

AFGHANISTAN

SEARCHING FOR POLITICAL AGREEMENT



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Searching for Political Agreement

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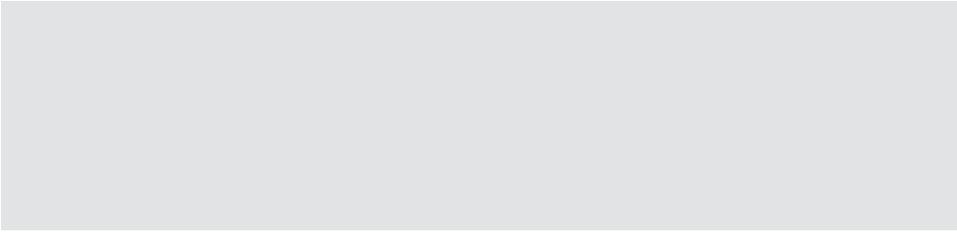
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Summary

The coalition strategy has reached an impasse. None of the efforts attempted since the summer of 2009 has halted the deterioration of the political and security situation. Although a few tactical successes might be possible, the coalition cannot defeat the Taliban or rally local commanders to its side. Moreover, the Karzai government enjoys very limited legitimacy and appears incapable of rebuilding a state that can assume responsibility for its own security in the foreseeable future. The coalition faces the risk of an endless engagement accompanied by an intolerable loss of life and treasure.

A less costly solution would be to negotiate a broad agreement with the Taliban leadership to form a national unity government, with guarantees against radical groups returning to Afghanistan. The United States must make contact with the Taliban leadership with the help of Pakistan in order to define the preconditions for negotiations and a cease-fire. The opening of negotiations hardly guarantees results, but the gains are potentially important for the coalition; the losses in the event of failure are negligible, given the absence of feasible alternatives.

Introduction

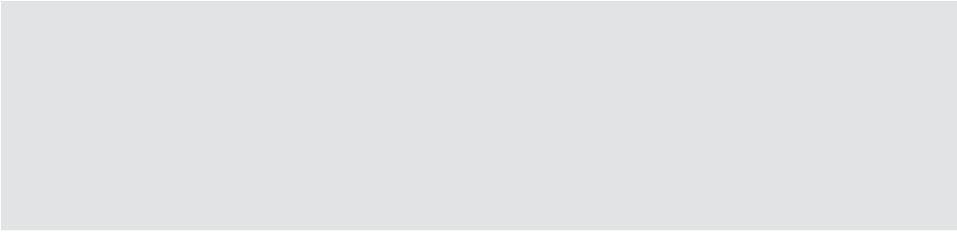
The London conference of January 28, 2010, illustrated the growing gap between the coalition's public discourse and realities on the ground. Far from offering credible, or even partial, solutions to the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan, the conference's conclusions recommend policies that already have proven ineffective if not counterproductive. Indeed, the coalition's strategy is at an impasse, as none of the efforts undertaken since the summer of 2009 has tempered the guerrilla war. A few tactical successes are possible, but the coalition cannot defeat the Taliban as long as Pakistan continues to offer them sanctuary. Under this scenario, any success would be dubious. Increasing resources is no longer an option.

Although it is highly unlikely that the United States would significantly decrease troop levels after the summer of 2011, there is also little chance that reinforcements would be sent. Such a move would run counter to President Barack Obama's statements, prevailing public opinion, and costs, which—to use Ambassador Karl Eikenberry's expression in the leaked telegram to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—are “astronomical.”

The entire coalition strategy revolves around a swift Afghanization of the conflict, with significant results by late 2010 or summer 2011. Yet the major development over the past year has been the weakening of the coalition's Afghan partner. If we use 2004—the year of the

Afghan presidential elections—as a benchmark, the dominant trend has been the breakdown of institutions, which have weakened rapidly; the state’s presence in the provinces has declined sharply. Furthermore, the legitimacy of the Karzai government is now being contested. Since the massive fraud in the presidential elections of August 2009, the government no longer enjoys any popular legitimacy, and the legislative elections slated for fall 2010 will probably undermine the political system even further because fraud is inevitable. In this context, President Hamid Karzai lacks the means to carry through with reforms and is increasingly dependent on clientelist and criminal networks. Achieving the Afghanization of security is unrealistic, and it is unlikely that the Afghan regime could one day autonomously assume responsibility for its own security. Finally, the Afghan government is being weakened by certain key aspects of the U.S. strategy that can be explained by the desire for rapid results—notably the privatization of security and the circumvention of Afghan institutions.

The coalition is therefore faced with the risk of an endless engagement accompanied by an intolerable loss of life and treasure. It would be less costly to negotiate a broad agreement with the Taliban leadership to form a national unity government, with guarantees against al-Qaeda’s return to Afghanistan. Yet there are no guarantees that such negotiations would succeed, or even that they might occur. The cost of their failure is negligible compared with the potential gain: a relatively swift way out of the crisis that preserves the coalition’s essential interests. Time is not on the coalition’s side, so the United States should make contact with the Taliban leadership as soon as possible to explore the possibility of negotiations, rather than waiting for the situation to deteriorate further.



