

BACKGROUND

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The U.S. Must Move Cautiously on Taliban Reconciliation

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Abstract

While President Obama is drawing down U.S. troops in Afghanistan, he is attempting to negotiate with the Taliban—despite the fact that the Taliban has renounced neither terrorism nor its support for al-Qaeda. If the Taliban is able to regain influence in Afghanistan without breaking ties with international terrorism, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups could re-establish safe haven there. A Taliban victory in Afghanistan would also strengthen Islamist extremist forces in Pakistan, undermining civilian democracy and emboldening hard-line elements within the Pakistani security establishment, which controls the country's expanding nuclear weapons arsenal. Rather than long-shot talks with the Taliban leadership, Washington should focus on strengthening anti-Taliban elements that share the U.S. interest in preventing Afghanistan from again serving as a safe haven for international terrorists.

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The Obama Administration is seeking to negotiate with the Taliban as it continues a draw-down of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Following recent setbacks for the U.S. mission in Afghanistan—including nationwide protests sparked by the accidental burning of Korans and a U.S. staff sergeant's shooting rampage that killed 17 Afghan civilians—the Taliban suspended negotiations with the U.S. Some observers had touted the Taliban's earlier willingness to open a political office in Qatar as a major breakthrough for a political process. However, the Taliban has not renounced terrorism or its support for al-Qaeda. Moreover, the Taliban leadership is seeking to exclude the Karzai government from the talks, which indicates that it is likely merely interested in having comrades released from prison, and is seeking to make a backdoor deal with the U.S. that allows them to regain power.

The building blocks for peace and stability in Afghanistan are not yet in place. The military gains made against the Taliban over the past 18 months are still fragile. While it may make sense for the Administration to keep doors open for negotiations with the Taliban, it would be unwise for the U.S. to make major

TALKING POINTS

- The Obama Administration is seeking to negotiate with the Taliban while it continues a drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan.
- If the Taliban is able to regain influence in Afghanistan without breaking ties with international terrorism, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups will have the opportunity to re-establish safe haven there.
- A Taliban victory in Afghanistan would also strengthen Islamist extremist forces in Pakistan, undermining civilian democracy and emboldening hard-line elements within the Pakistani security establishment—which controls the country's expanding nuclear weapons arsenal.
- Rather than basing U.S. strategy on long-shot talks with the Taliban leadership, Washington should focus its attention and resources on strengthening anti-Taliban elements that share the U.S. interest in preventing Afghanistan from serving as a safe haven for international terrorists once again.

concessions before the Taliban has renounced international terrorism and demonstrated willingness to compromise politically.

The U.S. misread the intentions of Taliban leaders and underestimated the strength of their bonds with al-Qaeda when it sought to engage them before 9/11. Similarly, U.S. over-anxiousness to negotiate with the Taliban now could jeopardize U.S. counterterrorism objectives and lead to greater instability throughout the region. There are alternative strategies to negotiating with the Taliban, which involve continuing support for anti-Taliban elements in Afghanistan, including through financial, diplomatic, and military support even after 2014. The U.S. should focus its attention on developing these strategies as it draws down combat forces over the next two years, rather than invest significant resources into negotiations with the Taliban, which remain a long shot.

Administration Opens Door to Taliban Talks

Over a year ago, on February 18, 2011, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered the Taliban a clear-cut choice:

Break ties with al-Qaeda, give up your arms, and abide by the Afghan constitution and you can rejoin Afghan society; refuse and you will continue to face the consequences of being tied to al-Qaeda as an enemy of the international community. ... All parties will have to commit to a

pluralistic system that respects the human rights of every Afghan.... We will not abandon our values or support a political process that undoes the social progress that has been made in the past decade.

These were sound words. But the lack of transparency surrounding current U.S. talks with the Taliban has raised concern among parts of Afghan civil society that the U.S. is straying from these parameters and is considering striking a closed-door deal with the Taliban in order to justify a rapid U.S. troop withdrawal, which would sacrifice the hard-won human rights and security gains made over the past decade. During its rule over Afghanistan in the late 1990s, the Taliban forbade girls and women from attending school, holding jobs, or leaving home without a male companion. The Taliban also conducted systematic human rights abuses against the ethnic minority Hazara community, including two civilian massacres that resulted in the murders of nearly 200 Hazaras in 2000 and 2001.¹ The Taliban regularly carried out public executions and floggings at stadiums and banned television, music, and the Internet.

