



Talking to the Taliban Hope over History?

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Executive Summary

- **The aim of this report is to examine the evolution of the idea of 'talking to the Taliban', analyse its underlying drivers and assumptions, and capture key lessons that may be of use in future conflicts when talks with insurgents will again be on the agenda.**
- **To date, efforts to talk to the Taliban have been a failure.** Given the short time remaining before the end of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) combat mission in December 2014, there are few grounds for optimism that further talks might lead to a major political breakthrough.
- **Talking to the Taliban became official policy by osmosis rather than deliberation and strategic choice.** For that reason, the idea has not been systematically evaluated or implemented in a clear-minded fashion. This echoes the experience of the Soviet Union trying to negotiate itself out of Afghanistan.
- **Talks with the Taliban have been characterised by wishful thinking, bad timing and poor management.** Some advocates of talks have overstated their case by stressing the 'ripeness' of the Taliban for a deal. More importantly, however, many of those who have converted to supporting negotiations since 2009 have done so too late in the day to achieve any serious benefits.
- **The strategic rationale for talks has never been clear.** Those who have advocated talks with the Taliban have done so for different reasons at different times. This has clouded and confused official policy. Some hoped to 'peel off' low-level insurgents, whereas others preferred to encourage the development of a Taliban political party; some hoped to divide the movement, whereas others hoped to massage it in such a way that Taliban 'doves' were strengthened over 'hawks'; some hoped to deal directly with the movement's leaders while others saw them as the chief obstacles to progress. Many of these strands were in operation at the same time, contributing to a sense that talks were conducted in a strategic vacuum.
- **The real 'game-changer' in Afghanistan is the departure of ISAF troops, not a moderate awakening within the Taliban movement.** A shift toward 'moderation' among the Taliban has been much overstated and not borne out by events on the ground. The real impetus for the tentative talks which have taken place are the major troop withdrawals that began in 2012. The internal dynamics of the Taliban movement are in flux but it is far from clear whether its future trajectory will make it more amenable to a peace deal.
- **Negotiations face a number of fundamental obstacles which have never been adequately addressed, and which are markedly similar to the Soviet experience in Afghanistan.** The most important is that the Taliban refuse to engage with the Afghan government under the leadership of President Hamid Karzai, despite American insistence that talks be Afghan-

led. Another is the fact that Pakistan has not been effectively harnessed into the process. Both the Soviet and ISAF/NATO experiences in Afghanistan illustrate the difficulties of trying to strike a bargain while rushing for the exit.

- **As we move into the last phase of the ISAF mission, with a renewed (and perhaps final) effort to reinvigorate the talks, the first step should be to learn from previous mistakes.** Even if this last-ditch effort fails, there are lessons in the experience thus far which should be taken into account for future negotiations with insurgents: namely, that ownership of the process should rest with one actor; that all main stakeholders must be involved; that talks need to have a clear strategic rationale and purpose; and that the needs of the ‘silent majority’ must be recognised.

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1 Introduction

The idea of ‘talking to the Taliban’ has been firmly on the political agenda for a number of years. What this means in practice, however, has not been elucidated clearly and consistently.¹ As the American-led military campaign in Afghanistan enters its final stages, the tentative ‘talks process’ has not yet delivered a political solution to the conflict. One reason for this is that ‘talking to the Taliban’ has become official policy by osmosis rather than choice, due to a diminishing pool of alternative options for stabilising Afghanistan. It has crept onto the political agenda rather than being systematically evaluated or implemented in a clear-minded fashion. Another reason is that ‘talking to the Taliban’ has meant markedly different things to different actors in the conflict. It has become a convenient shorthand for the entirely plausible mantra that ‘there is no purely military solution in Afghanistan’. A mantra, however, does not amount to a strategy.

As the Afghan government, with US encouragement, makes what appears to be one last effort to revive negotiations with the Taliban before a major drawdown of ISAF troops in 2014, this report seeks to understand why such attempts have not yet yielded success. The purpose is not to propose an alternative peace plan or scenario under which the conflict could be ‘won’ after all. Rather, the aim is to look at the evolution of the idea of talking to the Taliban, analyse its underlying drivers and assumptions, and capture key lessons that may be of use in future conflicts when talks with insurgents will again be on the agenda.

The report concludes that the idea of talking to the Taliban was never likely to be the ‘silver bullet’ which some early advocates hoped it might be. Moreover, the way in which the process has been managed has undermined the small chance that it might lead to success. The overall approach has been hampered by wishful thinking, misuse of historical lessons, reactive and tentative policymaking, and a lack of coordination and planning. One might say that this ‘anarchy of good intentions’ is symptomatic of the broader strategic vacuum which has characterised the campaign.

Students of military campaigns and counter-insurgency will dwell on the military lessons of Afghanistan for many years to come. But the conflict is just as ripe with examples of failed and mismanaged attempts at negotiation and dialogue, and wishful thinking about what they could achieve. It is those attempts at negotiation and dialogue – and the overall approach and policy by which they were informed – that this report hopes to understand and analyse.

The Soviet experience of Afghan negotiations

The United States and its allies are not the first to try to negotiate their way out of a war in Afghanistan. **Part 1** therefore provides a short overview of Soviet efforts to extricate themselves from their occupation

¹ See for example: S. Bates and R. Evans, *NATO Strategy in Afghanistan: A New Way Forward* (Washington, DC: Center for National Policy, May 2012), pp. 7-8.

of Afghanistan through a process of dialogue with Pakistan, the United States and the mujahedeen.

There are features of this Soviet extrication process which are prescient vis-à-vis attempts to bring an end to the current ISAF/NATO mission. These include:

- A gradual recognition that decisive military victory was not attainable;
- A faith in negotiations which grew in direct proportion to a lack of progress on the battlefield;
- A growing dissatisfaction and frustration with the Afghan government as a reliable political ally;
- The disruptive role played by Pakistan in pursuit of its own interests, along with other external actors;
- The enactment of programmes to 'peel off' individuals or regional commanders from the insurgency;
- A shift towards attempts at national-level 'reconciliation' and political reform to take the sting out of the insurgency as a whole;
- A final attempt to reach out to the leaders of the insurgency themselves and a 'mad dash' to achieve a political settlement against the destabilising backdrop of large troop withdrawals;
- The diminishing leverage in negotiations that came with the announcement of troop withdrawals.

As much as Western policymakers may resist the idea that their experience could follow that of the Soviet Union, in reality the Soviet and ISAF/NATO missions have seen a similar evolution of policy.

The evolution of 'talking to the Taliban' since 2001

Many of these themes are echoed in **Part 2** of the report, which details the evolution of various attempts to 'talk to the Taliban' as part of the American-led mission in Afghanistan. As this idea has gathered momentum over the last decade, questions of why talking might be beneficial, who should be engaged, how talks might be handled and to what end they should proceed, have all been transformed.

In 2001–02, the first year of the Afghan campaign, the very idea of talking to the Taliban was politically untenable, largely due to the well-known connections between the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Having been toppled relatively swiftly, the Taliban were excluded from the Bonn Conference and Agreement of 2001 which established the Afghan Interim Authority, under the protection of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) endorsed by the United Nations.

However, the emergence and resilience of a Taliban insurgency, particularly from 2006 onward, transformed the parameters of the debate. As the potency of the insurgency has increased, so have the number of voices arguing that the only way to restore any sort of stability to Afghanistan is to engage in negotiations with those behind it.

Thus, the idea of 'talking to the Taliban' has moved through several stages of evolution: from the realm of the unthinkable to the fringes of political acceptability, gradually seeping into official thinking before

finally being sanctioned at the highest level of government. In many respects, this evolution has been haphazard and chaotic, changing as a result of Western military fortunes, rather than as part of a coherent strategy.

As much as anything, the idea of 'talking to the Taliban' has gained traction because of the failure of ISAF forces to deliver a decisive victory on the battlefield, as the date of their exit from the theatre of conflict looms ever closer. The advocates for talks have stressed encouraging developments such as a gradual softening of Taliban aims or an increased willingness to compromise. However, while there have been glimpses of Taliban moderation, it has proved to be an elusive phenomenon and very difficult to harness to a peace process.

Between hope and expectation

Part 3 of the report offers some conclusions as to why talking to the Taliban has not worked in Afghanistan as some hoped it might. It is axiomatic that most military conflicts end in some sort of negotiated settlement between those groups who have been previously fighting.² But the fact remains that the prospects of a satisfactory settlement being reached in Afghanistan are not good.

Rather than objecting to the notion of talking to the Taliban *per se*, the report examines the management and implementation of this aspect of US/ISAF strategy. This is not to apportion blame for what, so far, seems like a failure of policy, or to offer a revisionist take on 'what might have worked' in Afghanistan, but to argue that the way talking has been approached has not proven conducive to success and has sometimes been counterproductive.

What does this mean?

Chances of a deal with the Taliban are slim but not entirely dead. There remain glimmers of hope for those invested in such an outcome. The Taliban too have incentives to avoid a complete breakdown of order in the wake of the ISAF drawdown, particularly as other groups are reportedly arming themselves in preparation for a potential civil war.³ Moreover, there is some reason to believe that internal dynamics within the movement – with an older and more traditional leadership trying to regain control from a younger, more extreme generation of fighters – could encourage a push toward a settlement.⁴ Also promising is the fact that opposition to talks with the Taliban from other stakeholders within Afghanistan has diminished.⁵ Even fiercely anti-Taliban groups such as the United Front have been more willing to consider the possibility of a deal.⁶

Even if the US and Afghan governments' last-ditch efforts are successful, this will not be a vindication of their overall approach,

² G. Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).
³ A. Rashid, 'The Pentagon Echoes With The Hubris of Vietnam', *Financial Times*, 1 May 2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f5270c18-92e9-11e1-b6e2-00144feab49a.html>.
⁴ A. Strick van Linschoten and F. Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2012* (London: Hurst and Co., 2012), p. 346.
⁵ T. Ruttig, 'The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to "Talks"', 14 July 2009, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=114>.
⁶ In 2008, reports emerged that United Front opposition leader and former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani was in contact with the Taliban and wanted to negotiate, having previously been strongly opposed to them. M. Chorev and J. Sherman, *The Prospects for Security and Political Reconciliation in Afghanistan: Local, National, and Regional Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center, Harvard University, 2012), p. 5.

which has been marked by confusion, mistakes and the absence of a clearly articulated strategy. It is not too early, therefore, to learn the lessons of these failures, so they can be avoided in future conflicts when talks with insurgents may be necessary again. The report's **Epilogue** highlights four of these lessons: the need for ownership of the talks process to rest with one actor; the involvement in the process of all the principal stakeholders in a conflict; the articulation of a clear strategic rationale and purpose; and the recognition and representation of the needs of the 'silent majority' who support none of the armed factions.

1 The Soviet Experience of Afghan Negotiations

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) presently deployed in Afghanistan is not the first to try to negotiate its way out of an Afghan war which has come to be seen as 'unwinnable'. Comparisons are often made between the Soviet and Western interventions in Afghanistan, although these mostly focus on the military aspects of the respective campaigns.⁷ This chapter revisits instead the Soviet experience of attempting to *talk* its way out of Afghanistan.

Britain's former ambassador to Afghanistan from 2007–09, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, has argued that '[w]e should do well to study the way in which the Soviet Union left Afghanistan'. In particular, he has advocated 'serious sustained collective diplomatic engagement', including talks with the Taliban and other regional players.⁸ However, it is difficult to paint the Soviet strategy for extrication as a successful model. The Soviet programme of 'national reconciliation', which was intended to co-opt elements of the insurgency, achieved very little. Moreover, while the Soviets managed to negotiate some sort of international agreement to cover their military withdrawal (in the form of the 1988 Geneva Accords), these did not include the mujahedeen leadership, and Pakistan failed to adhere to its commitment not to interfere in Afghanistan.

This chapter primarily focuses on those parts of the Soviet experience which are most pertinent to the current campaign in Afghanistan (rather than offering a comprehensive history of the Soviet experience). The key themes are as follows:

- Talks with insurgents (or their sponsors) became part of Soviet strategy because of a slow and stilted recognition that its military strategy was not succeeding. It arose from a Soviet desire to extricate from the conflict rather than any change in the nature of the insurgency or a growing willingness to compromise on behalf of the mujahedeen (quite the contrary).
- Both the military campaign and the efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement were hampered by internal divisions between and within the KGB, the military, and the foreign ministry. These divisions remained even after Gorbachev adopted a new strategy from 1985.
- Under Gorbachev, the Soviets had a dual-track approach to negotiations. One track was negotiation through the UN and with the United States and Pakistan to achieve a series of interlocking agreements that would end foreign support for the mujahedeen and leave behind a stable regime. The other track, called 'national reconciliation', involved substantial political reforms in Afghanistan

⁷ See, for example, G. Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010); L. Grau (trans.), *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996); W. Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); B. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), as well as other works cited below.

⁸ S. Cowper-Coles, 'Getting out gracefully', *The Spectator*, 16 March 2013, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/8864801/getting-out-gracefully/>.

aimed at redesigning the Afghan state so as to induce moderates and mujahedeen leaders toward non-violent political processes.

- The Soviets displayed a degree of wishful thinking about the intentions and interests of external actors in the Afghan conflict (such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan) and never developed a successful policy to deal with ‘spoilers’ from outside (above all, Pakistan).
- When identifying obstacles to their strategy, the Soviets placed too much emphasis on individuals at the top and failed to address the underlying causes of the insurgency. When President Karmal became a problematic and unreliable ally for the Soviets, simply replacing him with a more amenable partner, in the form of President Najibullah, did little to secure the ‘national reconciliation’ they hoped for and had very little impact on the perceptions of those involved in the insurgency.
- The Soviets made some efforts to deal directly with leaders of the mujahedeen at the end of their campaign in Afghanistan in order to secure safe passage for their troops and in the hope that they would accept the Afghan government. These were undermined by the fact that the mujahedeen already controlled large swathes of the country and felt little pressure to compromise when Soviet withdrawal had already begun. Another complication was that various mujahedeen parties were in fierce competition with each other and a deal with one group was no guarantee of security from the others. What is more, Pakistan continued to pursue its own interests within Afghanistan – which involved support for insurgent groups – despite their obligations under the Geneva Accords.

Imposing a solution

In April 1978, the radical ‘Khalq’ wing of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) deposed Afghan President Mohammad Daoud Khan, with the help of the Afghan army. Daoud had himself overthrown his cousin King Zahir Shah in 1973, establishing the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA).

Following Daoud’s deposition in 1978, the PDPA implemented a Soviet-style programme of reforms which were resisted by much of Afghan society (particularly conservative Pashtuns) and sparked a bloody rebellion. Under Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet Union sent troops into Afghanistan in December 1979 in support of the PDPA and with the intention of quelling the insurgency and bolstering the Afghan army. For almost a decade, the Soviets faced concerted violent opposition from a coalition of insurgent groups. These ‘mujahedeen’ were supported and funded by a number of external actors, chiefly the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Despite a massive investment of troops, financial support, and civilian and military advisers in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union never succeeded in defeating the insurgency and agreed to withdraw its forces. The rest of this chapter examines how Soviet attitudes toward negotiating with the insurgents and their sponsors – namely, Pakistan and the United States – developed over the course of the 1980s.

In a number of respects, the Soviet experience might be seen to prefigure some aspects of the ISAF experience twenty years later – not least, their failure to strike a decisive blow against the insurgents or to initiate a successful negotiation process in its place. Likewise, as the Soviets eventually came to recognise that military victory was impossible, they began to shift toward an exit strategy in which talks with the sponsors of the insurgency – and finally the insurgents themselves – became an important strand. This chapter describes five broad stages in the evolution of Soviet policy on negotiations.

The original rationale for the military invasion of Afghanistan was the stabilisation of the PDPA regime, which was threatened by internal power struggles between (and within) the Khalq and Parcham factions, rebellion in the countryside, and mutinies in the Afghan military. Over the course of 1979, the Central Committee of the Politburo overcame a previous reluctance to intervene and insisted that such an intervention was a ‘timely and correct’ decision in support of a ‘class struggle’ against a reactionary insurgency.⁹ However, the presence of foreign troops solidified opposition to the PDPA-led government, meaning that room for political manoeuvre was severely limited. When French President Giscard d’Estaing offered to intercede to negotiate a settlement at the time of the invasion, Brezhnev demurred and said, ‘I will make it my personal business to *impose* a political solution’ [emphasis added].¹⁰

In this early phase, the Politburo tolerated diplomatic contacts with those countries interested in facilitating a settlement. However, the composition of the DRA government was placed off limits as a subject for negotiation, and the Soviets made non-interference of other nations a precondition for any reduction of their own troop levels.¹¹ A May 1980 Warsaw Pact statement, signed by Brezhnev, stated that ‘once any forms of outside interference directed against Afghanistan are completely discontinued, the Soviet armed forces will begin to be pulled out from Afghanistan’.¹²

While Pakistan had some contact with the Soviet Union throughout the conflict, their interests and those of the Soviets proved extremely difficult to reconcile. In June 1980, Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq proposed negotiations between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran in Moscow as part of ‘the normalisation of relations’.¹³ But the Soviets balked when Zia stated Pakistan’s ‘red lines’ for participation, which included the ‘unacceptability’ of Afghan President Karmal remaining in office.¹⁴ The Soviets had helped install Karmal as PDPA chairman in the hope that he would be more ideologically flexible than his Khalqi counterparts and might be able to expand the base of the government among the population.¹⁵ However, he was widely seen as a Soviet puppet in Afghanistan and was unable to achieve the broader legitimacy that the Soviets hoped for.