1. The Military Impasse

The current strategy appears to have reached an impasse before all the reinforcements have arrived in Afghanistan, for the Taliban cannot be defeated militarily. The border with Pakistan is and will remain open for the insurgents, as the Pakistani army has refused to launch an offensive against the Afghan Taliban.¹ The Pakistani army has never considered operations against the Taliban leadership based in Pakistan as a way to seriously impair the insurgency. The February arrest of acting Taliban military commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, if not simply a mistake, is probably a sign that the Pakistani military wants more control of the insurgency to prepare for the negotiation process. The insurgency is now nationwide and cannot be contained with large operations in two or three southern provinces. In addition, the counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy cannot work because of the expected levels of resources it would require. In a marginal district such as Marjah, whose strategic importance is slight, the coalition would have to keep thousands of troops for months or years to prevent the Taliban's return. To replicate such strategy, even in only one province, would overstretch the U.S. military.

But COIN is only a minor part of the strategy. Coalition strategists think they can quickly weaken the Taliban through the creation of militias, the co-opting of Taliban groups, and targeted assassinations.² These policies will not strengthen the Afghan government's legitimacy or influence; to

the contrary, they will further weaken the central power. Notwithstanding public statements made last fall, the current strategy is not population-centered and is destroying the Karzai government's credibility.

The effects of the current strategy are irreversible, and with the acceleration of political fragmentation, the coalition is faced with the prospect of a collapse of Afghan institutions.

The Effects of the U.S. Strategy on Afghan Institutions

The coalition is in the difficult position of having to support an Afghan government that is largely corrupt and ineffective. But by systematically circumventing the Afghan state, the coalition's current policy contributes to the weakening of the regime. The circumvention of Afghan institutions takes two important forms: the militarization of aid, and the privatization of security through militias. The co-opting of Taliban groups, although in theory different from the privatization of security, will equally reinforce the political fragmentation.

THE MILITARIZATION OF AID, THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION, AND THE CIRCUMVENTION OF AFGHAN AUTHORITIES

Aid distributed by the coalition is not helping to shore up Afghan institutions; in fact, the bulk of such funds are not managed by the ministries in Kabul. Circumventing Afghan institutions is justified by the widespread corruption, but that means institution building is no longer a centerpiece of the current strategy. The progressive militarization of the Western force in particular has only reinforced this trend. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are no longer truly accountable to the Afghan government, or even to the provincial governors. Likewise, the emergency aid funds available to U.S. commanders—\$1.3 billion in 2010—are spent without Afghan government oversight, or without even informing the Afghan authorities. Because of the initial lack of government structures, the counterinsurgency strategy left coalition

military personnel responsible for providing schools, infrastructure, and so on for an unspecified length of time.

THE PRIVATIZATION OF SECURITY

Since 2009, probably the most striking outcome of the new U.S. strategy is the proliferation of militias and autonomous armed groups, which vary in nature. Private security companies have armed contractors who move about on the roads and fight the insurgency at the borders. Local militias have been established, and groups that do not always officially exist work with U.S. Special Forces. They are likely at the root of numerous incidents, such as the one in which Kandahar's police chief was killed in June 2009. These groups are not integrated into a coherent scheme, enjoy considerable autonomy, and often compete with regular forces.

In a previous report,³ I criticized the illusion of “playing local,” notably the risks of the creation of militias. These policies have proven ineffective and dangerous, as they destroy the possibility of a state and accelerate political fragmentation. The local population generally loathes these armed groups and often has credited the Taliban with cleansing the country of them. The population strongly opposes the return of the militias that were active during the civil war of the 1990s. Yet by supporting the proliferation of militias, the coalition is re-creating the conditions that helped bring the Taliban to power in the 1990s. Poor treatment of the population has earned a very bad reputation for Western or Afghan mercenaries working for security companies such as Xe (formerly Blackwater).

“Playing local” stems from the idea that segments of Afghan society can be manipulated, but this approach is profoundly wrong for two reasons. First, it underestimates the fact that the Taliban are a national political movement that is relatively centralized, ideologically coherent, and able to build on the public resentment toward the coalition and the Afghan government. No tribe or militia can reverse a national momentum. Second, the Westerners lack the capacity to implement this type of policy, especially in less than two years. Very few officers or civil experts know a district or a province well enough. Building trust with local strongmen

takes years, and nothing indicates that Westerners have done so. The media-reported success stories in Uruzgan, Kunar, and Loya Paktia turned out to be major tactical failures or, at best, uncomfortable stalemates.

Although efforts in Wardak province have not yielded conclusive results, the U.S. Army used a different logic in deciding to expand the number of militias. Instead of recruiting individuals, using a complex selection process as in Wardak, the new militias are pre-constituted groups, often criminals or former commanders from the 1990s. In Kunduz the government allowed groups in the Khanabad district to assume responsibility for security, and militias were created to ensure the security of major thoroughfares. Once constituted, these armed groups are extremely difficult to control, but the security of the Western forces' supply chain depends partly on them—especially in the South, where a large offensive will take place in 2010. It is not yet fully clear whether the Interior Ministry or the president's office will have legal control of these groups; in practice, they are largely autonomous.

The coalition's tribal policy is a variation on its use of militias and is based on several illusions. It is not a new idea: The United States has attempted—unsuccessfully—to manipulate the tribal system several times since 2001, when circumstances were clearly more favorable.

