

Reconciling with the Taliban: The Good, the Bad and the Difficult

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ABSTRACT Efforts toward a peaceful reconciliation with the Taliban have failed and Afghanistan and the United States remain engaged in a bitter war against the insurgent group. The US has shown willingness and capability to go after Taliban leaders on Pakistani soil, upsetting its relations with Islamabad and ending Pakistan's game of plausible deniability. Under its new leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban continue their onslaught against the Afghan state, with no intention of either negotiating peace or backing down. The US, awaiting a new president, is expected to make decisions about its involvement in Afghanistan—in what form and manner, and the degree to which it will play a role. This paper argues that a political and military victory in Afghanistan requires three pillars: significant improvement in the Afghan government's performance; long-term US commitment; and regional cooperation and investment in Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

The killing in May 2016 of Taliban leader Mullah Mansour in a US drone strike in Pakistan has further upset the fragile Afghan peace process and created ripples on the relations between the United States and Pakistan. The attack, which took place a few miles from the Afghan-Pakistan border in Balochistan province, reflects the growing US frustration with the Taliban and Pakistan. After all, Pakistan not only has failed to bring the Taliban to negotiate peace with the Afghan government under the Quadrilateral

Coordination Group (QCG) framework, but it has also continued to extend support—albeit covertly—to the Taliban, including providing shelter to their leaders.

While Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has long pleaded for US military action against the Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan, the strike on Mansour demonstrates America's commitment and determination to remove all barriers to bringing peace in Afghanistan. The fact that Mansour had

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rejected peace talks and was travelling with ease within Pakistan forced the US to carry out the strike inside Pakistan territory and without prior permission. In the aftermath, it would appear that efforts by Kabul and Washington for peace talks have taken a back seat.

The idea of negotiating with the Taliban dates back to the early stages of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Pervez Musharraf, then President of Pakistan, had begun lobbying Washington during Operation Enduring Freedom to include so-called “moderate Taliban” leaders into talks about Afghanistan’s political future, a request that was accepted by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.¹ Although the Taliban were excluded from the Bonn Conference of 2001, the George W Bush administration’s willingness to give “moderate Taliban” a future role allowed Pakistan military leaders a pretext to maintain ties with the group and shelter them on their soil.²

The initiative gained momentum after Barack Obama became US President in 2009, with the US arguing that “there will be no peace without reconciliation.”³ US readiness to engage the Taliban, once its arch enemy, has been a major reason why President Ghani staked significant political capital on pursuing reconciliation with the insurgent group after he became President in September 2014.

The discovery of Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar’s death in July 2015 and Mullah Mansour’s elevation as the new leader became a turning point in the reconciliation process. Until then, the US and the Afghan government believed that the talks were being held under Omar’s leadership. Soon after the Taliban admitted to Omar’s death, many of their soldiers, most of whom had been kept in the dark about his demise, broke away from the group to form rival factions. Pakistan Army chief Raheel Sharif’s visit to Kabul in December 2015 helped re-launch the talks, and the QCG was formed. The QCG, comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US, aimed to define a framework for the reconciliation

process and create an environment conducive to it. At a press conference in December 2015, President Ghani backed the QCG’s strategy, stating that it was “obvious that there are groups of Taliban, not a unified movement. The fundamental issue here is the choice: choose peace or terrorism. There will be no tolerance for terrorism.”⁴

While the QCG has met several times after January 2016, the Taliban refused to participate in the peace talks. In March 2016, the group released a statement reiterating their position that they would come to the negotiating table only if certain preconditions were met: the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan; the removal of Taliban members from the UN blacklist; and the freeing of their detainees from Afghan prisons. In April, as the Taliban launched their spring offensive, the peace talks collapsed.