The geopolitical importance of Afghanistan further hindered efforts to settle the internal affairs of the country. An escalation of American,

⁹ With almost no exceptions, all Soviet internal records cited in this report are drawn from a collection of records and dossiers published by the Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson Center over the course of a decade. They can be found here: www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/e-dossier_4.pdf.

¹⁰ R. Braithwaite, *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-1989* (London: Profile Books, 2011), p. 271

¹¹ ‘CPSU CC Politburo Decision on Afghanistan, 10 April 1980’.

¹² ‘Soviet Bloc Seeking Talks’, *The Victoria Advocate*, 15 May 1980.

¹³ ‘Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU’, 23 June 1980, *Documents on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, E-Dossier No. 4* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, 2001).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ M.H. Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

Iranian, Pakistani, Chinese and Arab support for the Afghan rebels only served to harden Soviet resolve to resist external interference. Soviet officials bemoaned the fact that these parties were ‘training, equipping, and sending into DRA territory armed formations of the Afghan counterrevolution, the activity of which, thanks to help from outside, has become the main factor destabilising the situation in Afghanistan’.¹⁶ One internal report explained that the ‘most serious actions against the DRA are being launched from the territory of Pakistan’.¹⁷

In the absence of satisfactory political alternatives, the primacy of the military approach was reaffirmed, despite the difficulties faced by the Soviet army from the outset. The Soviet leadership felt that their troops were better equipped for this campaign than previous invaders of Afghanistan, including the British. They were convinced that they could avoid making the mistakes of the past, despite the difficulties that soon became clear. ‘Do you mean to compare our internationalist troops with imperialist troops?’ asked one prominent official. ‘No’, another responded, ‘our troops are different – but the mountains are the same!’¹⁸

Diplomacy in aid of military strategy (1981–5)

The inability of the Soviets to pacify the insurgency led to a gradual shift in outlook. In early 1981, for example, General Norat Ter-Grigoryants (who went on to become Chief of Staff of the 40th Army in Afghanistan the following year) told Defence Minister Ustinov that it was impossible to ‘resolve the Afghan problem by military means’ alone.¹⁹

From 1981–85 there was growing acceptance that a renewed diplomatic effort was needed, but primarily to improve the chances of military success by reducing support for the mujahedeen. Rather than attempt to reach out to those within the insurgency, Soviet policymakers focused on ending the logistical support provided by other actors – chiefly Pakistan – to the insurgents.

The period also saw the emergence of a Soviet willingness to accept an active role for the United Nations in such a process. However, there was an unresolved debate between those who wanted a broader process of negotiations with the international community (including the United States) and those who preferred to invest in direct negotiations with Pakistan, as the main facilitator of the insurgency.

In response to these growing concerns, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko gave his ‘blessing’ to the pursuit of a diplomatic solution involving the international community.²⁰ In May 1981, UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim visited Moscow to meet with Brezhnev and Gromyko, and the Soviet leaders confirmed their receptiveness to a process that might settle the ‘international aspects’ of the conflict.²¹

¹⁶ Central Committee of the CPSU, ‘On Foreign Interference in the Internal Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA)’, 2 October 1980, *Documents on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, E-Dossier No. 4* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, 2001); ‘Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU’, 23 June 1980, *Documents on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, E-Dossier No. 4* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, 2001).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ A. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 60.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 61–62, 68.

²¹ D. Cordovez, ‘My Mission Begins’, in D. Cordovez and S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 77.

Later that year, in the autumn of 1981, the Soviets expressed their desire for bilateral negotiations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. A memorandum issued by the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained, ‘The hope was that the resulting agreement would lead Pakistan to withdraw its support of the opposition in Pakistan’.²² In April 1982, the newly appointed UN special representative for Afghanistan, Diego Cordovez, began to pursue a negotiations process in earnest, seeking first to get the parties to agree on an agenda and format for proximity negotiations.²³

At this stage, Pakistani officials sought to ensure that no agreement would involve ‘an admission of guilt’ on their part.²⁴ More important, Pakistan’s government announced that it would only participate in trilateral negotiations with Iran and the Afghan government. This was a step backward, not least because Iran refused to participate in any trilateral talks.²⁵ Cordovez was, however, able to get all parties to agree in principle to negotiations toward a set of reciprocal obligations of non-interference concomitant with a Soviet withdrawal.²⁶ The Soviets would not agree to a withdrawal timeline until Pakistan officially promised to halt support to the mujahedeen, and Pakistan would not agree to halt this support until Moscow set a timeline for withdrawal.²⁷

Throughout the conflict, the Soviets failed to find a political formula to deal with Pakistan’s interference. President Zia was intensely anti-Soviet, due to personal religious convictions as well as the close relationship between India and the Soviet Union. Pakistan had been supporting Islamist militants since the 1970s to exert leverage against the Afghan government and thwart Indian influence on Pakistan’s northwestern border. Thus, Pakistani aid to the Islamist mujahedeen of the ‘Peshawar Seven’ was in line with the country’s perceived strategic interests.

As a third strand of diplomacy, Soviet officials became willing to open up direct discussions with the United States – but they were rebuffed by the Americans, who instead increased levels of funding to the insurgency.²⁸ While Pakistan had a direct interest in controlling political outcomes *within* Afghanistan, the United States had little incentive to reduce the pressure on its greatest rival when it was embroiled in a costly and bloody war.

Having secured buy-in from the DRA, the USSR and Pakistan, Cordovez announced that negotiations between the DRA and Pakistan would begin in June 1982.²⁹ In the event, the Afghan and Pakistani delegates sat in different rooms and communicated with each other through Cordovez.³⁰ No substantive outcomes emerged from the dialogue. The Pakistanis denied they were responsible for any interference and the Afghan government refused to recognise the Durand Line as the border between the two countries. Cordovez stated, ‘The main significance of the first round of negotiations was that it was held at all’.³¹

²² Ibid., p. 65.

²³ Ibid., pp. 81–82.

²⁴ Yaqub Khan in: Ibid., p. 83

²⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kalinovsky (2011), p. 69.

²⁸ Cordovez (1995), p. 84.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

³⁰ Kalinovsky (2011), p. 66.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 66–67.

In November 1982, Brezhnev died and Yuri Andropov succeeded him as General Secretary. Many hoped that the change in leadership might allow for more flexibility in Soviet thinking. By the end of 1982, there did appear to be a more profound realisation within the Politburo Central Committee that the war was going badly. Indeed, one meeting held in November ended with Gromyko asking everyone to 'draw up a plan for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan'.³² In March 1983, Andropov told UN officials that the Soviets did not intend to keep troops in Afghanistan due to the negative effect the campaign had on relations with the United States, the Third World and Muslim states, as well as the costs in Soviet blood and treasure.³³

Yet various factors combined to make negotiations stall. These included Karmal's hostility toward the idea of talks, as well as American hostility toward the UN process and the Soviet Union, which in turn reinforced hardline instincts and positions in Pakistan.³⁴ Indeed, US support for the mujahedeen accelerated during this period. Andropov had sincerely wanted to explore talks but his illness and death in 1984 thwarted the negotiations.³⁵

By 1984, it was clear that this stop-start and selective attitude toward negotiations – by which the Soviets had hoped to isolate the insurgents – failed to appreciate that the other external actors on the Afghanistan question had little interest in facilitating a political solution within the country which was conducive to Soviet interests. External diplomacy was not going to provide cover for an internal military victory within Afghanistan. This provided the context for a reappraisal of the political strategy within Afghanistan itself.

The Gorbachev effect: toward an internal political strategy

Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party in March 1985, prompting a broader reorientation of Soviet foreign policy known as 'New Thinking'.³⁶ Already a growing number of officials within the Soviet state believed that the war in Afghanistan was unwinnable on conventional terms and had begun to argue that withdrawal was the only serious option available.

In 1985, Gorbachev personally told President Reagan he would withdraw Soviet troops within four years.³⁷ This prompted a renewed focus on, and reassessment of, the internal political situation within the country. To this end, the Soviets began to lean toward a process of 'national reconciliation' within Afghanistan, thereby reducing some of the grievances on which the insurgency fed. As KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov put it at this time: 'It is necessary to look for the means to a political solution of the problem. The military path for the past six years has not given us a solution'.³⁸

At the Communist Party Congress in February 1986, Gorbachev famously called the war in Afghanistan a 'bleeding wound'; the

³² Ibid., p. 67.

³³ Ibid., p. 68.

³⁴ S. Harrison, 'Making the Russians Bleed', in Cordovez and Harrison (1995), pp. 100-102.

³⁵ Braithwaite (2011), pp. 271-72.

³⁶ D.W. Larson and A. Shevchenko, 'Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy', *International Organization*, Vol. 57, 2003, pp. 77-109.

³⁷ Feifer (2010), p. 191.

³⁸ 'CPSU CC Politburo transcript (excerpt)', 13 November 1986, *Documents on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, E-Dossier No. 4* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, 2001).

preceding year had been the bloodiest yet.³⁹ At the same time, however, he did not believe that withdrawal could be successfully executed unless the Soviets and their allies reclaimed some of the momentum. For this reason, he surged 26,000 more soldiers into Afghanistan.⁴⁰ This fed into one of the first problems with the shift toward a national reconciliation strategy. Despite policies aimed at winning over the population, Soviet forces conducted regimental-sized operations that employed aerial bombing indiscriminately.⁴¹

Another problem was that the Soviets' Afghan partners, including President Karmal and his government, did not have the legitimacy or will to implement the national reconciliation they hoped for. In October 1985, Gorbachev told Karmal that he must moderate his policies and seek compromise with the opponents of his regime.⁴² Already, however, Karmal was seen as a hindrance rather than a help to the new approach. Gorbachev reported to the Politburo that 'with or without Karmal, we will firmly carry out policies that must lead to withdrawal from Afghanistan in the shortest possible time'.⁴³ By November, Karmal announced a series of new policies aimed at broadening the base of the government, but Gorbachev had already lost faith in him.⁴⁴

In November 1986, Karmal was replaced by Mohammad Najibullah, a Pashtun from Karmal's Parcham faction of the PDPA who had previously led Afghanistan's intelligence service. It was hoped that Najibullah would be a more effective partner in attempting national reconciliation. However, he took the reins of a country and a party which were both deeply divided.⁴⁵ The Khalq-Parcham split within the PDPA had long handicapped Soviet efforts to consolidate communist rule within Afghanistan. Karmal's sacking – and the elevation of Najibullah – now divided the Parcham faction itself in two, between Pashtun and non-Pashtun Parchamis.⁴⁶

At the time of Najibullah's appointment, Gromyko made it clear that it was now 'necessary to more actively pursue a political settlement'.⁴⁷ The three difficulties he identified in doing so were the 'social conditions' which fuelled opposition to the Afghan government, the lack of 'domestic support' for the Soviet strategy from that government, and the inadequacy of the Afghan army, in which 'the number of conscripts equals the number of deserters'.⁴⁸ Soviet troops were propping up a regime which was both politically and militarily weak when asked to stand on its own. Najibullah was therefore encouraged to engage in 'negotiations with Islamic parties and organisations inside Afghanistan and beyond its borders, which are ready to compromise'.⁴⁹ Najibullah also sought to establish relations with King Zahir Shah, who had been deposed in 1974.⁵⁰ This was part of a broader attempt to reach out to biddable elements in the armed opposition, as well as non-communist political and religious leaders not involved in the rebellion.⁵¹ As Kalinovsky has written, 'Moscow began changing its approach

³⁹ Rubin (2002), p. 146.

⁴⁰ D.G. Fivecoat, 'Leaving the Graveyard: The Soviet Union's Withdrawal from Afghanistan', *Parameters*, Summer 2012, p. 2.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² S. Harrison, "Bleeders," "Dealers," and Perestroika', in Cordovez and Harrison (1995), pp. 202-3.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ 'CPSU CC Politburo transcript (excerpt)', 13 November 1986.

⁴⁶ Rubin (2002), p. 146.

⁴⁷ 'CPSU CC Politburo transcript (excerpt)', 13 November 1986.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Braithwaite (2011), p. 143.

to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. Previously, the emphasis had been on winning over the population through economic incentives and establishing party and governance influence in the cities and countryside. The new initiative continued that policy but placed a much greater emphasis on pacification through winning over rebel commanders'.⁵²

The failure of national reconciliation

The *Policy of National Reconciliation* was written by the Soviets in 1986.⁵³ With a new aid package, more emphasis on outreach to tribes, efforts to make Afghan officials more independent, and dialogue with insurgent commanders, the Soviets hoped to set the basis for a durable state as they planned to withdraw.

In January 1987, Najibullah offered a unilateral ceasefire and convened a *Loya Jirga* in the hope of talking peace with mujahedeen leaders. Independent reconciliation committees were formed and amnesties granted to mujahedeen leaders and fighters; thousands were released from prison between 1987 and 1990. The most prominent mujahedeen were offered government power-sharing deals, to include control over key ministries.⁵⁴ However, given the context of expected Soviet withdrawal, the vast majority of insurgents remained aloof from these enticements and preferred to hold their position.

The national reconciliation initiative also met with resistance and criticism from within the DRA and Soviet camps.⁵⁵ Some Soviet military officers dismissed the need for a softer approach, preferring to continue robust combat operations. Steps toward negotiations, and indeed the conduct of the entire war, were periodically undermined by divisions within the Soviet camp – namely, between the KGB and the military. Efforts to engage with prominent mujahedeen commanders, such as Ahmed Shah Massoud of Jamiat-e-Islami, were sabotaged by the KGB and Najibullah.

In the same period, Najibullah initiated a reform package in the hope of drawing the sting from the insurgency. A new constitution established 'an Islamic legal system run by an independent judiciary, greater freedom of speech, and the election of a president by a *loya jirga* assembly consisting of parliament and tribal and religious leaders'.⁵⁶ The new constitution, written by Soviet advisers, disbanded the PDPA council that had hitherto ruled Afghanistan.⁵⁷ Najibullah also encouraged a role for religion in government and made space for capitalism and trade – a key reversal from the early years of PDPA rule and a notable shift for a Soviet client state.⁵⁸

With such initiatives having registered little impact, Najibullah extended the ceasefire later in 1987 at another *Loya Jirga* and offered confidence-building measures such as the 'inclusion of all political forces who...were willing to cooperate with the government', free and fair parliamentary elections, assistance for returning refugees, and

⁵² Kalinovsky (2011), p. 100.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ H. Najibullah, *Afghan Attempts at Peace and Reconciliation, 1986 and 2010: A Comparison* (New Delhi: Delhi Policy Group, 2011), pp. 9-10; Kalinovsky (2011), p. 100-07; L. Goodson and T.H. Johnson, *Parallels with the Past: How the Soviets Lost in Afghanistan, How the Americans are Losing* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2011).

⁵⁵ Najibullah (2011).

⁵⁶ Feifer (2010), p. 217.

⁵⁷ Rubin (2002), p. 147.

⁵⁸ Najibullah (2011).

devolution of power to the local level. In this *Loya Jirga* speech, he said, 'The scope of these guarantees can be expanded. We are ready to consider the proposals of the opposite side'.⁵⁹

Yet by late 1987, the Soviets were losing faith in national reconciliation. A letter from Colonel Dmitry Tsagolov to the Soviet defence minister in August 1987 highlighted its shortcomings. The Afghan people did not see any legitimacy in the PDPA-led regime, not least because the mujahedeen controlled such large swathes of the country and the prospect of imminent Soviet withdrawal provided little incentive for them to compromise in the short term.⁶⁰ According to Colonel Tsagolov:

*[T]he counter-revolution [the insurgency] is not planning for the search of ways to resolve the problems peacefully, but continues its course for putting an end to the regime by military means ... At the same time, one has to keep in mind that the counter-revolution is aware of the strategic decision of the Soviet leadership to withdraw the Soviet troops from the DRA ... The counter-revolution will not be satisfied with partial power today, knowing that tomorrow it can have it all.*⁶¹

Meanwhile, the Soviet suspension of offensive operations allowed Massoud to consolidate his hold on the Panjshir Valley, from which he launched a series of deadly attacks on the Red Army and the Afghan Army.⁶²

Withdrawal and the attempt to find a last-minute deal

The announcement of a timetable for Soviet withdrawal weakened the Soviet position further in their attempts to draw in international support for Najibullah's regime. In February 1988, against the advice of the Soviet team negotiating with the United States, Gorbachev announced that a full withdrawal would begin on 15 May, assuming an agreement could be reached at the negotiations in Geneva.⁶³ Gorbachev hoped that his unilateral announcement and the signing of the accords would induce the United States and Pakistan to cease arming the mujahedeen. However, one of the Soviet negotiators, Nikolai Kozyrev, stated that Gorbachev's announcement 'devalued the position of our delegation at the talks, put it in an awkward spot, and gave the opposite side extra motivation to pressure Moscow in the hope that the Soviet leadership would agree to further concessions'.⁶⁴

In 1983, US Secretary of State George P. Shultz had expressed a rather hardline view of negotiations on Afghanistan, stating, 'Negotiations are a euphemism for capitulation if the shadow of power is not cast across the bargaining table'. In response to Gorbachev's announcement of withdrawal, Shultz saw an opportunity to adopt an even more uncompromising position on negotiations. Early drafts of the Geneva Accords had envisaged an ending of American support

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Colonel K. Tsagolov letter to Comrade Dmitry Timofeevich Yazov, 13 August 1987, in A. Lyakhovskiy, *The Tragedy and Valor of Afghan* (Moscow: Iskon, 1995, translated by Svetlana Savranskaya, The National Security Archive), pp. 344-348.

