

Transition in Afghanistan

Securing the best achievable outcome

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We attacked Afghanistan in 2001 after the ruling Taliban turned aside repeated overtures to turn over Osama bin Laden. Joining a revived Taliban opposition, 400 U.S. Special Forces and CIA operatives supported by American airpower took down the Taliban government. That the Taliban was presiding over a harsh, medieval regime of repression was irrelevant. Only harboring bin Laden and his Al Qaeda cohorts made Mullah Omar's Taliban a target.

Bin Laden fled, first to the mountainous Tora Bora area, then to Pakistan. The Taliban senior leadership also escaped across the border. But what began in Afghanistan as an operation against Al Qaeda and global terrorism morphed into a war mostly against the Taliban. U.S. officials disavowed nation-building, but efforts to secure the country drew the U.S. and NATO into rebuilding the Afghan state and economy.

Devoting greater attention and resources to Afghanistan early on might have stabilized and shielded the nation from a Taliban resurgence. Certainly that would have diminished the prospects for a successful insurgency. Instead, Al Qaeda and the Taliban were viewed as spent forces. Afghanistan became a backwater as American assets were set aside for the main event, a war against Saddam's Iraq.

The Taliban re-emerged and made steady gains. The U.S. shifted policy to a people-centered counter-insurgency and set a 2014 deadline for its military commitment. A military and civilian surge produced mixed results. An accelerated transition to Afghan security forces and the certainty of diminished financial resources after 2014 have caused many to doubt that an Afghan regime hobbled by corruption and incompetence can stand on its own.

Achieving a viable peace

How can a viable peace be achieved? The U.S. and its allies have anxiously sought a shortcut to ending the conflict. Hope has centered on negotiating a power-sharing deal with the Taliban. Though compromises would be inevitable, many believe the political system can be salvaged and hard-earned social and economic gains protected.

Yet efforts to bring leaders of Mullah Omar's Quetta and other insurgents to the negotiating table have produced little. The Taliban opened an office in Qatar. But no talks have begun. The Taliban believes it can wait until 2014 and seize control. In the meantime, what it wants from engagement with the U.S. is release of its commanders from Guantanamo.

A viable accord requires executing a focused, disciplined strategy that lays a foundation for successful talks, not one that impels us into a political blunder. Some ask: “what is there to lose by talking?” For now, even agreeing to talk can create undesirable consequences. Some are already visible.

First, an exhausted Afghan people approve of serious negotiations for peace. But the prospect that the Taliban may gain domestic power through a political deal causes many to hedge their loyalties towards the Kabul regime and cooperation with foreign forces. Talks may divide Taliban leaders and fighters. But assassinations of would be peace-makers indicates that the Taliban hardliners are ascendant. Meanwhile, the Taliban’s “Spring Offensive” shows no signs of a dispirited insurgency.

Second, the talk about talks has increased suspicions about the Kabul government and intensified ethnic divisions. Many in the country’s north and west worry that President Karzai will sell out to his Pashtun brethren. A viable accord must include all the country’s major factions.

Third, current efforts to engage the Taliban ignore the impact talks may impose on the security, political and economic transitions under way. External financial and development assistance, and security aid, depend upon Kabul having a government that welcomes international support. A Taliban presence in a new government could nullify that opportunity should it adhere to its core goal that Afghanistan be an unadulterated Sharia state. The Taliban would rule out strategic agreements with the U.S. and others. Yet no Western country is likely to assist a regime that nullifies the gains made for social justice.

Fourth, pressing the Taliban to join in talks accords the Taliban unearned legitimacy. Direction negotiations with the U.S., supposedly facilitated by having the Taliban in Qatar, not only accord Mullah Omar’s Quetta Shura political status but leave it as the sole Afghan voice in talks to determine the country’s future.

Such consequences might have value if the Taliban offered anything useful in return. It hasn’t. The Taliban refuses to negotiate with the Kabul government or join the constitutional political system. It shows no sign that it would break with Al Qaeda, respect human rights, or lay down its arms. Mullah Omar insists that any agreement install him as head of state. That is no basis for talks.

Action steps to achieve a realistic accord

A successful strategy needs to set a foundation for talks rooted in military and political strength. This strategy should forcefully communicate to the Taliban through action and words that it confronts only two options: strike an accord acceptable to all the country’s major factions or face a prolonged civil war in which it is unlikely to prevail. Until that is achieved, talks will prove counter-productive.

A disciplined, systematic strategy requires leveraging the real interests of key players in the right strategic sequence.

