



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Afghanistan: It Never Hurts to Talk

Gary Anderson

Some pundits have questioned the wisdom of General David Petraeus' decision that allows certain Taliban leaders safe passage to conduct preliminary peace negotiations with the Afghan government. He has been second guessed before and has generally proven the critics wrong; there are three good reasons to believe that his decision was the right one.

First, there is very little we could do to stop negotiations even if the leadership of the coalition forces in Afghanistan disagrees with the concept, which it apparently does not. The Afghan government is sovereign, and has come to the conclusion that negotiations are needed. Some critics contend that the Karzai government will not be negotiating with all of the Taliban. The answer to this is "so what?" Fracturing the insurgency worked in Iraq, albeit in different circumstances. However, side changing is a time honored Afghan tradition.

Second, critics are wrong in saying that negotiations are premature, and that we should wait until we have a definitive battlefield success. If elements of the Taliban were confident that time is on their side, they would not be negotiating. Negotiations in that part of the world take time, and if we want to be in a position to meet President Obama's decision to begin withdrawing by next summer, the process needs to start now. I don't agree with the timeline, but General Petraeus and his command have no choice but to pursue the policies of the civilian leadership. If we expect to have any kind of plan in place by next summer that may involve a negotiated agreement, talks have to start now. We are probably already behind the power curve given the length of time such negotiations will likely take.

A third reason stems from a lesson from Vietnam. Although it never hurts to talk, negotiating from a position of strength is critical. We know that the North Vietnamese only started negotiating seriously when the 1972 bombing campaign began to seriously hurt their war fighting capability. This also held true during the surge in Iraq. The success of the surge and the Anbar Awakening accelerated the pace at which many insurgent leaders either switched sides or reached accommodations with the Iraqi government. If the Taliban leadership believed that they have the luxury of waiting us out, they would not be fighting as hard as they are at this time.

As with the surge in Iraq, the rise in casualties that has accompanied our recent offensive is a perverse indicator that this surge is having an impact. If NATO and Afghan forces succeed in their clear-hold-build strategy in critical Taliban strongholds such as Kandahar and Marjah, our first indication of success will likely be an eventual drop of in the friendly casualty rate in the

spring. The onset of winter will make it harder for the Taliban to operate, so a winter drop-off can be expected and should not be used as a premature measure of success.

However, if the Taliban cannot launch a vigorous offensive when the campaign season in April comes around, it should be one indicator of effectiveness. Another indicator is a decline in the quality of Taliban operations, and that will be hard to quantify. In Iraq, we could generally recognize when the insurgent infrastructure had been degraded in any given locality by a general lowering of competence in the way they fought. IEDs became less sophisticated and accidental pre-detonations increased as did the number of operations that were uncovered due to sloppy enemy planning.

In addition, civilian cooperation and amiability increased. Our military counterparts struggled to quantify it for their briefing charts with mixed success, but our civilian Provincial Reconstruction Team considered it sufficient to feel that our job was getting easier and less dangerous. It came down to "I'll know it when I see it." The challenge for General Petraeus will be to convey that to his civilian master, particularly the Congressional money allocators. They will want briefing charts and numbers.

As in Iraq, NATO and the Afghan government are attacking along four lines of effort. The COIN campaign to secure ground and deny it is the most important, but it is enhanced by attrition of experienced fighters and the targeting of key Taliban leaders both by kinetic means and encouraging defections. Negotiations are now the fourth leg of the stool.

What we need to do as we coach the Afghan government in these negotiations is to ensure that the Karzai team keeps its eye on the ball in insisting that part of any peace deal be the removal of Al Qaeda elements from Afghan soil. This is something that the Taliban cannot necessarily disagree with without fear of self contradiction. Their demand is for the removal of foreign forces, and Al Qaeda is nothing if not a foreign force. This should be the one non-negotiable in the process of negotiations. We went to Afghanistan to get Al Qaeda out; too many lives and too much treasure have been invested to fail in that objective.

Gary Anderson is a retired Marine Corps Colonel who is now a defense consultant and professor at the George Washington University Elliott School.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).

Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here](#).