⁶¹ Colonel K. Tsagolov letter to Comrade Dmitry Timofeevich Yazov, 13 August 1987.

⁶² Feifer (2010), p. 220.

⁶³ Kalinovsky (2011), pp. 136-37.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 135-36; N. Kozyrev, *Zhenevskie soglaseniye 1988 g. o Afganskoe uregulirovaniye* [The Geneva Accords of 1988 and the Afghan Settlement] (Moscow: Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000), pp. 21-22.

for the mujahedeen before Soviet withdrawal. Shultz now demanded that American aid to the mujahedeen and Soviet aid to the Afghan government could be withdrawn simultaneously.

The Geneva Accords were signed on 14 April 1988 by Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and the Soviet Union. They committed the Soviets to executing a 'front-loaded' withdrawal within nine months. The United States and the Soviet Union agreed to 'positive symmetry', meaning that their respective aid efforts to the mujahedeen and the Afghan government continued, rather than 'negative symmetry', which would have withdrawn aid to both. The Soviet leadership hoped that the Accords, which prohibited Pakistani interference and intervention in Afghan affairs, would mitigate the problem of aid to the mujahedeen.⁶⁵

Although they had agreed on a timetable for withdrawal at Geneva, the Soviets were left with two problems that required direct negotiations with the mujahedeen leadership. The first was how to manage withdrawal with so much of the countryside in control of the insurgents. To that end, 'the Soviets began negotiating truces with elders and mujahedeen commanders to establish "peace zones" through which soldiers and rebels would usually pass without reacting to each other'.⁶⁶ In exchange for abstaining from any offensive operations and turning a blind eye to mujahedeen activities, the Red Army was promised safe passage out of the country. Military commanders also again sought to reach a deal with Ahmed Shah Massoud, primarily to ensure a tidy and safe withdrawal.

The KGB, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, and Najibullah were all opposed to such local and regional deals. Indeed, Najibullah relentlessly pushed for renewed Soviet combat operations against Massoud's strongholds. Gorbachev vacillated during this period, going from full opposition to offensive operations, to supporting them, and back again. Efforts by Soviet military leaders to reach out to Massoud were hampered by these vacillations and spoiler behaviour from Najibullah.

The second reason to negotiate with the mujahedeen was – in a revisit of previous policies – to attempt to provide a broader base for the Najibullah government, which looked increasingly flimsy in the context of Soviet military withdrawal. These efforts were encouraged by the fact that President Zia, shortly before his death, stated that he would support a coalition that was divided in three between the former PDPA, 'moderates', and the mujahedeen; in response, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vorontsov was dispatched to Islamabad to negotiate directly with the mujahedeen leaders, encouraging them to join a coalition government. However, attempts to make a final deal with the mujahedeen and thereby stabilise Afghanistan proved unsuccessful. The mujahedeen leaders maintained their refusal to accept any form of government under Najibullah. Indeed, one Pakistani diplomat described these last-ditch efforts at negotiation in disparaging terms: 'This is mainly a face-saving provision. Such representation will let the Soviets feel they have not pulled out of Afghanistan in humiliation or ... dumped Najibullah'.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Kalinovsky (2011), p. 144.

⁶⁶ Feifer (2010), p. 224.

⁶⁷ M. Aftab, 'Vorontsov to discuss Afghanistan with top Pakistani, rebel leaders', *Associated Press*, 3 January 1989, <http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1989/Vorontsov-To-Discuss-Afghanistan-With-Top-Pakistani-Rebel-Leaders/id-6ad95236a46d987db8ee08ab90bb71b3>.

In fact, as the Soviets moved toward the exit, the coalition of mujahedeen forces which had fought the war – the 'Peshawar Seven' – were already beginning to turn on each other in their attempts to seize the initiative themselves. For example, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of Hizb-i-Islami mounted a ferocious power grab, assassinating other commanders and potential rivals across Afghanistan. Furthermore, despite the Geneva Accords, Pakistan continued to pursue its own interests, and the ISI offered support to Hekmatyar in an attempt to anoint him as the future Afghan head of state.⁶⁸ Afghanistan was sliding toward civil war.

Ultimately, Soviet withdrawal failed to stabilise Najibullah's regime, which was barely sustained by assistance from Moscow.⁶⁹ In 1990, in a new effort to broaden the legitimacy of the state, the Afghan constitution was again revised, giving the country an Islamic identity and allowing for the participation of any political party that had at least 300 members and stated its objectives.⁷⁰ But it was clear that the authority of Najibullah's regime was fragmenting. As Rubin explained, 'Unable to create an effective, modern military, the government moved away from a bureaucratic chain of command toward a system based on brokerage, in which the state pays powerful leaders to supply troops from among their followings'.⁷¹ The unintended consequence of this shift, however, was that the Afghan army became merely one faction within the larger number of armed forces under state control.⁷² While Najibullah's sponsorship of a loose patchwork of militias forestalled defeat for a short period, one legacy was to ensure that the civil war of the 1990s was even more ferocious than it would have been otherwise.

Ultimately then, as much as Western policymakers may resist the idea that their experience could follow that of the Soviet Union, the similarities are striking in some respects. The strategic rationale for talks was unclear and inconsistent, the commitment to talks increased in inverse proportion to military strength, and no successful formula was found for dealing with external 'spoilers'. The echoes of this experience in the post-2001 period are illustrated in the next part of this report.

⁶⁸ Feifer (2010), p. 350.

⁶⁹ Rubin (2002), p. 147.

⁷⁰ Najibullah (2011), p. 12.

⁷¹ Rubin (2002), p. 148.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

2 The Evolution of 'Talking to the Taliban' since 2001

The idea that it might be necessary to harness the Taliban, or sections of that movement, to a political settlement in Afghanistan is not new. On the contrary, as this chapter will demonstrate, the idea that the United States and its allies might be required to engage in dialogue or some kind of 'peace process' with its main military opponents is one that has been present from the early stages of the conflict, but has evolved and gathered pace in recent years.

In the immediate aftermath of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, the Taliban was 'locked out' of discussions on Afghanistan's future. Thereafter, against the backdrop of an escalating insurgency, tentative efforts were made to reintegrate individual Taliban members into the governance of Afghanistan, provided they renounced the movement and the use of violence. From 2008, a growing number of voices argued for some form of national reconciliation process with the 'mainstream' Taliban and even the 'leadership' of the movement under Mullah Omar.

At the time of the American 'surge' of troops in late 2009, it was hoped that a renewed counter-insurgency effort would form part of a 'talk-fight' strategy, which would force the Taliban to accept certain conditions in return for political participation. This moment soon passed, however, without any decisive shift in the military momentum of the campaign. From this point, what were once 'prerequisites' for dialogue with the Taliban were relegated to the position of hoped-for 'outcomes' of talks. Thus far, these talks have proved abortive. With a major drawdown of ISAF forces now looming, however, it seems possible that US Secretary of State John Kerry will make one more attempt to kick-start a dialogue process (nominally led by the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai).

Despite the many incarnations of the 'talking cure', and partly because of the variety of meanings attached to 'talking to the Taliban', a viable peace process involving the Taliban has yet to emerge, or even be close to emerging. The aim of this chapter is to recount the evolution of the idea of 'talking to the Taliban' and to explain why it has not yet yielded much in the way of tangible political success. The central theme is that the idea of 'talking to the Taliban' has been shaped by the fortunes of the military campaign, and that the strategic rationale for talks has never been sufficiently clear.

From exclusion to reintegration

The idea that there might exist a 'moderate Taliban' was one that the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) had encouraged the United States to embrace even prior to 11 September 2001. After the attacks of 9/11, President Pervez Musharraf talked about the potential

for working with 'moderate elements' inside the Taliban.⁷³ Indeed, even as Operation Enduring Freedom began in October 2001, Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar insisted that 'Taliban moderates' should have a 'part to play' in any emerging political settlement for Afghanistan.⁷⁴ Pakistan's insistence on the relevance and malleability of the Taliban was, of course, a reflection of its own strategic interests rather than a disinterested assessment of the Afghan political scene. With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can see that it foreshadowed later shifts in the policy of the United States and its allies.

Having been toppled from power relatively swiftly, the Taliban were excluded from the Bonn Conference held in December 2001, which aimed to build a UN-mandated democratic state for Afghanistan.⁷⁵ For a period in early 2002, it was possible to believe that the Taliban, as an organised movement, had been consigned to the past. Yet by the end of that year came the first signs that it might be regrouping in the south of the country (a fact signalled by the attempted assassination of Karzai in September).⁷⁶

Drawing on the assistance of the ISI, Mullah Omar (allegedly based in Pakistan) was able to rebuild a Taliban organisation in four key southern Afghan provinces: Uruzgan, Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul. In the eastern provinces, the reorganisation project was effectively sub-contracted to Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son, Sirajuddin (under the title of the 'Haqqani network').⁷⁷ An alliance was also formed with another veteran militant opponent of the new Afghan government, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who headed the group Hizb-i-Islami (HiG).⁷⁸

From the spring of 2003, just when the United States was preoccupied with invading Iraq, the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, with the small and constrained ISAF force in Kabul unable to make any significant impact. By the end of the year, foreign troops and the newly constituted Afghan security forces were subject to almost daily attacks from elements operating under the Taliban umbrella. The insurgents were able to exploit a number of grievances against the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

It was against this backdrop that the idea of reaching out to *former* senior members of the Taliban was first revisited, in the hope that they could be co-opted to support the Karzai administration. In effect, this policy allowed for the rehabilitation and reintegration of former Taliban members who had definitively renounced the movement. In October 2003, for example, Karzai's then chief-of-staff, Mohammed Umer Daudzai, confirmed that talks had been held with prominent 'moderates' from the former Taliban regime.⁷⁹ The move was subsequently endorsed by the leading US commander in Afghanistan, General David Barno, who stated: 'If you're a rank and file Taliban member and you reject your past ... then you can become part of the

⁷³ A. Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin, 2009), pp. 72-73; F. Bokhari, R. McGregor and J. Thornhill, 'Post-Taliban Settlement: Musharraf urges action on new regime', *Financial Times*, 31 October 2001.

⁷⁴ F. Bokhari and J. Thornhill, 'Part to play for Taliban moderates': Interview with Pakistan's Foreign Minister', *Financial Times*, 29 October 2001.

⁷⁵ Rashid (2009), pp. 101-06.

⁷⁶ 'Karzai Survives Attempt on his Life', *BBC*, 5 September 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/2238428.stm.

⁷⁷ 'Snake Country: The Pakistani Army's Complex Relationship with Jihadists', *The Economist*, 1 October 2001, <http://www.economist.com/node/21531042>; D. Ressler and V. Brown, 'The Haqqani Network and Al Qaeda', *Foreign Policy*, 19 July 2011, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/19/the_haqqani_network_and_al_qaeda; J. Dressler, *The Haqqani Network: From Pakistan to Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2010).

⁷⁸ Rashid (2009), pp. 243-44.

⁷⁹ V. Burnett, 'Kabul in peace overtures with "moderate" Taliban', *Financial Times*, 20 October 2003.

future of Afghanistan'.⁸⁰ As the Taliban insurgency grew during 2004, this message was reinforced by US Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, who asserted that 'non-criminal' elements of the Taliban would not be subject to arrest if they renounced violence.⁸¹

This policy also had some level of international underpinning in the form of the UN's Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme, which was launched in 2003. Again, rather than dealing with the Taliban as a collective organisation, it sought to weaken it by inducing *individual* Taliban combatants to switch allegiances.⁸²

From reintegration to reconciliation

In October 2004, Hamid Karzai became Afghanistan's first democratically elected president, leading some to hope that this might strengthen the government. However, 2005 was marred by both the worsening of the insurgency and concerns that the United States was seeking to reduce its presence in Afghanistan because of growing commitments in Iraq. In the last few months of 2005, the United States withdrew 3,000 of the approximately 20,000 troops it had in the country. By early 2006, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and General John Abizaid, Commander of CENTCOM, said that further withdrawals of as many as 4,000 US troops would follow.⁸³

Partly because of the anticipated security vacuum – and the inadequacy of the Afghan police and army – Karzai created the Independent Peace and Reconciliation Commission (known in Dari as Programme Tahkim Sulh, or PTS), under the leadership of former Afghan President Sibghatullah Mujaddedi. It was charged with leading a new effort to persuade Taliban members to forgo the insurgency in exchange for amnesty. However, despite encouragement from the United States as an alternative to a heavy military footprint in Afghanistan, its efforts were not deemed to be a success.⁸⁴

From 2005, as the insurgency intensified further, the strategy of 'peeling off' individual insurgents looked increasingly inadequate for keeping pace with the momentum being generated by the Taliban. More consideration was therefore given to engaging with the Taliban as a whole, perhaps as part of a broader process of 'national reconciliation'. Where once people had spoken of the prospect that individual Taliban fighters could be reintegrated as *individuals*, there was an increasing willingness to consider reaching out to the movement as a *collective*. From these early stages, however, it became clear that the Taliban movement had little interest in engaging directly with President Karzai, meaning that an 'Afghan-led' negotiation process was extremely difficult to instigate. It was within the context of this vacuum that other intermediaries stepped in.

Not for the last time, it was one of the NATO/ISAF coalition partners who took the initiative to pioneer a different approach to 'talking to the Taliban'. In July 2005, German officials met with Taliban delegates in the Swiss city of Zurich for three days of talks, in an effort to secure a

⁸⁰ V. Burnett, 'US backs Afghan proposal to woo moderate Taliban', *Financial Times*, 31 December 2003.

⁸¹ V. Burnett, 'You don't have to die, Taliban told: The US has joined Kabul in efforts to bring Afghan foes in from the cold', *Financial Times*, 17 December 2004.

⁸² *Afghanistan: Getting Disarmament Back on Track*, Asia Briefing No. 35 (Brussels/Kabul: International Crisis Group, 23 Feb 2005).

⁸³ 'US Won't Withdraw Troops from Afghanistan: Rumsfeld', *Xinhua News Agency*, 12 July 2006.

⁸⁴ *Global Security: Afghanistan and Pakistan* (London: House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2009).

deal to end the insurgency. Specifically, as a reflection of macro-level international priorities, the Taliban were offered political recognition if they emphatically rescinded any connection with Al Qaeda.⁸⁵ Separately, there were also reports that the CIA and the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) were themselves engaged in contacts with the Taliban in an effort to explore a potential political solution. Each of these initiatives failed due to the fact that the gap between the two sides was wide and appeared unbridgeable.

The difficulties faced in finding any sort of common political ground with the Taliban increased after their 2006 spring offensive in southern Afghanistan. A recently deployed and under-strength British brigade faced an escalating campaign of violence driven by known lieutenants of Mullah Omar, including Mullah Dadullah, who commanded thousands of fighters from across the border in Pakistan. Dadullah had played an important role in reconstituting the Taliban and in cementing its alliance with Al Qaeda.⁸⁶ As an indication of the Taliban's growing ambitions, Dadullah's men now deployed IEDs and suicide bombers in large numbers – the first time Afghanistan had seen such methods.⁸⁷

Faced with this intensifying conflict – and with less than 4,000 troops to call upon – British commanders engaged in localised dialogue and agreements in an effort to attenuate the insurgency. Thus, in September 2006, in the town of Musa Qala, a deal was reached (under the aegis of Lt Gen David Richards) by which all armed groups, both British and Taliban, would withdraw from the area and leave security in the hands of local elders, in return for an end to the fighting. At the time, some within the US military were very critical of the move, which was seen as a partial surrender.⁸⁸ The Musa Qala deal also raised concerns about whether any deal struck with the Taliban would ever be genuinely adhered to, as the town effectively fell under Taliban control in February 2007. Musa Qala was not retaken until the end of that year, when Mullah Salam, a senior Taliban commander (and their former governor of Uruzgan province), was persuaded to change sides under military pressure from NATO/Afghan forces.⁸⁹

Salam's switch in allegiance was hailed by some as a triumph for the *reintegration* policy – the attempt to encourage 'moderate Taliban' individuals and cells to abandon violence and accept the Afghan constitution.⁹⁰ In reality, however, this highly localised deal was unique to the circumstances in Helmand. It did not provide a successful template for a broader nationwide policy, and the Musa Qala saga raised more questions than it answered about the usefulness of 'talking to the Taliban'.

