

Afghanistan, the limits of counter-insurgency and the prospects for negotiations



Seminar in Madrid, 26 March 2008

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This report was written by Juan Garrigues and Robert Matthews. Juan Garrigues is an Adviser in the Policy Unit of the Prime Minister's Office. When he produced this report, he was a Researcher in the Peace and Security Programme at FRIDE. Robert Matthews is an Associate Researcher of the Peace and Security Programme at FRIDE.

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Goya, 5-7, Pasaje 2º. 28001 Madrid – SPAIN

Tel.: +34 912 44 47 40 – Fax: +34 912 44 47 41

Email: fride@fride.org

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Executive summary

The international community is now accepting the consequences of being engaged in a counterinsurgency. NATO's strategy is therefore no longer about killing Taliban but about winning over local populations through the development of effective governance models. Such models must be Afghan-led and developed through inter-agency efforts where civilians play a growing role. On the political side, UNAMA's experience and expertise must be taken advantage of and expanded. On the military side, a stronger focus should be placed on training the Afghan National Security Forces.

There are many challenges to the current counter-insurgency effort. Rising civilian casualties from the use of suicide attacks by the Afghan insurgency, internal divisions between NATO members, a public opinion crisis in many countries, and growing dissatisfaction among Afghans with the NATO mission and Afghan government raise the question of whether increasing numbers of troops may be counter-productive.

The insurgency is now younger than before, less respectful of its elders, and more closely linked to drug lords. While the insurgency has suffered important losses, fighters are easily replaced. An effort needs to be made to separate Afghan Taliban from the transnational jihadi network that supports them. Thereafter, the objective of negotiations should be to dismantle entire networks, not just individuals. The focus should therefore be on negotiations with the Afghan Taliban and not the "moderate Taliban".

Guarantees and incentives for the Taliban must be provided for national reconciliation to advance. While the PTS has helped over 6000 former Taliban return to their communities, the government has not politically backed the process and guaranteed the safety and reintegration of the individuals involved.

To advance towards a successful national reconciliation process the cooperation of Pakistan is essential. The results of the elections in Pakistan open a window of opportunity for progress in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region.

The government and armed forces in Pakistan must now help "push" the Afghan Taliban out of the country and not impede reconciliation initiatives with the Pakistan-based Taliban, as has happened in the past. The creation of the Pakistani Taliban is a worrying development for the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan.

Perceptions must be closely watched by the international community and the Afghan government. It is important to counter the perception by Afghans that strategic negotiations with the Taliban translate to bartering away Afghan sovereignty to Pakistan or the international community. An effort should also be made to ensure that the Northern Alliance members do not feel that national reconciliation with the Taliban will result in a shift of power that will compromise their position.

Afghanistan's neighbours must be given a stake in the future of Afghanistan and should not feel threatened by its national army. Russia's growing cooperation with NATO is a positive step. Iran must also be involved in issues in which it is affected directly such as narcotics.

Due to the inability of the Afghan state to effectively provide services to its citizens and the destabilising role that external countries have played in the past, it is still easy for other countries to interfere in the statebuilding process in Afghanistan. One participant argued that it is for this reason that a decentralised state was not put in place in Afghanistan. The potential for other countries to replace the void left by the government's weak presence in some areas is too dangerous.

Many lessons can be drawn from the experience in Afghanistan: it was a mistake not to have pressed a heavy footprint upon Afghanistan in the first 5 years after the 2001 invasion, as was the underestimation of the regional character of the conflict. This would have

reduced the influence of so-called “spoilers”. Lack of coordination in Western aid distribution, military-security strategies and reconciliation and negotiations efforts from the outset seriously prejudiced the peace-building and statebuilding efforts. Similarly, local justice and accountability should have been developed and emphasized from the beginning to be able effectively to fight a culture of impunity.

Focus should be placed on negotiations with the Afghan Taliban and not the “moderate Taliban”, the latter being part of the language employed by the US in its “war on terror”. These negotiations should be part of a national process in which the pragmatic Afghan Taliban, as one participant suggested, are invited (by Karzai) to join in a “peaceful jihad” for an Islamic Afghanistan, not least because they cannot be defeated militarily and a political solution is therefore necessary.

Acronyms

ANA	Afghan National Army
ANDS	Afghan National Development Strategy
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghanistan National Security Forces
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
NWFP	Northwestern Frontier Province
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OMLT	Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams
PPP	Pakistan People’s Party
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
PTS	Strengthening Peace Program (in the letter of its Afghan acronym)
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Contents

Introduction	1
Panel 1: The limits of counter-insurgency	1
Counter-insurgency revisited	2
“Eating soup with a knife?”	2
Stabilising Afghanistan and the role of PRTs	3
Panel 2: Understanding the enemy	5
Clarifying terms: towards a comprehensive strategy	5
Lessons learned: the need for guarantees and incentives	6
The prospects for peace in a turbulent regional context	7
Panel 3: Experiences of negotiations with the Taliban	9
The PTS experience: achievements and challenges	9
Keys for success and prospects for negotiations	10
Panel 4: The prospects for integrating a political and military approach	11
Towards a just and responsive Afghan government	11
National and regional challenges	12
Conclusions	13

Introduction

There is a general consensus that the increasing civilian casualties caused by the insurgency, the eroding support for President Hamid Karzai's government, and the divisions and shaky resolve of the international community all point to the need to revise the international community's strategy in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the new government in Pakistan and the elections in the United States in 2008 and in Afghanistan itself in 2009, point to a time of considerable changes for the country and region.

At first glance, the international community has come up short both in its objectives of eliminating a terrorist network that threatens its own security and in creating a stable, viable Afghanistan in which Afghans can lead a successful statebuilding project. In conferences around the world, internationals and Afghans meet and discuss the complexity of the challenges in Afghanistan: modalities of aid distribution, the pressing issue of the narcotics trade, the insurgency's refuge in Pakistan, the ineffectiveness of national institutions. Despite progress in areas such as education or the development of the Afghan National Army (ANA), overlapping issues of concern inevitably fuse together into a daunting scenario in these discussions.