The launch of the Taliban’s annual offensive on 18 April killed 65 people in a bomb blast in Kabul. The offensive signalled that the insurgent group was ready to fight, with fresh recruits and more funds following a successful poppy harvest in the areas under their hold. In response to the attack, President Ghani issued a scathing attack on Pakistan, blaming it for undermining peace efforts by sheltering terrorist groups. He lambasted Pakistan for its stance on the “good” and “bad” Taliban and for providing a safe haven for the Taliban, especially the Haqqani Network, and groups such as Al-Qaeda to plan, fund and orchestrate attacks in Afghanistan. Unless Pakistan takes action against these groups, Ghani warned, he would lodge a complaint before the United Nations Security Council.⁵

A month later, the US launched the drone strike. Not surprisingly, Pakistan protested against the attack and warned the US against future violations of its sovereignty. Gen. Raheel Sharif called on US Ambassador David Hale to declare that the attack was detrimental to US-Pakistan ties, regional stability, and peace efforts with the Taliban.⁶ That the US ordered a drone

strike on the Taliban leader inside Pakistan indicated its determination to eliminate irritants to the Afghan reconciliation effort. Given the personality and historical legacy of Haibatullah Akhundzada, Mansour's successor, the prospects for peace talks have become even more dim.

AKHUNDZADA'S LIKELY IMPACT ON THE TALIBAN

The Taliban's new leader differs greatly from his predecessor. He is known as a pious and austere cleric belonging to the group's conservative old guard. Hailing from a family in Kandahar, known locally as mullahs, Haibatullah Akhundzada is known to have run a number of small madrasas during the early years of Taliban rule. After being introduced to Mullah Omar around 1997, Akhundzada headed the military court in Nangarhar and then served as the head of the military court in Kabul until the 2001 US invasion. Before Mullah Omar's death, Akhundzada held the position of chief justice within the Taliban, keeping a close check on violators of Sharia within their ranks. Since then he has built himself up as a spiritual leader of the younger generation of Taliban fighters, teaching the Quran to sons and grandsons of insurgency leaders.⁷

His appointment, four days after Mansour's death, was helped by the respect and high status given to him by both Omar and Mansour. While he was part of the small circle that was in touch with Omar and Mansour, Akhundzada's personality and his history with the group make him a significantly different leader. As opposed to Omar and Mansour, he has neither hands-on administrative nor military expertise; he is also not known to have made personal ties with people in the Afghan government, and leads an austere, religious life with little personal property. This is in stark contrast to Mansour, who was known to be worldly and had been accused of enriching himself from the narcotics trade that funds the Taliban.⁸ His selection has been without major

controversy or opposition—he was the unanimous choice among members of the Quetta Shura and is assisted by two deputies who enjoy equal status—Mullah Yaqub, Omar's son, and Sirajuddin Haqqani.

On 5 June, days after Mullah Mansour's death was confirmed, the Taliban stormed a court building in the eastern Lowgar province, killing seven people including a chief prosecutor.⁹ A day later, an American journalist was killed in the southern part of the country.¹⁰ Such violent attacks are likely to continue as Akhundzada begins to consolidate his position. While Mansour's death is an important development, experience has shown the Taliban's ability to score local successes even without a central leadership.¹¹ The Taliban fighters across the region know that their aim is to overthrow the Kabul government, establish the Sharia law, and oust foreign forces from the country. It is likely that the Taliban will continue their fight unless their preconditions are met. While it may be too early to predict how Akhundzada will mould the insurgency, one can assume that his unique set of experiences and strict adherence to Sharia means that the insurgency will seek greater religious credibility.

As Borham Osman has argued, Akhundzada's passion for Islamic justice, given his past experiences as a religious teacher and chief justice, may lead to him come down hard on fighters who breach Taliban's code of conduct.¹² He must do this, of course, without stepping on the toes of provincial commanders and other leaders and while focusing on keeping the group intact and loyal to him. To do this, Akhundzada is expected to continue attacks and conquests around the country, reassuring his followers of his determination to continue Mansour and Omar's legacies.

Mullah Yaqub's position as deputy leader will provide Akhundzada support among Mullah Omar loyalists who may have opposed Mansour. Siraj Haqqani, given his decades of military

experience in executing attacks, is likely to continue his important role in the Taliban leadership as he enjoyed under Mansour. US and Afghan leaders have long alleged that the Haqqani Network has ties to Pakistan's military intelligence and NATO has called the group the "most lethal" and "most competent" terrorist organisation in the area.¹³ With Sirajuddin Haqqani increasingly running the Taliban's day-to-day military operations, Akhundzada will find it easy to consolidate his position.

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

The killing of Mansour demonstrates US determination to take out a Taliban leader who had been vehemently opposed to peace talks with the Afghan government. The strike also shows that the US has both the willingness and capability to execute an operation similar to that which targeted Osama Bin Laden in 2011. Confirming the attack, President Obama said that the strike was a "milestone" effort in the US efforts to stabilise Afghanistan, while again asking Pakistan to deny terrorists a safe haven. Meanwhile, as far as Akhundzada is concerned, peace will not be his main aim.

