to disentangle the different trends within the movement, clarifying the changes that generational shifts together with the new context have brought along.³¹
- To understand better the links between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and the stakes of Pakistan (and other regional actors). The increasing strength of the Pakistani Taliban and the threat it constitutes for Pakistan means that Pakistan's unconditional support to the Afghan Taliban in a future Afghanistan should not be taken for granted. The ideological bonds and loyalty between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban make it troublesome for the Pakistani government to continue a close alliance with the Afghan Taliban, despite the fact that the Afghan Taliban was formerly seen as instrumental to re-orient the attention of the Pakistani Taliban towards Afghanistan.

³⁰ An ICG report on the Taliban talks also points to the need to appoint a UN-mandated mediation team: "Talking About Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan", *Crisis Group Asia Report* no 221, 2012.

Messaging the Taliban

Tim Foxley

The Taliban-led insurgency remains virulent and highly destructive. It holds back Afghan development at all levels, economic, social and political. Although progress in Afghanistan has undoubtedly been made, much is shallow, fragile and, perhaps worst of all, reversible. The country faces an uncertain future and the prospect of civil war or some other indefinite period of conflict. In this section, some thoughts are presented on the prospects for dialogue with the Taliban and some suggestions are made for developing a more sensitive and creative messaging environment.

These suggestions are not about getting the Taliban to the table, but about creating a more constructive dialogue for all sides and helping the Taliban to lead themselves towards greater political discourse and away from a sterile and unproductive propaganda and insurgency environment. The goal in theory and practice should be, through dialogue and discourse, to give the Taliban the opportunity to shape themselves into a non-insurgency group, or at least to take steps towards this objective, without anyone talking of winning or losing and without anyone feeling resentful and humiliated.

Prospects for dialogue – nothing significant to report?

Regarding the potential for some form of negotiated settlement, it still remains difficult to give a clear assessment of progress and prospects for the future. Judging the progress of such activity as we have seen (or not seen – it is highly likely that other contacts are taking place far from the public gaze) poses many analytical challenges. But, even with all this activity in mind – one to one contacts, use of intermediaries, bold statements from regional and international communities, offices supposedly being established and Taliban appearances at academic conferences – it is hard to escape the conclusion that little of tangible value has been achieved. In January 2013 the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, reported:

“There are no significant peace talks under way with the Taliban, the US ambassador to Afghanistan has said, despite years of Western and Afghan government efforts to broker a political end to the decade-long war in the country, and some recent signs of progress.

James Cunningham, the US ambassador in Kabul, described reconciliation as ‘a process that hasn’t even really begun’, although he added that one of Washington’s goals was ensuring “at least the beginning of a serious process”.³²

Whatever is hoped for with ‘talks’ and however desirable is the process, this blunt statement probably most accurately sums up the situation. Numerous problems are suggested when we consider the current ‘process’. There are many different actors representing many different groups and many different agendas – the US, the Afghan government, the High Peace Council, the Pakistani government, insurgent groups (including both the Taliban and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-e-Islami), the United Nations and Afghan political and ethnic groups inside and outside of the Afghan government. Many strands of contact appear to be taking place simultaneously and without coordination. There is no clarity on what is to be discussed and no clarity on who is speaking for whom. Many of the terms employed in the discourse look as if they are being misunderstood and misused: e.g. talks, ceasefire, reintegration, reconciliation, power-sharing.

On top of this, there is much uncertainty and even paralysis brought about by the two-year transition period as ISAF scales down and prepares to leave. There is an atmosphere somewhere between “wait and see” and fear and uncertainty about the process for Afghans, insurgents and the international community alike. As a result of these issues, I suggest that there is still no real agreement on what is to be discussed in what is still very much ‘talks about talks’. However, there is a real need for many groups, for different reasons, to be seen to be engaged in meaningful contact and to be making progress. We should be cautious, therefore, of reading too much progress into the US, Afghan and Pakistani statements and, at the very least, manage our expectations towards a timeframe of years.