The first problem with this approach is a tendency to overestimate the importance of tribal structure in Afghanistan. As U.S. Army Major Jim Gant wrote in a paper widely distributed among the Special Forces, "When one says 'Afghan people,' what I believe they are really saying is 'tribal member.' Every single Afghan is a part of a tribe and understands how the tribe operates and why."⁴ Yet the Pashtuns, who make up around 40 percent of the population, do not all have a clear tribal identity, particularly in the cities. Tribal institutions are in decline throughout Afghanistan. Following the American invasion in 2001, there was a limited and temporary retribalization because of the collapse of the central authority and U.S. policy. The same thing happened in 1992, after the collapse of the regime in Kabul. In both cases, other political structures became dominant, and the Taliban systematically weakened the tribes. Islam, not tribal identity, is the key reference for the Afghan population in

the debate about justice, the presence of foreign troops, and the legitimacy of the government.

The second problem is the confusion between tribal institutions and tribal identity. Tribal institutions have a customary law and specific consultation procedures, and are found mainly in the eastern provinces. Tribal identity is one aspect of an individual's multifaceted identity, but it does not mean that he participates in tribal institutions. Political entrepreneurs might mobilize people who share an identity in order to collectively accumulate resources (typically land and contracts with the coalition), as has happened in Kandahar since 2001. Gul Agha Shirzai mobilized the Barakzai, Hamid Karzai did so with the Popolzai, and Mullah Naqib did so with the Alikozai. But such mobilization is not nation-building.

The practical consequences of the distinction between tribal identity and institutions are important: Outside of the eastern part of the country, there are no tribal "structures" per se, but rather fluid groups whose leaders have limited legitimacy and are not very useful allies for the coalition. Far from being mostly traditional leaders, they are often the products of jihad, as are Shirzai and Mullah Naqib. These armed groups, particularly in Kandahar, have accumulated resources and distributed public lands to their clientele, which has created tensions with the large majority of residents who haven't benefited.

RALLYING THE TALIBAN

Rallying local Taliban members to support the Karzai regime by paying them or granting amnesties has never worked. An amnesty was tried, notably in 2002, when the Taliban were clearly in a much weaker position than they are today. These attempts failed, for complex reasons relating to both the lack of a clear coalition policy and to Mullah Omar's rejection of such overtures. Now that the Taliban movement is much more organized, it is hard to see why some Taliban commanders would agree to rally to the coalition, particularly considering how effective the Taliban have been at punishing those who betray them.

The initial economic analysis of the fighters' motivation is dangerously misleading. There is *no* solid empirical basis for the coalition's claims that 80 percent of combatants could rally to the side of the Karzai government in order to obtain jobs. First of all, the (fragmentary) data and analysis of the Taliban militants show that their motivations are linked to a rejection of the Kabul government and the coalition, and to the insurgency's propaganda campaign. There is no correlation between economic development and the entrenchment or strength of the insurgency. The insurgents champion values that they consider threatened, such as national independence, religion, and morals. Reducing the complexity of their commitment to an economic motive is unrealistic.

As long as the insurgency has no problem recruiting, Karzai's ability to muster individual support is irrelevant. The current number of insurgent fighters exceeds 30,000, and there are millions of young, rural Pashtuns in the pool of potential recruits. The insurgency can easily replace a few thousand fighters. Disarmament programs and reintegration of former fighters only provided more resources to local strongmen. Co-opting groups makes more sense, but the loyalty of these groups is questionable. The proliferation of special operations and the elimination of several hundred mid-level Taliban cadres in Afghanistan and Pakistan run counter to that logic. Experience has shown that Taliban networks re-form quickly and in a more organized, more hierarchical way with local commanders who are more dependent on the Taliban's top leadership council in Quetta and in less of a position to make agreements with the coalition. Now that the insurgency is nationwide, it is hard to see how enough groups could be co-opted locally to change the dynamic of the conflict. In a fragmented context, if the coalition wins the support of one group, this can trigger a rapprochement of the competing ones with the Taliban.

The policy of rallying the Taliban to the coalition's side has harmful consequences: U.S. commanders who have considerable amounts of cash that they can spend with virtually no accountability will be tempted to buy off combatants. This risks exacerbating local disorder and alienating the population. Most of the mistakes related to targeted killings and bombings, which are such a political problem for the coalition, are born from faulty intelligence given to the coalition for revenge purposes.

A portion of any monies used to buy off combatants will no doubt be indirectly funneled to the Taliban.

Which Afghan Partner?

It is highly unlikely that the Karzai government will engage in institutional reform, given that it is increasingly dependent on the networks that ensured its re-election. This is why the coalition is having more and more trouble influencing Karzai, which does not bode well for future collaboration. The weakness of the central political institutions means that the development of the army and the police force—the coalition's priorities—is occurring in an institutional vacuum. Transferring security responsibilities to our Afghan partner probably will not be possible in the foreseeable future.

