

Negotiating Afghanistan

When? With Whom? About What?

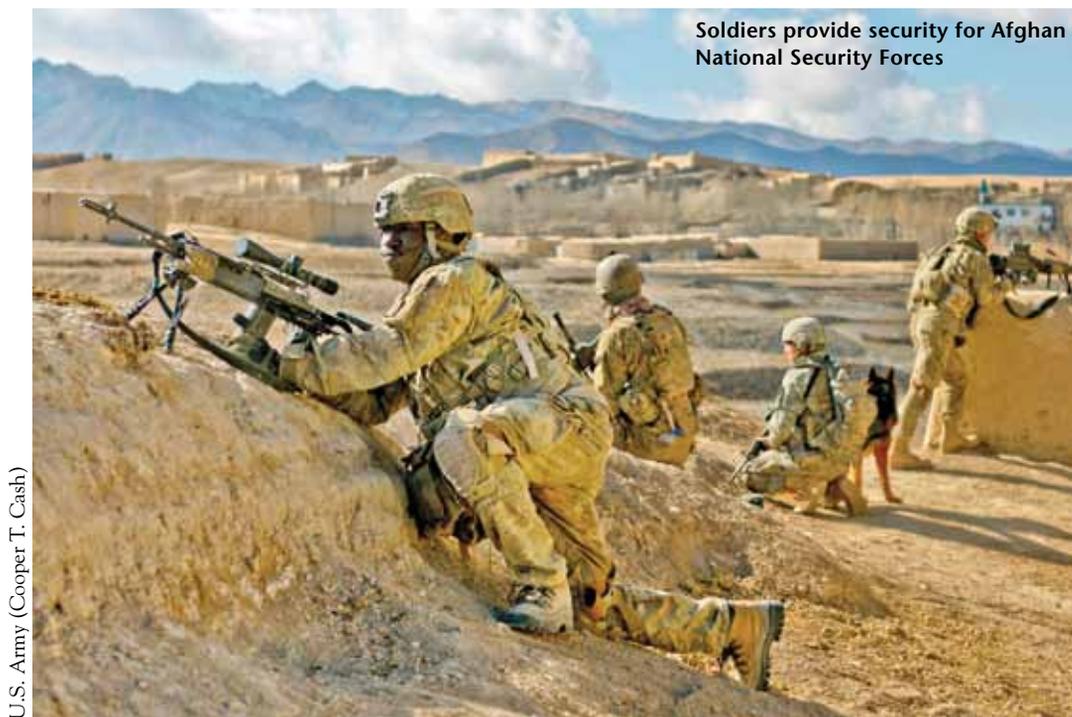
BY THOMAS R. PICKERING

Under the George W. Bush administration, negotiations were not included in the strategic mix of dealing with Afghanistan or, for that matter, Iraq. One can only conjecture about reasons. They may have included a sense that a military victory was possible; a belief that talk about negotiations was in itself a sign of weakness that should not—and could not—be conveyed to the opponent; full-blown distrust of the Taliban; a need to have a better balance of forces and more success behind us before we took on the task; a hope that a reintegration process, together with raising the military stakes, would be sufficient to win the day; and a distrust of diplomats and politicians who might be expected to conduct the negotiations—a sense that all achieved with the expenditure of so much blood and treasure would be given away if diplomats and politicians were turned loose on the problem.

While the administration policy of President Barack Obama regarding Afghanistan negotiations does not represent a radical departure from that of its predecessor, there has been greater openness to debate prospects and issues, and a sense that an unofficial effort at the proper time could have a useful and positive impact on the interest in negotiations as well as setting out the problems to be undertaken and overcome to achieve success in them.

To this end, last year a group sponsored and supported by The Century Foundation in New York studied this issue under the leadership of Lakhdar Brahimi, former Foreign Minister of Algeria and United Nations (UN) leader in Afghanistan after postcombat 2001–2002. I had the honor to co-chair this group. The study that the group produced looked at a number of salient questions after visiting the region and the capitals of many states interested in and likely to play important roles in the outcome of the war in Afghanistan. Many of our members had a great deal of experience in Afghanistan. Others had backgrounds in military and strategic matters. Most of us had been engaged in one time or another with negotiations both in a bilateral and multilateral framework. All of us understood that fair consideration ought to be given to this possibility. Our work paralleled

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Soldiers provide security for Afghan National Security Forces

U.S. Army (Cooper T. Cash)

the efforts then being made by Richard Holbrooke on behalf of the United States to help shape and organize such a possibility. While our conclusions were completely our own and Ambassador Holbrooke tragically died before our report was finalized, we believe that a fair and open review of the possibilities inherent in a negotiating process deserves attention.

