



# SEEKING SOLUTIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN

Second Report on the Abu Dhabi Process





# ABU DHABI PROCESS MEETING REPORT

October 5 - 6, 2010

Kabul, Afghanistan



**EASTWEST INSTITUTE**  
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For more information about the EastWest Institute or this paper, please contact:

The EastWest Institute  
11 East 26th Street, 20th Floor  
New York, NY 10010  
U.S.A. 1-212-824-4100  
[communications@ewi.info](mailto:communications@ewi.info)

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Cover photo: An Afghan man stands next to the ruins of a tomb as he looks towards the horizon during the final sunset of the year in Kabul, Afghanistan, Friday, Dec. 31, 2010 (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

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# Contents

Contents .....	5
Introduction .....	1
Conclusions and Recommendations .....	1
Discussion Report .....	3
Building on the National Consultative Peace Jirga .....	3
Steps Towards Reconciliation .....	5
The Role of the High Peace Council .....	7
Bilateral Aspects .....	9
Regional Aspects .....	11
Abu Dhabi Process .....	12



# Introduction

The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan have accepted a generous proposal from the government of Abu Dhabi to host a series of meetings facilitated by the EastWest Institute (EWI) to complement existing channels of communication between the two countries. Participants in the series, known as the Abu Dhabi Process, discuss areas of their relationship they believe will help build confidence, ensure greater stability, and enhance sustainable development in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The meetings are off-the-record, consultative in nature, and governed by the Chatham House Rule.

The deliberations held in October 2010 in Kabul built on a round of talks held in June 2010 in Abu Dhabi. This report summarizes the discussions in Kabul, based on the views of a select group of senior Afghan and Pakistani politicians and officials who participated in them.

While the recommendations and conclusions reflect positions that were agreed upon by all participants, the report on the debates proper neither reflects a consensus view nor pretends to fully capture all variation of opinions expressed in the discussions. It tries to capture, however, the predominant views of the participants.

EWI is solely responsible for the content as well as any omissions or errors in this report.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### I. Reconciliation in Afghanistan

- The decisions of the National Consultative Peace Jirga (NCPJ) of June 2010 created a legitimate mandate for the Afghan government to enter into political dialogue on reconciliation with the Taliban. NCPJ decisions should be taken seriously, notably the call for a comprehensive approach to reconciliation. Fragmented efforts, which are too often aimed at temporary gains and opportunistic goals, should cease.
- The establishment of the High Peace Council (HPC) should be used without delay to clarify assumptions on Taliban positions towards reconciliation, and to work out fundamental benchmarks for reciprocal steps towards creating trust. Due to the large size of the HPC, it

is equally important to establish an “executive body” comprised of a small number of people to lead negotiations.

- While the current set up of the HPC foresees province-wide activities that are valuable to the reconciliation process, these activities should play a complementary role to the core reconciliation efforts that must take place, first and foremost, with the Quetta Shura group and the Haqqani Network. Thus, it will be of great importance that reconciliation efforts at the provincial level are consistent with and complementary to political dialogue with the Taliban leadership. A prerequisite to these reconciliation efforts will be a comprehensive approach to reconciliation based on well-established parameters.
- Commitment towards developing a road map for political settlement is required from both sides. To that end, the leadership of both sides must commit to unconditional talks and to creating an environment of trust for such talks. An initial step could be the cessation of negative propaganda.
- Kabul should actively seek to engage the assistance of a well-respected international mediator to complement the work of the HPC. Such a mediator role could be entrusted to the UN or an OIC country such as the U.A.E. or Saudi Arabia, who recognized the Taliban in 1994. Moreover, Saudi Arabia played a crucial mediator’s role in 1994 and enjoys credibility with both the Taliban and the Kabul government.
- Equally, the engagement of respected tribal leaders will be vital to the success of reconciliation, notably along the border. At some stage of the reconciliation effort, an inter-Afghan Conference will need to take place, with tribal engagement playing a major role. Therefore, there is an urgent need for new steps towards building the foundation for tribal engagement. Tribal engagement is equally required on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line.
- Given the vital role of tribal leadership, the revival of the bilateral Jirga process between Afghanistan and Pakistan should parallel the national reconciliation process. The bilateral Jirga is necessary to complement the NCPJ and ongoing trust building efforts between the two countries.