While the media has reported on sporadic contacts between the U.S. government and Taliban leaders over the past two years, the substance of the discussions and the process under which they are taking place have been shrouded in mystery. Last summer the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* revealed that Germany's

Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Michael Steiner brokered talks between the U.S. and Taliban leaders, three rounds of which had taken place in Germany and Qatar. U.S. representatives are reportedly talking with Tayyab Agha, head of the Quetta Shura's Political Committee and close confidant of Taliban supreme commander Mullah Mohammed Omar.²

Grounds for Skepticism

While keeping the door open for a potential peace settlement with the Taliban may be appropriate, the Administration must keep its expectations low. There are plenty of reasons to be skeptical of Taliban intentions and willingness to negotiate in good faith.

Taliban Believes Time Is on Its Side. One factor behind an insurgent or terrorist group's willingness to compromise is a weakening position on the battlefield.³ There are several indications that the Taliban leadership believes time is on its side and that it is winning the fight against coalition forces. In a secret NATO report recently leaked to the British media, Taliban insurgents reportedly told their interrogators that they are increasingly confident that the Taliban will retake power once NATO forces depart Afghanistan, and that Pakistan is positioning itself for such an outcome.⁴ NATO officials have downplayed the report's contents, emphasizing that it represents uncorroborated pieces of information, not an overall analysis of the

1. "Afghanistan: Massacres of Hazaras in Afghanistan," Human Rights Watch Report, July 22, 2010, <http://www.hazarapeople.com/2010/07/22/afghanistan-massacres-of-hazaras-in-afghanistan/> (accessed April 19, 2012).
2. Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, "Can the Taliban Avoid Fracturing Over the Qatar Peace Talks?" The Daily Beast, February 23, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/02/23/can-the-taliban-avoid-fracturing-over-the-qatar-peace-talks.html> (accessed April 19, 2012).
3. Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 63.

military situation. But the report does provide a snapshot of insurgent thinking at the ground level that needs to be considered when assessing the Taliban's motives for agreeing to talks with the U.S.

A recently published National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Afghanistan also raises concerns that the Taliban could manipulate negotiations with the U.S. to gain international legitimacy, and simply stall for time as America draws down its forces.⁵ Lieutenant General Ronald Burgess Jr., head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, reinforced this analysis when he told the Senate Armed Services Committee at its annual worldwide threat hearing in February: "From its Pakistani safe havens, the Taliban leadership remains confident of eventual victory." Other unidentified Western intelligence officials have also expressed reservations about talks with the Taliban, and their assessment is that the Taliban is playing a waiting game and has no real interest in reconciling with the Karzai government.⁶

In a report released earlier this year, "Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade," U.S. terrorism expert Brian Michael Jenkins further highlights doubts that Taliban insurgents are feeling pressured enough to compromise at this stage of the conflict, particularly

when U.S. troops are withdrawing.⁷ In fact, the Taliban has likely calculated that time was on its side ever since President Barack Obama announced in December 2009 at the West Point Military Academy that the U.S. was committed to begin withdrawing troops in July 2011. That fateful announcement also likely contributed to Pakistan's reluctance to crack down on the Taliban and Haqqani network sanctuaries. Obama's speech signaled to the region that the U.S. was more committed to getting its troops out of Afghanistan than to achieving U.S. objectives in the region.

**"FROM ITS PAKISTANI SAFE HAVENS,
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CONFIDENT OF EVENTUAL VICTORY."**

No Changes on Pakistani Safe Havens. The loss—or threat of loss—of its sanctuary inside Pakistan would also likely motivate the Taliban to seek compromise through negotiations. In her book, *How Terrorism Ends*, Audrey Kurth Cronin points out that unless neighboring states are willing to facilitate negotiations with insurgents, they are unlikely to succeed in achieving a sustainable peace settlement.⁸ There have been no indications that Pakistan is cracking down on

Afghan Taliban or Haqqani network sanctuaries within its borders. Indeed, Afghanistan expert at the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War Jeffrey Dressler reports that Pakistan's support for the Haqqani network has recently increased through the facilitation of additional sanctuary and the provision of strategic and operational guidance.⁹ For reconciliation talks to succeed, the Taliban and Haqqani network would have to come under more pressure in Pakistan. As U.S. national security expert Anthony Cordesman pointed out, the U.S. inability to convince Pakistan to give up support for the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other terrorist groups has been a "critical failure" of U.S. strategy in the region.¹⁰

