

Talking to the Taliban 2011 – 2012: A Reflection

BY MARC GROSSMAN

When then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asked in early 2011 if I would become the United States' Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) – after the sudden death of Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the first SRAP – she described the foundations Ambassador Holbrooke had laid to manage one of the most challenging tasks facing the nation. Secretary Clinton also said that she wanted to continue the experiment: having the SRAP organization prove that the “whole-of-government” philosophy – the idea that the United States must employ expertise and resources from all relevant parts of government to address the nation's most important challenges – was the right model for 21st century diplomacy.² The SRAP team brought together experts from across the U.S. Government (and included several diplomats from NATO countries) to develop and implement integrated strategies to address the complex challenges in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the region.

Among the first things I learned when I arrived at my desk in February 2011, was that an allied government had put the United States in contact with someone who seemed to be an empowered representative of the Taliban, the Afghan insurgent group which the United States had removed from power in 2001, but which had ever since kept up a deadly war against Afghans, Americans and our allies, friends and partners.³ The contact was preliminary, but many in the White House and on the SRAP team hoped that this connection might open the door for the conversation everyone knew would be required if there were ever to be peace in Afghanistan: Afghans talking to other Afghans about the future of Afghanistan. Such direct talk had so far proven impossible because the Taliban refused to meet representatives of the government of Afghanistan. The intriguing opportunity offered by a direct U.S. conversation with the Taliban was that we might be able to create the context for the Afghan government and the Taliban to talk.

This reflection on the two years (2011-2013) I was the SRAP is my attempt to tell part of the story of the conversation between the United States and the Taliban, an initiative that became central to the SRAP team's efforts during these years. Others will recall it from their own

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perspectives, and there has been subsequent activity of which I am unaware. I also draw preliminary lessons and ask questions that might help those who may yet try to return to a conversation with the Taliban and those who will surely be faced with the challenge of talking to other insurgents to try to end future conflicts. Much of the detail of the conversations and the personalities involved properly remains classified, although too many people have already talked too much about our effort in ways that made it harder to achieve our objective.

The effort to sustain a U.S.-Taliban conversation was an integral component of America's national strategy in Afghanistan and a key part of the 2011-2012 diplomatic campaign in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was ordered, defined and described by President Barack Obama. The President's speech at West Point on December 1, 2009 was especially important: it was there that he ordered the surge of U.S. forces into Afghanistan and explained to the assembled cadets that, "We will support efforts by the Afghan government to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens."⁴

Secretary Clinton made the task explicit in a speech honoring Ambassador Holbrooke at the Asia Society in New York on February 18, 2011.⁵ In her address, the Secretary said that the military surge then underway in Afghanistan was a vital part of American strategy. Without the heroic effort of U.S. forces, joined by many allies, friends and partners, there was no chance of pursuing a diplomatic end to thirty years of conflict. Secretary Clinton also reminded her audience of the "civilian surge" underway in Afghanistan: thousands of courageous Americans from many U.S.

Government agencies as well as international and Afghan civilians were promoting civil society, economic development, good governance, and the protection and advancement of the role of Afghan women.

Secretary Clinton then called for a "diplomatic surge" to match the military and civilian efforts to catalyze and then shape a political end to the war. This meant focusing U.S. diplomatic resources in an effort to galvanize countries in both the region and the international community to support Afghanistan, including connecting Afghanistan and its neighbors by promoting regional economic opportunities and by engaging the leadership of Pakistan to make a contribution to an Afghan peace process. We believed that, as Henry Kissinger also argued in 2011, Afghanistan could only become secure, stable and prosperous when the region met its responsibility for a positive outcome.⁶

Secretary Clinton was explicit that the diplomatic surge would involve trying to sustain a dialogue with the Taliban even as she recognized the moral ambiguities involved in trying to fight and talk simultaneously with the insurgents. As she said that night in New York, "diplomacy would be easy if we only had to talk to our friends. But that is not how one makes peace." Crucially, she was clear that the U.S. would support the reconciliation of only those insurgents who met three important end conditions: break with al-Qaeda, end violence, and live inside the constitution of Afghanistan, which guarantees the rights of all individuals, including importantly, women.

The Diplomatic Surge

To achieve Secretary Clinton's objective to create a diplomatic surge, we decided first to refer to it as a "diplomatic campaign" to emphasize

that this would not be a series of ad-hoc engagements but instead an effort that followed a comprehensive plan.⁷ Building on the work done in 2009-2010 and the military and civilian efforts underway, and founded on SRAP's intense interaction and coordination with our Embassies in Kabul and Islamabad, we sought to connect the military effort with all of the instruments of non-military power in South and Central Asia, including official development assistance, involvement of the private sector, support for civil society, and the use of both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. We also sought at every stage to make sure these efforts provided the context to explore the tentative connection to the Taliban.