While all the above-mentioned issues are key to ensuring a coordinated international strategy with realistic prospects of creating a stable and sustainable Afghan state, security has clearly become the central issue for both the Afghans and the international community. After some years of relative peace, the armed insurgency has shifted its tactics away from the battlefield and towards suicide attacks and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). The last year saw the highest rate of civilians killed since 2001. In such a scenario, NATO has now accepted it is in a counter-insurgency campaign in which the international community's strategy must go beyond killing insurgents.

It is therefore urgent to start discussing what policy options the international community and Afghanistan

have. One policy option that many analysts are now proposing is to push forward a national reconciliation agenda which includes negotiating with the Taliban. The Afghan government has expressed its willingness to negotiate with the "Afghan" Taliban in the past and the Afghan government and the international community have become involved in contacts at different levels with the Taliban. Many doubts however remain as far as the incentives and guarantees for the actors involved, the trade-offs for the international community and the different modalities of negotiations. There are also serious concerns as to how realistic this political solution would be and how effective it could be in the long term.

In order to address the issues of a revised counter-insurgency strategy and political reconciliation, FRIDE organised a full day debate in Madrid under the title of "A debate on Afghanistan: is there a political solution?" Over forty participants: Government officials, NATO military officials, independent experts and representatives of the Afghan government and civil society, attended the Seminar. The following is a report of the debate that took place under the "Chatham House Rule".¹

Panel 1: The limits of counter-insurgency

In the first panel the participants explored the limits of a military response in Afghanistan and the challenges of fighting a counter-insurgency campaign. All participants agreed that since 2004 the international community has come to the clear conclusion that what is needed is a cohesive, coordinated, Afghan-led response which focuses more on reconstruction. However, differences of opinion existed on how the military should contribute to a more comprehensive effort. Two visions were expressed. On the one hand,

¹ When a meeting is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

some participants supported an enhanced military effort with a stronger focus on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and training, while others suggested that a more robust military effort was counter-productive as far as winning over the population and that a more defensive approach would be more appropriate.

Counter-insurgency revisited

A participant stressed the different mind-set that the military needs in a counter-insurgency environment. Counter-insurgency is not about killing as many insurgents as possible; it is about reducing the insurgency's influence on the population and therefore it requires a comprehensive process where security is not an end in itself. It is an inter-agency effort, a three-tier battle or a mosaic war, as the US calls it. All PRTs have improved their approach and the US army has become wiser and more flexible, as shown in its December 2006 counter-insurgency document, which states that counter-insurgency is a long term process. Nevertheless, other departments such as USAID and the State Department need to make similar efforts.

In counterinsurgency strategy there is also the need to make the distinction between hard-line extremists and local followers in Afghanistan. It was argued that battlefield victories (i.e., the control of Kandahar) had shown that defeating the Taliban is relatively easy. The problem is that local followers are easy to recruit because they are poor and have a negative perception of the central government and of the national police. A young man can be recruited for the price of a packet of cigarettes and a telephone card. There is therefore a need to persuade the local followers to stop fighting and for the international community to start developing a comprehensive "Marshall plan" where soldiers must build as well as fight.

A shift from battalion-centred operations to PRT-centred operations was encouraged; Europe must step up in this effort through more PRTs and a stronger focus on training. More Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (OMLTs) are needed: 12-man

training teams should be built as fast as Afghan battalions are built (20 have not yet been filled). For EUPOL, 150 police trainers is a failure considering the US has 3,500. It is also important to remember that if there are no more support elements (helicopters or intelligence), simply increasing the troops does not help.

"Eating soup with a knife?"

Another participant presented a critical vision and a radical proposition: the military pillar is not achieving results and may be counterproductive by undermining the stabilisation function of the NATO mandate. PRTs create targets for the insurgency and make it harder for NGOs to work in contested areas such as Faryab or Badghis provinces. International forces should therefore de-escalate towards a more defensive stabilisation and peacekeeping mission, inasmuch as it has in fact not been easy to defeat the Taliban.

Since 2002/3, many have argued that more troops are necessary to defeat the insurgency. In 2004, despite US troops more than doubling from 8,000 to 20,000, the following year the insurgency gained more ground and visibility. Despite NATO combat operations moving south in 2006, militants have followed adjusting tactics, recruiting more numbers and spreading geographically. Since 2006 there has been greater insecurity and the insurgency has spread further. While in 2001 the US military rejected the Soviet experience and pushed for a light footprint with a maximum 10,000 US troops, today there are around 50,000 troops, about half those the USSR had in Afghanistan much of the time.

The following arguments were provided to explain why a heavier military presence could be counterproductive:

1. When people's lives and property are destroyed, it is not enough to come later with funds for reconstruction. The destruction of property and infrastructure by the foreign troops is already done.

2. Collateral damage and civilian casualties are difficult to minimise and have a disastrous effect on Afghans' perceptions. Furthermore, in 2007 there was double the reliance on air power than in 2006, so the prospects for fewer casualties are not too bright.
3. NATO represents foreign, infidel forces that are targets for attack. In six Southwest provinces, 46% do not welcome NATO troops. Many Afghans think that civilian casualties are mostly NATO's fault, not the Taliban's. This creates a magnet for general grievances that nationalists exploit in the name of religion and nationalism.

It was furthermore argued by the same speaker that there are serious limitations on NATO's capacity for counter-insurgency:

1. NATO is an unyielding alliance: There are internal divisions, complicated command structures, too many rotations and critical public opinion within the member countries' populations (in Norway 50% want to pull out all Norwegian troops and in Canada and Germany the debate is growing fast).
2. Counter-insurgency is like "eating soup with a knife" (according to Lawrence of Arabia). To succeed in such a complicated task, innovative thinking in areas such as political intelligence is very important. In the mid-twentieth century the UK waged successful counterinsurgency in Malaysia because the British had been in the peninsula for 200 years; the Allies in Afghanistan are so far unsuccessful because they do not know enough about Afghans.
3. The "Clear, hold and build" strategy: It is argued that for this strategy to work and for NATO to bargain from strength, you need more troops. However, if fighting is counter-productive, the Allies will never get to a position of strength. The dilemma is that the more troops NATO gets to hold, the more it looks like an occupying force.
4. Regional links: Since 2004, the more difficult the situation is in Iraq, the stronger the need for the US to emphasise a national security commitment to Afghanistan and to reinforce NATO's credibility. In this sense, the Afghan conflict is becoming a US and transatlantic problem.