Pakistan's tolerance of groups that are fighting U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, and other groups, such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), responsible for the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, has facilitated al-Qaeda's ability to operate from Pakistan, and made it possible for Osama bin Laden to hide in the country for as long as he did. Former Director of National Intelligence Admiral Dennis Blair told the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee in February 2010 that Pakistan's conviction that terrorist groups help blunt India's

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4. Laura King, "NATO Report Says Taliban Captives Are Confident of Victory," *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 2012, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/02/nato-report-says-taliban-captives-are-confident-of-victory.html (accessed April 19, 2012).
 5. Sara Sorcher, "Peace Talks with Taliban a Good Step, But Unlikely to Pay Off," *National Journal*, January 23, 2012, <http://mobile.nationaljournal.com/nationalsecurity/insiders-peace-talks-with-taliban-a-good-step-but-unlikely-to-pay-off-20120123> (accessed April 19, 2012).
 6. Con Coughlin, "Talking to the Taliban: Are Afghanistan's Insurgents Really Serious About Peace Talks with Washington and Kabul?" *The Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2012.
 7. Brian Michael Jenkins, "Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade: Irreversible Decline or Imminent Victory?" *RAND Occasional Paper*, 2012.
 8. Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, p. 202.
 9. Jeffrey Dressler, "The Haqqani Network: A Strategic Threat," *Institute for the Study of War Afghanistan Report No. 9*, March 2012, p. 8.
 10. Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Afghanistan-Pakistan War at the End of 2011: Strategic failure? Talk Without Hope? Tactical Success? Spend Not Build (and then Stop Spending)?" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 15, 2011, <http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/showRecord.php?RecordId=36405> (accessed April 19, 2012).

military and economic advantages over Pakistan limit its incentive to pursue a comprehensive approach to countering terrorism. Blair went on to note that Pakistan's segmented approach to terrorism helped al-Qaeda maintain a safe haven in the country since some of the groups that Pakistan supports also aid al-Qaeda.¹¹ For instance, al-Qaeda operatives rely on support from the Haqqani network to hide in Pakistan's tribal border areas.¹²

Not only do Islamabad's dual policies toward terrorism jeopardize the overall U.S. and NATO mission in Afghanistan, they also contribute to instability inside Pakistan. Several thousand Pakistani civilians and security forces have lost their lives to attacks by the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP, the Pakistani Taliban) since its creation in 2007. The Haqqani network has a relationship with the TTP and has likely facilitated its ability to attack the Pakistani state.¹³ The violence perpetrated by TTP, the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, and al-Qaeda is mutually reinforcing and helps perpetuate each group's ability to conduct attacks against the targets it chooses.¹⁴

Despite the close links and relationships among these groups, Pakistan's Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) continues to cooperate with—rather than confront—them. The ISI reportedly facilitated the establishment of a

Coordination Council of militant commanders in January 2012 to foster greater ideological unity and operational collaboration among the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, TTP, and al-Qaeda.¹⁵ The Pakistani press reported in February that the chief operational commander of the Haqqani network, Sirajuddin Haqqani, confirmed that the Haqqani network, the TTP, and the Afghan Taliban had entered into a peace deal with Pakistani intelligence officials, in which the militant groups agreed not to attack Pakistani troops and instead focus their attention on the U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan.¹⁶

THE U.S. FELL INTO THE TRAP OF BELIEVING IT HAD TO TURN A BLIND EYE TO PAKISTANI SUPPORT FOR CERTAIN TERRORIST GROUPS IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN PAKISTANI COOPERATION AGAINST AL-QAEDA.

The 9/11 attacks should have crystallized U.S. policy toward Pakistan in straightforward and fundamental ways. Since the Pakistan military had played a significant role in using Islamic militancy and the concept of violent jihad to motivate extremist groups, U.S. policy should have focused directly on the task of convincing Pakistan to halt this practice. Instead, the U.S. fell into the trap

of believing it had to turn a blind eye to Pakistani support for certain terrorist groups in order to maintain Pakistani cooperation against al-Qaeda.

