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Afghan Peace Talks
A Primer

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Published 2011 by the RAND Corporation
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The overarching American objective in Afghanistan should not simply be to prevent that country from becoming a haven for transnational terrorists but also to prevent it from becoming a terrorist ally. Prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001, Afghanistan was both a haven for and an ally of terrorists, and it would be so again if the Taliban returned to power with Al Qaeda backing. The United States can prevent this indefinitely as long as it is willing to commit significant military and economic resources to a counterinsurgency effort. It cannot eliminate the threat, however, as long as the Afghan insurgents enjoy sanctuary in and support from Pakistan. The United States could also achieve its objective if the Taliban could be persuaded to cut ties with Al Qaeda and end its insurgency in exchange for some role in Afghan governance short of total control.

Peace negotiations would obviously be desirable if they could succeed in achieving this objective, but they are also worth pursuing even if they fail, as the risks associated with entering such a process may be greater for the insurgents than for the Afghan government and its allies. The Taliban leadership is fighting a jihad [holy war] with a view to reimposing a religiously based form of government rooted in an extreme interpretation of Islam. Engaging in negotiations for something short of that goal undercuts the purity of that message. The Kabul regime, in contrast, is fighting for representative government (as well as its own survival and hold on power), and it is prepared to accept insurgent participation in government in some capacity if the insurgents lay down their arms. Opinion polling shows both overwhelming
support within Afghan society for a negotiated settlement and a willingness to bring the Taliban back into the fold in something short of a dominant position. So, negotiating the terms of that entry with the Taliban is in no way inconsistent with the cause that the Kabul government espouses.

These considerations help explain why President Hamid Karzai, President Barack Obama, and leaders of other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member countries have, in principle, endorsed peace negotiations while the insurgent leadership has remained much more circumspect. Nevertheless, conversations between a number of independent observers (including the authors) on one hand and Taliban representatives and those close to them on the other indicate serious insurgent interest in the possibility of a negotiated settlement. The recent death of Osama Bin Laden may help motivate Taliban leaders in two respects: first, making them more anxious about their own security and, second, perhaps removing whatever personal link there may have been between those leaders and Bin Laden. The latter may make it easier for the Taliban leaders to cut their remaining ties to Al Qaeda, a key American and NATO demand.

Getting the Afghan parties together is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a meaningful peace process. Afghanistan is a weak country surrounded by stronger neighbors. Historically, it has been at peace when its neighbors perceive a common interest in keeping that peace but at war—civil war—when one or more of those neighbors sees some advantage therein. Over the past 30 years, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States have successfully supported insurgencies designed to overthrow the regime in Kabul. At present, it is Pakistan (and, to a much lesser degree, Iran) that is affording shelter and support to such an insurgency. Afghanistan will not be at peace until the governments of all of these countries see a common interest in that peace. To succeed, any peace process must therefore include these countries in some fashion.

Close examination reveals that the priorities of all the potential parties to an Afghan peace process overlap to a considerable degree. For instance, each desires a withdrawal of Western armed forces—a situation especially desired by the publics in all of the Western countries. All
Afghans want foreigners to stop interfering in their affairs. All foreign governments want assurances that Afghan territory will not be used to their disadvantage, whether by third parties or the Afghans themselves, and thus want to ensure that terrorists hostile to their countries cannot use Afghanistan as a sanctuary. Interests diverge less in the area of outcomes than in the area of timing. Western governments, under pressure from voters, want to withdraw NATO forces from Afghanistan (or at least from combat there) sooner rather than later, a preference shared by the Taliban leadership. Most other potential participants, including the Kabul government, are not in such a rush. Indeed, continuation of the current conflict, with the United States tied down and neither side able to prevail, is acceptable to most regional governments and, for Iran, probably optimal.

Negotiation among the Afghans will focus on the nature of any power-sharing arrangement, on possible modifications to the existing constitution, on social norms, and on the role of sharia law. Given the excessively centralized nature of the current Afghan government, it is not impossible that negotiations might actually lead to some improvement, via devolution, in subnational governance, although this would require both the Taliban leadership and the Kabul regime to alter their historical preference for a unitary, Kabul-centric system.

