

To Further Afghan Reconciliation: Fight Harder

Joseph J. Collins

It's official. Everyone from the Pentagon to Saudi Arabia thinks that reconciliation between the Taliban and the Karzai government is a good idea and a step toward settling the conflict in Afghanistan. A few deluded analysts even see dealing with the Taliban as the Afghan equivalent of the Sunni Awakening in Iraq. One wonders whether war weariness, success with reconciliation in Iraq, and a lack of familiarity with the Afghan context may not be pushing us toward a tactical error or worse, an endless round of talking with an illegitimate adversary that believes it has the upper hand.

Reconciliation in Afghanistan is fraught with complications. For one, there is no Taliban *per se*. In the south we have Mullah Omar's "old" Taliban, but in the East, the toughest fighters come from the Haqqani network and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezbi Islami, both of which work closely with Al Qaeda. Complicating the issue even more, there is now a multi-branch Pakistani Taliban, some of whom operate in both countries. Ironically, the Afghan Taliban and its friends seem to be well tolerated by Pakistani authorities who are now in conflict with their own Taliban.

Second, the Taliban have never been anyone's model combatants. They have tried to win hearts and minds through terror tactics and extreme repression. Even today, the Taliban's support in polls does not approach 20 percent across Afghanistan. When the Taliban ruled, it conducted numerous crimes against humanity for which there has never been an accounting. In addition to the extreme repression of its citizenry --- no kites, no music, no female education, executions at soccer matches etc. --- thousands of non-Pashtun Afghans were killed for sport by the Taliban.

Anyone wanting to reconcile with the Taliban will also have to figure out how to deal with the guys who have been planting IEDs, kidnapping civilians, and destroying reconstruction projects in the countryside. How will it sit with the U.S. public when and if the democratically elected government of Afghanistan and the Coalition sit down to negotiate with people whose signature tactics are burning girls' schools and cutting off the heads of non-combatants?

Third, all politics in Afghanistan is ethnic and tribal. Right now Father Karzai holds together a loose coalition of moderate modernizers from all groups, but Tajiks, Uzbeks, and especially the Hazara, Shiite Muslims, remember well the lash of the Taliban. While Karzai may see some of the Taliban as wayward brothers, his non-Pashtun allies do not.

Reconciliation with mass murderers will be difficult, especially as we approach 2009, an election year in Afghanistan.

Fourth, reconciliation talks with the Taliban come at a time of increasing Taliban battlefield successes. Taliban attacks through the end of September 2008 have already exceeded the total for 2007. This year already ranks as the worst year for fighting since the capture of Kabul in 2001. The Taliban have also fought pitched battles to control Lashkargah, a provincial capital in the south. They are so cocky that their “official” position has been that they will never negotiate with Karzai, only with the Americans. If the Afghan government sits down with the Taliban now, it does so from a position of increasing weakness, and diminished strength. To increase the prospects for Kabul’s success in negotiation, we will have to reverse that condition. How should we proceed?

To create favorable conditions for reconciliation and later negotiations, we must first step up our military efforts. General Petraeus is right: we can not kill our way to victory in Afghanistan. We can, however, create a more pliable enemy, one eager to negotiate, if we defeat Taliban offensive operations and threaten their sanctuaries. While wizards may imagine ways to do more militarily with less, in the short run, more Afghan and NATO troops, as well as more aid money will be essential.

In the long run, we need to continue to build Afghan police and military capacity to stand alone. We have done better at this in Iraq than in Afghanistan, but Iraq had much more human capital. Building across-the-board Afghan capacity for governance and management must be the top long-term priority.

Stepping up anti-Taliban activities in Pakistan will be essential but tricky. Cross border operations are a limited tool. Moreover, the Pakistani government --- both in its military and prior civilian versions --- have been Taliban sponsors. We should demand that they reassess their support and, as a minimum, exert extreme pressure on the Haqqani network and the Hezbi Islami, both of which are Al Qaeda allies. As Pakistan wrestles with its own Taliban, they may well realize that the key to success will come in a united front with NATO and the United States. Again, more aid --- military and economic --- for Pakistan must be part of the program.

We also need to ask the Gulf states to crack down on charity toward Taliban-affiliated groups. Charity, drug money, and other protection payments are paying Taliban bills. We need to dry up their funds as much as we can to weaken Taliban military efforts.

Finally, reconciliation is an issue on which the Afghan government must lead. We cannot navigate the maze of Afghanistan’s ethnic politics. Only the Afghan leadership can do that. Even public suggestions by Western officials about the desirability of reconciliation are risky. But inside this challenge, Kabul may find an opportunity to go over the heads of Omar, Haqqani, and Hekmatyar and encourage the rank and file of the resistance to come home as individuals.

For their part, the Taliban are looking for an opportunity to drive another wedge between the Kabul government and the West. The unfortunate civilian casualties and collateral damage that come with NATO military operations have already given the Taliban a chance to divide and conquer. We cannot let these 21st century barbarians play us off against our Afghan allies on the issue of reconciliation. In the meantime, we must all fight harder.

Joseph Collins, a retired Army Colonel, teaches strategy at the National War College. From 2001-2004, he was the first Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Stability Operations. He is a 30 year Afghanistan watcher.

The author welcomes comments to collinsjo@ndu.edu. This article represents the author's personal thoughts and does not represent U.S. government policy.

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