Despite many statements to the effect that a political solution is the only real way forward for the country, the international community has, through ISAF, put much of its effort and emphasis on military solutions. Even in 2012 and 2013, the US

³¹ A recent report on the Afghan Taliban, its relation to the Pakistani Taliban and Afghan Taliban’s attitude towards power-sharing provides some of these insights. See Antonio Giustozzi: “Negotiating with the Taliban Issues and Prospects” *The Century Foundation*, 2010. <http://tcf.org/assets/downloads/tcf-Giustozzi.pdf>, (retrieved 27 February 2013).

media was still full of articles discussing whether the US military is ‘winning’ or ‘losing’ and whether ‘victory’ will ultimately ever be achieved. But perhaps a better way of envisaging the current insurgency in Afghanistan is to present the desired outcome as one of aiding the reshaping of the Taliban movement away from its current ‘insurgency’ form and into something that is better able to constructively re-engage in Afghan society without any group being humiliated and opening up longer-term possibilities of genuine reconciliation. There are no obvious and immediate solutions here, but perhaps the communication ‘environment’ – the public range of media – press, radio, TV, internet, social media such as Twitter and Facebook and more formal discussions involving the Taliban (such as think tank panels at Paris and Japan last year) – in which understanding, discourse and dialogue between the involved parties might flourish, needs some improvement.

Better use of communications

There is a noisy, damaging, but ultimately inconclusive, media battle being conducted between the Taliban and their Afghan and international opponents. The main effect of this is to ‘poison the well’ for dialogue by entrenching positions and generating suspicion and mistrust. I suggest that the international community could spend more time considering how the messaging environment might be adjusted in style, tone, expectations and objectives to be more constructive. The international community should be trying to help to guide the Taliban towards choosing to change into a form more resembling a political organisation and looking to challenge and reverse the style of the current messaging regarding the Taliban. Otherwise, all that is left is a destructive and ineffective ‘propaganda war’.

International reference points might include Hamas, Hezbollah and Al Sadr – all of which have developed a significant political component. Every step of the way the Taliban should be encouraged, coaxed or challenged to talk more about political issues such as employment, reconstruction, development, education, governance, and less about fighting. The current conditions under which the Taliban might be permitted to rejoin the Afghan political community – i.e. that they express support for the current constitution, denounce Al Qaeda, renounce violence, hand in weapons and express support for human rights – sound like surrender terms. A deal that offers public humiliation might be more likely to push the Taliban away from dialogue.

Practical measures

A neutral organisation, such as the United Nations, could take the lead in messaging and efforts should be refocused on moving the discourse from issues of conflict to the political, social and economic. This will of course be difficult and complicated – both parties are set in their ways and US/ISAF/military messaging has dominated for some years, as a propaganda campaign can be an important part of counter-insurgency conflict.

There are practical measures that can be taken and messages that can be sent. Language directed at the Taliban should encourage any positive actions or statements from them, whilst firmly rejecting the negative, giving them regular feedback on all their actions. Such feedback and commentary would focus, in particular, on their political discourse, in a non-judgmental manner, in order to guide the discourse away from the language of violence. There would be no ‘point-scoring’ and the language – regardless of the provocations of the security situation – would stay calm but firm. A website discourse might be helpful – an officially recognised UN/international site that talks to the Taliban, perhaps lightly mirroring the Taliban website’s own style and addressing the issues and concerns that appear there. If one thing has become very clear, it is that the Taliban take a very strong interest in what is being said about them and often take steps to address particular issues as a result of what is being debated in the international arena. Civilian casualties are one example of this.

On the ground, ceasefires might be more generally associated with ‘winning’ or ‘losing’. But local cessations of hostilities might usefully give a ‘breathing space’ and combine with local construction or development projects taking place, with the approval of both sides and a joint monitoring team (i.e. a team that includes Taliban representatives) to oversee both ceasefire and work. Neutral, small-scale projects for the benefit of the local community that give no other military or security gain, should be selected. The still largely incomplete and ineffective Kajaki Dam project, intended to provide electricity to around 1.7 million people in southern Afghanistan, might be tested in this way as a means of generating local Taliban engagement – such as a joint monitoring team including Taliban representatives to undertake a ceasefire and monitor any work.³³

³² Graham-Harrison, E., “Taliban peace talks are not under way, says US ambassador to Afghanistan”, *The Guardian*, 17 Jan. 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/17/taliban-afghanistan-us-peace-talks?CMP=twi_gu (retrieved 11 March 2013).

Involving the Taliban in ‘joint’ projects with a group or groups they trust might give the Taliban a more tangible stake in society. This might be a difficult step for the Afghan government and the international community – it would be partial acknowledgement that the Taliban dominate in parts of the country. But allowing them to take some credit for such activities might seem counter-productive or counter-intuitive (certainly if you favour ‘defeating’ the Taliban), but once they have taken a small step to support development of the country (this is how it should be presented) it becomes harder for them to reverse direction. They become accountable and responsible for their work.