Initially, NATO estimated that 10,000 troops were enough because it was generally believed that it was possible to defeat terrorists with few forces. After 2001, the insurgency was only surviving. But by having few troops NATO allowed the insurgents to come back. President Karzai recommends a "clear, hold, build" approach. The previous policy of trying to hold without Afghan forces did not make sense. Consolidating the ANA is a major priority. As a response to the thin line that exists between Afghan and occupying forces, there should be more training teams, not more battalions, even in the South. With Afghans like Minister Zia in charge of projects, the PRTs would do a great job backing him up.

Stabilising Afghanistan and the role of PRTs

While there has been progress in areas such as access to education and basic medicine (80% of Afghans now have some form of healthcare) and some advances in security (in the north 80% believe the security situation has improved), building a government from scratch is difficult. The challenge is that although governance is crucial, human capital is weak. The only previous governance experience by former Governor Munib of Uruzgan province was six months with the Taliban Government in Kabul. In Uruzgan, the Chief of Police and the Ministry of Education representative were illiterate.

Corruption is also a big challenge and must be dealt with through training and mentoring. Organised crime is linked to 80% of the economy; therefore, the Alliance must attack the narco-economy and not the farmers. Farmers do not get rich from drug trafficking, a small group of traders and manufacturers do. Alternative livelihoods and eradication are therefore not the right solution because they do not target the right group.

A participant reminded the audience that the purpose of the international community's intervention was not to stabilise Afghanistan but to respond to a terrorist

attack. The Afghan state was originally conceived by a diplomatic agreement between Russia and Britain and it is still weak. It is easy for other countries to destabilise Afghanistan and, unless neighbours have a stake, there will not be stability. It is crucial for Afghanistan's neighbours not to see the Afghan national army as a threat to them or they will undermine it. The threat to the Afghan government is not only from the South. Governor Attah in Balkh province in the north, for example, could not be fired by President Karzai because outside support for Attah could change the future of Afghanistan.

One participant argued that the "Americanisation" of the East and South through the surge that is expected there will be an important change. Another expert explained that in countries such as Sweden, public opinion blurs Afghanistan with Iraq and the war on terrorism. It was also argued that it took too long for the Afghan government to say that the problem was emerging from outside Afghanistan. A heavy footprint in the first 5 years of the conflict, one that addressed the regional character of the conflict, would have been needed to eliminate spoilers.

On the issue of PRTs, all participants agreed that a common engagement policy was necessary. A common system for PRTs and how aid is distributed should have been established from the beginning. While PRTs are doing combat and reconstruction operations, the stronger political ties of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) should be used for an enhanced role in reconciliation. A joint NATO-US strategy with common denominators especially regarding security and protection is crucial. It is not good enough to just train police; there must be more national troops from the same province.

The role of PRTs has declined and most PRTs do not protect civilians, NGOs or do interdiction. European countries in the West and North, especially, hardly do anything, and development projects are minor. One participant argued that PRTs have become redundant. They were conceived by US General Dan McNeil and former UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi as a stop-gap

measure to provide the "ISAF effect" because then US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld refused to place ISAF troops beyond Kabul.

One expert critical of the current military strategy, argued that it was preferable to stop expanding PRTs and to instead make clear the rationale for reducing the military and elaborating an exit strategy. The doubling of US forces in 2004 was a mistake; a low profile combined with a political solution, a shift towards a more defensive position with a stronger role for civilian institutions are essential. It is better to have non-military NGOs even in insecure areas because Afghan NGOs can work in these areas. If PRTs can go into contested areas in Faryab or Bagdhis provinces they create targets for the insurgency that includes NGOs. The long term sustainability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) should also be reviewed considering that in 2007, 7 billion USD were invested in them.

Another participant considered that PRT stop-gap measures have worked in places like Zabul province, creating islands of security. The concept is evolving and it is an interesting model for supporting Afghan institutions. When talking about Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) it must be remembered that 70% of the helicopters in the South are the OEF's. Private contracting, on the other hand, is a worrisome development because there is no democratic control. The North and West should have non-military PRTs but in the South they should still be military. NATO military police trainers and OMLTs are needed and should be provided.

Panel 2: Understanding the enemy

Speakers and participants in the second panel called for a strengthened and transparent policy on negotiations from both the Afghan government and the international community. All agreed that uncoordinated efforts by many different actors until now have led to an ineffective policy. While there are serious obstacles regionally, the strategy for negotiations must incorporate Pakistan. It is necessary to create the guarantees and incentives that will enable a strategy that can push forward a reconciliation agenda. It is also important to develop a policy as soon as possible and not give the impression that negotiations stem from weakness.

Clarifying terms: towards a comprehensive strategy

One expert argued that a military approach is necessary but it is not the only solution. A comprehensive approach is needed. Security is the priority for the Afghan people and it must be provided to ensure their trust. Rule of law must also be improved to escape a culture of impunity. In general, there is a need to close the gap between the strategies of the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and the Afghanistan compact (in which there is general agreement) and the implementation of these strategies (where all participants tend to do it their own way).

It is necessary to understand who joined the Taliban and why. Disaffected communities and young brainwashed Afghans in *madrassas* are easy targets as the Taliban brings power to a young person with nothing to lose. People are also joining the insurgency because they fear retaliation if they do not and because

international and Afghan troops are not present everywhere. The Taliban are now younger than a decade ago, less respectful of their elders and closely linked to the drug lords.

