

Background

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Taliban Reconciliation: Obama Administration Must Be Clear and Firm

Lisa Curtis

Abstract: *As 30,000 additional American soldiers are deployed to Afghanistan, the U.S. is also focusing on reintegrating Taliban insurgents into Afghan society. There has been speculation that this new focus is part of a quick-exit strategy for the U.S. While reintegrating as many local Taliban fighters as possible is a vital part of the counterinsurgency strategy, premature negotiations with Taliban leaders based in Pakistan could easily backfire. The Obama Administration must bear in mind that insurgents are more likely to negotiate if they fear defeat on the battlefield. The Taliban have steadily regained influence in Afghanistan over the last four years—and U.S. and NATO forces must first weaken the Taliban on the battlefield before engaging in serious negotiations with the leadership.*

As the U.S. deploys an additional 30,000 soldiers to Afghanistan this year, there is also increased talk about pursuing reintegration of Taliban insurgents into the political mainstream. In its recently released “Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy,” the U.S. State Department supports Afghan-led reintegration of local insurgents who renounce al-Qaeda, cease violence, and agree to participate in the constitutional process.¹ U.S. and NATO Forces Commander in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal has rightly stated that reintegration is needed so that “people know there is somewhere to go off the battlefield.”

While reintegration of insurgents into the mainstream democratic process is indeed part of any wise counterinsurgency strategy, it is necessary to distin-

Talking Points

- As the U.S. deploys an additional 30,000 soldiers to Afghanistan, there is also increased talk about pursuing reintegration of Taliban insurgents into the political mainstream.
- The enhanced focus on supporting Afghan-led reintegration of the Taliban has fueled some speculation that the U.S. is seeking a political deal with Taliban leaders as part of an exit strategy from the region.
- The U.S. should support reconciliation efforts on the ground inside Afghanistan, and at the same time militarily squeeze the Taliban leadership based in Pakistan that is still closely linked to al-Qaeda.
- Premature talks with the Taliban leadership could easily backfire. Insurgents are more likely to negotiate if they fear defeat on the battlefield. The Taliban have steadily regained influence in Afghanistan over the past four years—and U.S. and NATO forces must weaken the Taliban on the battlefield before engaging in serious negotiations with the leadership.

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guish this process from one that would legitimize the Taliban's ruthless ideology. The enhanced focus on supporting Afghan-led reintegration of the Taliban has fueled speculation in the region and in some European capitals that the U.S. is seeking a political deal with senior Taliban leaders as part of an exit strategy from the region. Seeking to negotiate with the Taliban leadership (primarily based in Pakistan) before U.S. and NATO forces gain the upper hand on the battlefield in Afghanistan would be a tactical and strategic blunder with potential serious negative consequences for U.S. national security.

The Obama Administration must be clear and firm about its strategy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan—or risk squandering recent tentative battlefield gains in Afghanistan, as well as a positive shift in Pakistani public opinion against extremists operating in their own country. The U.S. must continue to assert a vision for the region that strengthens those who support democracy, human rights, and religious pluralism and weakens those who adhere to destructive, extremist ideologies. The U.S. strategy must provide the best chances for achieving U.S. objectives as enunciated by President Barack Obama in his December 2009 speech at the West Point Military Academy to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan.”

The U.S. had misread the intentions of the Taliban and underestimated the strength of their bond with al-Qaeda when it sought to engage them before 9/11.

The initial strategy introduced by the Obama Administration for Afghanistan and Pakistan in March 2009, which was fleshed out by General McChrystal in his August 2009 assessment, is sound and must be given time to succeed. The Administration called for the execution of an integrated civilian–military counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, an expansion of the Afghan National Security Forces, the reintegration of reconcilable

insurgents into the political mainstream, bolstering Afghan–Pakistani cooperation, and enlisting greater international assistance in stabilizing both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In his assessment, General McChrystal recommended pursuing a classic counterinsurgency strategy, focusing on protecting the Afghan civilian population. If the Administration backs down from this strategy now and signals that it is weary of the fight in Afghanistan, it will embolden and strengthen the terrorists who planned and supported the September 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S. and who seek to attack the U.S. again.