THE LEGITIMACY OF THE AFGHAN REGIME

Afghanistan is a country whose people perceive its representative institutions as illegitimate. The extent of the fraud makes precise analysis difficult, but between 10 percent and 15 percent of Afghans of voting age are believed to have supported Karzai during the 2009 presidential elections.⁵ All indications point to a high level of cynicism among the people and their rejection of the government; in fact, they massively refrained from voting even in places where security was reasonably good. The legislative elections scheduled for September 2010 will further erode faith in the political system. The current lack of security makes it impossible to hold credible elections throughout at least half of Afghanistan. In February 2010, Karzai seized control of the ECC (Electoral Complaints Commission); there is no longer an independent institution to validate the process. Most likely, those who are elected will be local strongmen (or their representatives) who are attached to their autonomy from the central authority, in some cases close to the insurgency.⁶ And there are still no political parties, so Parliament will remain politically fragmented, as it is today.

Aside from fraud and corruption, Karzai's lack of legitimacy is linked to his presumed lack of autonomy vis-à-vis the coalition. Internal U.S. Army studies, and the experiences of numerous journalists and researchers, indicate that a large majority of the population in combat zones now considers the foreign forces as occupiers (as U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates feared).⁷ Military operations are polarizing the population against foreign forces and further weakening Karzai's regime, which appears irreparably unpopular and illegitimate. The coalition is perceived as the main *insecurity* provider, and villagers do not want to see the establishment of coalition outposts that can bring only bombings and IEDs.

Last but not least, a large number of Pashtuns are alienated from the government. Karzai is Pashtun, but his alliances with the Hazara Mohammad Karim Khalili, Tajik Mohammad Qasim Fahim, and Uzbek Rashid Dostum mean he is perceived as the instrument of non-Pashtun ethnicities. Khalili, a Hazara who doesn't speak Pashto, was the first high-ranking official from the Afghan government to meet the Pashtun population in Marjah in February 2010. This reveals a lack of political savvy on the part of the Afghan government or, worse, the lack of a strong Pashtun personality.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REFORMING THE KARZAI REGIME

Two things make reforming the Karzai regime highly unlikely: the coalition's diminished influence and peripheral areas' growing autonomy from central institutions.

The coalition is gradually losing control of Karzai, who is less and less receptive to pressure, probably for two major reasons. First, attacks in the Western press have led Karzai and his allies to be deeply suspicious of the coalition. The personal closeness between President George W. Bush and Karzai prevented the United States from considering lending even implicit support to another candidate before the elections. The men surrounding Karzai are often deeply opposed to the coalition, for ideological reasons (many are Islamists, either members of the Hezb-i Islami or former members of Sayyaf's E'ttehad) and because they feel they have been targeted in the Western media. (Wali Karzai and Marechal Muhammad

Qasim Fahim were both accused of drug ties in U.S. newspapers.) The lack of trust between the coalition and the Afghan government increases the difficulty of pressuring the government or swaying Hamid Karzai on a specific issue.

Second, the elections of August 2009 revealed that Karzai, who is increasingly dependent on his allies, suffers from a real lack of legitimacy. The contest demonstrated two things: Karzai is supported by well-known figures, often former commanders, whose vote he has secured through favors. Karzai rewards loyalty with government jobs, appointments to sometimes highly lucrative government posts, or positions as militia leaders. Dostum's return from exile as the Afghan army's chief of staff is payment for his campaign efforts on behalf of Karzai. He was appointed despite the nearly unanimous opposition of coalition partners (Turkey was likely the exception). The growing dependence of Karzai on his local allies hurts the coalition, whose objectives are generally opposed to those of the local players. The Afghan government is distancing itself more and more aggressively from the coalition when incidents arise involving civilians (or "friendly fire"), further strengthening the coalition's unpopularity.

Obviously, the government in Kabul is now too weak to reassert control over regional systems as strongly structured as those of Jalalabad or Kandahar, or in the Northwest around Jumbesh. Even in Herat, it seems likely that deteriorating security will enable Ismael Khan to once again become a central figure in the political game, if he survives recurrent assassination attempts. The coalition depends on the regional leaders that it helped put in place or with whom it has worked. Challenging the balance of political power in Kandahar, particularly the dominant role of the network associated with Karzai, is practically impossible while the Taliban are exerting constant pressure. The few "technocratic" ministers—the best example of whom is Interior Minister Hanif Atmar—have no influence over the very solid networks connected with the Karzai family. And in a system as clientalist and personalized as the Afghan political system, it is hard to imagine how current practices could be transformed significantly without changing the people. Governance is highly unlikely to improve soon. Reforming a ministry in Kabul might be possible, but the effects on governance in the provinces are probably limited.

THE TRANSFER OF SECURITY RESPONSIBILITIES

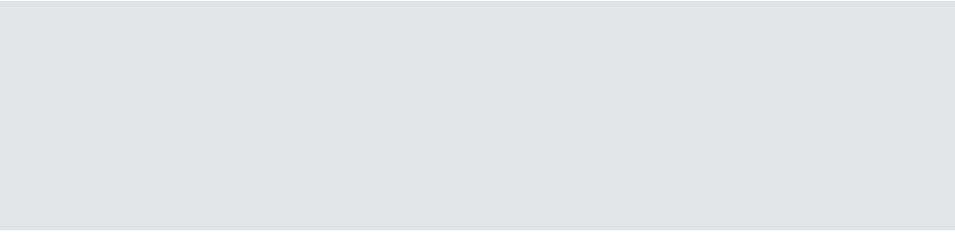
The weakening of the Afghan regime has major consequences for the coalition, which is promoting progressive Afghanization in order to reduce its own investment. In this regard, the London conference established that the transfer of responsibilities to Afghan forces would begin in 2011 and be largely complete by 2014. The Afghan National Army (ANA) is supposed to be in charge of ensuring the security of a certain number of undefined provinces, but NATO troops will remain to provide support. Just before the London conference, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board established the objective of increasing Afghan army troops from 97,000 to 171,000 by the end of 2011. In addition, Canadian Major General Mike Ward, NATO's deputy commander in charge of training (or re-training) the police force, plans to increase its numbers from 94,000 to 134,000 by the end of 2011. The aim is to have an army of 240,000 and a police force of 160,000 within five years.