Before these lessons could be fully digested, a crisis occurred in December 2007 which underlined the growing confusion over a number of aspects of talking to the Taliban, such as who was responsible for orchestrating such talks, and to what extent localised dialogue with insurgents should be fed into a broader national strategy toward talks. Indeed, the whole notion of talking to the Taliban rose to the forefront of the political agenda with the expulsion from Afghanistan of two

⁸⁵ M. Gebauer and H. Stark, 'Secret negotiations with the Islamists proved fruitless', *Spiegel*, 20 August 2007.

⁸⁶ C. Franco, *A Taliban Resurgence: The Destabilization of Kabul* (Charlotte, NC: NEFA Foundation, 2007). Dadullah would be killed in May 2007 in a NATO-led raid.

⁸⁷ In 2005, there were 530 IED attacks in Afghanistan, whereas in 2006 there were 1,297; in 2005 there were 21 suicide attacks, while in 2006 there were 141.

⁸⁸ T. Baldwin and M. Evans, 'US accuses Britain of Afghan failings', *The Times*, 16 December 2008.

⁸⁹ C. Gall, 'Afghanistan to expel 2 officials', *The New York Times*, 27 December 2007.

⁹⁰ R. Synovitz, 'Afghanistan: A First Step Toward "Turning" Moderate Taliban?', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 9 January 2008.

men, Michael Semple (a former EU aid worker) and Mervyn Patterson (who worked for the UN aid programme), after the Afghan government accused them of talking to the Taliban.⁹¹ Semple and Patterson were reported to have held meetings in Musa Qala with Mansour Dadullah (a key commander in Helmand and the brother of Mullah Dadullah) without the permission of the Afghan government. Semple, now a respected commentator on Afghanistan, later stated that their actions had been 'totally in line with official policy'. He also became a strong advocate of talks on the grounds that most Taliban insurgents ('two-thirds') could be drawn into the political process via a 'network of patronage'.⁹²

The circumstances surrounding this affair highlighted the ambiguities still surrounding ISAF policy in Afghanistan – above all, the organising assumption that all talks should be Afghan-led. Semple blamed his expulsion on the Helmand provincial governor, Asadullah Wafa, who had felt undercut and undermined by the meetings and had appealed directly to Karzai. Other sources suggested that the US government had in fact alerted the Afghan authorities to the meetings, because of their unhappiness at the existence of a communication channel outside their control.⁹³ Moreover, it also became apparent that the Afghan government was not the only actor unprepared for the implications of such talks. Having engaged with Semple and Patterson, Mansour Dadullah himself was dismissed by the Taliban for having participated in talks.⁹⁴

This confusion, mixed messaging and general sense of incoherence was a symptom of a broader degeneration in ISAF's campaign. By late 2007, insurgents in southern Afghanistan effectively controlled large swathes of Kandahar, Uruzgan, Zabul and Helmand – with neighbouring provinces also increasingly slipping from the authority of the central government.⁹⁵ In June 2008, American military casualties in Afghanistan exceeded those in Iraq for the first time since the two wars began.⁹⁶

While it is sometimes tempting to see exploratory talks as ameliorative and constructive in their own right, the recognition that 'talking to the Taliban' was now on the political agenda led to a battle for ownership of that process. From the outset, President Karzai was highly sensitive to concerns that he might be somehow excluded or marginalised from that process. Equally, for the Taliban, one of the major incentives in considering such talks was that it would undermine Karzai further by demonstrating his redundancy.

Karzai therefore tried to seize back the initiative by becoming a public advocate for talks. In September 2008, in a speech to mark the end of Ramadan, he appealed to Taliban leaders to 'come back to your country and work for your people's happiness and stop killing and harming people'. Having expelled Semple and Patterson at the end of 2007, Karzai now announced that he had been seeking the assistance of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan for the previous two years in order to try to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.⁹⁷

⁹¹ H. McDonald, 'Ulster peace process inspired aid workers', *Observer*, 30 December 2007.

⁹² H. McDonald, 'We can persuade Taliban to be peaceful – expelled EU man', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2008.

⁹³ E. Mayne, 'Diplomats expelled "at behest of the US"', *The Telegraph*, 30 December 2007; C. Gall, 'Afghanistan to expel 2 officials'.

⁹⁴ D. Nelson, 'Expelled British envoys tried to turn Taliban chief', *The Sunday Times*, 6 January 2008.

⁹⁵ Franco (2007).

⁹⁶ Mark Mazzetti, 'Military Death Toll Rises in Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 2 July 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/02/washington/02military.html>.

⁹⁷ J. Burns, 'Karzai sought Saudi help with the Taliban', *The New York Times*, 30 September 2008; J. Burns and A. W. Wafa, 'Karzai seeks Saudi help with Taliban', *The New York Times*, 1 October 2008.

It later emerged that talks were being held in Mecca, during an Iftar dinner hosted by the Saudi king, between Afghan government officials (including Karzai's brother Qayum) and former Taliban officials (including former Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Muttawakkil and Mullah Abdul Salaam Zaeef, the former Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan). Active Taliban members were also believed to have been present.⁹⁸ Saudi Arabia had been one of the few countries to recognise the Taliban regime in the mid-1990s. This, combined with their status as the Guardian of the Holy Places in Mecca and Medina, led some to view the Saudis as credible interlocutors. Meanwhile, separate contacts were also alleged to have been made with Hekmatyar's HiG through his son-in-law, Ghairat Baheer, who had been released after several years in the US-run Bagram detention facility in what some saw as a concession to 'create an atmosphere of trust'.⁹⁹

None of these various initiatives provided a substantive breakthrough in themselves, but they did herald a new direction.¹⁰⁰ However, it seemed that both the Afghan and US governments were orienting themselves to the view that negotiations with the Taliban might provide one way of achieving their interests, against the backdrop of declining military fortunes. In October 2008, draft recommendations within a White House assessment of Afghan strategy called for talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, with US participation. General David Petraeus, who was about to take overall command in Afghanistan as the incoming head of CENTCOM, publicly endorsed the concept of holding talks with 'enemies' and stressed the need to 'reconcile' those who were not irreconcilable.¹⁰¹ Later events raised doubts as to whether Petraeus' words reflected a genuine conversion to such a policy. Herein lay another portent of future problems: the difference between being willing to engage in dialogue with low-level insurgents as part of a counter-insurgency strategy, and being prepared to speak to the insurgent leadership as part of a new political strategy.

In October 2008, Pashtun tribal leaders from Afghanistan and Pakistan met in Islamabad, at the instigation of President Karzai, for a 'jirgagai' (or mini-jirga) to discuss ways of tackling militant violence. No representatives from the Taliban were present, but various reports at this time confirmed that the Afghan government was actively seeking peace talks with Taliban and other insurgent groups.¹⁰² In November 2008, Karzai offered Mullah Omar safe passage for negotiations and said he would resist demands to hand the Taliban leader over to American authorities.¹⁰³ In response to Karzai's offer, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid declared that they would 'not take part in any peace talks with Karzai... until such a day when foreign forces leave Afghanistan'.¹⁰⁴

In effect, there was a self-defeating dynamic at the heart of the process of 'talking to the Taliban' from the outset. Indeed, it is one which has still yet to be satisfactorily resolved. The United States was happy for talks with the Taliban to occur, provided they were Afghan-led, as this would allow the Americans to focus instead on the military aspects of the campaign; the Afghan government was keen to be seen to act independently of the United States and wanted to control all talks with

⁹⁸ 'Pakistani and Afghan Pashtun leaders meet', *The New York Times*, 26 October 2008; 'Afghanistan tests waters for overture to Taliban', *The New York Times*, 29 October 2008.

⁹⁹ C. Gall, 'As US weighs Taliban negotiations, Afghans are already talking', *The New York Times*, 11 March 2009.

¹⁰⁰ 'Taliban leader says peace talk "just enemies" propaganda', *Xinhua News Agency*, 13 December 2008.

¹⁰¹ 'US mulls talks with Taliban in bid to quell Afghan unrest', *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 October 2008.

¹⁰² C. Gall, 'Afghanistan tests waters for overture to Taliban', *The New York Times*, 29 October 2008.

¹⁰³ 'Karzai Makes offer to Taliban', *The Washington Post*, 17 November 2008.

¹⁰⁴ 'Taliban reject peace talks', *The New York Times*, 18 November 2008.

the Taliban; but the Taliban had little interest in talks precisely because talks might give the Afghan government more legitimacy.

'Talk-fight' to 'peace process'

After a three-month policy review following his inauguration, President Obama opted to increase substantially the number of US troops committed to the war in Afghanistan. An initial investment saw the dispatch of some 17,000 extra US soldiers, alongside additional NATO forces.¹⁰⁵ This was heralded as a greater emphasis on 'hearts and minds' through the fighting of a 'comprehensive, counter-insurgency campaign' that would deliver security as the Afghan army and police continued to be trained to take responsibility for security themselves.¹⁰⁶ In August 2009, President Obama ordered a 'surge' of a further 30,000 troops into Afghanistan from December; he made it clear, however, that the surge forces would be withdrawn beginning in July 2011.¹⁰⁷ When Obama made this announcement, some observers criticised the president 'for giving the Taliban a reason to lie low and wait out the Americans' and for doing 'little to discourage US allies from hedging their bets – Pakistan's continued coddling of the Afghan Taliban and President Hamid Karzai's reliance on self-serving warlords'.¹⁰⁸

While the military dimension of the campaign was re-energised, the idea that 'talking to the Taliban' would be an important part of a broader strategy going forward still remained. In March 2009, before announcing the surge, President Obama declared that there could be no peace in Afghanistan 'without reconciliation among former enemies' and expressed support for a 'contact group' of regional partners to discuss how this might be achieved. However, subsequent accounts of insider politics from within the administration suggest that there were tensions between those who wanted to invest primarily in the successful outcome of a COIN campaign in Afghanistan and those who preferred to focus on a larger diplomatic effort which included talks with the Taliban and their regional sponsors. It is clear that at least some key policy stakeholders were not yet persuaded of the need for a Taliban-inclusive political process – and views within the administration were divided.¹⁰⁹

During the 2009 Afghanistan strategy reviews overseen by Obama, those in favour of talking to the Taliban in some capacity included Ambassador Richard Holbrooke and Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, who according to one account 'believed a settlement [with the Taliban] was the only way the conflict would end, especially considering the corruption of the Karzai government, the incompetence of the Afghan security forces, and the safe havens in Pakistan'.¹¹⁰ For the moment, though, such voices remained in the minority. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for example, was said to be sceptical of the likelihood of such a settlement being achieved. The CIA was opposed to any deal without a clear Taliban renunciation of Al Qaeda.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, senior military

¹⁰⁵ M. Evans and S. Coates, 'Army is poised for Afghan surge', *The Times*, 27 March 2009; T. Reid and Z. Hussain, 'Obama offers new strategy to tame "most dangerous place in the world"', *The Times*, 28 March 2009; E. MacAskill, 'Obama's war: focus on beating Taliban and al-Qaida', *The Guardian*, 28 March 2009.

¹⁰⁶ D. Petraeus, 'Afghanistan is hard all the time, but it's doable', *The Times*, 18 September 2009; D. Kilcullen, 'If we lose hearts and minds, we will lose the war', *The Spectator*, 20 May 2009; D. Kilcullen, 'For answers to the Afghan-Pakistan conflict, ask: what would Curzon do?' *The Spectator*, 15 July 2009.

¹⁰⁷ B. Obama, 'The Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan', US Military Academy, 1 December 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

¹⁰⁸ T. Karon, 'Obama's Afghanistan Surge: A Long War with an Uncertain Outcome', *Time*, 13 December 2009.

¹⁰⁹ R. Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Knopf, 2002); V. Nasr, 'The Inside Story of How the White House Let Diplomacy Fail in Afghanistan', *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2013.

¹¹⁰ Chandrasekaran (2012), p. 126.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

leaders such as General Petraeus, along with Admiral Mike Mullen (then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and General Stanley McChrystal (then Commander of ISAF), thought it was premature to explore talks with the Taliban before the COIN strategy was given a chance to work, and were said to have been alarmed by the president's remarks in favour of a talks process.¹¹²

If there was some agreement, it was on the broad assumption that some combination of talking and fighting ('talk-fight') was necessary. Within this, however, there were important gradations of opinion. Senior military commanders continued to believe that it was better to use the 'surge' to coerce Taliban senior leaders to surrender or, at the very least, to force them to talk from a position of weakness.¹¹³ Meanwhile, Ambassador Holbrooke believed a negotiations process was 'the only viable American strategy', though this was contingent on the United States demonstrating a commitment to staying in Afghanistan and not withdrawing in the near future.

Those who wanted to foreground the search for a political solution were bolstered by the junior partners within the NATO/ISAF coalition. In particular, the UK, as the second largest contributor to the war, became an increasingly loud advocate for direct negotiations with the Taliban. In part, this might be interpreted as Britain's attempt to compensate for its role as a junior military partner by stressing its expertise in conflict resolution. A familiar refrain from British officials and ministers is that the experience of talking to the IRA in Northern Ireland provided a unique insight into similar negotiations with the Taliban.¹¹⁴

In a July 2009 speech at NATO headquarters, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband emphasised the need for a 'political strategy' which included 'reintegration and reconciliation' [emphasis added], with the goal of achieving a broad-based 'inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan'. As for who might participate in this settlement, Miliband's remarks referenced those who might be classed as 'accidental guerillas' who had joined the insurgency because of local grievances ('conservative pashtun nationalists') and those Taliban who were prepared to renounce any association with international jihadism ('those who want Islamic rule locally from those committed to violent jihad globally'.)¹¹⁵

Other senior British officials, such as Sherard Cowper-Cowles (the UK's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan) and Lieutenant-General Graeme Lamb (the former head of the SAS and Britain's senior military officer in Kabul), also emerged as firm advocates for a dialogue with the Taliban leadership.¹¹⁶ Cowper-Cowles in particular has been a frequent critic of the US approach on the grounds that it has placed too much emphasis on military aspects of the campaign and failed to seek a broader political settlement.¹¹⁷

In August 2009, Secretary of State Clinton publicly stated the willingness of the United States to negotiate with some elements of the Taliban. While it was unusual to have such a public confirmation

¹¹² Ibid., p. 223.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 126-27.

¹¹⁴ S. Rayment, 'Philip Hammond: I shook hands with Sinn Fein, we must talk to the Taliban too', *The Telegraph*, 13 November 2011.

¹¹⁵ 'Talk to Taliban, Miliband urges', BBC, 27 July 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8169789.stm.

¹¹⁶ R. Norton-Taylor, 'UK pressing Karzai to negotiate with Taliban, says leaked memo', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2009.

¹¹⁷ Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign* (New York: HarperPress, 2012).

of this willingness from the highest levels of the US administration, in reality it did not signal a huge departure from existing policy. The bar for participation in talks was still set high, with the United States 'ready to welcome anyone supporting the Taliban who renounces Al Qaeda, lays down their arms, and is willing to participate in the free and open society that is enshrined in the Afghan Constitution'.¹¹⁸

Behind the scenes, rather than moving toward a nationwide reconciliation process including the Taliban, the US administration remained divided over what this might mean in practice.¹¹⁹ In July 2009, for example, President Obama was contacted by Saudi King Abdullah, who offered to facilitate contact with a group of Taliban representatives who had been communicating with Saudi intelligence officials, but this line of contact was not pursued.¹²⁰

While the US administration was divided over the timing and nature of talks, a growing number of analysts suggested that the Taliban were suffering similar dilemmas and therefore might be ripe for enticing into negotiations. Some advocates suggested that it might still be possible to 'flip' certain factions under the Taliban umbrella in favour of a political settlement.¹²¹ Others claimed that it was increasingly possible to identify a divergence between Taliban 'doves' (such as the alleged deputy leader, Mullah Baradar) and 'hawks' (often said to be Mullah Omar or Siraj Haqqani).¹²² A common feature in such analysis was a belief in the divisibility of Taliban ranks, separating those who were 'reasonable' (and wanted talks) from those who were not (and did not).