The study group as a whole, and its members individually, visited the region several times, and held discussions with a wide range of interlocutors, including nearly a dozen hours of conversation with various representatives of the insurgency. They came from a number of groups representing most of the major players. In addition, senior leaders in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India met with us, as did many retired leaders and others from the fields of journalism, academia, and nongovernmental organizations, among others. Travel also included visits to Moscow, Beijing, a Central Asian conference in Tajikistan including representatives from Uzbekistan, and with Turks, Iranians, Saudis, senior leaders in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, and the UN.

The report addresses and attempts to answer three important questions: Should negotiations be undertaken, and if so, when? The resolution of what problems should the negotiations seek to address? How should the negotiations be put in place? Within these questions are a host of others—to mention only a few: Who might participate, what specific issues would have to be addressed, and how should the various relationships among the parties and possible parties be dealt with? It was also clear that such a study would not be able to address conclusively the individual positions of the various parties, their separate strategies, and how their expected negotiating postures might play out over the longer term of a negotiating process. That has been left to others and indeed the process itself, should it get going, to set out.

This article draws on the study, looks at the possibilities today, and seeks to answer some of the harder questions about this effort.

Should We Negotiate and, If So, When?

Despite skepticism, a good case could be made for negotiations. This conclusion is based on a number of factors. Most of those interviewed from the region and beyond supported (some very reluctantly) the idea of negotiations. Admittedly, they had widely varying and not necessarily congruent views about the outcome. But that is to be expected in any such process. Indeed, over the course of our study, many of the starting positions of both sides—those points that the other side had to meet before they would start to talk—had morphed into something more along the lines of “these are the points we have to achieve for the negotiations to be successful.”

Even more important are some of the more strategic issues. Few now see a clear military victory in the offing for their side. War fatigue hangs heavy over the battlefield and even more so among the civilian population in Afghanistan and beyond. As a result of the financial crises of 2008, heavy expenditures on the war are widely questioned in both the United States and Europe. The U.S. election campaign of 2012 shows increasing signs that ending the war will be a key issue.

At a more tactical level, while the “surge” might produce some readjustment on the battlefield and in local control, no one sees it as a silver bullet solution to the end game for the United States and its allies. While the Taliban made an art form of being stiff-necked over the war, it is also clear that some of that intransigence is breaking down, and increasingly large numbers of Afghans are pushing away from the

Taliban, in part to protect gains made in education and incomes, and benefiting from the programs of change of the government and its supporters in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

While some see negotiations as an alternative to the strategy of counterinsurgency with its attendant aspects of counterterrorism strikes, most are willing to accept that negotiations ought to be given a chance in the context of the present strategy, especially as the surge has the possibility of building a more positive situation in and around the battlefields. Many are prepared to accept the notion that military action alone will not produce the situation for satisfactory war termination. That fact alone has led many to the conclusion that civilian efforts at economic and social development to complement the military surge are also not within striking distance of something which could be called victory. The Taliban also increasingly does not see itself coming out on top. They tried to counter with the aphorism “You have the watch, we have the time!” Unfortunately, the counter to that, “We have the time, you just watch!” was also not totally convincing.

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What might make a difference is the fact that all wars end with political consequences. If we fail to take the opportunity to try to shape those consequences through negotiations, we are condemned to live with the result that military

operations offer: more uncertainty and perhaps, in the end, a withdrawal with no successful exit strategy. Negotiations are not certain to deliver a positive and helpful result, but not attempting to use them surely means we have set aside a potentially useful tool.

On the difficult question of timing for negotiations, there are many views. At the beginning of the study, the predominant view on the U.S. side was that it could not even consider negotiations until the military situation improved. Over time, this argument became tempered with the realization that it might take some time to put negotiations in place, that when we are at the height of our power, the other side knows that the future is more likely than not to be downhill for us. Moreover, bringing in the other side also requires time to convince them that they may have something to gain from a formula that converts their military campaign into a political effort based on electoral choice and fair rules of the game.