On the regional aspects of negotiations, Afghanistan's neighbours do not see it as a peace process, but rather as a larger realignment that includes the US intervention in Iraq. Internally, one participant added that the Northern Alliance is unsure about the idea of negotiating with the "moderate Taliban" because they consider President Karzai a moderate Taliban and feel that negotiations are useless because of this ambiguity.

In any case, the focus should not be on finding moderates but on attracting pragmatists. Many of the current Taliban are not associated with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar or the Tariki Taliban. There are now multiple networks operating under the guise of the insurgency whereas when the Taliban was in power, Mullah Omar had control over all Taliban. There is no longer any strategic centralised control. The Kandahari Taliban, for example, include eight or nine different networks. International strategy should be based on a study of "talibanology". It is necessary to understand these networks to know how to approach them (or not) and how to set up talks with them.

Another participant agreed that the term "Taliban" should be abolished as the insurgents call themselves *mujahideen* (freedom fighters). "Moderate" is part of US "war on terror" language. President Musharaf and the Pakistani security doctrine are based on this language so that they can get weapons to fight India. Ad hoc negotiations were not fruitful. There cannot be different channels open with no coordination. Some Taliban will negotiate with local commanders for local peace as a business agreement, aid organisations will negotiate with insurgents so that they can work in areas and many interested individuals simply try to make money out of negotiations. A common approach is needed that includes a comprehensive strategy with principles that cannot be compromised and an effective reintegration programme. The strategy must be both inclusive and selective. To create a stable state, locals

must be gradually empowered at district and provincial levels.

On the positive side, some maintained that the inclusion of warlords such as General Dostum in the political process has resulted in a clear reduction of their ability to raise arms and undermine the rule of law. There are also positive efforts such as the district level development of police and delivery of services through the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development (MRRD). As far as reconciliation, since Musa Qala, the number of Taliban who have contacted the government to change sides has increased substantially.

Lessons learned: the need for guarantees and incentives

For one of the participants, it was important to analyse the entire amnesty process to develop a clear strategy for political reconciliation. It should be recalled that in 2002 President Karzai offered an amnesty to all the Taliban fighters except the 242 on the UN terrorist list but ultimately it went nowhere. In 2003, President Karzai asked the Taliban to join the political process but the offer was blocked by the Northern Alliance and the US as the Northern Alliance controlled the cabinet posts. In a second appeal, in October 2003, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court attempted to initiate talks with the Taliban Foreign Minister Mullah Wahkil, but the process broke down. In March 2007, many Taliban fighters have come back through the Strengthening Peace Program (PTS in the letters of its Afghan acronym) as part of the amnesty and have been included thereafter in the political process.

The term “moderate Taliban” came from the powerful Pakistani Intelligence Services (ISI). Mullah Rabbani – one of the founders of the Taliban movement - was the only real moderate Taliban in the pre – September 11 period as he was opposed to the global jihadi movement, setting him apart from Mullah Omar. With Rabbani’s death 18 months before, the international contacts with the Taliban ceased. After September 11th 2001, the ISI sold the US a plan to split the moderate

Taliban from Osama Bin Laden so that he could be apprehended without entering into a war. The hidden agenda was that ISI in fact told Mullah Omar to resist the US invasion while at the same time the Pakistani government supported it.

In April 2003, President Karzai tried to sell negotiations to President Musharaf. Two things were needed considering that all the insurgency (both Afghan Taliban and international jihadists) were in Pakistan by 2003. First, the Afghan government needed to entice the Afghan Taliban and their families back from Pakistan. Kabul tried to provide this despite the opposition of the Northern Alliance. Second, a push was needed from Pakistan to expel the Taliban into Afghanistan. However, President Musharaf did not cooperate, and in fact held families back so that the Taliban, who had initiated contacts with Kabul, could not go back. The US is also to blame as they were more concerned with securing support from President Musharaf and concentrating on Al Qaeda, who they considered their only real enemy.

International guarantees for the safety of the Taliban were also missing. Apart from local, *shura* and tribal level guarantees, the Taliban needed guarantees that they would not be shipped off to Guantanamo Bay and that they would have some re-education programmes and even some financial support for reintegration. The talk of a role for the ICRC or UNHCR in this respect was still missing.

Another major problem mentioned was that when the insurgency started in 2004-05, many actors of the international community were talking with the Taliban. NATO defined the enemy by tiers based on ideology. The only insurgents considered “winnable” were those with fewer connections to the international jihad. The Afghan government’s vision, on the other hand, was based on the general tribal milieu, and was therefore more realistic. The objective was to exploit the differences between the tribes backing the Taliban and those not doing so and between the Taliban living in Pakistan and the Pakistani government.

There was a general consensus by participants that terms need to be clarified. Cooption, for example, is what the UK is doing in Helmand province by buying over field commanders in exchange for jobs such as that of police chief. Cooption is limited, however, as there are few jobs available. Inclusion is what President Karzai wanted in 2003, when the objective was to bring as many actors as possible into the political process (Loya Jirga, elections, etc.) The majority of the Taliban appear to want to return with their families but they need security guarantees and incentives. For an effective, comprehensive process to emerge it is necessary to close the gap between these different approaches.

In summary, to engage with the Taliban in an effective political reconciliation process the following problems must be addressed:

1. Al Qaeda and jihadi opposition in both Pakistan and Afghanistan: This can be seen in the killing of tribal elders in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan (FATA) and of NGO workers and Afghans associated with the government in the south of Afghanistan.
2. The attitude of Pakistan: the situation is currently different from that in 2003. The entire international jihadi movement and the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban are now based in Pakistan. The cooperation of the Pakistani government is needed to push these elements out.
3. The creation of the Pakistani Taliban in FATA: They act as a "hit force" for the jihadis against both the Pakistani government and the Afghan Taliban that may want to return to Afghanistan.
4. The perception by Afghans that starting talks with the Taliban means cutting a deal to hand over southern Afghanistan to the Pakistani military: the international community and the Afghan government need to explain to the public the reasons behind negotiations.
5. The difference between strategic and tactical talks: Beyond using wedge tactics, to foster divisions among the Taliban, there is a need to have strategic talks with the Taliban. To conduct talks with

individuals such as Jalaluddin Haqqani or members of the Quetta Shura, the international community needs to acknowledge the indispensable support of the government of Pakistan.²

The prospects for peace in a turbulent regional context

Although there is general optimism with the new Government in Pakistan and the move towards a civilian-military partnership, there are doubts that the Pakistani army will make the strategic decision to hand over the Taliban. There is a logical contradiction in the Pakistani army wanting to eliminate the Pakistani Taliban and yet wanting to keep the Afghan Taliban as a bargaining chip with the Afghan government. The Pakistani government has only handed back Afghan Taliban when they have stepped over the line.