The changing attitude toward talks with the Taliban was followed closely within Afghanistan during the disputed 2009 presidential elections. During the campaign, Karzai once again put himself forward as the only viable peacemaker within the political establishment, and promised that he would convene a tribal gathering including the Taliban and Hekmatyar and his followers if re-elected. By contrast, his main opponents, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, called for a grass-roots approach to 'reconciliation', centred on community and tribal councils; Ghani also insisted that a Taliban ceasefire should precede any peace negotiations.¹²³

While it did little to answer questions about his legitimacy, Karzai's victory opened up the prospect of renewed efforts on negotiations. In late January 2010, at the London Conference on Afghanistan, Karzai publicly called on the Taliban to engage in talks with the government and join a nationwide peace conference.¹²⁴ This appeal was endorsed by Mark Sedwill, NATO's new senior civilian representative in Afghanistan, who called for negotiations with the Taliban and other 'pretty unsavoury characters'.¹²⁵

As on previous occasions, the Taliban was quick to refuse the idea of talks with 'national traitors' in the Afghan government and reiterated

¹¹⁸ 'Peace talks with Taliban top issue in Afghan vote', *The New York Times*, 17 August 2009.

¹¹⁹ Nasr, 'The Inside Story of How the White House Let Diplomacy Fail in Afghanistan'.

¹²⁰ Chandrasekaran (2012), p. 232.

¹²¹ 'Indian Minister urges Afghan Political Settlement', *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 September 2009; F. Christia and M. Semple, 'Flipping the Taliban', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009.

¹²² For an example of this kind of approach, see H. Khan, 'To talk or not to talk: the Taliban's internal divide', *Foreign Policy*, 10 December 2009. The article does not use the terms 'doves' and 'hawks', but the logic is the same.

¹²³ 'Peace talks with Taliban top issue in Afghan vote', *The New York Times*, 17 August 2009; 'From insurgency to insurrection', *The Economist*, 22 August 2009.

¹²⁴ J. Borger, 'Karzai poised to unveil "land, work and pensions" plan to woo Taliban', *The Times*, 20 January 2010. For discussion of possible talks prior to this, see D. Filkins, 'The Taliban don't seem ready to talk', *New York Times*, 23 January 2010.

¹²⁵ J. Borger, 'Talk to Taliban for peace, says Afghan envoy', *The Guardian*, 27 January 2010.

their calls for complete withdrawal of foreign forces.¹²⁶ However, this was dismissed by Karzai aides who insisted that behind-the-scenes talks were already underway.¹²⁷ Furthermore, the idea that Karzai would reach out directly to Mullah Omar was also revived.¹²⁸ Indeed, it was to explore this avenue that Karzai travelled to Saudi Arabia in February 2010.¹²⁹

As the prospect of negotiations increased, Pakistan – which had not been central to the Saudi-mediated process – reimposed itself. The same month that Karzai travelled to Saudi Arabia, the Pakistan security services captured Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, widely regarded as the head of the Taliban's political arm and a senior military strategist.¹³⁰ Initially, some saw the arrest as a positive sign of increased security cooperation. As further details emerged, however, it seemed more likely that it was part of the Pakistani state's effort to interpose itself into any peace process. Baradar was believed to be the main interlocutor in behind-the-scenes dialogue and was said to have met the UN's most senior official in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, in Dubai the previous month.¹³¹ His swift removal from the political scene at such a critical moment was thus interpreted as a clear signal from the Pakistani authorities of their determination not to be sidelined in any emergent process.

Despite the disruption caused by the Baradar arrest, it was clear that support for a negotiations process was gathering momentum in the first half of 2010. First, other actors within Afghanistan recognised that their interests were better served by participation in these talks. For example, in March 2010, a delegation from Hekmatyar's HiG arrived in Kabul with a fifteen-point plan for peace and held informal talks with the Afghan government.

Second, the US administration gave the clearest indication yet of its willingness to pursue this avenue, as the National Security Council came out in support of negotiations. It was also believed that General McChrystal had grown more amenable to the idea of negotiating with the Taliban and was 'on board' for these efforts. However, his command of ISAF would soon be ended due to his now-infamous Rolling Stone magazine interview. When General Petraeus replaced McChrystal, he reportedly called a halt to ISAF initiatives aimed at facilitating reconciliation.¹³²

Shortly before McChrystal's departure in June 2010, President Karzai launched the Afghan National Peace Conference (or peace jirga) that he had spoken of in London. It was accompanied by a new plea from the president for dialogue, without preconditions, with his 'dear brothers' in the Taliban. By explicitly offering to set aside the preconditions previously established by the US government (that militants reject Al Qaeda, lay down their arms and accept the Afghan constitution), Karzai lowered the bar further than the United States was prepared to publicly endorse.¹³³

¹²⁶ B. Roggio, 'Taliban reject peace talks', *Long War Journal*, 27 January 2010.

¹²⁷ This is a possible reference to secret dialogue that was alleged by Al Jazeera to have been held around this time in the Maldives, between representatives of Karzai, the Taliban and Hekmatyar.

¹²⁸ R. Nordland, 'Afghan Official Dismisses Taliban Denial of Talks', *The New York Times*, 1 February 2010. For reports of the alleged Maldives' dialogue, see: 'Secret talks held over Taliban "integration"', Al Jazeera, 27 January 2010.

¹²⁹ M. Rosenberg, 'Karzai, in Saudi Arabia, Pursues Taliban Talks', *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 February 2010.

¹³⁰ 'A setback for the Taliban: Opening a new front', *The Economist*, 16 February 2010.

¹³¹ 'Tickets to the endgame', *The Economist*, 18 May 2010.

¹³² Chandrasekaran (2012), pp. 232-233.

¹³³ 'Afghanistan: All at peace except for the war', *The Guardian*, 2 June 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/03/afghanistan-british-foreign-policy-editorial>.

At the June conference, a formal negotiating team committee was established to deal directly with the Taliban leadership. Notably, Karzai also dismissed Interior Minister Amrullah Saleh, an ethnic Tajik known to strongly oppose talks with the Taliban, raising the concerns of minority non-Pashtun groups within the country.¹³⁴ Likewise, the government passed a resolution calling for greater enforcement of Sharia law in the country, also seen as a concession to Taliban demands.¹³⁵ Despite Karzai's desire to demonstrate his willingness to engage in negotiations, however, the potency of the insurgency meant that the momentum was with the Taliban. Once again, they rejected the whole premise of the peace jirga, attacking the gathering on its first day.¹³⁶

Thus, rather than any progress in negotiations, the second half of 2010 was marked by a hardening of the insurgency and an escalation of 'hard power' tactics from ISAF forces. Abandoning any attempt to 'peel' key Taliban members from the insurgency for the moment, the US and UK engaged in a sustained attempt to target senior and mid-level Taliban leadership figures, who were said to be taken off the battlefield 'in industrial numbers'.¹³⁷

From 'preconditions' to 'outcomes'

This deployment of hard power methods had some success but not to an extent that transformed the political landscape in Afghanistan. The failure of ISAF forces to achieve a decisive breakthrough against the insurgency – coupled with the absence of a plausible negotiation process – encouraged the Obama administration to further adjust its stance, in an effort to draw the Taliban into talks. From late 2010 onwards, the emphasis was less on 'talking from a position of strength'. In July 2011, the slow withdrawal of the surge troops began. Given the fact that the surge of troops was only a temporary measure, the need for talks to commence soon was also stressed. As a result, what had once been US 'preconditions' for talks were now repositioned as hoped-for 'outcomes'.

The issue of timing of talks with the Taliban was a cause of tension within the mission. In an October 2010 visit to Afghanistan, Ambassador Holbrooke is reported to have told General Petraeus that they needed 'to talk about reconciliation'. Petraeus' response is said to have been: 'Richard, that's a fifteen-second conversation. Yes, eventually. But no. Not now'.¹³⁸

Notwithstanding these differences over the timing of talks, any Afghan-led efforts to reach out to the Taliban were facilitated and encouraged. It was hoped that some progress might be made in the wake of Karzai's decision to appoint a seventy-person High Peace Council in September 2010, under the chairmanship of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a longstanding Taliban foe and the Tajik head of Jamiat-e-Islami.¹³⁹ At the end of October, US forces were reported to have facilitated the passage of

¹³⁴ E. Londono, 'Delegates at Afghan peace conference back Karzai's plan to talk to Taliban', *The Washington Post*, 5 June 2010.

¹³⁵ A. Gopal, 'Afghanistan peace conference urges Hamid Karzai to talk with Taliban', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 4 June 2010; Y. Trofimov, 'Karzai divides Afghanistan in reaching out to Taliban', *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 September 2010.

¹³⁶ Trofimov, 'Karzai divides Afghanistan in reaching out to Taliban'.

¹³⁷ A. Loyd, 'Taliban on verge of collapse after surge success, allies insist', *The Times*, 8 October 2010; R. Barrett, 'Op-ed: Time to Talk to the Taliban', *The New York Times*, 18 October 2010.

¹³⁸ Chandrasekaran (2012), p. 235.

¹³⁹ 'Karzai sets up council for peace talks with Taliban', *BBC*, 4 September 2010.

senior Taliban leaders linked to the Quetta Shura (and Mullah Omar) to Kabul for discussions with the Afghan government.¹⁴⁰

To great embarrassment, just a month later, it transpired that one of the Taliban interlocutors said to be facilitating this process actually turned out to be an imposter posing as a Taliban official called Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour. The readiness of Western intelligence agencies to pay him large sums of cash – and be encouraged by his surprisingly moderate demands – was deeply damaging. It seemed to indicate desperation to find a ‘deal-maker’ within the Taliban, naive credulity and a lack of concrete knowledge about their insurgent enemy. The Taliban response to the episode was stinging: ‘The Americans and their allies are very stupid and anyone could fool them’.¹⁴¹

Despite this setback, and the death of Holbrooke (the leading US advocate for talks), negotiations with the Taliban remained at the top of the political agenda into 2011.¹⁴² On 18 February 2011, Secretary of State Clinton again emphasised American willingness to ‘reconcile with an adversary’ as part of a ‘political surge’ in Afghanistan. At this point, she reaffirmed the US government’s ‘red lines for reconciliation’ with the Taliban: namely, that ‘they must renounce violence... abandon their alliance with Al Qaeda and abide by the constitution’.

However, a modification of the official position was already underway. First, the Afghan government had already indicated its willingness to be flexible on the issue of the constitution and the immediate renunciation of violence. Second, crucially, Clinton also now described these red lines as ‘necessary outcomes of any negotiation’ [emphasis added] and affirmed that Pakistan would necessarily play a central part in any settlement.¹⁴³ In effect, what were previously preconditions for dialogue now became desired ‘end-points’ of the process. It was this subtle but significant adjustment in the negotiation position which formed the basis of the political ‘surge’.

Ostensibly, the talks remained Afghan-led. In reality, however, the United States began to become much more directly involved in discussions. In April 2011, Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, an adviser to Karzai and secretary to the Afghan High Peace Council, confirmed that his government had been engaging in reconciliation talks with the Taliban for some time, with US support. At that stage, efforts were said to be continuing to try to find a location that could be used for further discussions.¹⁴⁴

From May 2011, with the Afghan-led process stalling, the United States began to take the initiative itself. In the wake of the killing of Osama bin Laden, it was reported that American officials had participated in meetings in Germany and Qatar with a high-level Taliban official, named as Tayeb al-Agha (who had been arrested by Pakistani authorities the previous year, but then released), in an attempt to accelerate peace

140 J. Barnes, ‘US Backs Taliban Talks’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 October 2010; K. DeYoung and C. Whitlock, ‘NATO forces facilitating Afghan-Taliban talks’, *The Washington Post*, 14 October 2010; M. Mazzetti, ‘Taliban Elite, Aided by NATO, Join Talks for Afghan Peace’, *The New York Times*, 19 October 2010; ‘Lunch with the Taliban’, *The Economist*, 28 October 2010.
141 D. Filkins and C. Gall, ‘Taliban leader in secret talks was imposter’, *The New York Times*, 22 November 2010; M. Rosenberg and A. Entous, ‘Sign of War Gains Proves False’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 November 2010.
142 R. Nordland, ‘Karzai calls on the US to free a Taliban official’, *The New York Times*, 8 February 2011. On Holbrooke, see Chandrasekaran (2012), p. 298.
143 Hillary Clinton, ‘Remarks at the Launch of the Asia Society’s Series of Richard C. Holbrooke Memorial Addresses’, New York City, 18 February 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156815.htm>.
144 R. Nordland, ‘Top Afghan official confirms talks with the Taliban’, *The New York Times*, 6 April 2011.

talks.¹⁴⁵ The following month, President Karzai publicly claimed that the United States was indeed involved in contacts with the Taliban.¹⁴⁶ US Defense Secretary Robert Gates subsequently admitted that early-stage talks were underway, while emphasising that the US military was continuing to apply pressure to the Taliban at the same time. Secretary Clinton also admitted that ‘very preliminary’ but ‘necessary’ dialogue had taken place.¹⁴⁷

The US delegation for these initial exchanges is reported to have comprised Frank Ruggiero, deputy to Marc Grossman (who had replaced Holbrooke as Obama’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan), and Jeff Hayes, a Defense Intelligence Agency official. As 2011 progressed, Grossman himself participated in further sessions with al-Agha.

To avoid a repeat of the previous year’s embarrassing fiasco – and to confirm the *bona fides* of their interlocutors – American negotiators asked their Taliban contacts to post a text on an official Taliban website. Having established their authenticity, they addressed the concerns of trying to get the Taliban to reject international terrorism and to support the political process.¹⁴⁸ Significantly, the Taliban’s main concerns were to have its senior officials removed from international and Afghan target lists. As an early confidence-building measure, the United States subsequently won approval at the UN Security Council for the separation of Taliban from Al Qaeda figures on the international sanctions list.¹⁴⁹

As a sign of the broadening of the American approach to negotiations, a meeting was also reported to have been held in August with a representative of the Haqqani network (identified as Ibrahim Haqqani) in Dubai, brokered by Pakistan. However, this avenue immediately proved problematic as it was followed by a spike in violence from the Haqqani network, including an assault on the US embassy in Kabul. Once again, the issue of Pakistan’s use of militant groups to increase its brokerage power came under the spotlight. Admiral Mullen publicly condemned the support given to the Haqqani network by Pakistan’s ISI and expressed doubts that the Haqqanis would ever be serious partners in negotiations.¹⁵⁰

Elsewhere, a delegation from Hekmatyar’s HiG held meetings with senior US officials, including US Ambassador to Kabul Ryan Crocker, General David Petraeus and General John Allen of the US Marine Corps (who had taken command of US forces in Afghanistan). HiG also met with French officials in Paris toward the end of 2011. At these sessions, HiG was said to have continued to demand the complete withdrawal of foreign troops but – more encouragingly – put forward concrete proposals for the creation of a new multi-party, power-sharing government in Kabul, alongside a revision of the Afghan constitution.¹⁵¹

145 K. DeYoung, ‘US speeds up direct talks with Taliban’, *The Washington Post*, 16 May 2011; C. Gall and R. Khapalwak, ‘US Has Held Meetings With Aide to Taliban Leader, Officials Say’, *The New York Times*, 26 May 2011; S. Myers and M. Mazzetti, ‘Taking a Risk With Taliban Negotiations, Even if the Talks Are Real This Time’, *The New York Times*, 25 June 2011.
146 R. Nordland, ‘Lashing Out, Karzai Says US Is Talking to the Taliban’, *The New York Times*, 18 June 2011.
147 G. Thompson, ‘Gates Acknowledges Talks with Taliban’, *The New York Times*, 19 June 2011; K. DeYoung, ‘Clinton: Talks with Taliban not “pleasant” but “necessary”’, *The Washington Post*, 24 June 2011.
148 D. Ignatius, ‘The challenge of getting the Taliban to the table’, *The Washington Post*, 11 January 2012.
149 The Taliban senior leadership believe that these lists bear some sort of relationship to ISAF kinetic targeting lists.
150 E. Schmitt, ‘For US, a Tricky Path in Dealing With Afghan Insurgents’, *The New York Times*, 5 October 2011.
151 Q. Butt, ‘Afghan endgame: Multi-party govt in Kabul being considered’, *The Express Tribune*, 19 January 2012; K. Gannon, ‘AP Exclusive: US talks to Afghan insurgent group’, *Associated Press*, 22 January 2012.

These tentative negotiations underlined the growing centrality of talks with the Taliban within US strategy. Moreover, rather than simply dividing the various insurgent groups operating under the Taliban umbrella, Secretary Clinton emphasised in October 2011 the need to harness the core of the Taliban movement and leadership to any negotiation process, stating: 'The negotiations that would be part of any Afghan-led peace process would have to include the Quetta Shura and would have to include some recognition by the Quetta Shura which, based on everything we know, is still led by Mullah Omar, that they wish to participate in such a process'.¹⁵²

The Qatar process as a 'turning point'

By the time of the second Bonn Conference on Afghanistan in early December 2011, it was clear that the political strategy of the United States and its allies was to construct a peace process which the Taliban would be encouraged to join. The conference produced a declaration in favour of a 'peace and reconciliation process' that would be 'truly Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' and 'inclusive ... of all the people of Afghanistan'.¹⁵³ In an interview in *Newsweek* in the same month, US Vice President Joe Biden stated that 'the Taliban per se is not our enemy' and spoke explicitly of the administration's desire to bring about a process of 'reconciliation' that would include them.¹⁵⁴

This strategy had been arrived at in an evolutionary fashion, shaped by the continued potency of the insurgency, the need to find an exit strategy, and the failure of the Afghan government to initiate a peace process which included the Taliban. What became clear over the course of 2012 was that the reorientation of strategy on behalf of the United States did not in itself create the conditions for a positive political breakthrough. Certain core realities about the conflict in Afghanistan remained, leaving serious obstacles to the construction of any peace process: the Taliban believed that they had time and momentum on their side and had every reason to think in terms of victory and supremacy rather than 'reconciliation' and 'power sharing'; the prospect of huge withdrawals in the immediate future reduced the negotiating leverage of the United States; Pakistan continued to play its own hand and preserve its own interests; and many other important players in the Afghan balance of power (including minority groups, ethnic blocs, warlords and even the government of President Karzai) felt undermined and threatened by a US-led negotiation process with the Taliban.