## **II. Afghanistan-Pakistan Bilateral Relationship**

- The bilateral relationship with Pakistan is key to any successful reconciliation. Both countries should urgently identify a suitable mechanism for a regular and genuine information exchange and cooperation



on the issue. In the first Abu Dhabi Process meeting, the creation of a special envoy was suggested as one possible element for success.

- Urgent steps that address the trust deficit between Afghanistan and Pakistan must be undertaken, as distrust remains a significant impediment. In particular, transparency on the engagement of India is required through constructive exchanges at the governmental level, including intelligence sharing, public debates in media and parliament-to-parliament contacts.
- Reconciliation will directly improve Pakistan's internal security problems. Serious steps towards Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) reform should, therefore, be undertaken soon. Such reform would minimize negative impacts and realize the potential of reconciliation for stability on both sides of the Durand Line.
- The current infrastructure between Afghanistan and Pakistan is vastly insufficient for two neighbors that share such a long border. Recommendations were made to expand cooperation in regards to infrastructure, such as increasing road connections and developing railway connections.

### III. Regional Aspects

- Reconciliation will not be possible without the constructive engagement of other countries in the region. Kabul must proactively consult its neighbors, notably Iran and the countries of Central Asia, on the steps undertaken in the context of reconciliation.

## Discussion Report

### Building on the National Consultative Peace Jirga

After the NCPJ of June 2010, the Afghan people have started to assume ownership of a national peace process that aims at a political settlement with the Taliban and their inclusion in Afghan politics. *Unlike most observers, participants of the first Abu Dhabi meeting in June have given a positive evaluation of the NCPJ proper as well as its mandate to enter into political dialogue ("reconciliation") with the insurgency for that purpose.* Legitimacy and ownership of the NCPJ, its proceedings and decisions were considered to be sufficiently broad to enter into such dialogue now. With the NCPJ's decisions, two essential preconditions for reconciliation have been met:

national and international endorsement; the latter was presented at the London Conference of early 2010.

In their meeting in Kabul (October 2010), participants in the Abu Dhabi Process stressed that *legitimacy and the need to enter into dialogue must not be questioned any longer or conditioned to “winning the war first,” as appears to be the case with the U.S. position.* General Petraeus so far has not changed that approach. Instead, he is playing for time, waiting to see if his counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy will work. He appears bent on achieving a position of greater strength through military means, striking at the Taliban by eliminating their commanders first. His apparent aim: to defeat the Taliban, and force them to accept a settlement later.

This puts the concept of reconciliation into question with regard to the political approach per se (settlement via dialogue or settlement via surrender). Equally, it prevents the development of an environment of trust for dialogue. It increases risks for the physical safety of those Taliban “members” wanting to join.

*The situation on the ground as it appears in October does not support Petraeus’s view that the Taliban can be forced into submission.* While there has been progress in some districts, the *overall security situation in the country deteriorated in 2010.* In Helmand and around Kandahar, Kabul and the coalition appear to be a long way from establishing firm control over the situation.

Months after the start of the Marjah offensive, security in the region remains very fragile and insurgents continue to enjoy strong popular support. Similarly, the delay of the Kandahar operation underlines how difficult it is to establish more security in the region.

Good governance issues have not improved either, least of all with regard to corruption and more justice and safety for the local population. The Kabul government remains weak and without much credibility in all of Afghanistan, but especially in the Southeast.

