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# From Stalemate to Settlement

Lessons for Afghanistan from Historical  
Insurgencies That Have Been Resolved  
Through Negotiations

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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*Cover image: British Royal Marines Brigadier Ed Davis (left), the commander of Task Force Helmand, shakes hands with Gen. Hakim Angar, the Helmand province chief of police, to commemorate the transition of lead security authority in Lashkar Gah district, Helmand province, Afghanistan, July 20, 2011 (British Royal Air Force photo by Sgt. Mitch Moore/Released).*

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## Summary

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Using strategic narrative and case-study analysis, this research examined in depth 13 historical cases of insurgency that have been settled through negotiation and ended with a mixed outcome (that is, neither side completely won or completely lost). From these 13 cases, we distilled a “master narrative” for how conflicts reach a conclusion through a process of negotiated settlement. This “master narrative” does not follow the precise storyline of one specific insurgency; rather, it is distilled from many insurgencies. Using the factors detailed in the 13 case studies, we sought to identify commonalities in the progress toward a negotiated settlement. Again, the master narrative developed does not describe a specific path toward negotiated settlement, but it does seek to capture the essential ingredients and sequence of factors common to the 13 cases. After explaining how we developed the master narrative, we apply it to possible future directions for Afghanistan following the 2014 withdrawal of international troops.

The master narrative for negotiated settlements generally unfolds in seven steps, though not always in this exact order. First, after years of fighting, both sides in a conflict reach a state of war-weariness and settle into a mutually hurting military stalemate, in which the costs of escalating the conflict would be greater than the benefits of doing so for both sides. Second, after a stalemate has been reached and the belligerents recognize the futility of continued escalation, the insurgents are accepted as a legitimate negotiating partner. Once the government accepts the insurgents, the terms of a cease-fire can be discussed. This third step (cease-fire)—like step 2 before it—is highly dependent on

the acquiescence of external powers, such as other countries involved or invested in the conflict. For example, if an active external supporter is pushing for continued conflict, it is likely that the negotiation process will end here.

If external actors refrain from further meddling, official intermediate agreements can be reached. This is the fourth step in the narrative. In the fifth step, power-sharing offers (including, for example, amnesty or elections) can further entice the insurgents to favor politics over armed struggle. Sixth, once the insurgents accept a power-sharing offer, the insurgency's leadership becomes more moderate, facilitating further progress by giving a voice to the politically minded cadre of the group. Seventh, and finally, third-party guarantors help guide the process to a close, acting as impartial observers or providers of security, economic and development aid, and other forms of assistance.

Figure S.1 outlines our master narrative for insurgencies that progress from conflict to negotiated settlement. Although only one of the 13 cases considered unfolded exactly according to this sequence, each case unfolded in a manner close enough to this narrative that it is a useful comparative tool for understanding how to reach negotiated settlements.