The new coalition government in Pakistan should take responsibility for fighting extremists. The government-military partnership should push for political reform in FATA. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is committed to this after winning the most seats of any party and forming a government with a PPP prime minister in March of 2008. Thus, there is a great window of opportunity despite the fact that the US seems to be trying to save President Musharaf.

A participant added that the biggest reconciliation effort done far had been the emergency Loya Jirga. It offered both a national and local process whereby people who were not in the new administration or connected to the Taliban were specifically included and invited to negotiate. Many took that offer and it was broadly successful, but since then not much has happened. The potential of UNAMA, as a national political instrument at the disposal of the international community has been undervalued and the Government appears not take reconciliation seriously.

² Haqqani is a pashtun that forms part of the armed insurgency and is best known for fighting the Soviets in the 1980s. The Quetta Shura is the leadership council of the Taliban based in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan province.

Iran says that negotiations with the Taliban are dangerous because the perception is that the US is aligning itself with Iran's neighbours against Iran and the return of Taliban influence in Afghanistan would represent an additional danger. There is therefore a need to choose between stabilising Afghanistan or prioritising strategic regional interests. Iran recognizes that if a conflict emerges between US regional interests and those of Afghanistan, the regional interests will always win. Russia's role should also be considered. If Russia facilitates government or international forces' movements through the north, in exchange they will demand that there be no Taliban in the government.

Another participant agreed that the Afghan Taliban is not monolithic. There are extremists such as Mullah Omar that may not be willing to talk and others, such as the former Taliban Foreign Minister Muttah Wakil to whom perhaps we should not talk because they do not have sufficient influence with the rank and file of the Taliban. As far as national level negotiations, there is a serious risk of the Northern Alliance opposing them.

One participant favoured a regional approach and classified NATO's move to engage with Russians as positive. Iran must also be engaged on the issue of counternarcotics. Elections in Pakistan, in FATA in particular, have proved that the people do not support extremists. The Afghan government and the international community must work on a peace jirga with international support. After the first one in Kabul, it would now be time for a second dialogue.

The second speaker argued that the issue of Pashtun alienation has become more complex. Since the 1990s the Taliban do not preach Pashtun nationalism because it would undermine their relationship with Pakistan. These Taliban must be anti-India and anti-Pashtunistan in order to get military support from Pakistan. There is now the fear that in the 2009 Afghan elections Karzai or others will play the Pashtun card, thus alienating the Northern Alliance. Instead, the Afghan government should use its anti-Pakistan

card because it is the only common denominator that joins the North and Pashtuns.

The idea of a global jihad is now more entrenched in the Taliban leadership than in 2001. A Pakistani Taliban has been created and is an extremely ideological group. The decision to spread fear in the NWFP and to attack NATO supply lines before the summer offensive is a major risk. It is therefore important to set up incentives for Pakistan. Since 9/11, the US has given over 10 billion US dollars to Pakistan, much of which has been used for ships and F16s, not precisely the counter-insurgency tools needed in FATA or NWFP. More money should be spent on the economic development of border areas. An Indo-Pakistan dialogue also needs to progress further after the hopeful signs of the recent breakthrough and the elections in Pakistan.

Panel 3: Experiences of negotiations with the Taliban

Some of the participants shared experiences in negotiating with the Taliban. In particular, two different experiences were presented. The first was at the official level by the national commission responsible for peace and reconciliation. The second was based on the experiences of international contacts with the Taliban at different levels. In both cases it was argued that investment for political reconciliation or negotiations with the Taliban has been scarce and had come too late. Most participants considered that both the international community and the Afghan government needed to start investing more funds in negotiations and needed to develop a coherent, coordinated, Afghan-led strategy for reconciliation.

The PTS experience: achievements and challenges

The Takhim-e-Solh Program, Strengthening Peace Program (PTS in its Afghan initials) was established in May 2005 acknowledging that military measures alone cannot halt the ongoing conflict and that peace negotiations can support creating stability in Afghanistan. Since then, over 6,000 Taliban have given up fighting as a result of negotiations.

These individuals are given a letter in order to prove to the district and province authorities that they have gone through the proper process and have the right to live in their communities. The PTS provides vocational training and jobs and some financial support so that individuals can return to their communities. The PTS is also trying to create capacity for re-educating Taliban to counter the Pakistani *madrassas*. The PTS is opening 14 *madrassas* or religious schools in 14

provinces (and eventually will be present in all). The Ministry of Education will create a different curriculum that includes 40% religious teaching, 40% basic subjects, 20% language. However, with a total budget of only \$2 million a year, there is a need for further investment.

Apart from its general objective to end armed hostilities against the Afghan state, the PTS also works to release unjustly imprisoned prisoners. Of them, 684 have been released from Guantanamo Bay, Bagram and Pul-i-Charkhi detention centres. Recently 50 prisoners that had been detained because of mistaken US intelligence were released. The PTS, however, is not limited to the Taliban; it also had a role, for example, in releasing the Korean hostages taken in 2007.

The PTS has 11 regional offices manned by community and religious leaders in coordination with for example, the ISAF, ANA, and the Afghan National Police (ANP). The PTS issues public invitations and undertakes media campaigns to encourage negotiations and efforts to release prisoners. It works through television, radio, as well as the distribution of flyers. Some 215,000 posters and leaflets have been distributed as its community awareness campaign.