In other parts of Afghanistan, the Taliban have been gaining ground. In a growing number of districts throughout Afghanistan, *there has been progress towards establishing a Taliban shadow state.*

The “civilian surge,” which forms a vital “second leg” of the Counter Insurgency (COIN) strategy and is supposed to complement the “military surge” of the coalition, has not produced substantive results. On the contrary, the socioeconomic situation for the local population remains precarious in most areas of the country, while the number of casualties continues to escalate. In light of the contested nature of last September’s parliamentary elections, there are legitimate concerns that the results will not lead to more stability or the strengthening of the Kabul government. Rather, they

may further complicate an already difficult domestic situation, since many popular candidates feel they were treated unfairly.

The invitation to reconciliation by the Kabul government is based on the assumption that the Taliban are willing to join the process, and that the Taliban's readiness for a final compromise includes a recognition of the past decade's progress towards democratic government and universal human and civil rights in Afghanistan. Whether these assumptions are realistic remains to be seen and will be established during negotiations. *It should be one of the primary tasks of the High Peace Council (HPC) to establish the validity of these assumptions in light of vital elements of an envisaged end state as outlined above.*

Entering into dialogue with the Taliban must be based on the principles of accountability and reciprocity. *The responsibility for the creation of an environment of trust rests also with the Taliban.* Prisoner release and de-listing efforts of the government should be balanced by appropriate trust building steps by the Taliban. *Working towards such reciprocity should equally be a priority task of the HPC.*

## Steps Towards Reconciliation

The government in Kabul has begun to implement the NCPJ's decisions by undertaking steps towards trust building with the insurgency, thus laying the groundwork for dialogue. The release of Taliban prisoners and successful lobbying for a de-listing of insurgents from the UN Security Council Blacklist were positive steps. However, such action ended with the release of *only* five members out of 137. Additionally, there must be provisions for the physical safety of Taliban leaders who want to join the peace process and guarantees that they won't be arrested.

The insurgency groups remain united in their preconditions, notably the withdrawal of foreign troops, yet their overall approach towards reconciliation is ambivalent. There are indications that Al Qaeda is monitoring groups inside the Taliban to identify those who are willing to join the peace talks. At the same time, there are concerns that the coalition forces may be targeting potential participants as well. Thus, addressing the physical safety of potential Taliban participants should be a high priority.

There is a need for a "neutral address" outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan where talks with the Taliban insurgency can be held with some degree of safety for participants. Such possibilities include the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia or Turkmenistan, which were discussed among participants in the

first Abu Dhabi meeting (June 2010). This is an issue that remains high on the agenda as an important building block for reconciliation.

*The value of the NCPJ decisions is determined by their call for a comprehensive approach to reconciliation and the acknowledgement that for reconciliation to be successful, opportunistic goals and temporary gains that have marked previous efforts must be avoided. This will require a strategic vision of where the political dialogue with the insurgency should lead—in other words, what kind of end state is desirable.* It is difficult to imagine that, without such a vision, the comprehensive approach to reconciliation can succeed.

While the NCPJ decisions contain a somewhat vague commitment to the constitutional set-up, and while Afghanistan has moved far away from the realities of Taliban rule in the nineties, neither side has outlined such an end state.

*An important building block will have to be a more inclusive arrangement for the political process in the country.* Such an arrangement should ensure that tribal, ethnic and any other legitimate interests that were excluded from the post-Bonn political settlement are given a stake in the political process and are able to compete for political representation. Such an end state must allow *all* Afghans to address their grievances in the political process. It must also contain effective provisions for law enforcement and putting an end to the current culture of impunity.

In their public announcements, the Taliban have put forward one goal, which they see as a precondition for negotiations: the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. They emphasize the need for Shari'a rule and signal openness with regard to breaking ties with al Qaeda. But what their perceived future participation in the political set-up might look like remains unclear so far. While some envisage becoming part of a new central government, spokespeople of the Quetta Shura have underlined that they would not want to become part of a government; instead, they maintain that they would see themselves in an overall supervisory function. It is not yet clear whether such a supervisory function might be compared to the Guardian Council in Iran or if it is envisaged as more of a body that monitors accompanies day- to-day business.