Meanwhile, the behaviour of the Taliban during the course of these early and tentative negotiations did not seem to suggest that there was a moderating or softening of their aims or tactics. In fact, they frequently acted in a way which suggested that they wanted to prevent any peace talks from taking place. As an early example of this, in September 2010 the Taliban claimed the killing of Burnahuddin Rabbani, the Jamiat-e-Islami leader and head of the High Peace Council, in a suicide attack – prompting the Afghan government to suspend peace talks at that time.¹⁵⁵ This was the first of a number of serious attacks.

¹⁵² D. Nelson, 'Washington ready to negotiate with Mullah Omar', *The Telegraph*, 28 October 2011.

¹⁵³ 'Letter dated 6 December 2011 from the Permanent Representatives of Afghanistan and Germany to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General,' United Nations General Assembly, 66th Session, Agenda Item 38, 9 December 2011.

¹⁵⁴ L. Gelb, 'Joe Biden On Iraq, Iran, China and the Taliban', *Newsweek*, 19 December 2011.

¹⁵⁵ 'US Gives Up on Taliban Talks', *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 October 2011; 'Karzai Confirms Taliban Talks on Hold', *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 October 2011. Rabbani would be replaced in the role by his son Salahuddin, who also took over as the head of the JI.

Another emerging problem was evidence of a growing rift between Washington and Kabul over the management of the negotiation process. In public, the US and the UK reiterated the need for an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' peace process. However, it was clear that Karzai became increasingly concerned that he was being undercut and that a deal might be made without him. In the lead-up to the second Bonn Conference, secret talks had been held in Germany and Qatar between US and Taliban representatives – but with no representatives from the Afghan government. In late January, Karzai's chief of staff expressed renewed concern that the United States was failing to keep the Afghan government properly informed about talks.¹⁵⁶ In response, President Karzai recalled Afghanistan's ambassador to Qatar.¹⁵⁷ He also attempted to initiate a separate strand of dialogue with the Taliban, separate from the American one, by meeting Taliban leaders in Saudi Arabia.¹⁵⁸

Despite these tensions, the emergence of the Qatar strand of dialogue was heralded in some quarters as a 'turning point', in which early 'confidence-building measures' were agreed upon which would provide a platform for negotiations to begin. These measures included the transfer of Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo Bay to Qatar, and the opening of an official Taliban office in Qatar – giving the movement, for the first time in years, a clear 'return address'.¹⁵⁹ The office was not to be used for fundraising, propaganda or forming a shadow government, but it was to be staffed by senior personnel close to Mullah Omar, such as Tayeb Agha and Obaidullah Akhund (who had served as defence minister in the Taliban regime).¹⁶⁰

In January 2012, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid publicly endorsed this new initiative and confirmed the Taliban's interest in negotiations.¹⁶¹ Advocates for talks, such as Michael Semple, described the development as 'a game-changer', signalling that the Taliban were ready to take 'real steps towards serious political engagement and reconciliation'.¹⁶²

At this point, President Karzai also signalled his willingness to acquiesce in this process. However, his lack of comfort with it was demonstrated by his preference for the office to be in Turkey or Saudi Arabia, and his drawing up of eleven 'ground rules' before negotiations could begin. These included demands that the Taliban should end attacks on civilians, cut ties to Al Qaeda, and accept the Afghan constitution. Ironically, for the first time, Karzai's insistence on these preconditions meant that he was adopting a firmer line on talks with the Taliban than the United States.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶ R. Nordland and G. Bowley, 'Karzai aide says US isn't providing enough details about Taliban talks', *The New York Times*, 19 January 2012.

¹⁵⁷ 'Afghans Pull Envoy to Qatar', *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 December 2011; 'Afghan Rebuke of Qatar Sets Back Peace Talks', *The New York Times*, 15 December 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Q. Sommerville and B. Sarwary, 'Afghan President Hamid Karzai "plans talks with Taliban"', *BBC*, 29 January 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16779547>.

¹⁵⁹ M. Ryan, W. Strobel and M. Hosenball, 'Secret US, Taliban talks reach turning point', *Reuters*, 19 December 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/19/us-usa-afghanistan-idUSTRE7BI03I20111219>; S. Miglani and H. Shalizi, 'Afghanistan sets ground rules for Taliban', *Reuters*, 26 December 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/26/us-afghanistan-talks-idUSTRE7BP06U20111226>. The prisoners were subsequently reported to include Khairullah Khairkwa, a former Taliban governor of Herat; Mullah Mohammed Fazl, a former military commander; Noorullah Nori, a former interior minister and governor; Abdul Haq Wasiq, a former intelligence official; and Muhammad Nabi, another senior official in the former Taliban regime.

¹⁶⁰ E. Londono, 'Taliban publicly expresses interest in talks with US', *The Washington Post*, 4 January 2012.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.; D. Nissenbaum, H.K. Totakhil, and J. Barnes, 'Taliban Agree to Open Office for Peace Talks', *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 April 2012; S. L. Myers, M. Rosenberg and E. Schmitt, 'Against Odds, Path Opens Up for US-Taliban Talks', *The New York Times*, 12 January 2012.

¹⁶² M. Semple, 'How to talk to the Taliban', *Foreign Affairs*, 9 January 2012.

¹⁶³ M. Ryan, W. Strobel and M. Hosenball, 'Secret US, Taliban talks reach turning point'; S. Miglani and H. Shalizi, 'Afghanistan sets ground rules for Taliban'.

While they were prepared to deal directly with the United States, the Taliban also made it clear that they had no interest in reinitiating contact with the Afghan government. In mid-February 2012, Zabiullah Mujahid told CNN that the Taliban would not engage in dialogue with the 'puppet' regime in Kabul, as America is the 'real power holder'.¹⁶⁴ They were swift to dismiss Karzai's offer of Saudi talks.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, they emphasised that a willingness to negotiate with the United States was 'not connected to an acceptance of the constitution of the stooge Kabul administration'.¹⁶⁶

Despite the much heralded breakthrough in January 2012, the Qatar process stalled within weeks. The confidence-building measures discussed during preliminary talks were not implemented. The Qatar office remained unopened (despite reports that leading Taliban figures had relocated to the country).¹⁶⁷ Moreover, in what appeared to be a retreat to a tougher line on preconditions, Ambassador Crocker publicly emphasised that the opening of the office in Qatar was dependent on a Taliban renunciation of international terrorism and a declaration in favour of a peace process.¹⁶⁸

The issue of prisoner releases was a familiar stumbling block. Responsibility for detainees has now been handed to President Karzai, thereby ceding leverage to the Afghan government on a key issue of concern to the Taliban.¹⁶⁹

A serious worsening of US-Pakistani relations in early 2012 – following an American strike on Pakistani territory which killed 24 soldiers – also threw up a significant stumbling block to talks. Marc Grossman, a key figure in the putative peace process, found himself denied a visa to visit Pakistan during January 2012. Pakistan began to express growing concerns that the United States was withholding important information about talks with the Taliban.¹⁷⁰ Unsure of the US position, the Pakistani line has vacillated considerably between facilitator and spoiler.¹⁷¹ In mid-February 2012, Pakistan's foreign minister went as far as to state that the very idea of Pakistan encouraging the Taliban's Quetta Shura to the negotiating table was 'preposterous'.¹⁷² A week later, in an apparent reversal, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani called on 'the Taliban leadership as well as to all other Afghan groups, including Hizb-e-Islami, to participate in an intra-Afghan process for national reconciliation and peace'.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁴ N. Walsh and M. Popalzai, 'Taliban will not talk peace with Karzai government, spokesman says', *CNN*, 14 February 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/14/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban>.

¹⁶⁵ 'New Statement from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: "Response regarding the prospective meeting between the Kabul Administration and Representatives of Islamic Emirate in Saudi Arabia"', *Shahamat English*, 3 February 2012, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:YQBlwCnc8Lk:www.shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamooona/28829-response-of-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-prospective-meeting-between-kabul-administration-and-repre+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a>.

¹⁶⁶ 'Taliban set terms as US pushes for talks', *Al Jazeera*, 12 January 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/01/2012112516329823.html>.

¹⁶⁷ Q. Sommerville and B. Sarwary, 'Afghan President Hamid Karzai "plans talks with Taliban"', *BBC*, 29 January 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16779547>.

¹⁶⁸ 'US diplomat: Taliban needs to renounce terror for Qatar office', *CNN*, 24 January 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/24/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban>.

¹⁶⁹ E. Londoño and P. Finn, 'U.S. agrees to transfer control of detainees in Afghanistan', *The Washington Post*, 9 March 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/us-agrees-to-afghan-detention-system-handover/2012/03/09/gIQAATFg50R_story.html?wprss=rss_world.

¹⁷⁰ R. Nordland and G. Bowley, 'Karzai aide says US isn't providing enough details about Taliban talks', *The New York Times*, 19 January 2012.

¹⁷¹ J. Borger, 'Pakistan will not support Afghan talks until Kabul backs them, says minister', *The Guardian*, 21 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/21/pakistan-not-support-afghan-peace-talks>; D. Walsh and E. Schmitt, 'Pakistanis Press Taliban to Start Talks With Afghans', *The New York Times*, 24 February 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/world/asia/pakistan-presses-taliban-to-enter-afghan-talks.html>.

¹⁷² S. Abbot, 'Pakistan: It's "preposterous" we could bring Taliban chief to talks', *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 February 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2012/0217/Pakistan-It-s-preposterous-we-could-bring-Taliban-chief-to-talks>.

¹⁷³ 'Gilani urges Taliban to take part in peace talks with Afghan government', *AFP*, 24 February 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/341199/gilani-urges-taliban-to-enter-peace-talks-with-afghan-government/>.

In combining continued military operations with a willingness to negotiate, the US/ISAF strategy in Afghanistan since 2009 has sometimes been given the label 'fight, talk, build'.¹⁷⁴ During that time, it has also become apparent that the Taliban have proved adept at pursuing a 'talk and fight' strategy of their own. This has included a deadly assassination campaign against Afghan government officials (such as the district governor of Khaneshin in Helmand, who was killed in December 2011, and Mutalib Beg, MP for Takhar province) and anti-Taliban tribal leaders.¹⁷⁵ As 2012 progressed, the violence showed no sign of abating, with the Taliban exploiting both the unrest over the February 'Qur'an burning' incident and the March killing of sixteen civilians in Kandahar province by a US soldier, before signalling the onset of their 2012 spring offensive with a high-profile attack on Kabul.¹⁷⁶ What has been particularly problematic – and occasionally confusing – for advocates of talks has been the fact that acts of Taliban violence seem to have focused on disrupting and damaging attempts at reconciliation within Afghanistan. On 12 January 2012, for example, a suicide bomber killed the governor of Kandahar's Panjwai district, Sayed Fazuldin Agha – a man credited with driving efforts to reintegrate former combatants into the local community.¹⁷⁷

The fact that the United States has shifted its position so markedly over the past ten years has been interpreted, not unreasonably, as a vindication of Taliban methods to this point. On 15 January 2012, as the Qatar process was in its infancy, a statement was issued by the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' (the title used by the Taliban) making a 'formal proclamation' of 'victory', following their 'militarily successful resistance' against ISAF forces.¹⁷⁸ At the same time, Hekmatyar stated that the United States had failed to achieve its goals and the Karzai government was on the verge of collapse.¹⁷⁹

Rather than moderating their aims or softening their tactics, then, the Taliban's flirtations with the negotiating process reflected their belief that time and momentum were on their side. According to media reports, in February 2012 a leaked NATO report into insurgent attitudes, based on interviews with Taliban detainees, confirmed a widespread belief within the movement that they would soon retake full control of Afghanistan.¹⁸⁰ The same month, senior US intelligence officials reported to the US Congress that the Taliban remained confident of 'eventual victory'.¹⁸¹ Simultaneously, this confidence was given a further boost by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's

¹⁷⁴ D. Nelson, 'Washington ready to negotiate with Mullah Omar', *The Telegraph*, 28 October 2011; 'US hopes to renew talks with Taliban for Gitmo prisoner transfer, Karzai said to have doubts', *The Washington Post*, 30 December 2011.

¹⁷⁵ 'At least 20 killed in suicide attack in Afghanistan', *The Telegraph*, 25 December 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/8977377/At-least-20-killed-in-suicide-attack-in-Afghanistan.html>; B. Roggio, 'Taliban assassinate key district governor in Afghan south', *Long War Journal*, 12 January 2012; R. Faiez, 'Anti-Taliban Afghan Tribal Leader killed in Mosque', *Associated Press*, 17 January 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/anti-taliban-afghan-tribal-leader-killed-mosque-104437942.html>.

¹⁷⁶ S. Rahimi and A. Rubin, 'Koran Burning in NATO Error Incites Afghans', *The New York Times*, 21 February 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/22/world/asia/nato-commander-apologizes-for-koran-disposal-in-afghanistan.html?_r=0; 'U.S. Soldier Kills Afghan Civilians in Kandahar', *BBC*, 11 March 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17330205>; E. Graham-Harrison, 'Taliban's "spring offensive" reminds Kabul of insurgents' reach', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/15/taliban-kabul-spring-offensive>; 'Taliban strike across Afghanistan in "spring offensive"', *BBC*, 15 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17719956>.

¹⁷⁷ 'Afghan suicide bomb kills senior official in Kandahar', *BBC*, 12 January 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16534603>.

¹⁷⁸ 'Formal Proclamation of the Islamic Emirate's Victory', *Jihadology*, 15 January 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/01/15/new-statement-from-the-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-formal-proclamation-of-the-islamic-emirates-victory/>.

¹⁷⁹ 'US has failed to achieve goals in Afghanistan: Hekmatyar', *The News* (Pakistan), 16 January 2012.

¹⁸⁰ E. Flock, 'Secret NATO report alleging Pakistan helps Afghan Taliban is another in culture of leaks', *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2012; H. Shalizi and M. Harooni, 'Taliban vows to retake Afghanistan: report', *Reuters*, 1 February 2012.

¹⁸¹ 'US intelligence officials offer grim words on Afghanistan', *The Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 2012.

announcement that the United States hoped to complete its main combat operations in Afghanistan by mid-to-late 2013.¹⁸²

Suspension of talks

In March 2012, the Taliban formally announced the ‘suspension’ of ‘dialogue with the Americans’.¹⁸³ An important obstacle was the prisoner releases, which had been discussed in preliminary talks but had been held up by congressional procedures.¹⁸⁴ However, the suspension of talks also took place against the backdrop of the accidental ‘Qur’an burnings’ at Bagram Air Field and the massacre of 16 Afghan civilians in Kandahar by an American soldier. Some analysts believe that these events emboldened those hardliners within the Taliban who were opposed to talks.¹⁸⁵

That said, the Taliban did not rule out talks in the future and called on the US government to ‘clarify their stance on the issues concerned’. While blame was apportioned to the United States, the Taliban did not reject the prospect of negotiations in any form: ‘[T]he real source of obstacle in the talks was the shaky, erratic, and vague standpoint of the Americans’.¹⁸⁶ US officials also indicated that there was some reason for optimism that the talks could be revived, pointing out that they had broken down over a very precise issue – American insistence that any prisoners released remained in Qatar rather than returning to Afghanistan.¹⁸⁷ One senior administration official was quoted as saying that the Qatar process was ‘not over as an option’, although ‘the chances are considerably less than 50 percent’.¹⁸⁸

In May 2012, with little sign of progress in negotiations with the Taliban, President Obama announced an Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with President Karzai. Although not an official treaty, the SPA committed the United States to enduring financial, economic and military support for the country. In stressing that it would not abandon the Afghan government after the end of major combat operations, one intention was to provide a counterbalance to Taliban projections of victory within Afghanistan. The same anonymous senior administration official that had said the Qatar process was ‘not over as an option’ also argued that the SPA underlined the US commitment not to let the Taliban win, stating that the insurgents had been ‘living in a fantasy that after Dec. 31 [2014], we’d be gone’.¹⁸⁹ ‘We are not abandoning Afghanistan...and the Taliban has taken notice’, reaffirmed James Cunningham, the US Ambassador to Afghanistan.¹⁹⁰

In his speech announcing the SPA, President Obama once again signalled a willingness to explore ‘a negotiated peace’ with the Taliban. With the Taliban process still suspended, other tentative lines of dialogue appeared to open up. It was reported that Afghan government officials had met both with HiG representatives and a former Taliban

¹⁸² C. McGreal, ‘US plans to end Afghan combat mission in 2013’, *The Guardian*, 1 February 2012.

