

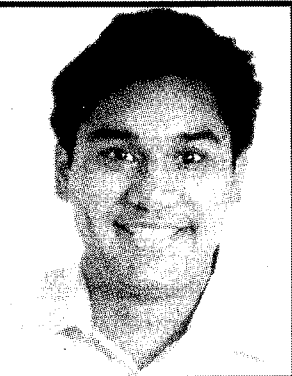
Negotiating with Taliban is a reality in Afghanistan

For most western politicians, the cost — in blood and treasure — of achieving even modest outcomes in Afghanistan outweighs their respective benefits. In sum, the political momentum for the war has been lost. Indeed, while western forces bombed their way into Afghanistan, the exit strategy is predicated on negotiating their way out. Dealing with the Taliban as political actors rather than enemy forces is seen as the bedrock of an uneasy, but necessary peace dividend.

To be sure, negotiation is hardly a novel approach. At the turn of the 20th century, following two devastatingly unsuccessful incursions into Afghanistan, British military commanders designed the “closed frontier strategy”. The idea was to manage the prospect of conflict. Accordingly, village elders and British representatives entered multiple agreements to keep the peace. In the mid 1980s, towards the end of Soviet occupation, Khad, the Afghan Intelligence Service, signed protocols with CIA and Pakistani-backed Mujahideen commanders. The most famous of these was the Panjshir protocol with Ahmed Shah Masood, the Tajik leader who later led the Northern Alliance.

Following the US-led intervention in 2001, the Bonn accords — the UN sponsored agreement that placed Hamid Karzai as head of the interim Government — provided some space for reconciliation. Despite the common criticism that the lack of Taliban representatives — forcefully excluded by the US — led to the rise of the insurgency, some Taliban commanders joined the political process in Kabul. This of course did not include actors belonging to the Quetta Shura, the hard core elements of the Taliban leadership led by Mullah Mo-

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hammad Omar, but it demonstrated that political representation, rather than more war and bloodletting, was attractive to erstwhile Talibs. Indeed, between 2001 and 2008, 22 middle and senior level Taliban agreed to work with the Afghan Government, or at least not against it.

That this figure has only marginally increased since 2008 is a result of the lack of attention to governance in the provinces and the in-

tricacies of regional dynamics associated with the “end game”. Reconciliation strategies in the provinces range from reintegrating middle level fighters to striking deals with local elders. Hence, not all negotiations involve those totting Kalashnikovs, but also with tribes and sub-tribes, who, mostly out of necessity, are sympathetic to the Taliban.

A key question asked by those approached by Government forces is “what do

we reconcile into?” President Karzai’s refusal to decentralise the power sharing arrangement between Kabul and the provincial Governments and the thin security footprint at the district level, have done little to convince willing parties to negotiate, leave alone reintegrate. Take for instance the case of Musa Quala, the Pashtun dominated district north of Helmand.

In September 2006, the provincial Government in Musa Quala entered into an accord with beleaguered local tribes. In effect, the accord provided the political space for a jirga supported by local tribes to administer the district. Western forces withdrew from the area, and the jirga nominated local individuals to take up key positions. From the outset, the accord provided stability. The Taliban agreed to stay

away, while local leaders were made stakeholders in governance. However, the lack of infrastructural support and developmental monies turned the tide. The tribes lost faith, and the ugly head of the insurgency reappeared in the streets and bazaars of Musa Quala.

In the current milieu, apart from the continued problems associated with stretching the reach of governance, negotiating with the Taliban has been made all that more complicated by existing tensions between regional actors. The Pakistani military and intelligence services have positioned themselves as the principle brokers between the Taliban leadership in Quetta and the Afghan Government. Consequently, and for good reason, Indian representatives have denounced any advantages accrued by negotiating with those supported by Pakistan.

It is widely argued that the only way to disentangle these tensions is for the West to invest in a regional strategy that assures the neutrality of Afghanistan. To be sure, an expansive version of the 1988 Geneva Accords, a tenuous peace settlement that oversaw the Soviet withdrawal, is certainly attractive. However, the Geneva Accords were unable to limit regional interference. Currently, there is little hope for a regional strategy to contain the emotions and interests of wily stakeholders. Given the loss of western political will, negotiating with the Taliban is a reality. The following 12 to 18 months will determine the terms of negotiation. In the end, bolstering governance capacity provides at least some hope for an independent Afghan state, where the offer of politics can overshadow the attraction of violence.

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A soldier keeps watch outside a polling station in Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan during last week’s elections. AP/PTI