The U.S. Must Avoid Past Mistake of Misreading Taliban Intentions

Premature talks between the U.S. and Taliban leadership would provide the movement with legitimacy by discrediting peaceful political players and rewarding those who have relied on a violent, ruthless path to power. Past precedent demonstrates that insurgent groups are more likely to negotiate and compromise if they believe they have little chance of success on the battlefield. The Taliban have steadily regained influence in southern and eastern Afghanistan over the last four years, so U.S. and NATO forces must first weaken the Taliban on the battlefield before serious negotiations move forward.

The U.S. had misread the intentions of the Taliban and underestimated the strength of their bond with al-Qaeda when it sought to engage them before 9/11. U.S. diplomats, acting largely on inaccurate advice from Pakistani leaders, overestimated their own ability to influence decision-making within the Taliban Shura (leadership council). Michael Rubin, former political adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, believes that U.S. attempts to engage the Taliban from 1995 to 1999 represent “engagement for its own sake—without any consideration given to the behavior or sincerity of an unambiguously hostile interlocutor.” Rubin, now a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, details how U.S. State Department officials were repeatedly misled by Taliban officials harboring Osama bin Laden even after al-Qaeda attacked two U.S. embas-

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1. U.S. State Department, Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, “Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy,” February 24, 2010, at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/135728.pdf> (March 8, 2010).

sies in Africa in 1998. As Rubin notes, “face-to-face meetings with Americans served only to reinforce the Taliban gang’s pretensions as a government rather than as an umbrella group for terrorists.”²

The fundamental question is whether the Taliban and al-Qaeda can now be split apart after supporting each other on the battlefield for the last eight years. The Taliban have benefited significantly from their relationship with al-Qaeda, receiving strategic direction and ideological inspiration, access to international financial networks, and recruits and training for suicide attacks inside Afghanistan.

Some indications point to a Taliban leadership that has become so fused with al-Qaeda and its virulently anti-West, pan-Islamic ideology that it would be nearly impossible for the leadership to break those ties without losing its *raison d’être*. As Barbara Elias, director of the Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Taliban Project at the National Security Archives at George Washington University, argued in November 2009 in *Foreign Affairs*, the Taliban cannot break their relationship with al-Qaeda “without also surrendering their existing identity as a vessel for an obdurate and uncompromising version of political Islam.”

Local Reintegration, Not High-Level Political Talks

Instead of conferring legitimacy on senior Taliban leaders in Pakistan by seeking high-level political negotiations, the U.S. should focus on reconciling with Taliban commanders on the ground in Afghanistan by concentrating on providing jobs, development assistance, addressing local grievances, and reintegrating Taliban leaders into local governing structures. In the absence of any signs that the Taliban leadership is willing to break ranks with al-Qaeda or to participate in a normal political process in Afghanistan, it makes little sense to engage in high-level dialogue. Granting the senior Taliban leadership a share of the power in Kabul would almost certainly eventually lead to the Taliban retaking national power and implementing policies similar to those they pursued throughout the 1990s—policies that repressed average Afghans, especially

women, and provided the staging ground for the 9/11 attacks.

Given that premature high-level talks can backfire and set back opportunities to foster local reconciliation, the U.S. must react cautiously to the United Nations’ recent efforts to promote reconciliation with the Taliban leadership. The United Nations

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Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) is taking an active role in supporting Afghan-led local reconciliation, but is also exploring opportunities for engagement with senior Taliban leaders. Outgoing UNAMA Special Representative Kai Eide reportedly met with a group of Taliban leaders in Dubai shortly before the international conference on Afghanistan held in London in late January to explore the possibility of face-to-face talks between the Afghan government and Taliban leadership. Earlier in January, the United Nations Security Council had agreed to lift sanctions on five former officials in the Taliban government, including former Taliban Foreign Minister Ahmed Mutawakil.

Local reconciliation efforts have been underway for several years in Afghanistan but have been stymied by lack of coordinated and cohesive international support and financial resources to back them up. The Afghan Independent Department of Local Governance (IDLG) and international nongovernmental organizations like Oxfam have encouraged local reconciliation efforts. The Afghan National Solidarity Plan (NSP), created in 2003 to help Afghan communities implement development projects, also provides an opportunity for reconciliation at the local level through a network of more than 21,000 village development councils.³

Local reconciliation is a way to counter the insurgents’ ability to capitalize on grievances held by the civilian population and on the lack of governance. It

2. Michael Rubin, “Taking Tea with the Taliban,” *Commentary*, February 2010, p. 11.

involves local government reaching out to the public and delivering development assistance in order to prevent pockets of Taliban influence from taking root. The process also involves the provincial governors developing lists of reconcilable insurgents, in coordination with UNAMA and NATO officials, and then working to integrate the selected insurgents into the system. Washington should focus its attention and resources on coordinating and buttressing these local reintegration/reconciliation efforts.