Is this goal attainable? Probably not, for four reasons:

- The current Afghan army probably has slightly more than 60,000 troops who are combat capable, and it does not have a nationwide presence. The annual turnover rate is around 25 percent. The police force has an annual turnover rate close to 70 percent.⁸ The training effort must be enormous simply to make up for departures.
- One of the army's key problems is its inability to operate independently of the coalition (beyond about 100 men). Coordination is the chief problem, and the demoralized officer corps must become more professional. More time and resources are needed to ensure that training is not cut short.
- The quality of training could suffer because of the number of people to be trained and the weakness of the current system. The use of private subcontractors and the lack of a recruit selection process mean a risk of infiltration by the insurgency and a low-quality police force and army. Ninety percent of police recruits are illiterate, and many use drugs.

- It is hard to build a military that is independent of the institutional network that constitutes the state. Problems such as ethnic tensions, local and national corruption, and the lack of a clear project make it hard to motivate soldiers and officers. The local population is exasperated by endemic police corruption. Pashtuns perceive the army as Tajik, and a majority of the officers do indeed speak Persian.

For all of these reasons, the official objectives are unrealistic, particularly given that the Taliban have become an effective, well-organized enemy. More modest objectives would be more realistic.⁹ The coalition should recognize that an autonomous Afghan army is a very distant goal. The quick degradation of security in the West and North make it unlikely that the Afghan security forces will be able to contain the Taliban pressure nationwide. In any case, the strategic outcome in the next eighteen months will be insignificant. If this analysis is correct, the large offensive to “clear” Taliban territory will not work, because the Afghan army and the police are not ready. The coalition will quickly be overstretched if it tries to secure Taliban territory on a long-term basis, and casualties will increase significantly.



2. The Argument for Negotiations

The London conference rejected the principle of negotiating with insurgency leaders in favor of co-opting local figures. This strategy is unlikely to succeed. Most observers recognize the impossibility of a military solution and the current strategic impasse, but different arguments have been put forward to reject negotiations. First, the coalition needs more time. Reinforcements are not yet fully in place, so any talk of failure is premature. Negotiating with the Taliban now would encourage them just as military pressure is reaching its peak. Experts such as Ahmed Rashid explain that the Taliban have reached the height of their influence, implying that the coalition would be in a better position in the future.

One can counterargue that the coalition should begin negotiations now while it still has the means to exert military pressure. There is nothing to indicate that the Taliban are going to slow their advance; in fact, their influence might be spreading. They are pursuing a strategy that includes expanding their influence in the cities, which I believe to be effective; other ethnic groups, such as the Uzbeks, are not necessarily immune from Taliban propaganda. Yes, the Taliban could experience tactical setbacks this year. But the coalition now has a limited window, and there's nothing to indicate that the Karzai regime won't be even weaker a year from now. If this happens, the coalition will be in a

relatively more difficult position in late 2011. In this perspective, the Afghan surge would have had the same result as all increases of troops since 2003: a deterioration of security. Marginal military gains for the coalition in the next eighteen months are the exact equivalent to a defeat at a strategic level. Because of its cost, the surge imposes a strong time constraint on the coalition (hence the choice of 2011 as the beginning of the withdrawal). If the Taliban are convinced that the coalition is under pressure to withdraw, the negotiations will be more difficult.

Second, the difference between the Taliban's values and those of the coalition is often presented as a major obstacle to negotiations. The reality is more complex. The coalition has worked with (and in certain cases protected) war criminals such as Dostum and drug traffickers linked to Karzai, so asserting the coalition's moral purity is difficult. Also, fundamentalism is not unique to the Taliban; the discourse of the political elites who support the government is often very similar to that of the fundamentalists, notably because some of them came out of the resistance movements of the 1980s. There is no major difference between the ideology of the Taliban and that of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Mohammad Karim Khalili, Burhanuddin Rabbani, or Ismael Khan. A negotiated solution might marginalize the most educated, Westernized segment of the population, but things could be far worse for them: Without an agreement that would make it possible to rebuild society and include the main ideological and political movements, this segment of the population can easily be targeted for violence.

Finally, it can be argued that if the negotiations fail—a distinct possibility—the political cost to the coalition would be significant. I wrote this argument myself in a previous report (*Focus and Exit*), but the weakening of the Karzai regime since the summer 2009 elections and the military impasse in the South lead me to think that the consequences of a breakdown in negotiations would be negligible today. First, insofar as the Afghan authorities and the United Nations are openly making contact with the Taliban leadership, the latter are already recognized as potential partners. Second, an attempt to negotiate is a good argument against those who believe the coalition is seeking to remain in Afghanistan indefinitely. The opening of negotiations must be part

of an effort to decrease the level of violence and polarization (foreigners versus insurgents) leading the population to side with the Taliban. Even with respect to Western public opinion, there might not necessarily be a loss of support as Westerners have already absorbed the possibility of the coalition's failure and the need for an exit strategy. Opening negotiations could mobilize Afghan elites, who often have the illusion that the coalition will remain in Afghanistan indefinitely.