Any reconciliation efforts must consider that the Taliban-controlled areas include diverse groups of insurgents driven by a broad range of religious, nationalist and local motives. A younger generation that is playing a growing role in the insurgency has a more radical agenda and is willing to employ more extremist tactics, while ostensibly remaining loyal to the “old generation” Taliban.

The influence of foreign fighters (Mujahideen) and al Qaeda in the Taliban network is not clear. However, there are indications that both have regained influence and strength in 2010, which would imply that they are injecting a more radical and internationalist perspective than the fundamentally nationalist agenda of the Quetta Shura.

Despite a somewhat horizontal structure of the Taliban network referred to above, *there can be no doubt about the leadership role of Quetta Shura and Haqqani network. They must, therefore, be the main interlocutors in a reconciliation process at the political level.* They continue to cooperate closely at the strategic and tactical levels, despite considerable communication difficulties. Occasional differences, such as the Quetta Shura's alleged resentment of the Haqqani network's involvement in the UN guesthouse attack of 2009, appear to have had no major effect on their cooperation. This leads to the conclusion that despite the diversity in the Taliban network, *relevant counterparts for the establishment of a dialogue based on reciprocity and accountability do exist.*

## The Role of the High Peace Council

*According to the NCPJ decisions, the High Peace Council (HPC) is supposed to be the central mechanism for reconciliation, but serious doubts remain whether it will be able to fulfill its task.* The HPC represents a broad spectrum of Afghan society, including non-Pashtun representatives, which in theory should position it well for talks. But in the eyes of much of the population and, in particular, the Taliban, most of its members are discredited. Many are tarred by corruption or charges that they behaved like warlords, undermining their credibility as leaders of a peace dialogue.

Members of the HPC are supposed to lead negotiations at the district and provincial levels, but not least due to a lack of personal and political credibility, they often may not even be able to travel safely to the areas for which they are responsible. *Targeting reconciliation at the district and provincial levels also raises questions about how these negotiations should be integrated and coordinated with the crucial talks with the leadership of the insurgency, the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani Network.*

The large size of the HPC (68 members) may qualify the council as a facilitator but hardly as an instrument to actually lead negotiations with the Taliban leadership. Therefore, it is necessary to establish an "executive body" comprised of a small number of senior-level members who are able to lead negotiations.

*Given these inherent weaknesses of the HPC, outside mediators could play a role that would complement its work.* As discussed in the first Abu Dhabi Process meeting in June 2010, the UN, the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Turkmenistan or member countries of the OIC seem particularly fit for that role. *At the national level, well-orchestrated efforts to bring respected, influential tribal representatives into the dialogue will be of utmost importance.* The vital role of tribal leadership, during some stage of the political dialogue, also makes convening an inter-Afghan conference imperative. Such a conference would be the most suitable mechanism to sanction and legitimize the inclusive end state referred to above.

Thus, there is a need to include all the ethnic groups of Afghanistan, while carrying out national reconciliation in a transparent manner. All ethnic groups, tribes and members of civil society organizations (CSOs), should be part of any reconciliation talks. The same tribal and ethnic groups that were excluded from the post-Bonn political settlement should be given a real stake in the current political process.

In the context of a vital tribal engagement, where strong cross border aspects of the insurgency have had implications for any dialogue regarding reconciliation, there is an urgent need for a resumption of the bilateral Jirga process, involving the tribes that live on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border. A Jirga of these tribes was held in 2007 but hasn't resumed since then.

While an inter-Afghan conference will have to constitute a vital part of the political dialogue at a later stage, important initial steps must include:

- Unequivocal commitment to unconditional talks expressed by the leadership of both sides;
- Cessation of negative propaganda and (continued) release of prisoners;
- An agreement on a mediator, respected by both sides, responsible for facilitating an eventual face-to-face dialogue with the Taliban. In light of the concerns discussed earlier, it would seem unlikely that the HPC or representatives could play such a role;
- The creation of a ceasefire or at least a demilitarized zone inside Afghanistan that would allow for the physical safety of the participants in the political dialogue.