The killing of Mansour once again refutes Pakistan's plausible deniability. The fact that Mansour was travelling freely within Balochistan near the Afghan border has vindicated the Afghan and US governments' longstanding claim that the Taliban are using Pakistan as a safe haven. Pakistan military and civilian leaders can no longer claim that the Taliban is not in their country and that they are exerting all effort to purge militants from the country with Operation Zarb-e-Azb. It also lends credence to the fact that Pakistan has done little to crack down on Taliban movements within its borders.

In the days following the attack, Pakistan's Interior Minister Chaudhary Nisar Ali Khan accused Washington of "sabotaging the peace talks with Afghan Taliban"¹⁴ by killing Mansour.

Sartaj Aziz, adviser to the prime minister on foreign affairs, stated that Pakistan was committed to reconciliation within the QCG. However, Pakistan fails to realise that the time for peace is long gone. The attack was a signal directed at Pakistan and the Taliban that the US will no longer tolerate the strategic challenge posed by the Taliban leadership by virtue of being in Pakistan.¹⁵ It shows the US' commitment to stabilise Afghanistan, support its government and crush the Taliban, regardless of Pakistan's sentiments about them, even if peace talks must be put on hold. Further evidence came when the US Congress blocked the sale of eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan on the grounds that it was not doing enough to crack down on the Haqqani Network. While the US-Pakistan relationship has seen ebbs and flows, the blocking of sale of military equipment and the killing of Mansour, months within each other, show US' willingness to do what it takes to stabilise Afghanistan. Akhundzada's adherence to Sharia and dedication to Islamic rules and laws reflect him as a much more conservative leader and there is nothing in his record to deem him any more "pro-peace" than Mansour. It is therefore unlikely that the Taliban will be renouncing violence any time soon.

At present, any effort toward reconciliation with the Taliban is unlikely to be fruitful. Given the complexity of the relationship between the main actors, any future plans for peace will only prove to be complicated. While the QCG may have failed, any future prospect for peace requires a significant change in the relationship between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US. It is difficult to achieve a strategic military victory against the Taliban when the country is politically and economically weak. While the outgoing Obama administration has postponed the complete withdrawal of US troops, the new president might find it difficult to station troops in Afghanistan for much longer. With a greater focus and diversion of resources to Syria and the Middle East and the US looking for a quick exit-strategy,

Afghanistan must utilise the present American support to strengthen its security forces and government, along with developing greater regional support to assist its development.

The present political and economic situation in Afghanistan is not conducive to peace, especially since the government has no clear roadmap. The Ghani-Abdullah government should put aside their political rivalry and focus their energies on formulating a blueprint for peace. It is counter-productive to waste political capital on engaging Pakistan to nudge the Taliban to the negotiating table, when there has been no preliminary discussion within the government and between the government and civil society on the nature of such talks. Besides initiating electoral reforms and eradicating corruption, the government needs to decide what form the negotiations will take, how they plan to reintegrate Taliban members into society, what role they can play, what incentives they can provide the Taliban so that they do not re-arm themselves, and how they can harness the capacity of local communities and local leadership to support peace.¹⁶

The strengthening of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is vital for the country's stability. While the government has made it a priority, much is left to be done. It must recognise the importance of reforming the leadership of security agencies as well as military units directly fighting the insurgents. ANSF's shortcomings in terms of capabilities and resources must be seriously addressed along with improving its preparedness to counter the Taliban, better coordination among ground units, commanding officers and central headquarters.¹⁷ According to Gen. John Campbell, who ended his command of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan in March 2016, the Afghan Air Force would not reach necessary strength levels until 2020. Though the fledgling Air Force has significantly improved its operations, much remains to be done to build, train and advice it.¹⁸

The Afghan government also needs to alter its method of 'messaging' or communicating with the Taliban. To build confidence among leaders of the Taliban and provide incentive for them to lay down arms and join the political process, the government should ponder how the messaging environment could be made more constructive in terms of style, tone and expectation.¹⁹ The Taliban realise that they no longer have the same strength, power or legitimacy that they did in 1994.²⁰ The political situation in the country has changed vastly after 1994 when the Taliban first captured power, and the majority of the population now reject their brand of violence. The international community and the government should therefore encourage the Taliban to talk about sociopolitical issues such as employment, education and development.²¹ By removing violence from the discourse and organising the insurgency into a political movement, the Taliban will be able to acquire political clout to influence Afghanistan's future in a healthy democratic country.