The possibility of negotiating raises several questions: What are the preconditions for opening negotiations? Who should be in charge of the negotiations: the United States, the United Nations, or the Karzai government? What should the agenda be?

The Negotiating Framework

The negotiating framework should be determined during a secret contact phase mediated by the Pakistani army prior to the strictly diplomatic phase conducted under UN auspices. The Pakistani army has continuously supported the Taliban against the coalition, and there are good arguments against rewarding this duplicity. However, the arrest of Mullah Baradar and other members of the Taliban leadership indicates that the Pakistani military have the means to stop any Taliban attempt to negotiate directly with Karzai or with the coalition. A real negotiation process is difficult to organize without Pakistan. Why should the coalition trust Pakistan, when that country is supporting the coalition's enemies? Pakistan's Afghan policy can be seen as totally conditioned by the (probably irrational) perception of an Indian threat. The Pakistani military wants to be part of a political agreement in Afghanistan to avoid a repeat of the 1990s, when the Taliban were quickly marginalized by the international community. The Pakistani government has a real long-term interest in fighting al-Qaeda, which has relentlessly targeted the Pakistani army.

What preconditions should the coalition establish? First, negotiations must be used to change the internal political dynamic by decreasing the level of violence and, therefore, the local population's opposition to foreign troops. A cease-fire during the negotiating process, which could

last for months, would encourage contacts at the local level between Taliban commanders and local authorities, strengthening the chances of an agreement. The coalition would gain a few months of calm in the southern provinces, which could significantly alter perceptions. A ceasefire, and the return of some Taliban commanders in Afghanistan, is the best chance to “Afghanize” the negotiation process. At the same time, it is essential to “demilitarize” humanitarian aid and promote agreements between the Taliban and nongovernmental organizations so that the latter can intervene in areas held by the insurgency. A significant number of compromises on the local level would themselves benefit the coalition.

The selection of participants will largely determine the success of the negotiations, and must be based on effectiveness. Potential spoilers must be included; excluding Pakistan from the 2001 talks in Bonn helped lead to the failure of the Bonn agreement. Organizers must avoid bringing in pairs of players whose interests constitute a zero-sum game. Not all regional powers can be part of the negotiations dealing with political balances in Afghanistan. The opening of direct negotiations with the Taliban and the de facto recognition of Pakistan’s influence is an important shift in the regional situation, and the states that are left out—mainly India—would oppose it. Yet Pakistan is the only country that can truly act as a spoiler. India, and to a lesser degree Iran, might feel uncomfortable with the inclusion of the Pakistani army (which could consider its inclusion a victory) but they probably do not have the means to sabotage an agreement. And without an agreement, the future would be even worse for Indian and Iranian interests. For these reasons, initial negotiations must include only the essential actors: the Karzai government, Pakistan, the Taliban, and the United States (representing the coalition). This quartet could negotiate an agreement that includes the redefinition of Afghan political balances and international guarantees.

The United States should have a central role in the opening of negotiations, both to convince the Taliban to negotiate and to achieve a final status compatible with coalition interests. Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, is *a priori* the person who should conduct the negotiations, as the idea is to take Pakistani interests into account. Establishing contacts must not be left

up to the Karzai government. The Taliban will not negotiate with only Karzai, because he is too weak and cannot make a commitment on key points: the withdrawal of Western forces and security guarantees relating to al-Qaeda.¹⁰

Obviously the Taliban must be invited to the negotiations; the case for including Hezb-i Islami, the second insurgent movement, is more complex. That party, and notably its leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, has a long history as a spoiler and bears great responsibility for the outbreak of war following the *mujahideen's* 1992 entry into Kabul. As early as the 1980s, Hekmatyar, whom Pakistan and the United States then favored, launched regular attacks against other groups of fighters. In the current context, one of Hezb-i Islami's strengths is its ability to work with both sides. It is a legal party in Kabul, represented by some 30 members in Parliament, with elected officials who often maintain good relations with Karzai. Failing to include Hezb-i Islami in negotiations is a major risk, but including it could derail the entire process. There is no satisfactory solution, but it is probably too dangerous not to include the group.

The Final Status

The most complex point in the negotiations is the articulation of two types of demands: a new political contract with the Taliban and the other political forces and, at the same time, a system of guarantees to ensure that radical groups do not make Afghanistan their base for striking India and the West. These two aspects must be negotiated concurrently, for Afghanistan's domestic equilibrium is the key to a reasonable guarantee with respect to neutralizing radical groups.

A NEW SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTRACT

The Bonn agreement, insofar as it excluded the Taliban and included a new leader (Karzai) who was chosen by the United States, was not a good foundation for stabilizing Afghanistan. A new agreement, which could be reached through a *Loya Jirga* in Kabul, must include the major

political forces but also civil society representatives. The new constitution could be more conservative than the current one, so NGOs must try to limit backsliding on human rights, particularly for women. The risk is significant and should be addressed now, before negotiations even begin. The coalition must encourage and assist associations to establish a common front and organize into a pressure group.