Closing in on Taliban Sanctuary?

The Afghan Taliban leadership based in Pakistan coordinates the insurgency across the border in Afghanistan—which makes it critical for the U.S. to convince Pakistan to disrupt the Taliban’s sanctuary. As long as the Taliban leadership maintains a safe base of operations inside Pakistan, it will be hard for coalition forces to gain the upper hand against the insurgents in Afghanistan. After months of mounting frustration in Washington over Pakistan’s unwillingness to crack down on Afghan Taliban leaders, Pakistan has recently engaged in cooperation that could help turn the tide in the war in Afghanistan.

Pakistani and U.S. authorities confirmed that they captured the number two Taliban leader, Mullah Baradar, in early February. Additional reports indicate that at least four other senior Taliban leaders also may have been captured in Pakistan, including Mullah Abdul Kabir, a deputy prime minister in the former Taliban regime and a member of the Taliban Shura; former Taliban finance minister Agha Jan Mohtasim; and two “shadow governors” of Afghan provinces.

Afghan Interior Minister Hanif Atmar declared on February 24 that he hoped these arrests signaled the beginning of a “large-scale” Pakistani operation against the Taliban. Afghan officials further claimed that the Pakistani government had agreed to turn Baradar over to the Afghan authorities. On February 26, however, Pakistan’s Lahore High Court ruled that Baradar and four other unnamed Taliban leaders could not be extradited to face charges. If Pakistan were nevertheless to hand over Baradar to

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the Afghans, it would be a promising sign of new Pakistan–Afghanistan cooperation at a critical time in the Afghanistan war.

It is unclear why Pakistan is now cracking down on the Afghan Taliban. Most U.S. observers believe that Islamabad may be seeking to ensure that it will have a role in determining any potential settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan. Others say it is partly a response to mounting U.S. pressure. President Obama reportedly appealed directly to the Pakistanis to crack down on the Afghan Taliban through a letter hand-delivered by National Security Adviser General James Jones to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari last fall.

The letter coincided with revelations of the arrest of David Coleman Headley, a Pakistani–American who worked with the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba in Pakistan to scout sites for the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India. Headley was arrested by U.S. authorities in early October, and a former major in the Pakistani army was named in the U.S. affidavit as serving as Headley’s handler for the Mumbai attacks. Since then, the U.S. has repeatedly made the case to Pakistan that facilitating some terrorist groups while fighting others is counterproductive.

It is possible that this message is finally beginning to sink in. But given Pakistan’s long track record of support for militant groups fighting in Afghanistan and India, it is too early to determine whether the most recent arrests signal a permanent reversal of past policies, or merely a tactical shift to demonstrate leverage in the region.

Avoiding Pakistani Leadership in Reconciliation Process

The U.S. must be clearheaded about Pakistani goals in the region and accept that Pakistani interests often run counter to U.S. efforts to protect the

3. Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, “Thwarting Afghanistan’s Insurgency: A Pragmatic Approach toward Peace and Reconciliation,” United States Institute of Peace *Special Report* 212, September 2008.

U.S. homeland from future 9/11-type terrorist acts. While the U.S. seeks to prevent Afghanistan from again serving as a safe haven for international terrorists, Pakistan's primary goal is to curb Indian influence in the country. Pakistani Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani recently restated in media interviews that India remains the primary threat to Pakistan and the focus of the Pakistani military.⁴

Pakistan's fixation on India should give pause to U.S. policymakers when considering Pakistan's expressed interest in brokering peace talks with the Taliban. According to U.S. media reports, Pakistani officials have offered to prevail on deadly groups like the Jalaluddin Haqqani network to break their ties to al-Qaeda.⁵ Pakistani military strategists view the Haqqani network as its most effective tool for

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blunting Indian influence in Afghanistan. (Credible U.S. media reports indicate that the Haqqani network, in cooperation with Pakistani intelligence, was responsible for the bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2008, killing more than 50 people, including two senior Indian officials.)