The Afghan and US governments also need to establish a level of trust and engage in confidence-building measures with the Taliban. In return for accepting certain Taliban demands such as re-opening of their political office in Doha and removing names of Taliban leaders from the UN sanctions list, the Afghan government can demand that the group cease its violent attacks and denounce the Al-Qaeda. Such quid pro quo is crucial to make a breakthrough in the talks. The US must continue to be committed to the cause of the Afghan people. A withdrawal in troops or aid, at this point, will only reverse the gains made over the last 15 years and put the Taliban once again in the driver's seat. It must also continue to put pressure on Islamabad to stop its double-game on terror and persuade the Pakistan army to cooperate in stabilising Afghanistan.

THE ROLE OF REGIONAL POWERS

Each of Afghanistan's neighbours has tried to exert influence in the country through ethnic

networks, economic investments, development aid, and assistance to militant groups. In return, they all have felt the impact of Afghanistan's woes. Despite their divergent interests, the neighbouring states have built institutional frameworks such as the Heart of Asia, Shanghai Cooperation Council, and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference²² that aim to coordinate peace efforts. However, these organisations have not yet been effectively used to mobilise multilateral support for the country.

Any grand plan for stabilising Afghanistan will require the Afghan government to reach a political accommodation with the Taliban or dismantling of the terror support networks and infrastructure in Pakistan and their strongholds in Afghanistan. However, there are still ways in which regional states can cooperate to impede the resurgence of the Taliban. Both Russia and Iran, plagued by the problem posed by the large-scale smuggling of heroin out of Afghanistan, should assist Kabul in implementing stronger anti-narcotics measures. The trade in heroin, produced from opium harvested in Afghanistan, helps the Taliban in financing their insurgency. By implementing joint counter-narcotic programmes with Kabul, along with launching a crackdown on cross-border terrorism, Moscow and Tehran can contribute to efforts at defeating the group.²³

Beijing, meanwhile, notwithstanding its participation in the QCG, should make its relationship with Kabul more meaningful to the Afghans by ensuring that its extraction of minerals from Afghanistan brings benefits to local communities.²⁴ China can help develop rural infrastructure in Afghanistan's far-flung areas that are often prone to militant takeover. Given Afghanistan vast natural resources, Chinese investments in developing copper fields, mining of iron ore and electricity generation will have a lasting impact on Afghanistan's development trajectory.

For its part, India, by virtue of its long-time friendship with Afghanistan, should continue to


extend military assistance and training to ANSF. New Delhi should also continue its policy of being Kabul's development partner and engage in more infrastructure and development projects in the country.

CONCLUSION

A political and military victory in Afghanistan requires three pillars: significant improvement in the Afghan government's performance; long-term US commitment; and regional cooperation and investment in Afghanistan. Electoral reform and the holding of district council and parliamentary elections will boost the government's popularity and credibility, which has suffered due to political bickering, inability to fulfil electoral promises, and the failure of peace talks. The incoming US president should make a decision to continue military engagement with Afghanistan and not pull out troops from the territory. The US commitment should be long-term, to support the Afghan government and military to permanently defeat the Taliban. For any peace process or military action to succeed against the Taliban—which has, over the years, proven itself to be resilient—internal strength and unity within Afghanistan is essential.²⁵

The government must remember that the military defeat of the Taliban is not the only means to an end. It is indeed a vital step, but it will only prove to be unsustainable if the country continues to be plagued with political instability and economic underdevelopment. The government should work toward electoral reform that builds on its democratic infrastructure and strengthens political processes. By reaching out to former warlords, rural leaders, civil society institutions and government officials across ethnic and religious lines, the government should widen the peace process to make it a truly Afghan-led process. Moreover, regional engagement must be understood not only as a means to achieving

stability, but as a result of it.²⁶ Only when Afghanistan is able to secure itself and develop a pan-Afghan consensus on peace talks, should

Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah reach out to the Taliban. Until then, any attempt for peace with the Taliban will only prove futile. 

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