U.S. Has Poor Record on Taliban Negotiations. The U.S. misread the intentions of the Taliban and underestimated the strength of its bond with international terrorism when it sought to engage the group before 9/11. U.S. diplomats, acting largely on inaccurate advice from Pakistani leaders, overestimated their ability to influence decision making within the Taliban leadership. The U.S. must not repeat the same mistakes. Former Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Rick Inderfurth, who was deeply involved in trying to negotiate with the Taliban from 1997–2001, wrote in a recent article in *Foreign Policy*, “On a scale of one to ten on good faith negotiations, the Taliban proved to be a zero.” He warns the current Administration against falling into the Taliban's “rope-a-dope” strategy, in which it strings the U.S. along in negotiations without committing to anything, and then eventually strikes back hard against the U.S. as it had intended to do from the outset.

Instead of trying to engage with the Taliban in the 1990s, the U.S. should have substantially backed the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in order to make Afghanistan a more

11. Dennis C. Blair, former Director of National Intelligence, “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” February 2, 2010, http://www.dni.gov/testimonies/20100202_testimony.pdf (accessed April 19, 2012).

12. Don Ressler and Vahid Brown, “The Haqqani Nexus and the Evolution of al-Qaida,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point report, July 14, 2011, p. 14.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

15. Tufail Ahmed, “The Realignment of Jihadist Groups in the Pakistan–Afghanistan Region—The Formation of Shura Muraqba in Parallel to the U.S.–Taliban Talks,” Middle East Media Research Institute Report No. 807, March 6, 2012, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/50/6150.htm> (accessed April 19, 2012).

16. Amir Mir, “Siraj Haqqani Exposes Military–Militants Peace Deal,” *The News*, February 14, 2012, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-92666-Siraj-Haqqani-exposes-military-militants-peace-deal> (accessed April 19, 2012).

inhospitable environment for international terrorists and to deter the growth of al-Qaeda. Many believe that the Clinton Administration's greatest failure in dealing with al-Qaeda in the 1990s was not backing murdered Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Masood. Masood was written off as a warlord who lacked popular support and a following. The lack of backing from the U.S. apparently puzzled Masood, especially after al-Qaeda's bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998.¹⁷

Risks of Releasing Taliban Prisoners

The U.S. is reportedly considering transferring five top Taliban leaders from Guantanamo Bay prison to Qatar to help foster talks with the Taliban. The Taliban leaders being considered for transfer include former Taliban Interior Minister Mullah Khair Khowa; former Taliban commander in Mazar-e-Sharif and governor of two provinces in northern Afghanistan, Mullah Norullah Nori; and former Taliban Army commander Mullah Fazl Akhund. Nori has been accused of ordering the massacre of Shiite Muslims when he commanded Taliban forces in northern Afghanistan.

U.S. Members of Congress are wary of such transfers, especially because Taliban leaders have a track record of returning to the battlefield once released from U.S. custody. Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Saxby Chambliss (R-GA) said in late January that he was opposed to the Taliban transfers. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper Jr. acknowledged to a congressional committee in late January that there were risks to transferring the Taliban prisoners but also said the transfers could be considered confidence-building measures that might help move negotiations forward.¹⁸

According to the Director of National Intelligence, of the 599 prisoners that have been released from the Guantanamo facility since it opened in 2002, 167 (about 28 percent) have either re-engaged, or are suspected of having re-engaged, in insurgent or terrorist activity.¹⁹ More than half of those released have been sent to Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia and about 14 percent to Pakistan and Yemen.²⁰ Afghan Taliban military chief Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir, aka Abdullah Ghulam Rasoul, had been captured in Afghanistan in 2001, was sent to Guantanamo in 2006, transferred

back to Afghan government custody in 2007, and then eventually released in May 2008.²¹ He became Mullah Omar's second-in-command in 2010 after Mullah Beradar was jailed by the Pakistani authorities. Zakir went on to coordinate a major Taliban offensive in spring 2011 code-named "Operation Badar" and may be responsible for more allied deaths than any other Taliban leader.²² Pakistani intelligence agents reportedly arrested Zakir in February 2010, and then later released him without explanation.