One participant argued that serious improvements to the PTS program are needed. The PTS security guarantee is dependent on efforts of other national and international actors respecting that guarantee. The feedback about the PTS is that another round of harassment ensues after the guarantee. This is dangerous, as one bad experience can crowd out several good ones. Governors have also been using operational funds for political purposes, but few resources have been employed in pursuing the stated objectives of bringing in the Taliban. Most of them are simply media friendly gestures.

It was argued that in reality there is no R in the DDR program of the PTS. The key is getting to the commanders. This should happen before ISI finds out

or they will take them out first as has happened two or three times with individuals such as the Taliban military leader Mullah Dadula. Some others are now in the pipeline. This must be done secretly, with no press, first moving families back to their villages. The Saudis, on the other hand, are re-educating those Taliban they have captured and are re-teaching them Islam and training them in new skills. A participant added that it is ironic that Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) have been developed for local war lords and militias but not insurgents.

Keys for success and prospects for negotiations

A participant that had established contacts with about 200 people associated with insurgency and Taliban through international organisations since the Taliban were in power presented a different perspective. The speaker saw negotiations as an ongoing permanent effort because the insurgency and the people's decision to take part in it are open-ended. The Taliban find it easy to replace low and mid-level fighters using the old jihadi network, which is always larger than those actively fighting. There is therefore a potential for the insurgency to grow, especially considering that the Taliban finds sufficient comfort in how things are going to maintain the fight. The mid-to-low level Taliban are happier to talk about surviving an encounter with NATO, although four out of five battles they face are with the Afghan government. Finally, the insurgency will most likely continue to maintain command and support operations in Pakistan.

It was argued that the option for reintegrating insurgents and the Afghan opposition has already been tried. "The Bonn political process - in which opposing factions participated - was ongoing before reconciliation was even mentioned in any formal sense." While negotiations have been continued as the insurgency has been getting worse, there has been no success because there was never a serious strategic priority with political clout and resources both within the international community and the Afghan

government. "There has been a cafeteria approach welcoming all individuals willing to disarm, without any real strategy behind it". To some extent, this approach was necessary because you cannot reject people but it was inadequate to bring in strategically important people from the insurgency.

On the Taliban side, the speaker argued that the alternative of staying with the insurgency has been attractive for most Taliban. Potential returnees face reprisals from colleagues if they change sides. There is no open reconciliation option for those that must return to areas contested by the Taliban. The reconciliation policy is also fraught with problems for the central government. The process is slow: most of the "reconciled" are individuals, not whole networks. In the case of Abdul Wahid Baghrani, one high profile Taliban who came over, it was done without a deal and he did not deliver any of the political or military capital he had available (i.e. valuable intelligence, access to other insurgents, etc.). Like refugees that repatriate too many times to benefit from aid programmes, some Taliban exploit reconciliation opportunities for quick financial benefits.

Reconciliation is inherently political at the national and international level. Based on past Afghan experience, it must have a political direction with intelligence backup to retain the credibility of those representing the government in the reconciliation process. While foreigners need to be detached from the process because of local xenophobia, the international community needs to stay involved in order to ensure good "after sales service". There is also a need to progress from an individual to a network approach. If a commander is important, he will bring fifty fighters with him. There should be no hint of surrender; it should be done on a "cluster basis" - focusing on networks and not individuals - and in an Islamic way (a "peaceful jihad").

We must take advantage of the political window of opportunity in Pakistan. Publicity should create a distinction between the patriotic Afghan and the Taliban in Pakistan. There is a need to build

relationships of trust and consider local reconciliation arrangements that bargain away foreign troop presence and replaced by ANSF, so that the insurgency loses reasons to complain and cases like Musa Qala (where the British and Helmand Governor Daoud are accused of bartering away Afghan sovereignty) are not negotiated. Rather than more initiatives, someone with broad oversight is needed – a Presidential special envoy – to coordinate all efforts and prioritise.

One participant explained that the conditions set by the Taliban publicly state that they will only talk if international forces leave. On the other hand it was suggested that they will not talk to President Karzai because they know that the foreigners are the ones in charge.

Participants concluded that although the elections will bring in many wild cards, the reconciliation agenda should be pushed forward. Six months to a year from now may be too late.

Panel 4: The prospects for integrating a political and military approach

The final panel offered a broad discussion of the need to create a comprehensive approach to stabilising Afghanistan that integrates a political and military approach and includes human rights and economic prosperity as central issues. Many participants seemed to favour an approach with more troops but with a lower profile and fewer combat operations. The key question of what kind of Afghan state is needed was also discussed. In general, participants agreed that there are serious challenges ahead for a centralised Afghan state although there are few realistic alternatives due to the weakness of the state and the influence of Afghanistan's neighbours.

Towards a just and responsive Afghan government

The first speaker focused on the need to bring human rights to the fore of the Afghan national agenda. It was explained that while the 2007 Independent Human Rights Commission reports that over 78% of Afghans are optimistic about their future, most Afghans also believe that focusing on the war on terror overshadowed the statebuilding project. The international community and the Afghan government must review why there is one dollar for development to ten-eleven dollars for military operations.

It was argued that while the PTS must continue working for reconciliation at social and grass-roots level, justice and accountability should be the cornerstones of discussions. The Afghan government needs to become more assertive with human rights to break the culture of impunity. It must critically review injustices done in the

past for political reconciliation to work. The advisory panel to the president, including high-ranking officials (provincial governors, district governors, attorney generals, police chiefs), has been undermined and has consequently been ineffective. A vetting mechanism is needed for the government to be credible.

For the counter-insurgency to work you need the military, but it must respect human rights and international law. We must not forget that there is a danger of civilian casualties being used as a tool to manipulate opposition. The strength of the insurgency comes from the weakness of government authorities. The Afghan government and the international community must fight corruption and get aid to marginalised areas. To do this it is necessary to improve the distribution of development aid and assistance. The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and the development councils are a useful tool that cover over 19,000 villages and should be used to empower Afghans.