Options for engagement

In brief, other engagements for the Afghan government and/or the international community to consider might include:

- For the Afghan government to allow some form of Taliban monitoring of their prisoners in the notorious Pol-e Charkhi in Kabul, looking at health, human rights and treatment issues. Time and again this emerges as a key issue for the Taliban and therefore one that could yield results, even small initiatives that at least showed recognition of this Taliban concern.³⁴
- For the International Community to more formally admit to mistakes made in their approach to Afghanistan before and after 2001, and encourage the Taliban to do likewise.
- For the International Community to stop the covert IO/media/propaganda attacks against the Taliban (for example placing rumours of Omar’s death in the media or setting up false Twitter accounts). The Taliban are acutely sensitive about what they see as Western media ‘trickeries’.³⁵

³³ See this report from the AAN from this year, http://www.aanafghanistan.org/uploads/20130125_Arjomand_Kajaki_Dam_final1.pdf (retrieved 11 March 2013).

³⁴ “Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding the inhumane treatment of oppressed prisoners in Pul-e-Charkh”, Taliban website, 14 March 2012, http://www.shahamat-english.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15753:statement-of-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-inhumane-treatment-of-oppressed-prisoners-in-pul-e-charkh&catid=4:statements&Itemid=4 (retrieved 11 March 2013).

³⁵ “Some Dailies which are the mouthpiece of the Western Colonialism and other media outlets that toe their line, once again, circulated a baseless rumors, following their other futile propaganda campaigns and tried to create suspicions about the policy of the Islamic Emirate”, Taliban website, 18 May 2011, http://www.shahamat-english.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7547:remarks-of-the-spokesman-of-the-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-fresh-rumors-of-the-western-media&catid=4:statements&Itemid=4 (retrieved 11 March 2013).

- For the Afghan government and International Community to engage with the Taliban and seek Taliban thoughts on political, economic and religious matters – to get them talking – i.e. ‘how would you do this?’
- For the Afghan government and International Community to be more careful when placing blame. There are likely many security incidents, particularly explosive detonations, which may have causes other than the Taliban, such as mines from the Soviet period. However, the default setting in any incident, particularly from local government authorities, is to blame the Taliban before any investigation has taken place. If the cause is unclear, this could at least be explained. As a possible example, I am not convinced that the ‘school poisonings’ stories from last year were genuinely insurgent attacks – and neither, apparently, was ISAF or the Afghan government.³⁶ But it is still an easy accusation to throw at the Taliban which infuriates them. As a confidence-building concept, it perhaps makes sense for the Taliban to generally be given credit where it is due and demonstrably exonerated if at all possible.

There are many difficulties with messaging approaches that reach out to the Taliban. There are many stakeholders to be convinced – in particular non-Pashtun ethnic and political groups of Afghanistan but also the Afghan government, the international community, the US, ISAF, neighbouring countries. The insurgents themselves will be highly suspicious. For many, it will be seen as appeasement of Taliban. For the Taliban themselves, many already believe they are winning and that they need only to await the withdrawal of ISAF in 2014. Such an approach, it is true, would require major compromises. Many groups would question whether issues such as human rights, women’s rights, the Afghan constitution, the addressing of war crimes, are all being given up.

But ‘jaw-jaw’ is surely better than ‘war-war’, and there is an element of ‘win/win’ here. If the Taliban do fail to engage credibly in discourse beyond ‘jihad’ and violence, it exposes their ideas and pronouncements to accusations that they are not sincerely engaged in considering the wishes of the people of Afghanistan.

³⁶ Gutcher, L., “Fear in the classrooms: is the Taliban poisoning Afghanistan’s schoolgirls? Hundreds in hospital – but are terror attacks on schools to blame, or mass hysteria?” *The Independent*, 1 June 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/fear-in-the-classrooms-is-the-taliban-poisoning-afghanistans-schoolgirls-7808463.html> (retrieved 11 March 2013).

The Taliban have absorbed many lessons since 2001 – they have learnt a lot about the international arena and the Afghan population. They have probably had to become much more like their Afghan and international opponents than they think, in terms of the ways in which they think, act, prioritise and express themselves. They have had to actively consider the relationship between civilian casualties and popular sentiment and address the issue. They have had to learn to explain themselves in numerous ways that they would not have thought about 10–15 years ago. This is how far they have come and careful use of non-aggressive messaging can take them even further. This is the real opportunity for the messaging environment.

Defence and Security Studies at DIIS

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