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Another Guantanamo prisoner that was transferred from U.S. custody, Yousef Muhammed Yaqoub, returned to Afghanistan in 2004, aided an insurgent jail-break in Kandahar, and then was killed by U.S. forces.²³ Abdullah Mehsud, who spent nearly two years at Guantanamo before his release in

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17. Roy Gutman, *How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2008), p. 167.
 18. Anne Gearan and Kimberly Dozier, "US Confirms Possible Release of Taliban from Gitmo," Associated Press, January 31, 2012.
 19. "Summary of the Reengagement of Detainees Formerly Held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba," as of December 29, 2011, Director of National Intelligence, <http://www.dni.gov/reports/March%202012%20Summary%20of%20Reengagement.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2012).
 20. Peter Bergen, Katherine Tiedemann, and Andrew Lebovich, "How Many Gitmo Alumni Take Up Arms?" *Foreign Policy*, January 11, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/11/how_many_gitmo_alumni_take_up_arms (accessed April 19, 2012).
 21. Seth G. Jones, "Mullah Sprung from Gitmo Jail Now Leads Foe in Afghan Campaign," RAND Corporation, July 5, 2009, <http://www.rand.org/commentary/2009/07/05/NYP.html> (accessed April 19, 2012).
 22. Ron Moreau, "The Taliban After Bin Laden," *Newsweek*, May 15, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/05/15/the-taliban-s-plan-for-an-epic-afghan-surge.html> (accessed April 19, 2012).
 23. "Raw Data: Former Gitmo Detainees Who Returned to Terrorism," Fox News, December 30, 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/12/30/raw-data-gitmo-detainees-returned-terrorism/> (accessed April 19, 2012).

2004, also went back to the battlefront and was believed to have commanded nearly 5,000 Taliban fighters before he was reportedly killed in 2007 during a raid by Pakistani forces in the Baluchistan Province of Pakistan.

Administration officials are reportedly considering backing down from their original demand that the Qatari government keep the Taliban leaders under house arrest and are now weighing whether to make the transfers contingent only on a pledge by the Qataris to not allow the Taliban to leave the country.²⁴ Even if Taliban leaders remained in Qatar, they would be able to provide battlefield advice to their comrades in Afghanistan and to direct other Taliban activities. Some observers believe that Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar is counting on the U.S. to transfer the Guantanamo detainees so that they can provide military information for the insurgency.²⁵

Impact of bin Laden's Demise

One of the primary questions after the May 2, 2011, U.S. raid that eliminated Osama bin Laden concerns the impact that the terror master's death might have on the Taliban's relationship with al-Qaeda. In addition to decapitating al-Qaeda, the U.S. has pursued a relentless drone-missile campaign in Pakistan's tribal areas bordering Afghanistan that has further weakened al-Qaeda as an organization. The U.S. media have reported

that documents found at Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad showed that bin Laden was worried about the devastating impact of the drone campaign on his organization.²⁶

The U.S. has hinted that it might pursue similar unilateral operations inside Pakistan against other top terrorist leaders, despite Pakistan's strong opposition to the Abbottabad raid. Immediately following the bin Laden operation, Pakistan expelled nearly 130 U.S. and British military trainers from Pakistan, and shut down the U.S. ability to launch drones from Pakistani territory. Pakistani officials almost certainly are worried that the U.S. could launch future unilateral operations to eliminate terrorists in Pakistan, including Mullah Omar.

The threat of being targeted by U.S. drones or an Abbottabad-like operation could potentially motivate the Taliban to separate from al-Qaeda. Yet, even if some Taliban leaders see the logic in breaking ties with al-Qaeda, they would find it extremely challenging to do so from an operational and logistical perspective, given the network of relationships that has been forged between individual members of each group over the past three decades.

Terrorism and al-Qaeda expert Peter Bergen told a congressional committee in 2011 that al-Qaeda is physically more imbedded with Haqqani network fighters than the Taliban Shura (leadership council).

This is due to the fact that when al-Qaeda fled Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002, the leaders re-located primarily to North Waziristan—the Haqqanis' long-held base of operations—not Quetta, where the Taliban Shura resides.²⁷ Bergen further reported that al-Qaeda functions mostly in eastern Afghanistan because of its long-standing ties to the Haqqani network.