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The outcome was simple and straightforward in its recommendation: that negotiations had more to offer than no negotiations and that it was time to start preparing for them now rather than wait for some elusive optimum moment which might never arrive.

What to Negotiate About?

As painful as it seems for both sides, the issue of the future governance of Afghanistan

is clearly the central pivot around which the negotiations will have to turn. Each side—the Taliban, government of Hamid Karzai, and United States—has approached the negotiations with a series of positions. These positions, which began as demands that had to be conceded to by the other side in order to begin talks, have now shifted more toward becoming the goals they wish to achieve in the process itself.

For the Taliban, the goals have included the removal of all foreign forces, release of all prisoners, and return of the Taliban Islamic Emirate as the form and substance of future governance of Afghanistan. On the non-Taliban side, the requirements were that there should be no more use of force to resolve problems, that there had to be a complete and irrevocable Taliban split with al Qaeda, and that the constitution of Afghanistan should be respected. In one way or another, all of these requirements centered around governance, and most of them represented areas where the resolution of differences will be very hard indeed.

The Taliban is, of course, not monolithic. The Haqqani Network operating out of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas is principally focused on Afghanistan but not exclusively. In our conversation with a representative from the network, it was made clear it would work with Quetta and Mullah Omar on negotiating issues. The Quetta Shura is considered to be under the control of Mullah Omar. Gulbudin Hekmatyar and his group have also indicated an interest in negotiations and noted a willingness to work with Quetta.

It appears that the greatest differences among the Taliban emerge on the field of battle in planning and executing military operations where broad autonomy is exercised. At the other end of the continuum of control

is theology where large deference is paid to Mullah Omar. Politics lies somewhere along the continuum, perhaps now closer to theology, since there is only at this point an opening consideration of the issue and little practical impact on the various groups and players. If things proceed and issues become more cogently defined, there may well surface differences of a larger and more apparent variety.

Some have asked whether the Taliban would indeed stick together throughout the negotiating process. The answer is unclear. What is equally unclear is why Taliban cohesiveness would or should be an interest, much less a priority, of their negotiating adversaries.

With regard to the key issues of governance, the following are likely to be some of the major points of contention, and among the players in the various groups as much as between them. The critical points of governance as they emerged from the study include, for example, what should be the future division of power in the government? Who gets what in terms of ministries and other high offices? A second closely related issue has to do with the future form of government—what institutions will be in place, and who gets to affect their working relationships? A key factor here will be the shape and scope of an electoral law. Next, the issue of who makes appointments will require settlement. There is also the overarching question of whether the present, heavily centralized presidential system will continue or whether, more perhaps in keeping with Afghan tradition, there is a shift away from a strongly centralized government in favor of the devolution of more authority to regional leadership. Finally, the issue as to whether or not a prime ministerial and parliamentary system might work more effectively than one dominated by a strong president will

need to be examined. While there are no easy answers to these questions, the study group was strongly impressed by the interest in them among the people with whom we spoke and their centrality to any solution.

Beyond these political issues, we identified others that would play a role or be likely to play a role in the process of negotiations. A major issue is the place of Islam in the future governance of the country. The present constitution has put in place formulas on this point, which seemingly could be accepted widely. Much more difficult will be the guarantees of civil and human rights for all Afghans and—particularly based on the past history with the Taliban—the role and place of women in Afghan society. Will they be assured that the gains that have been made will stay in place and be expanded upon over time?

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In the past, more among non-Afghans (including human rights nongovernmental organizations) than Afghans, the problems of justice and accountability for the abuses and crimes of the past have been a centerpiece of interest. Afghans have had a tendency to want to put it aside and may well try to do so again. Also, security issues closely linked to the future include the questions of what will be the organization and role of an Afghan central security force that will have to carry a full share of the burden of assuring that any agreements are carried out.