The agreement's general orientation must be a power-sharing arrangement, not the regional division of Afghanistan. Karzai would not accept a regional power-sharing arrangement, where the Taliban would take complete control of the southern provinces, because all the Pashtun areas quickly would switch to the Taliban side. That is particularly the case in Kandahar, where Karzai's support is rather limited and the insurgency is largely dominant. In the North, the area's ethnic composition partially cuts through political alliances; establishing homogeneous political areas would create insurmountable tensions. Power sharing in the center—a government comprising Taliban ministers—must be accompanied by an agreement at the provincial level with the appointment of Taliban judges and administrators in districts the Taliban already control. Karzai's resignation and the appointment of a new leader by a *Loya Jirga*, rather than through elections, would help overcome the liabilities of a now-discredited government.

INTERNATIONAL GUARANTEES

For the members of the coalition, a political agreement with the Taliban is meaningless without guarantees that al-Qaeda will not return to Afghanistan. From this standpoint, the negotiations must focus on two issues: the withdrawal of coalition forces and the nature of the required guarantees. On the first point, the coalition must avoid committing to a specific timetable, which would very quickly diminish its influence in Afghanistan.

On the second point, an agreement could lead to partial control of the border by the Afghan government—sufficient at least to ensure that training camps are not established in Afghanistan. The country's use as

a haven is inevitable, but this level of risk is probably manageable (and is hardly different from what is taking place). The coalition must seek to obtain—preferably with UN approval—the right to strike non-Afghan groups operating from Afghanistan, either from bases within Afghanistan or outside the country. It is essential to establish a legal base for future counterterrorism operations.

There could be two positive outcomes of a unity government. First, Pakistan could largely lose control of the Taliban once they are reintegrated into the Afghan political process. In the late 1990s the Taliban became progressively more autonomous, and it is no secret that the Taliban today are not especially happy with the Pakistani army, especially the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The negotiating process could “nationalize” the Taliban. Second, an agreement or even the opening of negotiations would be a political problem for al-Qaeda, which needs continued fighting to distract the United States and drum up Muslim support. Negotiations remain the best possible way to distance the Taliban from al-Qaeda. The Taliban’s history as an Afghan movement rooted in the rural, Pashtun segment of Afghan society is at odds with al-Qaeda’s internationalist goals. These tensions can be exploited, especially when it is in Pakistan’s overriding interest to make Afghanistan a local problem.

THE SEARCH FOR A REGIONAL AGREEMENT

Once a power-sharing agreement is in place, the situation in Afghanistan should begin to stabilize. At that point a regional agreement on issues such as borders and trade can be envisioned that would make it possible, in principle, to avoid a return to the 1990s, when foreign powers largely contributed to prolonging the war by supporting different armed Afghan groups.

Obstacles to Negotiation

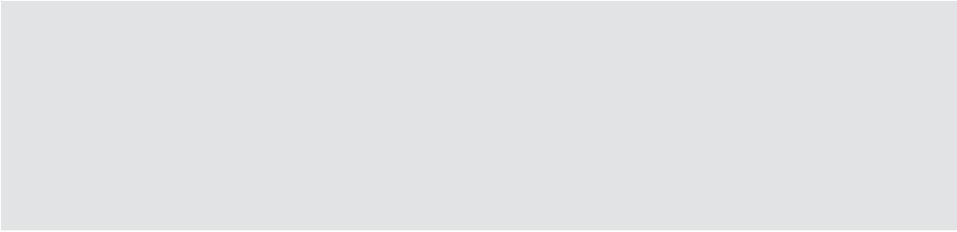
There are many obstacles standing in the way of negotiations and their success: their rejection by the Taliban, obstruction by Karzai allies, and the nature of guarantees against the return of radical groups.

There is no guarantee that the Taliban will accept negotiations. Indeed, its leaders are optimistic about the outcome of the war. The fact that the U.S. troop commitment (and by extension, that of the coalition) will reach its apex next year in a way limits the effort. Even the coalition's successes in the South will not translate into real stabilization, as there is no Afghan partner to pick up the reins. For the time being, at least, the Taliban are showing a great ability to adapt (notably in Helmand), and popular support for them is growing in areas that are seeing frequent military operations. Moreover, the Taliban can hope for further gains in the North, such as Herat and the Northeast. Pakistani support remains solid, and the Afghan Taliban avoided the mistake of supporting the Pakistani Taliban in its show of force with the central government that began in the Swat Valley and continues in South Waziristan. The Afghan Taliban remain popular among a large swath of the Pakistani population. Therefore, Mullah Omar might decide (if he can achieve a sort of consensus) to reject the negotiations and wait for the coalition to sufficiently weaken. A final element might come into play: the rise of a new generation of more radical Taliban cadres and the personal experience of leaders such as Jalaluddin Haqqani or Mullah Omar, whose families have been hit hard by American missile strikes.