Throughout my service as SRAP, and especially on questions of talking to the Taliban and other insurgents, I drew on guidance received directly from the President, Secretary Clinton, the National Security Council, and from meetings of the Principals and Deputies Committees and special groups formed to support the conversation with the Taliban. My access to the White House, especially National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough, and Assistant to the President Douglas Lute, was extensive and productive. When we met Taliban, we did so with an interagency team. There were occasions when some colleagues tried to micromanage the conversation with the Taliban in ways designed to make it impossible to continue, but the need to keep interagency representatives engaged and as supportive as possible overrode my periodic frustrations.

As we reviewed the diplomatic calendar after Secretary Clinton's speech, we devised a roadmap to create a regional strategy that would produce political and material support

for Afghanistan from its neighbors and the international community while trying to set the conditions for talking with the Taliban. We pursued this roadmap by trying to shape, guide, and leverage four international meetings already set for 2011-2012: a meeting of Afghanistan's neighbors in November 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey, designed to define the region's stake in a secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan, including a potential peace process; an international meeting to mobilize post-2014 support for Afghanistan in Bonn, Germany, in December 2011; the NATO Summit in Chicago, United States, in May 2012; and an international gathering to promote economic development in Afghanistan set for Tokyo, Japan, on July 8, 2012

The government of Turkey organized the "Heart of Asia" conference in Istanbul on November 2, 2011, to have the region speak for itself about how it should and would support Afghanistan. At the conclusion of the Istanbul meeting, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and India all signed the Istanbul Declaration, a vision that mandates specific regional follow-up actions, including cooperation on counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics and efforts to increase trade and investment.⁸

On December 5, 2011, 85 nations, 15 international organizations and the United Nations met in Bonn to review the progress of the previous ten years and reiterate the international community's commitment to Afghanistan. The conclave agreed on a 2014-2024 "Transformation Decade" for Afghanistan. (2014 is the date NATO and the government of Afghanistan had chosen at the NATO Summit in Lisbon to end the combat mission in Afghanistan and the year that the Afghan constitution requires the election of a new president.) In Bonn, the government of

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Afghanistan made clear and specific promises on governance, women's rights and economic development. The Bonn conference also spelled out the international community's support for a peace process with end conditions for insurgent participation that mirrored those Secretary Clinton had laid out in February 2011.⁹

In advance of the NATO Summit in Chicago, hosted by President Obama, allies and partners pledged more than \$1.1 billion dollars (USD) per year for the years 2015, 2016, and 2017 to sustain and support the Afghan National Security Forces, in addition to the substantial support the United States had pledged. The Afghan government also committed \$500 million dollars (USD) per year for those three years. The strength and

continued development of Afghanistan's army and police will be essential to back up possible future Afghan negotiations with the Taliban and defend Afghanistan's progress if talks stall or fail.¹⁰

In Tokyo, the Japanese government and the Afghan co-chair sought to highlight the crucial role future official development assistance would make to the Transformational Decade. The Japanese government got pledges of \$16 billion dollars (USD) in development aid for Afghanistan for the years 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. Those who gathered in Tokyo also emphasized the need for private sector efforts to develop the region and highlighted the adoption of the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (MAF), in which the government of Afghanistan pledged itself



U.S. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Chad J. McNealey

British Prime Minister David Cameron, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta, U.S. President Barack Obama and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen observe a NATO color guard before a moment of silence honoring service members killed or wounded in Afghanistan at the NATO summit in Chicago, May 20, 2012.

to specific, consistent reform, especially in the area of the protection and promotion of women's rights, in exchange for continued international economic support.¹¹

We wanted the Taliban to receive a series of clear messages from the meetings in Istanbul, Bonn, Chicago, and Tokyo: that the international community supported a regional vision of peace, prosperity and stability which was designed to undermine the Taliban's narrative of never-ending conflict; that the international community was committed to supporting Afghanistan beyond 2014; that the Afghan government understood the need to improve its governance and fight corruption to answer the Taliban's charges that they would do a better job for the people of Afghanistan; that it was therefore time for the Taliban to change course and join a peace process with the Afghan government.

The other key component of the diplomatic campaign's regional strategy was based on the recognition that no regional structure to support Afghanistan's stability (or encourage an Afghan peace process) would succeed without a strong economic component, including a role for the private sector. To that end, Secretary Clinton introduced in Chennai, India, on July 20, 2011, a U.S. vision for a "New Silk Road" (NSR) to connect the vibrant economies in Central Asia with India's economic success, with Afghanistan and Pakistan in the center, where they could both benefit first from transit trade and ultimately from direct investments.¹²

This NSR, recalling historic trade routes, was based not just on the hope that the private sector, supported by governments, could find a way to connect the region economically, but on ideas and projects already on the table, including the proposed

Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI) and the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement. In addition, a U.S. Geological Survey report had recently concluded that Afghanistan had substantial potential mineral wealth, including rare earth minerals.¹³

Trade between Pakistan and India, with the encouragement of both governments, was expanding. The region had begun to recognize the necessity of economic links through its own organizations. In his book *Monsoon*, Robert Kaplan describes the importance of Afghanistan in the center of these potential regional linkages: "Stabilizing Afghanistan is about more than just the anti-terror war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban; it is about securing the future prosperity of the whole of southern Eurasia."¹⁴

I also believed that the NSR vision could provide additional context for encouraging talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. A successful NSR would, at least for some fighters, offer economic opportunities that would make it possible for them to conceive of an alternative future.