Other issues of more salient interest to the international community will also need

to be addressed in some form in the process. These include the nature and continuation of economic and social assistance to whatever government emerges, along with continued security assistance to military and police forces of the future Afghanistan. A related question will be the continuing role of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and International Monetary Fund in the future development of the country. Capacity-building will be a continuing major demand in the economy if success—or even a breakthrough toward progress—is to be achieved. Access to natural resources and the role of the new state in controlling their exploitation and sale will be issues of importance. Finally, the need to begin to address the economic issues in particular on a regional basis will be significant. Because of its geography, Afghanistan plays a critical role in the future transportation structure of the region.

Beyond these issues and of real importance to the country, region, and well beyond are the problems of narcotics production and transportation.

Afghan political leaders will need to reach conclusions about and seek support for its preferred posture regarding its future neutrality or nonalignment.

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There will need to be consideration of a peacekeeping organization, probably led by the UN, but devoted principally to monitoring and verification. The sense now is that Afghan forces will have to deal with violations of the peace agreements.

This is a full and difficult menu. There will undoubtedly be more vexing problems to address as the issues outlined here are taken up.

How to Get to Negotiations?

We began with some assumptions that helped guide our work and thinking. No one party to the conflict, including the United States, was sufficiently well placed so that it could manage to bring all of the others to the negotiating table, much less to a successful conclusion. There are just too many differences between them for that to happen.

The obvious conclusion is that a neutral facilitator or “facilitation mechanism” might be a useful idea to move the conflict toward a negotiating process. A facilitator might be an individual, small group, state or group of states, or international organization. Whoever takes on this role must be familiar in some detail with Afghanistan, its history, and its political and cultural background. It would also require a person or a group broadly acceptable to the parties involved, but most particularly to the Afghan parties that would be at the center of negotiations (for example, the Karzai government, the “loyal Opposition,” the old Northern Alliance, civil society including human rights and civil rights, and women’s groups, and, of course, the Taliban). Each of these groups has its own internal divisions, so finding a facilitator will not be an easy task.

The facilitator might well be designated formally by the UN Secretary-General to give the position status in dealing with the effort. Some have also suggested that it might be advantageous at an appropriate time to have the facilitator approved or even appointed by the UN Security Council. This would help widen the basis of authority and indicate that the members of the council, including

the five Permanent Members—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—were on board with both the concept and the personality or personalities being chosen for this role. The process for selecting the facilitator(s) would certainly require, at a minimum, close consultation among the Afghan parties, Pakistan, and the United States. That might precede the more formal process noted above. While it is clear that a formal role for one of the major parties to the conflict is unlikely to be successful, it is equally clear that each of those major parties will have to come together around a candidate or candidates.

The role of the facilitator would be developed in two phases. The first would be devoted to bringing the parties to the table for talks and negotiations. The second would be to assist the principal negotiating parties—the four Afghan groups mentioned previously—in constructing an agreement or agreements between them leading to an end of the conflict.

The initial work for the facilitator(s) would be to discuss with the parties, on an individual basis, their interest in a process of negotiations, their ideas concerning how the process should unroll, as well as timing, participation, and so on. Also, in the first phase, a facilitator(s) would explore with the parties their substantive positions—that is, what they would expect from the other parties and what they would be prepared themselves to put on the table.

These two elements would form the basis for a judgment by the facilitator about the feasibility and possibilities for success in bringing the parties together around a table and what their agenda for discussions might be. In particular, it is unlikely that the starting positions

of the parties will be close enough to provide a high assurance of success. But the facilitator will need to make careful decisions and recommendations on the basis of extensive contacts on both procedure and substance, and as a result fill a role that only he or she may be capable of carrying out.

The second phase for the facilitator should be to work with the parties and those in the various circles around them from the region and beyond to find agreement. This is a substantive role of singular importance and requires a facilitator who is imaginative, inventive, patient, willing to listen, and who commands significant authority among the parties engaged in the negotiation. Subsequently, the regional parties might also be encouraged by the facilitator not only to take on a constructive role with the parties in helping them come together, but also to engage in putting together agreements among themselves, the purpose of which is to support and strengthen any accords reached by the Afghan parties.

The same facilitator may or may not be appropriate for the entire process. The burden will be heavy, and several persons may well have to be involved, particularly if one person is not fully *persona grata* with all of the players.