Al-Qaeda may be more operationally integrated with Haqqani fighters, but the group's leaders also understand the importance of maintaining ideological ties to the Quetta Shura Taliban. Ayman al-Zawahiri swore allegiance to Mullah Omar via a June 2011 video, shortly after he assumed command of al-Qaeda. According to terrorism expert Brian Michael Jenkins, a Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan would "guarantee al-Qaeda's survival."²⁸ Likewise, the Haqqani network would benefit from the Taliban regaining influence in Afghanistan, given that the Haqqanis have also pledged their loyalty to Mullah Omar. While many hoped the death of bin Laden would inspire the Taliban to break ranks with the international terrorist movement, there have so far been no signs that Taliban chief Mullah Omar is ready to renounce ties to al-Qaeda and its global agenda.

Pakistani intelligence officials understand better than anyone how to break apart the Taliban-Haqqani-al-Qaeda nexus. ISI has had close relationships with members of these

24. "U.S. May Agree to Stringent Controls for Possible Qatar-Bound ex-Taliban Leaders," Reuters, March 30, 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/357326/us-may-agree-to-stringent-controls-for-possible-qatar-bound-ex-taliban-leaders/> (accessed April 19, 2012).

25. Yousafzai and Moreau, "Can the Taliban Avoid Fracturing over the Qatar Peace Talks?"

26. Peter Bergen, "Bin Laden's Final Days—Big Plans, Deep Fears," CNN, March 16, 2012, http://articles.cnn.com/2012-03-16/opinion/opinion_bergen-bin-laden-final-writings_1_drone-strikes-year-bin-bin-laden?s=PM:OPINION (accessed April 19, 2012).

27. Peter Bergen, "Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Other Extremist Groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan," testimony before the Foreign Relations Committee, U.S. Senate, May 24, 2011.

28. Jenkins, "Al-Qaeda in its Third Decade."

groups for three decades and has a well-developed understanding of the dynamics among the organizations and the strengths and weaknesses of each group's leaders. But if Pakistan is unwilling to use its leverage to help bring genuine peace to Afghanistan, there are other policies—aside from pursuing reconciliation with the Taliban—that the U.S. can pursue. Political reconciliation involving the Taliban is desirable only to the extent that it contributes to the goal of ensuring that Afghanistan never serves as a safe haven for global terrorists again. Even as the U.S. is drawing down combat forces, it should focus its resources on supporting allies in the region that oppose the Taliban.

Focus on Strategic Partnership Talks

It is crucial for the U.S. to retain the ability to conduct counterterrorism missions in both Afghanistan and Pakistan post-2014. It is likely that many of the terrorists that now hide in Pakistan's tribal border areas would move into camps inside Afghanistan once U.S. and NATO forces depart.

The conclusion of the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between Kabul and Washington is important because it will both demonstrate to the Afghans that the U.S. will remain committed to the country long after 2014, and provide a framework for the U.S. to maintain a residual presence to train Afghan forces and conduct counterterrorism missions. The Koran burnings in late February and shooting rampage by a U.S. staff sergeant on March

11 made it more difficult for Hamid Karzai to clinch the agreement, as he faced pressure to demonstrate that it would not undermine Afghanistan's sovereignty. Despite these difficulties, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker and Afghan National Security Advisor Rangin Dadfar Spanta finalized the SPA on April 22. The signing of the SPA before the NATO summit in Chicago in late May will help build confidence among the NATO allies and encourage them to make their own long-term commitments to Afghanistan. While the SPA specifies neither future U.S. funding levels nor troop levels, it offers a broad U.S. commitment to Afghanistan for 10 years after the withdrawal of combat troops at the end of 2014.

POLITICAL RECONCILIATION INVOLVING THE TALIBAN IS DESIRABLE ONLY TO THE EXTENT THAT IT CONTRIBUTES TO THE GOAL OF ENSURING THAT AFGHANISTAN NEVER SERVES AS A SAFE HAVEN FOR GLOBAL TERRORISTS AGAIN.

The two sides overcame major stumbling blocks in the SPA talks in recent weeks. On March 9, they agreed on a plan to transfer 3,000 Afghan detainees from U.S. to Afghan control. The agreement states that the U.S. must transfer control of prisoners at the Parwan prison within six months, but that U.S. officials will retain the ability to block the release of detainees even after they are transferred to Afghan authority.²⁹ The two sides

also hammered out an agreement on the issue of night raids on suspected Taliban hideouts, in which they agreed that Afghan security forces will take the lead in night raids, and will continue to receive support from U.S. forces "as required or requested."³⁰ The issue of night raids had become particularly controversial with Afghans, who view them as an infringement on their sovereignty. The U.S., on the other hand, sees the use of night raids as a key element in its anti-Taliban operations. The agreement appears to leave the door open for U.S. unilateral raids against high-value targets in exceptional circumstances.