It was also argued that negotiations must apply to how you develop the country. A comprehensive approach that goes beyond ideology and military solutions to emphasize a strong and sustainable economy is urgent. In the last years, counter-narcotics has brought together the opposition. The Taliban offered protection to farmers against eradication and for traffickers who can afford these large protection networks. Most people involved in these networks are not outcasts; they are in fact, powerful figures generally unsympathetic to Taliban. However, they have not been included in negotiations. They must be included and we must consider how they can move their business interests into other areas.

A participant noted that the government should have a more focused approach with the initial objective of controlling ten difficult districts and later take on the other forty. In any case, the Afghan-Western alliance must not make the mistake of integrating the Taliban while risking losing the Northern Alliance. Another participant worried that there is a danger of political reconciliation being seen as an admission of the failure of the Western statebuilding project.

On the issue of aid distribution, a number of participants also called on a more prioritised Afghan approach that goes beyond long documents with unrealistic goals. The results of the recent OXFAM/ACBAR report – 40% of the aid money goes back to Western donors and only one third goes through the Afghan core budget – were also cited as recent proof of how the international community must revise how aid is distributed.

It was also proposed that the Taliban arguably had a more effective justice system because the crude form of Sharia law they practised was accepted by mullahs in every village. They had stronger human capital. Now there is a better system, but as a human and financial system it does not really exist as the government's presence is scarce in the provinces. A governor is the provincial representative of the President but he has no authority over other ministries there. For example, Mullah Abdu Salam, district governor of Musa Qala, has no budget for the security forces. He has power from unofficial sources, not from institutions because these are not strong enough to exercise authority.

National and regional challenges

A participant reminded the audience that what looks like a solution at one time may later be a problem. Another reason why we should not say "moderate Taliban" is because labelling their ideology does not help to understand the reasons for their actions. Many have had family members killed, families affected by poppy crop eradication, or form part of a disfavoured ethnic group.

Afghans must also understand their so-called allies. The Taliban ask why do we need the US in our country if with a \$50 billion dollar a year budget nothing is done effectively. The real reason is the terrorist threat; democracy-building is just a rationalisation. Without Al Qaeda, the international community would leave Afghanistan and European countries would not feel obliged to contribute to NATO to strengthen their ties with the US.

It was argued that the international community got to the governance model because it learned that you need a legitimate government with control over the entire country to counter the enemy. Today the threat is a military and political jihadi network based in the tribal agencies of Pakistan and part of Baluchistan. The Haqqanis, for example, have their base 10 km from the Durand line on the other side of Khost.

The single most needed policy for this priority security area is therefore the integration of the federally administered tribal agencies into the central polity of Pakistan so governance can exist in these areas. There must be negotiations with Taliban and other political and social forces in these tribal areas. These negotiations must include Pakistan Taliban, Al Qaeda, Afghan Taliban, Afghan refugees and Pakistan officials. This is a political and military effort that the ANP (which governs the NWFP) and the PPP might be willing to make.

It is crucial to have a regional approach to negotiations because the insurgency is based on networks or groups of people with mutual support networks which include exchanges of goods, symbols, marriage, etc. These networks spread into Pakistan and the Persian Gulf. While Afghans generally prefer to deal with Westerners rather than representatives of the Islamic world, it must not be forgotten that Iran and Russia could easily start an insurgency in Northern Afghanistan because the Northern Alliance is also dissatisfied.

A second speaker insisted on examining how large is the role Afghanistan's neighbours play. An argument against a more decentralised state is that people in provinces where the Taliban would have the most influence do not want to be under the control of the Taliban. On the other hand, Pakistan wants a more decentralised state in order to weaken the central government as well as the Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar. The problem is that the provinces would effectively belong to Pakistan because Afghanistan does not have the resources to control them. However, if the provinces have autonomy they will be ruled de facto by influential neighbouring

countries. In the case of Afghanistan, the existence of a constitutionally strong central state signals the weakness of the state because paradoxically it admits that the state cannot properly administer a decentralised state. A truly powerful Afghan state would be able to maintain its political prerogatives with a decentralized administrative state. But -you cannot decentralise a state that barely exists and you cannot create power sharing mechanisms when there is not enough power to share.

Conclusions

The international community is now accepting the consequences of being engaged in a counterinsurgency. NATO's strategy is therefore no longer about killing Taliban but about winning over local populations through the development of effective governance models. Such models must be Afghan-led and developed through inter-agency efforts where civilians play a growing role. On the political side, UNAMA's experience and expertise must be taken advantage of and expanded. On the military side, a stronger focus should be placed on training the ANSF through the deployment of OMLTs.

There are many challenges to the current counter-insurgency effort. Rising civilian casualties from the use of suicide attacks and IEDs by the Afghan insurgency (as opposed to the Pakistani Taliban on the border), internal divisions between NATO members, a public opinion crisis in many countries, and growing dissatisfaction among Afghans with the NATO mission and Afghan government raise the question of whether increasing numbers of troops may be counter-productive. In any case, NATO needs to improve its coordination and image, for example, working towards a common system for PRTs or changing to non-military PRTs for the north and west, as one participant suggested.

The insurgency is now younger than before, less respectful of its elders, and more closely linked to drug

lords. While the insurgency has suffered important losses, fighters are easily replaced. An effort needs to be made to separate Afghan Taliban from the transnational jihadi network that supports them. Thereafter, the objective of negotiations should be to dismantle entire networks, not just individuals. The focus should therefore be on negotiations with the Afghan Taliban and not the “moderate Taliban”. While the latter is part of the US “war on terror” language, the former should be part of a national process in which the Afghan Taliban are called to take on a “peaceful jihad”.