## Bilateral Aspects

In the first Abu Dhabi Process Meeting in June, participants determined that the *bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is key to any reconciliation with the Taliban as well as to wider regional efforts for more stability. Unfortunately, the profound trust deficit and the lack of substantive progress towards addressing it cannot be overlooked. The relationship remains fundamentally mired in a Cold War mentality where distrust is as strong as ever.* If this situation continues, it will undermine any effort to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan.

*It is therefore imperative that the underlying sensitivities in both countries should be addressed with clarity:*

*Pakistani concern over the role of India in Afghanistan has been at the root of the Pakistani (direct and indirect) engagement in Afghanistan for decades. Even representatives of the Pakistani security establishment admit that, at times, Pakistan may have overplayed India's role in Afghanistan. However, for the time being, Pakistan's most fundamental national security interests remain linked to minimizing or negating India's influence in the region, particularly in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The Kashmir dispute, including the parallelism of events in Kashmir and Baluchistan over the summer, have underscored again the strategic importance of Afghanistan for New Delhi and Islamabad.*

Without détente in the Indo-Pakistani relationship, sustainable stability in Afghanistan and the region will be difficult to achieve.

*More immediately, the key to addressing the trust deficit is increasing transparency through an exchange of intelligence between Pakistan and Afghanistan on Indian engagement in Afghanistan. Such transparency will be crucial for successfully launching a dialogue on a political settlement in Afghanistan.*

In the first meeting in Abu Dhabi in June 2010, participants agreed that the trust deficit between Afghanistan and Pakistan needed to be addressed at the government and institutional level as well as through people-to-people contacts. Such people-to-people contacts are also important for dealing with India. *Straightforward, honest public policy debates in both countries on the trust deficit should be promoted in the media of both countries as well as through parliamentary contacts. In that regard, parliamentarians from both countries should establish a common agenda.*

Instability in Afghanistan has always had negative consequences in neighboring countries, notably Pakistan. It has allowed insurgency movements such as Tehrik-e-Taliban and others to undermine Pakistan's internal security. Moreover, the weak authority of the Karzai government and the

foreseeable disengagement of the international community have created concerns for reconciliation. Thus, there is a strong case for cooperation and transparency between both countries concerning reconciliation.

*The reduction or withdrawal of coalition troops in the Pashtun-dominated Southeastern part of Afghanistan and/or the formal participation of Taliban in the provincial government, possibly even the formation of an autonomous government there, will have a negative impact on Baluchistan. It could lead to an increased Taliban presence or even extremist hegemony in Baluchistan and other Pashtun-dominated areas in Pakistan. It would undermine the influence of moderate Pashtuns along Pakistan's western border, notably in FATA. The terrorist threat is escalating already. There have been numerous targeted killings of moderate Pashtun representatives, and radical Islamist elements in these areas of Pakistan represent clear threats to the peace process.*

*It is thus, imperative that reconciliation is pursued in a coordinated and comprehensive approach, and undertaken in close cooperation with Pakistan at the senior government and institutional level, notably the Afghan and Pakistani intelligence and military services.*

Effectively addressing Afghans' concerns regarding sanctuaries of extremist insurgents in Pakistan and uninhibited cross-border movements along the Durand line in both directions must be an integral part of such cooperation.

Better management of border crossings to address Afghan and Pakistani concerns has been discussed for quite some time. Some progress, though slow, has been achieved. One recent example is the introduction of biometric measures. Currently, around 56,000 legal border crossings take place every day between the two countries. While better cooperation at the administrative level on border movement can be recognized, *more fundamental issues such as increased intelligence sharing need to be addressed with urgency if reconciliation is to take place in a sustainable manner and, at the same time, not negatively affect Pakistan.*

In that regard, Pakistani participants remain firm in their belief that reconciliation with the *Pakistani* militants will not be possible; on the contrary, it will require decisive countermeasures for the foreseeable future through appropriate military and intelligence measures.