India-Pakistan Relations and Afghanistan

To help stabilize Afghanistan, it is necessary to reduce Indo-Pakistani regional rivalry. Pakistan's failure to crack down on Taliban and Haqqani sanctuaries is driven primarily by the Pakistani military leadership's assessment that these groups will be assets for Pakistan in countering Indian influence in Afghanistan. In addition to fears about an Indian axis of power stretching from New Delhi to Kabul, Islamabad also is wary of the potential for a strong, centralized, nationalist Afghan state that could lay claim to the Pashtun areas that straddle the Afghan-Pakistani border. While Pakistani officials insist they have an interest in stability in Afghanistan, their continued support for Afghan insurgent groups belies those claims. A "stable Afghanistan" for Pakistan appears to mean one that is largely under its influence and has little contact with India. In turn,

29. "Memorandum of Understanding Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America on Transfer of U.S. Detention Facilities in Afghan Territory to Afghanistan," March 9, 2012.

30. "Memorandum of Understanding Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America on Afghanistanization of Special Operations on Afghan Soil," April 9, 2012.

many Indian experts believe the Indian government should strongly back remnants of the Northern Alliance to counter Pakistan's designs and ensure that Indian interests are protected when U.S. and NATO forces depart the region.³¹

THE SCOPE AND PACE OF WITHDRAWALS OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS SHOULD BE DETERMINED BY U.S. MILITARY COMMANDERS ON THE GROUND, NOT BY U.S. ELECTORAL POLITICS.

Despite continued apprehension about India's role in Afghanistan, Pakistan's civilian government took a major step forward in defusing tensions with its regional rival earlier this year when Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani announced that Islamabad will grant New Delhi Most Favored Nation (MFN) trading status by the end of the year. Granting India MFN status would allow the two countries to trade on equal terms, offering each other low tariffs and high import quotas. Pakistan had previously linked the opening of trade with India to progress on resolving Kashmir. Indian analysts believe the Pakistani army may have given a green light to civilian leaders to take this positive step to reduce tensions on its eastern border at a time when it needs to focus the bulk of its military attention on its western border. Indian analysts view Pakistan's willingness to finally grant India MFN status as a "tactical retreat"

by the Pakistani military rather than a "strategic shift," according to U.S. media reports.³² While Indian officials may not believe a serious breakthrough with Pakistan is in the cards in the near term, they are more than willing to take advantage of Islamabad's current interest in defusing tensions.

India is committed to building economic and political links with Afghanistan both to prevent the re-establishment of terrorist sanctuaries in the country and to gain trade and energy access to Central Asia. India has pledged nearly \$2 billion in aid to Afghanistan, making it one of the top donors to the country, and is moving forward with major economic investments. President Karzai and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh completed their own "Strategic Partnership Agreement" last fall that would allow, among other things, Indian training of Afghan security forces. India recently announced plans to construct a railway line that would connect the Iranian port at Chabahar—where most Indian exports to Afghanistan must transit—to the Hajigak region in Afghanistan's Bamiyan province, which is known for its rich mineral deposits. A consortium of Indian companies was recently awarded a contract for iron ore extraction at Hajigak.

U.S. Policy

While there may be sound reasons for leaving the door open to talks with the Taliban, the Administration must keep its expectations for those negotiations in check. As Cronin notes in *How Terrorism Ends*,

negotiations can help spur a process in which an insurgent or terrorist group declines, but talks alone have rarely been the single factor that brought an end to conflict. Cronin argues that governments should instead view talks as a way to manage violence over a longer-term period in which the group faces decline, begins to splinter, and eventually ceases to exist for other reasons.³³ The U.S. must continue to focus the majority of its attention on building up Afghan security forces and democratic institutions, and establishing a broader regional strategy that encourages peace, and uproots support for terrorist activities and ideology. Moving forward with its Afghan strategy, the U.S. should:

- **Establish a process of negotiations that is jointly led with the current Afghan government, is transparent, preserves the human rights improvements of the past decade, and implements measures that ensure that the Taliban must participate in a normal political process.** As part of this process, the U.S. must be able to verify the Taliban has broken ranks with al-Qaeda and its allies to ensure that negotiations do not allow international terrorists to regain a foothold in the region. The U.S. must also ensure that negotiations with the Taliban do not interfere with the U.S. ability to keep troops stationed in Afghanistan for training and counterterrorism purposes long after 2014.