Should the facilitator reach a positive conclusion on these questions, the process might then be developed in a way that incorporates the Bonn arrangements of 2001, which set up the present government in Afghanistan. Essentially, these arrangements were based on negotiations led by and among Afghans with outside parties in successive, concentric circles of regional and other parties around the Afghan parties playing a supporting role. There are differences today: inclusion of the Taliban, more regional players, and a greater regional interest and need

for regional arrangements for the purpose of providing stability and security.

The study group report recognizes that there are many ways to proceed. Rather than spell out a series of options, it presents in detail a specific negotiating framework that we believe has a good chance of succeeding. At the center of our proposal is the fact that the key negotiations must take place among Afghan parties. Others may come and assist, but the fundamental arrangements for Afghanistan's future governance must be agreed to among Afghans if the future is to see success. Afghan groups would therefore be at the center along with the facilitator. Among the Afghans, there are four basic interest clusters: the present government, "loyal opposition" (the former Northern Alliance), Afghan civil society groups including women and minorities, and the insurgent groups. In the inner ring, but just beyond them, would be the parties now closest to the conflict and perhaps most important in its resolution: Pakistan and the United States. The next ring would include

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the major neighbors—Iran, India (a near neighbor), Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan—and, moving out farther, China, Russia, key European nations, Japan, and perhaps Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and others.

All parties would play the critically important role of working with the Afghan parties to reach fundamental agreement on the key questions involving Afghans and necessarily doing

so with a developing area of agreement among themselves. Ideally, they would support and assist the facilitator to bring the Afghan parties into contact and help them think through and develop solutions to their differences. There is no sense among Afghans or other interested parties that a purely institutional initiative would mechanically generate some successful response meeting the needs of all the parties. However, on the basis of past success and given the special nature of the interests of all the parties, as well as the possibilities for synergy and mutual support, this construct, based on the Bonn Conference of 2001, could offer genuine advantages.

The Taliban made it clear that to participate they would need some kind of representative office at or near the negotiations, probably in a third country, and guarantees to move their people securely to the talks. We did not explore or seek to help resolve where negotiations might take place, but believed that would best be left for the facilitator to explore. We suspect that a Muslim country not engaged extensively on one side or the other in Afghanistan might well be a leading candidate for the locus of negotiations. It would also be necessary for the facilitator to have good relations with that country, which would also be interested in helping pursue successful negotiations for its own reasons.

Beyond the purely Afghan portion of the negotiations, should these show some promise, the regional parties and others could turn their attention first to putting together an agreement among themselves to support the arrangements agreed to by the Afghans. Beyond that, if the Afghans agreed and encouraged the agreement, they might set in place arrangements to ensure regional recognition of and support for Afghan neutrality or



U.S. Army (Daniel P. Shook)

Afghan National Policeman fires weapon during training exercise

nonalignment. There are further subjects for regional approaches and agreement: security issues, narcotics control, transportation, trade arrangements among the states in the region, and so on. These could result in an agreement or agreements among themselves to memorialize and make permanent those arrangements.

The Positions of the Parties

The Taliban Quetta Shura, led by Mullah Omar, the most influential of Taliban leaders on political issues as well as theological ones, has a number of interests in negotiating:¹

- ❖ the death of many subordinate leaders in drone strikes and special operations raids
- ❖ impact of attrition on attenuating command authority by the Quetta Shura over the Taliban, perhaps significantly in military operations
- ❖ fear that the United States might remain indefinitely in Afghanistan
- ❖ alternatively, fear that the United States and NATO could be ready to negotiate the terms of their exit
- ❖ anger with Pakistan and fear of being sold out by Islamabad to Kabul or Washington²
- ❖ removal of foreign forces, perhaps with the exception of peacekeepers for a deal

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- ❖ security for themselves, neutralizing the international and Afghan threat to them and ending the targeting of their leaders and families
- ❖ international recognition as a legitimate political actor, removal of key leaders from UN terrorist lists, and release of prisoners
- ❖ reestablishment of Emirate of Islamic law
- ❖ purge of corrupt government leaders and prosecuting or exiling unfriendly warlords.³

The following are some of the key objectives of the Karzai government:

- ❖ Karzai remaining until 2014 (and perhaps beyond) with security for him, his family, and inner circle and immunity for some key allies
- ❖ the orderly, phased withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and U.S. forces with continued training and weapons through 2014 and beyond
- ❖ an international peacekeeping force for a limited period that provides security in place of ISAF
- ❖ power-sharing with non-Pashtun elements to forestall a civil war on sectarian lines
- ❖ a democratic Afghanistan with the current constitution largely preserved and some new minority and civil protections
- ❖ continued international financial support.⁴