The Afghan National Government (ANG)

Westerners often view Karzai as presiding over a corrupt, inefficient, over-centralized government. Afghans also worry about corruption and election fair play. Karzai won the 2009 Presidential election through massive fraud and intimidation. Opinion divides about equally on whether the 2010 Parliamentary elections were free and fair.¹ Yet Afghans hold a positive view of their situation. Recent polls indicate confidence in the Afghan National Army and the government. They do not yearn for a Taliban government.²

Five steps, taken in tandem, will strengthen the hand of the ANG and our ability to support it.

First, help the ANG consolidate strength in areas that it can plausibly defend. A decision needs to be made where to focus these forces. That judgment falls beyond the scope of this commentary, but it should be guided by the realization that insufficient resources exist to secure all the country. Let's focus resources where the government is strongest. One need not concede the south and east. But probably priority goes to major population centers and the north and west.

Second, work to ensure that the next elections are free, fair, and open, and to create a united front behind the next Afghan National Government that provides a legitimate, strong political base of support to counter Taliban ambitions.

Third, communicate forcefully that the U.S. will stand by the Strategic Partnership Agreement reached with the ANG to help anti-Taliban forces prevent a Taliban victory.

Fourth, articulate a cohesive, coordinated message with the ANG and its allies that Taliban dreams of inevitable victory are delusional. The Taliban realizes that winning requires tough fighting. But information warfare is about framing the terms of a conflict and influencing enemy perceptions and expectations.

Fifth, insist that in any accord the ANG and its partners respect two red lines: Afghanistan must not be used as a safe haven for terrorists or align with them. And respect for social progress such as allowing girls to be educated and other rights that protect human dignity must be guaranteed. There seems scant prospect that a U.S. Congress would fund the Strategic Partnership Agreement unless that occurs.

The U.S. and NATO

Six steps should guide these parties' actions between now and 2014.

First, work to size the Afghan National Army at a level that might plausibly receive needed financial support from the U.S. and other countries, and help train this force to function effectively.

Second, help secure areas the ANG can hold and support elections that strengthen the ANG politically.

Third, engage with regional neighbors, to ascertain what assistance they might provide to assure regional stability. Build on the fact that all the neighbors recognize that an ascendant Taliban is not in their interests. Dealing with Iran is notably sensitive, but U.S. and Iranian interests tend to converge as to Afghanistan. Iran's own interests may motivate it to be helpful. Its history with the Taliban is turbulent and it wields influence with the Hazara, who are overwhelmingly Shia and comprise at least nine percent of the Afghan population,³ and in Western Afghanistan.

Fourth, engage with Saudi Arabia to influence Pakistan to help facilitate meaningful negotiations that can produce a viable accord.

Fifth, engage with India to identify how it might reassure Pakistan that India won't use Afghanistan as a platform to meddle in Pakistani internal affairs. India is adamant against U.S. meddling in Kashmir. It may show more flexibility on Afghanistan.

Sixth, engage with Russia and China. Self-interest comes into play: both want U.S. and NATO military forces out of the region but not to exist precipitously.

The U.S. and Pakistan

Complicated, contradictory impulses appear to drive Pakistani security interests. Pakistan's active help in facilitating talks, once a proper foundation is set, is vital, and despite its double-dealing with the U.S. and the Taliban, plausible.

Key strategic steps include:

First, assure Pakistan that any accord with the Taliban will factor in Pakistan's security interests. Acknowledge Pakistan merits a role as a partner in facilitating talks for an accord and ensure that it has one. We should persevere in persuading Pakistan to back off its beneath-the-table support of the Taliban. But keep that effort separate.

Second, leverage belief among the Pakistani military that the U.S. strategic agreement won't preclude Pakistan from being Afghanistan's most important, influential neighbor.

Third, capitalize upon Pakistan Chief of Army Staff Asfaq Parvez Kayani's view that chaos in Afghanistan impairs Pakistani interests. While Pakistan exerts influence over elements of the Taliban, real tensions between them exist. The army understands that an expansionist Taliban that gains full control in Kabul could embolden Pakistan's own Taliban insurgency. A viable accord in Afghanistan will strengthen Pakistan's ability to

clamp down on Islamic extremism at home. That is also critical for real economic growth that offers its best path to opportunity, prosperity, and security. Our strategic communication must drive that message – and persuade the elected civilian Pakistani government and military to drive it among their citizens.

Fourth, address Pakistan's concerns about Indian influence in Afghanistan and disavow the belief that any Indian involvement in Afghanistan means strategic encirclement. Engagement will be sensitive. It must be undertaken. Ultimately, the real check on Indian influence would derive from an accord that precluded Indian adventurism, while also checking Taliban expansionist ambition into Pakistan.