The American objective in these negotiations should be a stable and peaceful Afghanistan that neither hosts nor collaborates with international terrorists. Only to the extent that other issues impinge on this objective should American negotiators be drawn into a discussion of Afghanistan’s social or constitutional issues. That qualification is significant, however, because constitutional issues will certainly affect Afghanistan’s stability, as may social provisions if they are likely to antagonize influential elements of the population. In the end, however, the country’s form of government and codes of behavior are preeminently of interest to the Afghans. Americans and other international actors should have some confidence that a reasonably representative Afghan government delegation will not stray far from the desires of its population, the overwhelming majority of whom are strongly opposed to a return of an Islamic emirate and desirous of retaining the many social and material gains most of them have made since 2001.
American and European opinion is, nevertheless, likely to be particularly sensitive to the issues of civil society and the role of women. However, the elements of Western society most concerned about such issues are also, in general, those least supportive of continued military engagement and thus the most likely to support unilateral steps that will reduce the negotiating leverage of both Washington and Kabul. This will lead to considerable dissonance in Western attitudes toward an enfolding peace process.

Other actors are likely to experience even greater dissonance. Neither the Kabul regime nor the Taliban is a well-integrated polity with a clear and reasonably unified sense of its respective interests and goals. Pakistani society may be even more divided than Afghan society, and the government in Islamabad often seems even less coherent than the one in Kabul, since the Pakistani political leadership and military establishment are autonomous actors with quite divergent priorities regarding domestic and foreign militancy and an Afghan settlement. Historically, the Pakistani military has employed militant groups and terrorism as instruments of policy. The country’s civilian leadership seems convinced that this distinction between “good” and “bad” militants cannot be sustained now that the latter threaten the viability of the country’s democracy. In contrast, the Pakistani military does not yet seem ready to cut ties with the terrorist groups with which it has long been associated. One of the main obstacles to any negotiated settlement will be getting the respective parties in Islamabad (and elsewhere) to decide what they really want and what they are willing to trade for it.

Herding such cats will strain the capacity of even the most skilled statesmen. As by far the most powerful and influential participant, the United States will have to play a leading role in this effort. But the United States is also one of the main protagonists in this conflict and therefore not in the best position to mediate. We thus recommend that Washington work to secure the appointment of a figure of international repute with the requisite impartiality, knowledge, contacts, and diplomatic skills to take charge of putting together and then orchestrating a multitiered negotiation process, one with the Afghans at its
core as well as several concentric rings of regional and other interested
governments actively but quietly engaged on the periphery.

Signaling and timing obviously matter a great deal in any peace
process. The United States is due to begin withdrawing troops in mid-
2011, and, with this withdrawal, its leverage in any negotiation will
slowly diminish. Of all the possible major participants, therefore, the
United States is likely to feel the greatest sense of urgency. Yet, its pros-
psects of getting an acceptable agreement depend heavily on it not needing one. Only if Washington has an acceptable non-negotiated outcome
in prospect will American diplomats have much chance of securing
their negotiating objectives. This uncomfortable paradox accounts for
much of the dissent and confusion in the American domestic debate on
strategy in Afghanistan.

American policymakers must prepare for two futures: one nego-
tiated, one not. Both must meet its bottom-line need to prevent
Afghanistan from falling into the hands of an Al Qaeda–linked regime.
This means preparing both to stay indefinitely and to go definitively.
If negotiations fail, some level of American military engagement will
probably be necessary well beyond the 2014 date by which President
Obama has promised to remove all American combat forces. On the
other hand, the full withdrawal of American troops from the country
by some not-so-distant date is probably a necessary component of any
peace deal. In bargaining terms, promising to leave is the American
counterpart to the Taliban’s commitment to cut its ties with Al Qaeda.
Troubling as Americans may find this symmetry, these potential con-
cessions represent each side’s highest cards and are thus likely to be
played only at the culmination of any negotiation process. Indeed, they
will probably be essential to closing any deal.

It is thus perfectly reasonable for Washington and Kabul to be
negotiating, as they are, the text of a long-term strategic partnership
that involves an enduring military component. Without the pros-
psect of such an enduring American presence, the Taliban would have
little incentive to negotiate rather than just wait the United States and
NATO out. On the other hand, American and Afghan officials should
also be making clear, at least privately and perhaps publicly, that any
such accord between Kabul and Washington is subject to amend-
ment, depending on the outcome of a peace process and its successful implementation.