Pakistani interests include:

- ❖ ensuring a neutral, stable Kabul government with the Afghan Taliban as a junior partner
- ❖ supporting Afghan and U.S. operations against the Pakistan Taliban
- ❖ withdrawing the United States and NATO in phases, but with continuing military and economic aid thereafter
- ❖ limiting Indian influence, including effective checks on aid to the Baloch insurgency
- ❖ expanding trade and investment in Afghanistan.⁵

U.S. interests include:

- ❖ preventing the resurgence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan
- ❖ assisting a reasonable stable, friendly, autonomous Afghanistan
- ❖ preventing further Afghan violence from destabilizing Pakistan
- ❖ preserving democratic and human rights in Afghanistan
- ❖ continuing credibility for NATO
- ❖ reducing illicit drug trade.⁶

Indian interests include:

- ❖ a friendly, or at least neutral, Afghanistan not dominated by the Taliban or other Pakistan proxies
- ❖ eliminating al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists who target India
- ❖ preserving a presence in Afghanistan, including political and military intelligence capacities
- ❖ expanding trade and investment, including transit routes through Pakistan
- ❖ ensuring basic human rights in Afghanistan
- ❖ strengthening growing strategic partnership with the United States.⁷

Iranian interests include:

- ❖ withdrawal of U.S. and ISAF military and intelligence forces
- ❖ a stable regime in Kabul, friendly to Iran, and not dominated by Pakistan or its proxies
- ❖ protection for traditional Iranian allies in Afghanistan: Hazaras, Tajiks, and Heratis
- ❖ trade, investment, and transit trade through Char Bahar
- ❖ return of 2 to 3 million Afghan refugees in Iran
- ❖ reduction/elimination of narcotics-trafficking
- ❖ Kabul cooperation in fight against Jundallah, in Iranian Baluchistan and beyond.⁸

Other states have similar objectives based on their individual goals and interests, many of which overlap. While an early assessment of the possible areas for agreement is possible, the uncertainties remain large enough at this stage to understand that conclusions may be nearer to “guesstimates” than hard judgments about real outcomes. It is useful to note that there are a number of overlapping interests, and this raises prospects for a positive outcome without of course in any way guaranteeing such.

The Report Today

The Century Foundation report received wide publicity, and many leaders and others were interested in the results.⁹ The team that prepared the report briefed it widely. The timing of the report’s release in March of 2011 was appropriate, coming as it did after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s mid-February address on the subject to the Asia Society and following indications that some views among the Taliban were shifting in a more positive direction toward talks. Since that time, no state or national leader, and indeed very few nonofficial leaders, has criticized the report or its findings in any specific way. Quiet assurances of interest have been received along with indications that a number of the ideas and approaches in the report reflected and reinforced views already adopted by governments or being seriously considered by them. Press reports, not confirmed by governments, have indicated that contacts continue to take place among the various parties, including between the United States and the Taliban. The latter contact has seemingly been vexed by the publicity, and we may be in some form of stalemate regarding opening up the prospects for a start to negotiations, at least for the moment.

What has happened is that the process has moved from being almost entirely ignored to gaining serious consideration. It has become a process that, now in addition to discussion in public, has been favorably commented on by a number of players, including the United States. “Coming out of the closet” might be a fair way to describe what has been happening. Far from claiming credit, it seems that the report may well have come at a time when its ideas and proposals were more open to examination than previously. It seems also to be a time—for a host of reasons, including U.S. withdrawal, a sense of military stalemate, a growing sense of frustration with the conflict among the public, and a rapidly growing concern about financial drain—when the report may continue to help move the parties toward negotiations.

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Spoilers

No negotiation is without its vulnerabilities. This one will be particularly difficult. At the top of the list, there are the interests in and willingness of the parties to participate. This includes the central Afghan players. There is no question that while there is a general willingness to engage, there are many limitations to that process. President Karzai has made it clear at various times that he would like to supervise and oversee the unfolding and conduct of negotiations, but this will be strenuously contested by the insurgent factions. Both the present

government of Afghanistan, as well as Mullah Omar and the Taliban, would resist the United States as the authority organizing negotiations. They are, to borrow the old expression, necessary parties, all of them, but they are not sufficient to begin, manage, or end the process on their own in a leadership role.