**Figure S.1**  
**Master Narrative for Reaching Negotiated Settlements**

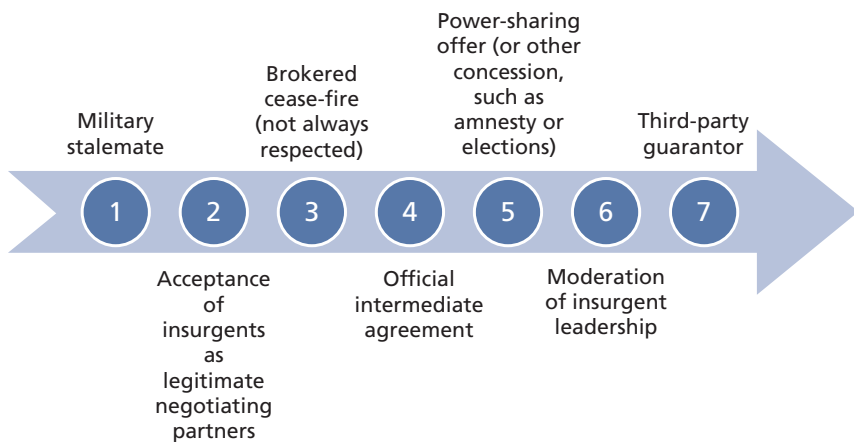


Table S.1 shows which of the 13 cases passed through any the seven steps of the master narrative and in what order. The first row, for the Northern Ireland conflict, shows that the case progressed through all 7 steps in that order. Where steps occurred nearly simultaneously (as was the case for steps 2, 3, and 4 in the Congo case), this is denoted with the same number. Two things are noteworthy in the table. First, as is often the case with a master narrative, it perfectly described very few of the cases (only one, Northern Ireland, followed all steps in order). Second, most of the cases do include most of the master narrative steps, and predominantly in the specified order.

## Recommendations

While it is still too early to tell whether the conflict in Afghanistan will end in a negotiated settlement, should this prove to be the case, it seems likely that the result of any negotiated settlement will be “mixed,” with both the Afghan government and the Taliban making fairly major concessions to reach an agreement. Even if this is not the ultimate end game, it is still valuable to examine the combination of factors needed for a negotiated settlement so we can analyze whether or not it could be successful. Let us be clear, a mixed, negotiated settlement is not a *fait accompli*. Much can still happen between now and the final phase of the conflict in Afghanistan, especially if the force mix on the ground differs radically from the current force. The situation as it stands in 2013 is around step 2, which means that some combination of the approximately five remaining steps toward negotiated settlement still need to occur.

To reach a negotiated settlement, it helps if both sides have faced setbacks, neither side perceives unambiguous military victory as likely, external actors on both sides reduce their levels of support, and all external actors press for negotiated settlement (and at least one external actor is willing to act as a guarantor). Based on these criteria, prospects for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan look reasonably good if the insurgents are unable to prevail militarily once the coalition withdraws, if insurgents’ external supporters push for a negotiated settlement, and

**Table S.1**  
**The Master Narrative for Reaching Negotiated Settlements in 13 Selected Cases and Order of Steps**

Case	Stalemate	Insurgents Accepted as Political Partners	Cease-Fires	Official Intermediate Agreements	Power-Sharing Offers	Moderation of Insurgent Leadership	Third-Party Guarantors
Northern Ireland, 1969–1999	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Yemen, 1962–1970	1	3	—	2	4	4	4
Philippines (Moro National Liberation Front [MNLF]), 1971–1996	1	2	3	3	6	5	—
Lebanese Civil War, 1975–1990	1	4	2	3	7	6	5
Western Sahara, 1975–1991	1	4	2	4	—	3	6
Mozambique (Mozambican National Resistance [RENAMO]), 1976–1995	1	3	4	2	6	5	7
Indonesia (Aceh), 1976–2005	1	2	3	5	6	4	7
Kampuchea, 1978–1992	1	2	3	—	4	5	6
Bosnia, 1992–1995	1	4	2	2	4	—	6
Tajikistan, 1992–1997	1	2	4	3	5	5	7
Burundi, 1993–2003	1	2	4	3	5	5	7
Chechnya I, 1994–1996	1	3	2	3	5	—	—
Democratic Republic of the Congo (anti-Kabila), 1998–2003	1	2	2	2	6	5	7



if a third party can be found to act as an honest broker and provide peacekeepers.

With a stalemate largely achieved, the master narrative for reaching a negotiated settlement as applied to Afghanistan suggests that efforts are necessary to make progress toward the following (steps 2–5):

- *Step 2:* Co-opt the leadership on both sides and put sufficient pressure on respective parties (the United States on the Karzai government, Pakistan on the Taliban) to accept each other as legitimate negotiation participants.
  - *Substep 2:* Convince external powers to support peace rather than continued fighting.
- *Step 3:* Broker a cease-fire.
- *Step 4:* Make progress toward some type of official agreement.
- *Step 5:* Offer a power-sharing agreement: The promise of political legitimacy to the insurgent leadership must be a step in the process, not a measure of last resort.