Fifth, address the Pakistan military's relationship with the Haqqani network. While Pakistan won't attack the Haqqanis in their North Waziristan redoubt, we might persuade it to cease assistance. Should Pakistan balk, we do have leverage and should communicate a willingness to employ it. This includes signaling that resistance could lead the U.S. to forge a stronger security relationship with India. Cutting off U.S. military and civilian aid won't alter much. But the U.S. can influence Pakistan's continued ability to receive life-sustaining loans from the World Bank, the IMF, the Asian Development Bank, the European Union and Japan. There may be a way to leverage that without draconian measures.

The Taliban

Other issues complicate the Taliban's recalcitrance noted above. Who could speak for this factionalized movement in talks? Mullah Omar's sanction, and Haqqani concurrence, would matter. Yet whether all elements of the Taliban may respect any accord or how it could be enforced is unclear.

The important strategic point is that reason will not alter the Taliban's posture. Military and political strength might. While not necessarily convincing the true believers among the Taliban, it could allow the more pragmatic among the leadership to gain the upper hand.

It bears stressing: we must lay a military and political foundation that forces the Taliban to enter into a national accord or face a prolonged, unwinnable civil war pitting the Taliban against the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara and other anti-Taliban forces that draws in Pakistan, Iran, India, and possibly China and Russia. We must assert firmly the will to stand behind the Afghan National Government and deny an unreconstructed Taliban the opportunity to seize full power in Kabul.⁴

Four key factors support the plausibility of this strategy.

First, with perhaps 35,000 active members, the Taliban remains a relatively small force in a nation of 30 million people. While not defeated, we can make clear it cannot also prevail.

Second, Afghans today view the Taliban unfavorably. That represents a watershed change from the mood in 1996, when the Taliban credibly presented themselves as unifiers who stood for ending the rule of warlords, moral clarity, a just and safe society, and selfless patriotism. Experience is a powerful teacher. Our strategic communication must focus in a disciplined way on target audiences to solidify attitudes. Making that work requires that we use resources to maximize development as much as possible while establishing real security that provides safety to individual Afghans. If it cannot be done nationwide, it can be done in targeted areas or regions.

Third, this time around, the Taliban can't be assured of Pakistani army full support. Last time that was crucial to the Taliban's successes. Pakistan fears total Taliban victory and can expect strong criticism from the international community should it again aid the Taliban as it did in the 1990s. Of course, Pakistan will have less reason to aid the Taliban if a new government adequately represents the Pashtuns and has no inclination to align with India.

Fourth, the ethnic groups that formed the core of the North Alliance – Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara – are well armed and because many in the north have been trained as members of the Afghan National Army, they could give the Taliban a tougher fight than in the 1990s.

Putting the pieces together

Only the Afghans can decide what shape an accord would take, or what a future government would look like or be selected, led, and governed. It is their nation. They are independent minded. They will not tolerate foreign dictation. Engagement with regional neighbors can help facilitate talks, but we should avoid a three-ringed circus with multiple parties engaged in multiple talks. Afghans alone can and must determine their own future.

The U.S. and Pakistan are uniquely positioned to facilitate substantive negotiations – probably more so than the United Nations. Whether the talks are mediated, or by whom, must be an Afghan decision. The factions may not trust one another. Our goal should be to create the conditions that make clear to the Afghan stakeholders that they face two stark alternatives: a protracted civil war or an accord.

Successful negotiations with the Taliban are plausible only should real progress be achieved for political reconciliation among Afghanistan's various political factions. A critical test is whether a sufficient consensus can be forged for the next Presidential and Parliamentary elections to ensure that a legitimate national government emerges. Electoral mandate and an achievable military strategy offer the best hope for a viable political outcome for Afghanistan.

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1. Afghanistan in 2011: A Survey of the Afghan People,” *The Asia Foundation*: <http://asiafoundation.org/publications/pdf/989>.
2. See, e.g., “Afghanistan: Where Things Stand,” *ABC News/BBC/ARD Poll*, January 11, 2010: <http://abcnews.go.com/images/PollingUnit/1099a1Afghanistan-WhereThingsStand.pdf>. The poll shows far higher support for U.S. forces outside the south and east of Afghanistan; and “Afghanistan in 2011: A Survey of the Afghan People,” *The Asia Foundation*: <http://asiafoundation.org/publications/pdf/989>.
3. *CIA Factbook, Afghanistan*: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.
4. It may be worth reminding that after the Soviets left, expectations of a rapid collapse of the Afghan government at that time, which lacked anything like the popular and international support or resources standing behind the current one, fought on for three years before suffering defeat.