However, the failure of any essential party to attend the negotiations is almost by definition a killer. This would include the Taliban, Karzai government, and in the first circle of players, Pakistan and the United States. Without others, there will be a serious impairment of the process but most likely not a fatal one.

Those on the outer rings of the process are also potential serious spoilers, including those that may have, as Pakistan does, some serious influence with the Afghan Taliban. How they play their role and how they assist in developing positions and approaches to the other Afghan parties can be either a spoiler or something that can help encourage progress.

Other procedural and process problems can also serve as spoilers, sometimes absolutely, but often in a limited way, and sometimes opportunistically where they serve as potential trading cards for other concessions of interest to the spoiling party or parties. The first and outer ring players, if they are brought on board and share a number of common objectives and interests, can be considered as possible allies in overcoming some of the spoiler tactics on procedures that might be deployed. One is reminded of “shape of the table” issues over Vietnam, which played such a role.

Overcoming spoiler tactics can involve many techniques. These include concessions by one of the parties or by other players outside the context of negotiations. The United States and Pakistan are well placed to assist in this

kind of approach. Other techniques involve the use of packages to bring a series of interrelated tradeoffs to deal with concerns and interests that may result in a spoiler problem. Other ideas involve creating a series of stepwise deals or agreement, parsing the negotiating landscape into small packages and steps that can help to move things forward and build confidence, which is often absent at the beginning stages of a negotiation—a time when spoiler problems may be most intense and difficult to deal with.

Undoubtedly, there will be spoilers, both in process and substance. The task of the facilitator, the parties, and their friends and others in the various “rings” will be to encourage success by finding ways to overcome them. Nothing at the present stage seems to have emerged as a full and unconquerable spoiler. That gives a note of hope and limited optimism. But patience and perseverance will be required in what looks like a long and complex negotiation. It is highly unlikely that no spoilers will emerge. It is par for the course that they will. The dedication and commitment of the players will be sorely tested.

Some Remaining Key Questions

How can we trust the Taliban in a negotiation and observe the result? There is no certainty that we can, but we will not know whether they will be prepared to make a deal until we try. Some among them say that is what they want. Observing a deal is critical. With or without a deal, we will have to put in place sufficiently strong Afghan forces to assure the survival of a non-Taliban administration. It may well be better to construct a deal to do this than take a chance with a purely military outcome. Negotiations might even help to bring the conflict to an end sooner and support our exit strategy.

Why should the United States negotiate with the Taliban? The Century Foundation proposal does not suggest that it should. Instead, a process is proposed that would take place between Afghan parties, including the Taliban. In any conflict, a negotiated solution has to include the opposing parties in some fashion if it is going to be successful. The Taliban say they want to negotiate with the United States because they believe the United States can determine what will happen among those opposed to the Taliban. If that is the case, then we have leverage, most likely through our relations with the non-Taliban Afghan, to get a deal they and we could live with.

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How can we get them to the table if they do not show interest in coming? Thus far, they seem to have shown such interest. They do not like publicity because it indicates to their supporters that they are preparing to negotiate and perhaps make a deal, which will fall short of the victory they have sought—that is, all foreign forces out of Afghanistan and the Taliban back in control.

What makes the present ripe for trying to resolve the question? Is the Taliban not likely to wait us out? Do they not perceive that their fortunes are improving? The answer is not yet clear. Some Taliban certainly seem to want to negotiate because even though they may see their fortunes improving, they do not have confidence that they will improve to the degree necessary to gain full power in Afghanistan. Much depends

on this critical question as we draw down from standing up Afghan forces that cannot only hold the line but also keep the Taliban off balance and out of control of key regions. That remains an uncertain proposition on both sides, but the Taliban seem interested in testing out the negotiating possibilities. There are signals that growing numbers of Afghans are against the Taliban—and the Taliban know this.

the U.S. goals in Central Asia need to be clarified

What lessons can we draw from negotiations with the Palestinians, North Koreans, Vietnamese, and so forth that might help us negotiate with the Taliban? Negotiate when the other side has come to the conclusion that it cannot gain its objectives by use of military force. Hold to key positions and make sure that the U.S. public will continue to support efforts. Put in place an arrangement that makes it clear that we can hold our ground whether we have negotiations or not.