¹⁸³ The full statement can be found here: ‘Declaration of the Islamic Emirate About the Suspension of Dialogue with Americans, office in Qatar and its Political Activities’, *Long War Journal*, 15 March 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/03/taliban_suspends_dia.ph. For discussion of the statement, see: K. Clark, ‘The End of the Affair? Taleban Suspend Talks’, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 16 March 2012, <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=2610>.

¹⁸⁴ M. Rosenberg, ‘US Abandoning Hopes for Taliban Peace Deal’, *The New York Times*, 1 October 2012.

¹⁸⁵ D. Sanger, ‘Attack May Derail Effort to Force Taliban into Talks’, *The New York Times*, 11 March 2012.

¹⁸⁶ ‘Declaration of the Islamic Emirate About the Suspension of Dialogue with Americans’.

¹⁸⁷ Elisabeth Bumiller and Matthew Rosenberg, ‘Parents of P.O.W. Reveal US Talks on Taliban Swap’, *The New York Times*, 9 May 2012.

¹⁸⁸ T. Rubin, ‘Best Time for Talks with the Taliban is Now’, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 July 2012.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ J. Bennet, ‘Obama Administration to Try Again on Taliban Talks’, *US News and World Report*, 31 July 2012.

official in Paris, and then with Din Mohammad, a member of the Taliban’s political office, at an academic conference in Japan. These were rather tentative discussions, however. According to Salahuddin Rabbani of the Afghan High Peace Council, the Paris meeting amounted to nothing more than ‘a brainstorming session’. As for the Japanese encounter, the Taliban claimed to have sent Din Mohammad solely to restate their position that negotiations would not take place until all foreign troops had been withdrawn from Afghan territory.¹⁹¹

A more promising line of communication did appear to open up in August 2012, following the decision of the Pakistani government to allow Afghan government officials to meet with the Taliban ‘dove’ Mullah Baradar, who had been in detention since 2010.¹⁹² This was interpreted as a small, yet important sign that Pakistan was willing to accept – and cooperate with – a negotiation process.

At the end of August, members of the Taliban negotiating team (said to include two former Taliban diplomats to Pakistan) returned to Qatar following discussions over the Taliban negotiating position among the Quetta Shura.¹⁹³ In early September 2012, it was also reported that US officials were holding talks with Afghan and Pakistani officials in Islamabad, in order to arrange travel for Taliban leaders to join peace talks. This was the inaugural meeting of what was to be known as the ‘Safe Passage Working Group’.¹⁹⁴

Interestingly, the willingness to explore potential contacts with the core of the Taliban leadership has coincided with a hardening of attitude toward the Haqqani network. In September 2012, the Obama administration decided to blacklist the group as a foreign terrorist organisation, despite some objections from those who thought such a move would ‘undercut’ prospects for negotiations. Notably, the main body of the Taliban movement did not receive the same designation.¹⁹⁵ Also by September 2012, the last of the US forces associated with the ‘surge’ had departed Afghanistan.

The biggest obstacle to talks remained – and still remains – the fact that the Taliban refuse to engage with the Afghan government. Reports suggested that the Taliban delegation in Qatar refused the offer of positions in a coalition government, for example.¹⁹⁶ This consistency in the Taliban approach has run up against a renewed insistence from the US government that talks must be Afghan-led. Ambassador Cunningham has repeatedly stated that the United States would not participate in any talks with the Taliban without a representative of the Afghan government being present.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ W. Nakano, ‘Taliban ready for dialogue with Karzai if foreign troops leave’, *Asahi Shimbun*, 27 June 2012, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/social_affairs/AJ201206270084; G. Bowley and M. Rosenberg, ‘Afghan Officials Hail Talks with Insurgents’, *The New York Times*, 28 June 2012.

¹⁹² A. Ibrahim and M. Georgy, ‘Pakistan grants Afghan officials access to a top Taliban leader’, *Reuters*, 12 August 2012. Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi alternatively argue that Baradar’s imprisonment was a consequence of the assassination of a rival Taliban commander, in T. Farrell and A. Giustozzi, ‘The Taliban at War’, *International Affairs* (May 2013).

¹⁹³ I. Hussain, ‘Taliban team in Qatar for negotiations with US’, *The Daily Times* (Pakistan), 28 August 2012.

¹⁹⁴ ‘Pakistan, Afghanistan, US discuss safe passage for Taliban Leaders to join peace talks’, *Associated Press*, 5 September 2012.

¹⁹⁵ E. Schmitt, ‘White House Backs Blacklisting Militant Organization’, *The New York Times*, 7 September 2012.

¹⁹⁶ ‘Taliban talks in Doha drag on endlessly’, *Al Jazeera*, 26 February 2013.

¹⁹⁷ M. Haseeb, ‘Afghan peace talks pending Taliban agreement with Kabul’, *The Khaama Press*, 13 January 2013; K. DeYoung, ‘US attempts to restart peace talks with the Taliban’, *The Washington Post*, 3 February 2013.

Prospects for a resumption of talks

Despite the promising start to 2012, hopes for any deal with the Taliban receded significantly toward the end of the year.¹⁹⁸ This is not to say that the idea of talking to the Taliban has been abandoned entirely. Reports as recent as February 2013 suggest that the United States is prepared to restart negotiations.¹⁹⁹ That same month, General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, revisited the idea that some elements of the Taliban may be amenable to the idea of forming a political party.²⁰⁰ He said there was not yet a 'shift' but that there was 'an encouraging debate inside the movement'.²⁰¹

For the moment, however, any negotiations with the Taliban seem to have been parked with the Afghan government's High Peace Council, under the leadership of Salahuddin Rabbani. In October 2012, Shamila Chaudhary, formerly the director for Pakistan and Afghanistan on the US National Security Council, noted that thus 'the tone of the whole discussion has shifted to a less US-led approach and toward a more Afghan-led approach'.²⁰² In November, the High Peace Council sent a delegation to Pakistan to negotiate the release of several high-profile Taliban prisoners as a potential prelude to negotiations (though, significantly, Mullah Baradar was not among them).²⁰³

The High Peace Council has drawn up an ambitious roadmap for peace which envisions the demobilisation of the Taliban, HiG and other armed groups by 2015 and their replacement by 'political groups... actively participating in the country's political and constitutional processes, including national elections'.²⁰⁴ The roadmap lays out five steps in which talks with the Taliban are to feature. The first is to secure Pakistan's cooperation. An important step toward this was achieved in February 2013 following a meeting of the Afghan, Pakistani and British heads of government in London (though questions remain as to the ultimate intentions of other branches of the Pakistani state).²⁰⁵ The second, to also take place in the first half of 2013, is the implementation of confidence-building measures, followed by the initiation of contact between the government of Afghanistan 'and identified leaders of the Taliban and other armed opposition groups'.²⁰⁶ The third step, to take place in the second half of 2013, would be direct negotiations between the Afghan government and representatives of the Taliban, 'preferably through one consistent and coherent channel'. These negotiations would be preceded by both ceasefires and prisoner releases. Discussions would focus on development, education, the withdrawal of international forces, elections, demobilisation, inclusion of Taliban officials in the structure of the state, reintegration of Taliban members back into society, and the composition of the security forces.²⁰⁷ The fourth step is to implement and consolidate these agreements over the course of the first half of 2014. In the fifth and final step, Afghanistan and Pakistan will aim to ensure the 'voluntary and orderly return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan' and continue the fight against Al Qaeda.²⁰⁸

¹⁹⁸ M. Rosenberg, 'US Abandoning Hopes for Taliban Peace Deal', *The New York Times*, 1 October 2012.

¹⁹⁹ K. DeYoung, 'US attempts to restart peace talks with the Taliban', *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2013.

²⁰⁰ J. Michaels, 'Taliban said to be considering political path', *USA Today*, 9 February 2013.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² M. Rosenberg, 'US Abandoning Hopes for Taliban Peace Deal'.

²⁰³ D. Walsh, 'Pakistan Frees Taliban Prisoners, Renewing Hopes for Peace Talks', *The New York Times*, 14 November 2012.

²⁰⁴ High Peace Council, Peace Process Roadmap to 2015, November 2012.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

At the time of writing, the roadmap has been given strong international backing. In February 2013, President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan and President Karzai committed to a six-month timeline to achieve a peace settlement, at a trilateral summit in London with Prime Minister David Cameron. The three leaders issued a joint statement that insisted, 'All sides agreed on the urgency of this work and committed themselves to take all necessary measures to achieve the goal of a peace settlement over the next six months'.²⁰⁹

Chances of a deal with the Taliban are slim, therefore, but not entirely dead. Even if this round of talks is successful in cobbling together some kind of deal, this will not, however, be a vindication of the confusing, seemingly aimless and often desperate approach that preceded it.

²⁰⁹ M. Abi-Habib, 'Afghan Peace Deal Sought in 6 months', *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 February 2013.

3 Conclusions: Between Hope and Expectation

Building on the previous section of this report, the following observations identify some of the flaws in the attempt to initiate a peace process involving negotiations with the Taliban. They are not intended as a critique of specific efforts or actors, but are features of the overall approach which has evolved since the idea of talks first began to seep into the political agenda.

Talks have been characterised by the anarchy of good intentions

A willingness to talk to the Taliban has arisen from a number of entirely rational calculations, including: a recognition that a purely military solution in Afghanistan is unachievable; an acceptance that the Taliban are a significant power broker in the politics of Afghanistan; and a desire to stabilise the country in the run-up to major troop withdrawals.

However, there have been too many actors involved in this process and so many different lines of communication with the Taliban that the cumulative effect has been chaos. Multiple channels have been operating in parallel, creating confusion, disjointed expectations from all parties, and contradictory messages.

Moreover, the line between officially sanctioned dialogue and unofficial contact has never been clear. Official policy seems to have been a few steps behind those engaging in secret or undercover talks with the Taliban. While this is not in itself unusual, some of those engaged in secret talks appear to have been accused of over-reaching their brief and putting themselves forward as self-appointed mediators. The problem here is that this 'official policy' has never been defined.

There have also been subtle but important differences between the positions on talks adopted by the United States and its allies within the ISAF coalition, leading to further confusion. Recriminations and mixed messaging have created a political atmosphere that has not been conducive to talks. Within the US administration alone, there have been many different views as to the necessity for such talks and, more importantly, their timing. Despite being the United States' closest partner, the UK has also taken a more proactive role in trying to initiate talks. Meanwhile, there have been numerous other actors involving themselves as third-party facilitators, including Germany, Qatar, Turkey, Norway, France and Saudi Arabia. This has allowed participants in talks to play the channel of communication which suits them best (such as President Karzai's adoption of a Saudi-led talks process, following fears that he was being excluded by the Qatari process).²¹⁰ It has arguably encouraged a 'market-bazaar approach to negotiations' in which '[b]argains are being cut with any and all comers, regardless of their political influence or ability to influence outcomes'.²¹¹ Perhaps

²¹⁰ T. Ruttig, 'Talks on Two Channels? The Qatar office and Karzai's Saudi option', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 19 January 2012, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2474>.

²¹¹ International Crisis Group, *Talking About Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan*, Asia Report No. 221, 26 March 2012, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4f72f2f1.html>.

more important, it has also meant that no single line of verifiable communication was established until January 2012, in the form of the Taliban office in Doha (which never became operational).

Much of this activity has been well-meaning and based on a recognition that some form of dialogue is necessary. However, the talking process has had too many owners and too many participants. Rather than create a strategy for negotiations, tentative early talks have been allowed to proceed in the hope that they might provide a glimpse of a breakthrough. Thus, without any central direction and ownership of talks, these numerous different strands have led to contradiction, confusion and chaos.

Talks have never had a clear strategic rationale

Advocates of talks largely share the view that the Taliban cannot be defeated militarily and therefore need to be engaged and incorporated into the political scene in Afghanistan. The earliest advocates of talks will point out that they were among the first to recognise this and that others have been slow to come to the same conclusion.

Beyond this, however, the rationale for talking to the Taliban has never been clear. Talking has meant different things to different actors. Moreover, official US/ISAF policy on talks has gone through so many different stages of evolution that a clear strategy for talks has never been articulated.

Initially, some advocates of talks proceeded on the belief that a significant portion of the Taliban movement comprised non-ideological fighters who might be 'biddable' by concessions and dialogue addressing local and/or regional concerns (referred to as so-called 'mid- and low-level' Taliban). This policy existed under the broad banner of 'reintegration' and was also thought to be reconcilable with a counter-insurgency campaign.

Some have hoped to divide the Taliban through a negotiation process which empowers 'doves' in the movement (those prepared to abandon Al Qaeda and enter a power-sharing government) at the expense of the 'hawks' and their maximalist aims. However, the Taliban has proved hyper-sensitive and deadly in its response to any putative attempts to divide it through negotiators. For example, Sayed Fazuldin Agha, the governor of Kandahar's Panjwai district and a key player in the reconciliation and reintegration of insurgents across Kandahar, was killed by a Taliban vehicle-borne suicide IED in January 2012. In previous months Agha had reconciled the Taliban's former shadow governor of Kunduz and fifty of his men with the government. The Taliban immediately took credit for his death, with a clear message: 'He was also considered a very close partner of US invaders who always tried to create rifts amongst Mujahideen and now faced his punishment after a long period of surveillance'.²¹²

More recently, other advocates of talks have suggested that – rather than divide and rule – it was preferable to encourage the Taliban movement as a whole to become a more identifiable political movement with a clear leadership. For that reason, they felt that it was better to deal directly with the Taliban leadership rather than 'peel off' individual

²¹² Bill Roggio, 'Taliban assassinate key district governor in Afghan south', *Long War Journal*, 12 January 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/01/taliban_assassinate_4.php

members, and that only a unified leadership could deliver a sustainable deal.

The lack of clarity about the rationale for talking has fed into confusion about who to talk to within the movement, which has yet to be resolved. As part of a process of 'reintegration', most early emphasis was on reaching out to those who could be 'weaned' off the insurgency. As 'reconciliation' began to dominate policy, western security agencies appeared desperate to find a Taliban 'dove' with whom to do business, such as Mullah Baradar or the surprisingly plausible 'Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour', who turned out to be an imposter posing as a key Taliban negotiator.

As this avenue failed to deliver any progress, the prospect of dealing directly with the 'hawks' (including Mullah Omar) began to be considered more seriously, as official policy made a 180-degree turn. However, because these changes in policy were faltering and tentative, they have rarely had full support from within the United States and the NATO coalition.

In other words, just as a growing number of officials accepted the need for talks, there was no agreed vision on what successful talks might look like. Ryan Crocker, the former US Ambassador to Kabul, has been quoted as saying: 'There will be no negotiated deal with Mullah Omar. It wouldn't work here in Afghanistan. You have a fractured, divided Taliban. I'm not sure we need a Qatar office. We can get it by onesies and twosies, not some sort of grand bargain with Mullah Omar'.

Taliban 'pragmatism' certainly exists, but Taliban 'moderation' has been over-hyped and overestimated

The claim that the Taliban movement is showing more moderation and a willingness to move into politics should be treated with scepticism. There are many examples of pragmatism on behalf of the Taliban, and a willingness to negotiate. But it would be foolish to predicate policy on an expectation that the Taliban are becoming a more moderate movement. Likewise, an approach which seeks to 'groom' the Taliban into a more amenable and pliable movement is highly implausible.

There have been a number of reports which point to the complexity and diversity of views within the Taliban movement. These offer important insight into the movement and provide a reminder that the Taliban has a capacity for 'pragmatic' as well as 'maximalist' actions. Others have also indicated that the Taliban are softening their stance on a number of issues important for negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, such as the presence of US military bases after 2014 and their willingness to accept the ANA in some form.²¹³

The real 'game-changer' in Afghanistan, however, is the departure of ISAF troops, not a moderate awakening inside the Taliban movement. There is scant evidence that the Taliban movement is moderating its overall aims, or its methods. Instead, it seems that they are adopting a form of 'talk-fight' of their own. If anything, as the prospect of talks has increased, so have their violent activities. For example, the number of

²¹³ A. Lieven, 'Lessons from my talks with the Taliban', *Financial Times*, 25 July 2012.