Guarantees and incentives for the Taliban must be provided for national reconciliation to advance. While the PTS has helped over 6000 former Taliban return to their communities, the government has not politically backed the process and guaranteed the safety and reintegration of the individuals involved. Further investment on both the Afghan and international side and the participation of actors such as the ICRC and UNHCR is still missing. The naming of a presidential envoy for national reconciliation might ensure coordination and an Afghan-led approach,

To advance towards a successful national reconciliation process the cooperation of Pakistan is essential. The results of the elections in Pakistan open a window of opportunity for progress in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. If done in coordination with the international community and the Afghan government, the new national civilian coalition government in Pakistan and moderate parties in FATA and Baluchistan should provide a positive framework for improving governance in these areas and pacifying the insurgency.

The government and armed forces in Pakistan must now help “push” the Afghan Taliban out of the country and not impede reconciliation initiatives with the Pakistan-based Taliban, as has happened in the past. The creation of the Pakistani Taliban is a worrying development for the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan as they can increase such official Pakistani interference. Afghan-Pakistani cooperation at both the national and regional level is therefore necessary.

Perceptions must be closely watched by the international community and the Afghan government. It is important to counter the perception by Afghans that strategic negotiations with the Taliban translate to bartering away Afghan sovereignty to Pakistan or the international community. An effort should also be made to ensure that the Northern Alliance members do not feel that national reconciliation with the Taliban will result in a shift of power that will compromise their position.

Afghanistan’s neighbours must be given a stake in the future of Afghanistan and should not feel threatened by its national army. Russia’s growing cooperation with NATO is a positive step. Iran must also be involved in issues in which it is affected directly such as narcotics. One participant suggested that for national reconciliation negotiations in Afghanistan to be effective, Pakistani Taliban and Pakistani officials must be included.

Due to the inability of the Afghan state to effectively provide services to its citizens and the destabilising role that external countries have played in the past, it is still easy for other countries to interfere in the statebuilding process in Afghanistan. One participant argued that it is for this reason that a decentralised state was not put in place in Afghanistan. The potential for other countries to replace the void left by the government’s weak presence in some areas is too dangerous.

Many lessons can be drawn from the experience in Afghanistan: it was a mistake not to have pressed a heavy footprint upon Afghanistan in the first 5 years after the 2001 invasion, as was the underestimation of the regional character of the conflict. This would have reduced the influence of so-called “spoilers”. Lack of coordination in Western aid distribution, military-security strategies and reconciliation and negotiations efforts from the outset seriously prejudiced the peace-building and statebuilding efforts. Similarly, local justice and accountability should have been developed and emphasized from the beginning to be able effectively to fight a culture of impunity.

Participants

Lisa Abend, Time magazine, Spain
 Anna Adema, The Netherlands Embassy to Spain
 Mariano Aguirre, FRIDE, Spain
 Cory Anderson, Deputy Director, Security Task Force on Afghanistan, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada
 Felix Arteaga, Real Instituto Elcano, Spain
 General José Enrique de Ayala, General Spanish Armend Forces (reserve), Spain
 Jos Boonstra, FRIDE, Spain
 Paulo Botta, FRIDE, Spain
 Ivan Briscoe, FRIDE, Spain
 Victoria Burnett, International Herald Tribune
 Emilio Cassinello, Toledo International Centre for Peace, Spain
 Cristina Churruca, Universidad de Deusto, Spain
 MA Lcol Cuthbert, NATO
 Rafael Dezcallar, Director General for Foreign Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Spain
 Tim Eestermans, European Council
 Luis Elizondo, Instituto Complutense de Estudios Internacionales, Spain
 Juan Garrigues, FRIDE, Spain
 Amélie Gauthier, FRIDE, Spain
 Sarah-Lea John, FRIDE, Spain
 Fahim Hakim, Vice President of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Afghanistan
 Aziz Hakimi, The Killid Group, Afghanistan
 Daniel Korski, European Council on Foreign Relations, United Kingdom
 Consuelo López-Zuriaga, Intermón Oxfam, Spain
 Citha Maass, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Germany
 Judith Maas, The Netherlands Embassy to Spain
 Robert Matthews, FRIDE, Spain
 Malcolm McKechnie, Ambassador of Canada to Spain
 Rosa Meneses, El Mundo, Spain
 Marco Mezzera, Cligendeal Institute, The Netherlands
 Madalena Moita, FRIDE, Spain
 Najibullah Mojadidi, Deputy PTS/Special Adviser on Health and Education to the President, Afghanistan
 Covadonga Morales, International Consultant, Spain
 Ferdinand Mugie, The Netherlands Embassy to Spain
 Jesús Núñez, Instituto de Estudios sobre Conflictos y Acción Humanitaria, Spain
 Diego de Ojeda, Prime Minister's Office, Spain
 Martín Ortega, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Spain
 Mylène Paradis, Canadian Embassy to Spain
 Ahmed Rashid, Journalist/Author of "The Taliban", Pakistan
 José Manuel Romero, FRIDE Vice President, Spain

Barnett Rubin, Centre on International Cooperation, USA
Gabriella Sancisi, The Netherlands Embassy to Spain
Stuart Savage, Minister Counselor, Canadian Embassy to Spain
Pierre Schori, FRIDE Director General, Spain
Julia Schünemann, FRIDE, Spain
Michael Semple, European Union
Scott Smith, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations
Massoom Stanekzai, Senior Advisor to the President, Afghanistan
Astri Suhrke, Chr, Michelson Institute/FRIDE Associate Researcher, Norway
José Ignacio Torreblanca, European Council on Foreign Relations, Spain
Como Van Hellenberg Hugar, Ambassador of the Netherlands to Spain
General Ton Van Loon, Former ISAF Commander Regional Command South
Nuria del Viso, CIP Fuhem, Spain
Kimana Zulueta, FRIDE, Spain

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As the conflict in Afghanistan worsens and extends, a series of debates is unfolding in NATO and the need for discussion about the political options available to the international community and the political forces within Afghanistan is becoming increasingly urgent. One option suggested by many analysts is to promote an agenda of national reconciliation that includes the Taliban in negotiations.

In order to address the issues that surround a revised counter-insurgency strategy and political reconciliation, FRIDE organised a seminar last March in Madrid entitled: "Afghanistan: is there a political solution?". The event was attended by more than 40 experts, government workers and members of the armed forces.

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