What is the proper role for the United States? Support the Afghan parties that oppose a Taliban take over. Be prepared to agree to arrangements in which the Taliban become one among a number of political parties and factions and where they must face popular elections to gain support.

What endstates could we permit? It is easier to describe what we do not want or will not support:

- ❖ an enduring connection between the Taliban and al Qaeda
- ❖ the use of force or violence by the Taliban

- ❖ a solution that significantly alters the current Afghan constitution.

Can Pakistan block the process or slow it down? Either is possible. Pakistan is a key player. Pakistani leaders state that they are interested in a process and want to see it carried forward. Some in Pakistan have continued to support the Afghan Taliban, but among them are those who say they do not want to see the Taliban back in charge. Members of the Taliban also complain about their relations with the Pakistanis, saying they do not trust them. It will be critical for the United States and Pakistan to work to define an outcome they both can live with and even more importantly to define a Pakistan-Afghanistan future relationship that both sides can accept. Such steps should help to avoid a breakdown or breakup in the process.

Will the United States really pull out entirely when a relationship with Afghanistan gives it access to and a presence in Central Asia? President Barack Obama says he will pull out all U.S. combat forces. He may leave behind some trainers and others—such as Special Forces—to deal with al Qaeda and their leadership. The U.S. goals in Central Asia need to be clarified. The United States went there to be able to have access to Afghanistan. Now that we are in Afghanistan, we might want to stay in order to have access to Central Asia. Over the years, we have dealt successfully and well with Central Asia without having a military presence there. Such a presence is only likely to create opposition and animosity to the United States among their public. Once the United States has withdrawn from Afghanistan and al Qaeda is kept from returning, there would seem to be little reason for the United States to remain or return to Central Asia.

Will the Karzai government be able to survive after 2014 without a peace deal? Any answer involves significant speculation. U.S. strategy seems designed to provide for the survival of a non-Taliban government in Afghanistan after 2014 with or without a negotiated deal with them. President Karzai will have to face new elections to stay beyond his current term. A deal with the Taliban may well provide for greater stability and continuity in a non-Taliban government, representing the majority in Afghanistan, staying in office beyond 2014. Of course it should be up to the people of Afghanistan to decide who will lead them after 2014.

Conclusion

No one is able to predict whether negotiations will take place or succeed. It appears on balance that now is the right time to determine whether that can happen. The risk in negotiation is far outweighed by the potential for gain, even if the situation remains uncertain. There are clearly ways forward. Negotiations provide the best chance for success and must be part of an overall strategy that puts in place a stable and secure Afghanistan. We just do not know if negotiations can succeed unless we try. We have the capacity to make a serious effort in this direction. Because the situation on the ground cannot and does not support a military victory, the chances are increasing that a negotiation can happen, and is likely to work. Military stalemate, war fatigue, financial difficulties, domestic support for withdrawal, and Afghan interest in finding a negotiated solution all make this prospect more useful and potentially attractive.

U.S. leadership in this process is essential. Pakistan and the Afghan parties are all key players. Others in the region and beyond with interests and influence in Afghanistan and the region are also key players. Getting a process started will be as hard as keeping it together and bringing it to a useful and successful conclusion. With the growing interest in negotiation in the region and beyond, now is the time to develop this option and see if it can be put in place and made useful.

All wars end with political consequences. It is in the interest of the United States to attempt to shape those political outcomes in ways that are favorable to its interests, including facilitating its exit strategy. Negotiation is a key way to attempt to do this. [PRISM](#)

Notes

¹ While the report itself did not examine in detail the positions of the various key players, a subsequent report for RAND by two of our participants did so. See James Shinn and James Dobbins, *Afghan Peace Talks: A Primer* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, August 2011). I have drawn heavily on their work for this section of my article and thank them for it.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

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⁹ See Lakhdar Brahim and Thomas R. Pickering, Co-Chairs, International Task Force on Afghanistan in Its Regional and Multilateral Dimensions, *Afghanistan: Negotiating Peace*, Report of The Century Foundation Task Force (New York: The Century Foundation, 2011).