Yet there are solid reasons for believing that the Taliban might accept at least preliminary contacts and possibly real negotiations. Pakistan's influence might turn out to be decisive. The Pakistani army does not want to see a situation like that of the 1990s when the Taliban regime was ostracized by the international community, largely reducing the strategic benefit Pakistan hoped to reap from its victory. Pakistan wants a diplomatic solution in which its role as a regional power is recognized and India is supplanted. The Taliban might also derive tactical advantages from an agreement. But although it is likely that they will use the negotiations as an instrument to accomplish their goal of re-establishing the Islamic Emirate, they could find themselves progressively enmeshed in a political process and lose some control of their regional commanders. If the coalition plays its cards right, the Taliban could initially engage in the process with the idea of seizing power, then find themselves progressively

integrated into the political game. Negotiations would strengthen the importance of the Taliban's Quetta-based leadership council, notably Mullah Omar, who could see this as an opportunity to reassert his authority and become recognized as a legitimate interlocutor.

Karzai's allies—notably the Kandahar networks, Dostum, the Shi'i Hazaras (represented by the *Hezb-i wahdat*) and certain northern groups historically opposed to the Taliban (Abdullah Abdullah, who puts himself forward as Masud's successor, and Fahim)—might oppose negotiations that could, in the event of a coalition government, marginalize them politically. For Dostum, accused of having massacred several thousand Taliban prisoners of war in 2001, there is no easy solution for coexistence, other than leaving the local governors in place and guaranteeing a sufficient level of autonomy at the provincial level. Special legal status might solve the problem for the Shi'a.



Conclusions and Recommendations

Negotiations with Taliban leaders can be undertaken only if the Pakistani army agrees to act as a broker. Without Pakistan, there will be no solution in Afghanistan. Yet at least since the 2005 nuclear agreements between India and the United States, India has been the United States' preferred regional partner. This has reinforced the Pakistani army's fear and, indirectly, its support for the Taliban. The opening of negotiations would initiate a new phase in U.S. relations with Pakistan.

Official negotiations cannot begin without the participation of the Karzai regime and international guarantees preventing the return of radical groups to Afghanistan. Along with negotiations, it is important to help increase areas of cooperation with the insurgency instead of polarizing the political game. A cease-fire must therefore be observed during the negotiation process. The reduction in violence could help demobilize the Taliban and distance them from the radical groups currently in Pakistan, such as al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban. Likewise, aid must be demilitarized, and NGOs must be permitted to negotiate directly with the Taliban in order to work in the regions under their control.

The privatization of security (militias, deals with individual tribes, and private companies) is dangerous. These groups will be difficult to control

in the event of an agreement and are weakening Afghan institutions. The United States should immediately stop funding militias, which is counterproductive in the long term. U.S. strategy should immediately bring an end to the proliferation of these armed groups.

Nothing guarantees that negotiations—if agreed to by the Taliban—will succeed. Furthermore, the regime that will be established will be unstable for months, perhaps even years. But if the negotiations succeed, they will enable the formation of a national unity government in Kabul, a new constitution negotiated during a *Loya Jirga*, and internal and international guarantees to prevent the return of al-Qaeda. Given the current impasse in which the coalition finds itself, such a result is the best that one can hope for.

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Notes

- 1 Experts and neighboring governments—India, Pakistan, the countries of Central Asia, and Iran—anticipate that the American strategy will fail, further weakening Pakistan’s incentive to attack the Taliban.
- 2 The coalition’s most effective tactic has been the targeted assassination of hundreds of leaders of Taliban groups on both sides of the border by U.S. Special Forces and drones. In Afghanistan, these “black” special operations are implemented outside of the NATO command, as they are not part of any legal framework. The Afghan government is not consulted, and the allies are informed at the last minute on a need-to-know basis. This tactic only contains the Taliban upsurge while producing known negative effects (negative public opinion, radicalization of the Taliban movement). There are no official figures on the extent of these operations or their results, but there do not seem to be any provinces where the insurgency has been weakened in the long term.
- 3 Gilles Dorronsoro, “Focus and Exit,” Policy Brief, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2009, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publicactions/?fa=view&id=22619>
- 4 Major Jim Gant, *A Strategy for Success in Afghanistan: One Tribe at a Time*, 2009, p. 11, http://blog.stevenpressfield.com/wp-content/themes/stevenpressfield/one_tribe_at_a_time_ed2.pdf. Interestingly, this very naïve text was recommended reading for Special Forces.
- 5 Official figures indicate that Karzai won less than 50 percent of the vote, with only 31 percent of eligible adults voting. But credible observers have argued that real turnout was much lower, perhaps around 20 percent.
- 6 See Scott Worden, “Delays Will Not Improve Afghan Elections,” Peace Brief, United States Institute of Peace, February 2010, <http://www.usip.org/resources/delays-will-not-improve-afghan-elections>.

- 7 One of the central elements of the Western narrative of the war in Afghanistan is that the coalition troops are accepted by the Afghans, who want protection from the Taliban. The major problem is that there is support for the coalition in places where the coalition is not operating. Where the coalition is militarily active—mostly in the Pashtun belt—the support is now marginal.
- 8 According to Lieutenant General William Caldwell, the Commander of the NATO Training Mission and Combined Security Transition Command, Agence France-Press, March 2, 2010.
- 9 A RAND Corporation report, established much more credible objectives: an army of 120,000 by 2014. See Obaid Younossi et al., *The Long March: Building an Afghan National Army* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2009, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG845.pdf).
- 10 On the clash between the United States and Karzai, see Gareth Porter, “US, Karzai Clash on Unconditional Talks With Taliban,” IPS, February 2, 2010, <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=50196>.

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