31. Council on Foreign Relations, "The Future of U.S.-Pakistan Relations in an Asian Context," workshop, July 14, 2012, http://www.cfr.org/content/thinktank/IIGG_FutureUSPakistanRelations.pdf (accessed April 19, 2012).

32. Shaiq Hussain and Simon Denyer, "Pakistan Normalizes Trade Ties with India, Signals New Warmth," *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2011.

33. Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, pp. 35-36.

- **Slow down troop withdrawals and make clear that the U.S. plans to remain closely engaged diplomatically, financially, and militarily with Afghanistan over the long haul.** President Obama's continued focus on troop withdrawals gives the impression that the U.S. is rushing for the exits, which is creating fear and uncertainty among the Afghans and causing President Karzai to become a less reliable partner. The scope and pace of withdrawals over the next two years should be determined by U.S. military commanders on the ground, not by U.S. electoral politics.
- **Encourage Indo-Pakistani measures to improve trade relations and enhance regional economic integration.** Pakistan's focus on improving economic ties with its neighbors will help contribute to overall stability in the region by enhancing regional integration and boosting overall trade and economic growth. The U.S. should continue diplomatic efforts to help India and Pakistan resolve tensions in an effort to create a new security paradigm in the region that discourages zero-sum thinking and encourages regional economic integration and cooperation.
- **Pressure Pakistan to support the U.S.-led strategy in Afghanistan and demonstrate that Islamabad's failure to help stabilize Afghanistan will result in decreased U.S. military aid and diplomatic engagement.** Some Administration officials believe that Pakistan will never cooperate with U.S. goals in Afghanistan and thus advocate

immediate aid cuts, or even a complete severing of U.S.–Pakistan relations. A better strategy is to convince Pakistani military leaders that pursuing a broad crackdown on violent Islamist groups in the country will strengthen Pakistan's economic and political outlook and overall regional position. Pakistani military leaders have so far resisted cracking down on Taliban and Haqqani network sanctuaries largely because of their failure to envision a new strategy that both protects Pakistan's regional interests and uproots support for terrorist activities and ideology. Islamabad's practice of relying on violent Islamist proxies in Afghanistan (and India) has backfired badly on Pakistan and there is increasing recognition among Pakistanis that a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan would likely have a destabilizing impact on Pakistan. U.S. officials must build on this sentiment by convincing Pakistani leaders that unless they use their resources now to force the Taliban to compromise in Afghanistan, Pakistan will suffer from an emboldened Taliban leadership that will project its power back into Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan will face increasing isolation and lose credibility with the international community for continuing policies that encourage terrorism and endanger the safety of civilized nations.

- **Focus more diplomatic attention on working with NATO partners to develop a coordinated strategy toward Pakistan.** If Pakistan continues to pursue an independent Afghanistan policy that involves support to insurgents, the U.S. and NATO partners must look

beyond Pakistan and toward other like-minded partners in the region, such as India and the Central Asian states, to help bring peace to the country. In these circumstances, the U.S. and major international partners, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, should also demonstrate their willingness to sanction Pakistan for its unhelpful policies on Afghanistan, including by blocking International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans, which are critical to the health of the Pakistani economy. This strategy will work only if the U.S. and other NATO countries are willing to continue to provide the Afghan authorities with robust financial and diplomatic support after 2014.

Conclusion

If the Taliban is able to regain influence in Afghanistan without breaking ties with international terrorism, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups will have the opportunity to revive and re-establish safe haven there. A Taliban victory in Afghanistan would also strengthen Islamist extremist forces in Pakistan, thus undermining civilian democracy and emboldening hard-line elements within the Pakistani security establishment, which controls the country's expanding nuclear weapons arsenal. Rather than basing U.S. strategy on long-shot talks with the Taliban leadership, Washington should focus its attention and resources on building up anti-Taliban elements that share the U.S. interest in preventing Afghanistan from serving as a safe haven for international terrorists once again.

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