Just as the United States is poorly placed to broker a peace settlement, it will also require third-party assistance in overseeing the implementation of an accord, particularly one that calls for the withdrawal of American forces. The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of Afghan forces will be an essential element of any peace agreement. Given that there are between 25,000 and 35,000 insurgents but more than 250,000 Afghan army and police—a number far in excess of what the country will be able to afford or that donors will fund once the fighting ceases—the demobilization of government forces is likely to be even more demanding and certainly more expensive than the demobilization of the insurgents.\(^1\) Indeed, some of the insurgents will probably have to be integrated into the government forces even as the total number of government forces is brought down. This will make it all the more important that those being marshaled out receive generous severance packages and some prospect of subsequent employment.

Of course, the United States will want to phase the implementation of any accord so that the removal of American forces occurs at the end of the process, by which time much of this local demobilization should be in train. The United States will also, as will be appropriate, insist that, before a full American departure, the Taliban completely break with Al Qaeda and other terrorist networks, evidence of which will be both (1) the Taliban’s surrender of all its non-Afghan terrorist leaders still enjoying its hospitality and (2) its agreement to suitable means of verifying that these leaders are not invited back.

Even assuming such sequencing, the implementation of a peace accord will require a level of mutual trust likely to be absent on both sides. Additionally, whenever American and NATO troops do ultimately depart, they will leave behind something of a power vacuum. It will be important, therefore, to identify during the negotiating pro-

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\(^1\) Number of insurgents according to an Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman (“Up to 35,000 Insurgents Active in Afghanistan: Official,” *Peoples Daily Online*, February 9, 2011); number of Afghan army and police according to a NATO news release (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF),” media backgrounder, March 2011).
cess some follow-on international presence, military as well as political, that can oversee the process of implementation. This presence need not be powerful enough to compel adherence (something even the United States and NATO have not been strong enough to do), but it should be sufficiently robust to deal with marginal spoilers and to set a high threshold for evasion by any party of its undertakings. This is a role that United Nations peacekeeping forces have successfully played in many other such circumstances, so that organization is the logical candidate to deploy a post-peace agreement force into Afghanistan.

Iraq is an inexact parallel to Afghanistan, but several components of any peaceful solution in the latter are likely to be similar to those employed in the former. First, the United States will have to tolerate—indeed, seek to broker—the inclusion of former insurgents in an enlarged coalition government. Second, the United States will have to promise to “go home,” withdrawing its remaining combat forces on a fixed, mutually agreed schedule. Third, Washington will need to remain heavily engaged in the implementation of whatever accord is reached.

We thus recommend that the United States seek the appointment of a United Nations–endorsed facilitator to promote agreement among all the necessary parties to an Afghan peace process regarding a venue, participation, and the agenda for talks. We believe that Germany (perhaps Bonn) might be a good locale for such talks, as might a site in Turkey. Alternatively, if the Taliban objects to a NATO locale, Geneva is a neutral site where the parties could conveniently converge. Doha, where exploratory talks are reportedly under way between American and Taliban representatives under the auspices of German and Qatari officials, is another viable locale. We recommend that only the Afghan parties take formal part in the core negotiations over their country’s future but that all of the major external stakeholders, including India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States, conduct parallel, less formal discussions with a view to exercising convergent influence on the Afghan parties.

This will not be easy, given the divergent interests and objectives of the various actors. Figure S.1 illustrates the views of the main stakeholders on the issues likely to be at the center of any Afghan peace
process. It distinguishes among nine external actors and the following three Afghan parties: the Kabul government, the Taliban, and the legal opposition to the Karzai government (which includes elements of the former Northern Alliance and of current civil society). We believe that this third group will ultimately have to be dealt with outside the formal negotiating process or included in it via incorporation within the Afghan government delegation; one way or another, its concerns will also need to be addressed.

The issues are withdrawal of NATO forces, the residual commitments and arrangements to combat terrorism, a commitment by the Afghan parties not to allow their territory to be used against any third party (nonalignment), the reciprocal commitment by Afghanistan’s neighbors not to allow their territories to be used to destabilize Afghanistan (noninterference), a promise of continuing American security assistance, a United Nations peacekeeping operation, a commitment by Afghanistan and its neighbors to cooperate against drug trafficking, arrangements for power sharing among the Afghan factions, the role of Islam and sharia law, and commitments by the international community to continue economic assistance to Afghanistan.
Figure S.1
Stakeholder Views About Issues Central to the Peace Process

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Government of Afghanistan</th>
<th>Taliban</th>
<th>Legal opposition</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Europe</th>
<th>Pakistan</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Iran</th>
<th>Russia</th>
<th>China</th>
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<td>Noninterference</td>
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