The Haqqani network has also been a major facilitator of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, and responsible for some of the fiercest attacks against U.S. and coalition forces. Haqqani forces were responsible for a truck bombing that killed two U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan's Khost province in March 2008, and for the storming of the Serena Hotel in Kabul during a high-level visit by Norwegian officials in January 2008.

Jalaluddin Haqqani is a powerful independent

militant leader whose followers operate in the border areas between Khost in Afghanistan and North Waziristan in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). He has been allied with the Afghan Taliban for nearly 15 years, having served as tribal affairs minister in the Taliban regime in the late 1990s. Jalaluddin's son, Sirajuddin, is reportedly increasingly taking operational control of the militant network. The source of the Haqqanis' power lies primarily in their ability to forge relations with a variety of different terrorist groups (al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, and India-focused groups like the Jaish-e-Muhammed), while also maintaining links to Pakistani intelligence. U.S. officials have appealed to Pakistani leaders to crack down on the Haqqani network in North Waziristan, but have been rebuffed with declarations that the Pakistani military is over-stretched and incapable of taking on too many militant groups at once.

In a demonstration of the extent to which Pakistani goals in the region diverge from those of the U.S., a Pakistani official was recently quoted in *The Financial Times* stating that, "with Pakistan's help, and only with Pakistan's help, the return of the Taliban to the political high table will be a far more stabilizing development for Afghanistan than... a [U.S. surge]."⁶ Given the Taliban's continued links with al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations targeting the U.S., a Taliban seat at "the political high table," while serving Pakistan's strategic interests, would likely only increase the chances for future terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland. *The Financial Times* article also notes that "Pakistan sees its ties to Taliban as a way to wring concessions from Washington, including over Kashmir and regarding its influence in Afghanistan."

The Obama Administration has recently begun to challenge the Pakistanis on their lack of consistency in countering terrorism in the region. The

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4. Nirupama Subramanian, "Pakistan: Vindication on Afghanistan, Assertive with India," *The Hindu*, February 7, 2010, at <http://beta.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article102550.ece?homepage=true> (March 7, 2010).
 5. Jane Perlez, "Pakistan is Said to Pursue Role in U.S.-Afghan Talks," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2010 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/10/world/asia/10pstan.html> (March 11, 2010).
 6. Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan Offers Key to Taliban," *The Financial Times*, January 25, 2010, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c14ce72e-09e7-11df-8b23-00144feabdc0.html> (March 7, 2010).

Kerry–Lugar bill passed by the Senate last September (the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009) authorizes \$7.5 billion in civilian aid to Pakistan over the next five years and conditions military assistance on Pakistani measures to address terrorist threats. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates hinted that Pakistan could be doing more to fight terrorism when he noted in a recent op-ed in the Pakistani daily *The News* that seeking to distinguish between different terrorist groups is counterproductive. U.S. Director of National Intelligence Admiral Dennis Blair recently elaborated on this point when he testified before Congress on February 2, 2010, that “Pakistan’s conviction that militant groups are strategically useful to counter India are hampering the fight against terrorism and helping al-Qaeda sustain its safe haven.” U.S. officials must continue to make such statements and be prepared to follow them up with action in order to demonstrate that Washington’s patience with Islamabad is not unlimited.

Conclusion

If the U.S. seeks to prevent Afghanistan from turning back into a safe haven for terrorists that want to attack the U.S., it must convince Pakistani officials to crack down on Taliban leaders who find

sanctuary in their country. Pakistani public opinion is beginning to turn against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. If the U.S. tries to find a quick exit from Afghanistan, however, these gains in Pakistan will be squandered and the Taliban’s ideology will regain legitimacy throughout the region.

The U.S. should support Afghan reconciliation efforts on the ground in Afghanistan diplomatically and financially, and at the same time militarily squeeze the Taliban leadership based in Pakistan that is still closely linked to al-Qaeda. These actions should occur simultaneously so that the local Taliban fighters view the U.S., NATO, and Afghan authorities as being on the winning side, and simultaneously see a process through which they can switch sides without punishment. But U.S. over-anxiousness to negotiate with the senior Taliban leadership in Pakistan would likely undermine efforts to coax local fighters into the political mainstream, thus jeopardizing General McChrystal’s counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan and prolonging instability throughout the region.

—*Lisa Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*