'enemy initiated attacks' during 2012 was greater than the same figure for 2009, the year prior to the US-led surge.²¹⁴ Rather than simply focusing their efforts on 'foreign soldiers', moreover, they have done nothing to allay the fears of those within Afghanistan who are alarmed by the prospect of a return to Taliban rule. For example, insurgents killed more civilians in August 2012 than in any month since September 2009.²¹⁵

There may indeed be *pragmatic* Taliban who favour negotiations toward some sort of power-sharing deal, but there are also those who view negotiations as a means to an end or as 'a way to reduce military pressure, enabling them to conserve their strength and consolidate their authority in the areas of Afghanistan they currently control'.²¹⁶

Notably, where 'moderates' within the movement have been identified, more hardline factions have moved swiftly to shut them down. Zabiullah Mujahid, the official spokesman, has described some of those offering more conciliatory messages as 'opportunist individuals and parties' who 'have committed and are committing such deceitful actions for some gains'.²¹⁷ Reports of a softening of negotiation positions have been dismissed as Western propaganda or 'fatuous jibber-jabber'.²¹⁸

These difficulties are illustrated by the fate of former Taliban leader and member of the Quetta Shura, Agha Jan Motasim, who claimed in May 2012 that a majority of Taliban want a peace settlement and only 'a few' hardliners opposed it. In fact, he went further and suggested that 'a majority of the Taliban and the Taliban leadership want a broad-based government for all Afghan people and an Islamic system like other countries'. He also criticised the West for failing to back the moderates in the movement with incentives.²¹⁹ Motasim was shot in August 2010 in Karachi and is now living in Turkey. He has blamed hardliners in the movement for the attempt against his life.²²⁰ In May 2012, another former Taliban leader, Arsalan Rahmani Daulat, who was prominent in President's Karzai's reconciliation efforts, was assassinated in Kabul.²²¹

The reality is that the Taliban leadership appears to believe that in any negotiations in which they might engage, they will be operating from a position of strength and momentum. The most important factor in the negotiation process is the fact that the ISAF military presence is being drawn down dramatically. All parties are positioning themselves for this new dispensation: *this* is the game changer, rather than some moment of moderate 'awakening' within the insurgency.

²¹⁴ T. Joscelyn, 'ISAF analysis shows Afghan violence remains worse than before the surge', *Long War Journal*, 26 November 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/isaf_data_show_viole.php.

²¹⁵ ISAF data/slides can be found here: [http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/20120924_NIU_ISAF_Monthly_Data-Release%20\(Final\).pdf](http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/20120924_NIU_ISAF_Monthly_Data-Release%20(Final).pdf). Analysis of the data by *Long War Journal* can be found here: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/09/isaf_data_shows_insu.php.

²¹⁶ R. Barrett, 'Talking to the Taliban', *Foreign Policy*, 20 August 2012.

²¹⁷ Cited in B. Roggio, 'Taliban deny media report that they seek split with al-Qaeda', *Long War Journal*, 1 August 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/taliban_deny_media_r.php#ixzz2S9BbxdVl.

²¹⁸ Z. Mujahid, 'Remarks of Spokesman of Islamic Emirate Regarding Report Published by Royal United Services Institute', 12 September 2012, <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Sep12/Remarks%20of%20spokesman%20of%20Islamic%20Emirate%20regarding%20report%20published%20by%20Royal%20United%20Services%20Institute.htm>.

²¹⁹ K. Gannon, 'Moderate Taliban speaks of divisions', *Associated Press*, 14 May 2012.

²²⁰ T. Rubin, 'Best Time for Talks With the Taliban Is Now', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 July 2012.

²²¹ Gannon (2012).

A deal with the Taliban will not solve the root causes of violent conflict in Afghanistan, and important questions remain unanswered about the structure of the Taliban movement and the nature of rebellion in Afghanistan

All these proposed solutions face the same obstacle: that it is very hard to get a clear picture of the structure and trajectory of the Taliban movement – or of the precise relationship between it and other insurgent groups such as the Haqqani network.

At the time of writing, there is still some hope that talks might be re-instituted, through the Qatar process, with Mullah Omar and those who might be said to constitute the Taliban's political leadership. Ironically, however, just as it has finally become official policy to deal with the higher echelons of the Taliban hierarchy, concerns have re-emerged about the fluid and changing dynamics within the movement.

Following on from this, there is also the question of the ability of the Taliban leadership to secure any agreement, even if one is reached. Some believe that the trajectory of the Taliban movement might be an obstacle to this. According to Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, 'if current trends are not fundamentally altered, the movement will be increasingly less subject to hierarchies and restraints on the part of its senior leadership'.²²² In this interpretation, the most significant challenge to the leadership of Mullah Omar can currently be found in the 'younger generation of commanders who are more and more independent, both financially and ideologically, from the old-school Kandahari Taliban leadership based in Quetta'.

While Mullah Omar might still guarantee a certain level of cohesiveness to the movement for the moment, this younger generation is potentially more radical; they do not share the irritation with Al Qaeda expressed by some of the older commanders, and are more sympathetic to an international jihadist agenda.²²³ Yet, the Qatar process was, to a significant degree, predicated on the idea that Mullah Omar might emerge to take on a more defined leadership role and lead the Taliban movement toward a negotiated settlement. What is not so clear is whether Mullah Omar will necessarily have the capacity to play such a role.

Meanwhile, the overwhelming localism of this war is dizzyingly complex yet unavoidable. It stands in contrast to the conventional binary narrative of the war in Afghanistan as a conflict between the 'Taliban' on one side and the Government of Afghanistan with its ISAF allies on the other.²²⁴ As such, even should a negotiated settlement somehow emerge between Kabul and the Quetta Shura, it is far from certain that the insurgency would cease. Local drivers of conflict must be taken into account in any negotiated framework for the future of Afghanistan. Afghans are engaging in both violent and non-violent politics at the local level on each and every side for predominantly local reasons that often have little to do with any national or transnational cause, whether

²²² Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn (2012), p. 318.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

²²⁴ R. Evans, 'The Micro-Level of Civil War: The Case of Central Helmand Province', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 9:12, September 2012.

that cause be the violent Islamism of the Taliban, or the democratic nationalism officially espoused by the Afghan government.

As is often the case in civil wars and protracted insurgencies, conflict in Afghanistan is driven by a confusing aggregation of 'micro-conflicts'.²²⁵ More often than not, these 'micro-conflicts' are decades old, each with unique histories at the provincial, district and village levels. The constant recurrence of conflict in Afghanistan over the last thirty years can be traced to these 'micro-conflicts'. People choose sides (factions within the government, factions within the insurgency, narcotics cartels, or a mixture of all three) based on where their enemies sit, their own family loyalties, and where they believe they can best access resources to prevail against their opponents or rivals. To make matters even more complex, a great deal of Afghanistan's instability, corruption, and violence is driven by criminal elements without strong political agendas outside of the survival of their illicit enterprises. Any peace process must take these considerations into account.

Talks with the Taliban have never been truly 'Afghan-owned' and it might be too late in the day to insist they are

Direct dialogue between the United States and the Taliban was unthinkable in 2002 but entirely plausible ten years later. Both sides have an incentive to talk. The biggest obstacle to initiating a negotiating process in Afghanistan, however, is that the Taliban see it as a way of marginalising their domestic political rivalries – above all, the Afghan government. This leads to a situation in which the United States insists all talks must be led by the Afghan government, whereas the Taliban are only seriously interested in talks which do not include the Afghan government.

The weakness of the Afghan government in negotiations is largely due to flaws of its own making. However, its position has also been severely undermined by the fact that it has been sidelined in talks with the Taliban almost since the idea was first mooted. Rather than seeing the talks process as something which could be built up piece by piece, the temptation to reach out immediately to the Taliban and ignore the Afghan government contributed to what might be called a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which the Taliban have become the most important brokers in any deal.

In their official statements, US and NATO representatives maintain that the Afghan government's involvement is critical to the negotiation process. As all parties stressed during the June 2010 London Conference, the international community is unconditionally committed to 'Afghan-led peace, reintegration and reconciliation efforts'. But the 'Afghan-led' principle has not always been adhered to in practice.

Rather, the Afghan government has frequently found itself playing 'catch-up'. To counter this, it has on occasion attempted to set up alternative channels to keep itself 'in the game'. This has created a counterproductive scenario in which talks are proceeding along at least three simultaneous tracks – each of which can contradict the other. The Afghan government have claimed that they have been talking, and

²²⁵ S. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

continue to talk, to the Taliban. The Taliban leadership has rejected this and claimed that they have no interest in talking to Karzai and only want to talk to the United States. Representatives of the United States have claimed that all talks are Afghan-led while continuing their own tentative contacts directly with the Taliban.

The only 'winners' from this confusion are the Taliban. The failure to make talks genuinely Afghan-led has been corrected in recent policy pronouncements. However, it is arguable that the damage might already have been done. The Afghan roadmap, presented in late 2012, heralds the beginning of a truly Afghan-owned process via the High Peace Council. With the legally required end of Hamid Karzai's presidency next year, there are some hopes that the Taliban may be willing to negotiate directly with a post-Karzai Afghan government. However, the idea that talks need to be genuinely Afghan-led has only been matched by official policy at the last possible moment.

Fear of a secret deal with the Taliban has caused fear among many other religious, political, tribal and ethnic interest groups in Afghanistan and has been a further source of destabilisation

The mystery that has surrounded early talks with the Taliban, and the way they have crept onto the political agenda, has heightened fears within Afghanistan about the future of the country. Many interest groups in Afghanistan, including Karzai and his allies, the legal political opposition, civil society groups (including women's rights and human rights organisations), non-Pashtun tribes and ethnic minorities, former communists, and former mujahedeen commanders have expressed growing concerns that a political deal with the Taliban might come at their expense and without their consent.

Many within Afghan society are concerned that American interest in a talks process is focused solely on attaining a 'decent interval' in the Taliban insurgency that might allow for an orderly ISAF military withdrawal. As a report by the International Crisis Group has concluded, every faction in Afghanistan has recognised 'that the international community's most urgent priority is to exit Afghanistan with or without a settlement'.²²⁶ Indeed, this has increased the number of potential spoilers who see no interest in acquiescing to or facilitating an atmosphere in which talks might prosper. Factionalism within the security forces – the Afghan National Army and the National Directorate of Security (NDS) in particular – has also been a natural result of this chaotic approach. Elements which traditionally formed part of the Northern Alliance have been preparing in anticipation of civil war after US and ISAF security forces withdraw. These and other factions may not be willing to accept Taliban participation in national government.²²⁷

Even if some sort of deal with the Taliban was still attainable, the prospect of a major backlash from Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras of the National Front for Afghanistan, and even Hizb-e Islami and other Pashtun groups, is high.²²⁸

²²⁶ International Crisis Group (26 March 2012).

²²⁷ R. Evans, 'The Once and Future Civil War in Afghanistan', *Foreign Policy*, 26 July 2012, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/07/26/the_once_and_future_civil_war_in_afghanistan.

²²⁸ A. Rafiq, 'The Coming Civil War in Afghanistan', *Foreign Policy*, 3 February 2012.

The Pakistan problem remains

Pakistan remains as critical to the future of Afghanistan as ever, and its role is just as complex as it was during the period of the Soviet invasion. There is no simple answer to its playing of multiple games within the country and its manipulation of proxies. One thing is clear, however: Pakistan is intrinsic to any negotiation process and needs to be included. A durable negotiated peace in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without addressing Pakistani interests (irrespective of whether those interests are legitimate or otherwise).

Before and since, Pakistan has demonstrated its willingness to use armed insurgent groups such as the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network in pursuit of what it perceives as its immutable interests: first, avoiding strategic encirclement by India; second, maintaining strategic depth against India; and third, blunting Pashtun nationalism. In 1992, for example, as the Najibullah regime crumbled following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, Pakistan's ISI gave support to insurgents under Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, which helped plunge Afghanistan into renewed civil war. This was partly to undermine a UN peace plan they feared would bring moderate Pashtun nationalists into power and cultivate strong bilateral ties with India.²²⁹

To date, US development and military aid packages have certainly not succeeded in changing the way Pakistan views its interests. Its sense of strategic insecurity cannot be wished away; nor can the country's numerous internal problems. Any 'deal' or 'process' that ignores any of these interests will result in a continuation of Pakistan's destabilisation in Afghanistan.

Efforts by the US and Afghan governments to increase Indian involvement in security force assistance and security agreements have only served to validate Pakistan's worst fears and harden the ISI's commitment to supporting non-state armed actors. In the short term, they do not encourage Pakistan's willingness to allow a peace process to develop within Afghanistan. Guarantees from Kabul and Washington to limit Indian involvement in Afghanistan might be considered in exchange for full-throated Pakistani support – both overt and covert – for a negotiation process.

²²⁹ P. Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), p. 9.

Epilogue Lessons Learned

Regardless of the outcome of the current, last-ditch efforts to facilitate some kind of deal with the Taliban, there are valuable lessons to be learned from the near-decade in which the idea of 'talking to the Taliban' evolved. Afghanistan will not be the last conflict in which Western forces confront a complex insurgency, nor will the Taliban be the last insurgent movement with which Western governments engage in negotiations. Indeed, there is a wealth of experiences from previous conflicts which echo the four lessons that we have identified based on the decade of failed engagement with the Taliban.²³⁰

Speak with one voice

For much of the decade, talks with the Taliban were pursued by different governments at different times and with varying objectives. This 'chaos of good intentions' has produced a 'market bazaar' approach in which Western governments could be played against each other, and deals were cut by different governments with different factions or individuals within the Taliban movement. While the use of third-party mediators may – at times – be useful, it is of critical importance that everyone involved in talks is on the same page, and that all the actors involved in reaching out to an insurgent movement on behalf of a government – or coalition of governments – are working from the same script. Rather than contributing to a peaceful, negotiated outcome, the Afghanistan experience shows that 'freelancing' – even when based on the best of intentions – has a destabilising effect: it allowed the Taliban to gain tactical advantages while undermining their confidence in the credentials of Western negotiators and their ability to deliver real and tangible outcomes on behalf of their governments.

Make sure you have a clear strategic rationale

Related to the first lesson, negotiations with insurgents need to have a clear strategic rationale. The absence of clarity and unity about what talks with the Taliban were meant to achieve, how they were going to be conducted, and who was to negotiate with whom, led to widespread confusion and the perception of weakness, which – inter alia – undermined the willingness of the Taliban to take any such process seriously. Paradoxically, therefore, the 'mad dash' aimed at talking to the Taliban – *any* Taliban, with any possible outcome – fuelled conspiracy theories while making meaningful negotiations less likely. By contrast, the talks process in Northern Ireland, which supporters of negotiations with the Taliban frequently reference, was a masterpiece in clarity and purpose: despite numerous ups and downs, it stuck to the framework and format that were announced in the 1993 Downing Street Declaration, and it never lost sight of delivering on the objectives that had been formulated in that document.²³¹

²³⁰ See J. Bew, M. Frampton and I. Gurruchaga, *Talking to Terrorists: Making Peace in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country* (London: Hurst, 2009); P. Neumann, 'Negotiating with Terrorists', *Foreign Affairs*, January 2007.

²³¹ P. Neumann, *Britain's Long War: British Strategy in the Northern Ireland Conflict, 1969-98* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 148-78.

Potential spoilers need to be ‘inside the tent’

A key issue which policymakers in Afghanistan have failed to heed is the notion of having all the key stakeholders involved in the process. In Afghanistan, the US and other Western governments naively assumed that a bilateral deal with the Taliban was feasible, and that the interests of other players – especially those of the Afghan and Pakistani governments – could safely be ignored. As it turned out, every attempt by Western negotiators to find a bilateral deal with the Taliban caused the two governments to play the role of ‘spoilers’, doing their utmost to sabotage those negotiations and, thereby, making a successful conclusion virtually impossible. As much as Western governments would have liked to reduce the conflict to a simple confrontation between ISAF and the Taliban, the Afghan and Pakistani governments are key players whose influence has consistently been underestimated. As much as Western policymakers have become irritated with those governments for what they perceive as duplicity and dishonesty, no peace deal in Afghanistan will ever be possible without their involvement. Indeed, the currently unfolding round of negotiations is a belated recognition of the maxim that successful peace negotiations need to bring all the players to the table.

Recognise the needs of the ‘silent majority’

No peace deal will ever be sustainable if it ignores the needs and interests of the majority of the population. Stakeholders within Afghan society – including minority groups – are part of the process. While ordinary people cannot play the role of ‘spoilers’ as easily as armed groups or governments, their fears, concerns and objections can nevertheless make the implementation of a peace deal impossible. In the Afghan case, rather than alleviating those fears and possible objections, the way the talks process has been conducted has increased the concerns of religious, tribal, ethnic and political interest groups, as well as minorities and women, who fear that their futures are being negotiated behind their backs and – crucially – at their expense. This has created ‘security dilemmas’ in which anti-Taliban factions have started to re-arm as a way of ‘hedging’ against any deal that will see the return of the Taliban to a position of power and influence. The lesson is clear: if civil war is to be avoided, negotiations with insurgents need to be as transparent as possible, and the desire to secure a deal with armed groups has to be balanced by making sure it does not come at the expense of the fundamental interests and needs of the ‘silent majority’. Ignoring those fundamental needs and interests not only increases the risk of civil war, it also destabilises the negotiation process itself.

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