*Domestically in Pakistan, this will require an end to the "outsourcing of Pakistani border regions to militants." And thus, apart from determined intelligence and military action, this will require long overdue steps to reform FATA and integrate them better into the Pakistani state. Such reform also would open those areas to major funding by the international community ("Marshall Plan for South Asia"). Economic development of the border*



region is urgently needed in both countries in order to move from a war to a peace economy.

Preparatory steps must be undertaken *now* as FATA reform will be a long process and needs to be prepared with utmost attention to local sensitivities. Integrating the local tribal population--notably, the tribal leaders--will be a key to a successful FATA reform and a substantial improvement of overall border management. Neither FATA reform nor border management will be possible without substantial tribal engagement and support. *It could be highly advisable to renew the bilateral Jirga process discussed earlier.*

## Regional Aspects

Because of Afghanistan's chronic instability in recent decades, the country has been constantly at the mercy of outside powers and far from being the master of its own fate. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the 1990s were chaotic, with various groups torpedoing any hopes for internal peace with the support of outside powers. Given this background, it is necessary to involve neighboring countries in the reconciliation process, reassuring them that their legitimate concerns will be taken into account.

*Mutually reinforcing diplomacy and coordination that include major, regional and international actors will be a prerequisite to the success of reconciliation.* However, getting to this point will be a difficult task since the interests of the main international and regional actors are neither consistent nor compatible.

It will require, above all, a *focused and conscious effort by the Kabul government to include regional stakeholders.* However, this will be difficult without a comprehensive approach to reconciliation as (legitimate) suspicions in Kabul arise with regard to the intentions of neighboring countries. A major impediment to such mutually reinforcing efforts is equally the *ambivalent position of the U.S. on reconciliation.*

Particularly, *Iran and Central Asian states* should engage in diplomatic efforts to support, or at least not to counter, any reconciliation efforts.

In principle, Iran has played a supportive role in stabilizing Afghanistan in the past. It was even considered to be a "troubleshooter" in the run up to the Bonn Agreement. It has, at the same time, continued to extend its influence in the country. Iran has publicly committed U.S. \$600 million to help stabilize Afghanistan, notably the Hazara community. Iran has built schools and libraries, and funded the power sector, agriculture and the transportation grid. In Herat, Iran has established a Chamber of Commerce and even built a car manufacturing plant.

*Much as in the case of Pakistan, it can be argued that Iran is using “soft power” as a defensive means and will support steps towards more stability, including a political settlement with the insurgency.*

Iran hosts about two million Afghan refugees from three decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Continued instability in the country in Central and Northern Afghanistan would not only diminish chances for their eventual return, but will also increase the probability of a further influx of political and economic refugees. Iran has one of the highest rates of drug addiction worldwide. Thus, it is in the national interest of Iran to reduce the flow of narcotics coming from Afghanistan, but that can only happen with a peaceful solution to its internal conflicts and the establishment of a society based on some level of law and order.

*For the Central Asian states, the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, along with the rising strength of the Taliban in the Northern part of the country, is a growing concern, particularly given the threat represented by extremist groups in their own countries.* It is of crucial importance to seek Central Asian cooperation for the reconciliation process, since they currently view it with considerable suspicion.

## **Abu Dhabi Process**

In light of their deliberations in Kabul, the participants decided to focus their future meetings on developing possible parameters and “red lines” for reconciliation, and on their efforts to build regional support.

They will also focus on building bilateral confidence by promoting a suitable mechanism such as a joint Afghanistan-Pakistan Jirga process, and measures aimed at dispelling mutual negative perceptions. In that context, particular emphasis will be placed on parliamentary and media exchanges.

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**EWI Brussels Center**

59-61 Rue de Trèves  
Brussels 1040  
Belgium  
32-2-743-4610

**EWI Moscow Center**

BolshayaDmitrovka  
Street, 7/5, Bl. 1, 6th Floor  
Moscow 123001  
Russia, 7-495-234-7797

**EWI New York Center**

11 East 26th Street  
20th Floor  
New York, NY 10010  
U.S.A. 1-212-824-4100

[www.ewi.info](http://www.ewi.info)