The effort to create a regional context to support Afghanistan and to sustain the dialogue with the Taliban in order to open the door for a direct conversation among Afghans required that we worked closely with Afghanistan's neighbors and the wider international community. At every meeting of the International Contact Group (ICG) – an organization of over fifty nations (many of them Muslim) previously created by Ambassador Holbrooke to support Afghanistan – that took place in 2011 and 2012, we encouraged the Chairman of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC), the Afghan government entity given the responsibility to carry out negotiations

with the Taliban, to brief the ICG on the status of the Afghan peace process. We used other events, such as meetings of NATO allies and ISAF partners to keep people informed.

We made a major effort to keep Russia and India informed of our thinking. Moscow and Delhi were both skeptical of the capacity of the Taliban to meet the requirements set by the government of Afghanistan and the international community, but both were key to any possible success. SRAP team members traveled often to Central Asia where there was always great interest in the possibilities for peace that could lead to secure borders, economic integration, and more regional cooperation to combat drug trafficking, and to China, where Beijing was arranging its policies toward Afghanistan to support the government in Kabul through various aid programs (three done jointly with the United States) and investments in the extractive industries.

These international and regional consultations always started and ended with discussions with Kabul. We also kept the government of Afghanistan, especially President Hamid Karzai, completely and fully informed of all of our conversations with the Taliban. We worked especially closely with the Foreign Minister and his team and with leaders and members of the HPC. Working with the HPC was especially important. Although more could always be done, especially to include more women in the HPC's senior ranks, HPC members did try to represent Afghanistan's geographic, ethnic, and gender diversity. I consulted with HPC Chairman Burhanuddin Rabbani, his deputy Mohammad Stanekzai, and other HPC members on each of my trips to Kabul, at each of the four international conferences and at many other international meetings. Embassy Kabul

kept up the dialogue not only in Kabul but also in HPC offices around the country.

During my service as SRAP, we encouraged the HPC to play an increasingly active role in setting Afghan peace policy and in pursuing tentative contacts with the insurgents in Afghanistan and, where possible, in other countries in the region. Indeed, on several occasions the HPC and then U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, met potential contacts as a team.

Problems with Pakistan

2011 was an awful year for U.S.-Pakistan relations.¹⁵ In February and March, the Raymond Davis case, in which a U.S. contractor shot and killed two Pakistanis when he thought he was the target of a robbery, pre-occupied both governments.¹⁶ On May 2, 2011, U.S. Special Forces killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad. After an initial positive reaction to the death of the world's most prominent terrorist, Pakistanis focused on what they said was a U.S. violation of their sovereignty, and U.S.-Pakistan relations deteriorated. In September 2011, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul was attacked by fighters from the Haqqani Network, a terrorist gang that operates largely from Pakistani territory. On November 26, 2011, twenty-four Pakistani soldiers were accidentally killed on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border by U.S. aircraft.

Although we had from the beginning of the diplomatic campaign in February 2011 paid special attention to working with Pakistan's civilian and military leadership, we felt it best at this point to step back and let Pakistanis debate the future of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship and come to their own conclusions before it would be possible to reengage.

On April 12, 2012, the Pakistani Parliament unanimously approved the recommendations of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security for U.S.-Pakistan relations.¹⁷ In Washington, these recommendations were read as far from ideal, but they formed the basis of a new dialogue. When Secretary Clinton met Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari at NATO's Chicago summit in May, the two sides agreed to try over the following six months to reopen the ground lines of communication from Afghanistan through Pakistan (which had been closed since the November 2011 incident), focus on supporting the Afghan peace process, pursue joint counter-terrorism efforts, and try to move the U.S.-Pakistan economic relationship from one that was centered on U.S. aid to Pakistan to one based on trade and investment. Secretary Clinton met with Foreign Minister Hina

Rabbani Khar in Tokyo in July and in Washington in September, and then again with President Zardari in New York that same month to find concrete ways the U.S. and Pakistan could identify shared interests and act on them jointly.

The one bit of good news in 2011 had been the establishment of the U.S.-Pakistan-Afghanistan Core Group, organized to enable the three countries to talk about how to support an Afghan peace process. By end of 2012, the Core Group had met eight times, including one meeting chaired by Secretary Clinton with Pakistani Foreign Minister Khar and Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Zalmay Rassoul. In Core Group meetings and, more importantly, in bilateral meetings between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Pakistanis seemed more ready to engage in taking specific steps to promote reconciliation among Afghans, such as discussing



U.S. Army Sgt. David E. Alvarado

Gen. Bismullah Mohammadi of the Afghan National Army, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani Chief of Army Staff of the Pakistan Army and Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, Commander of NATO International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces Afghanistan (Center) gather for a group photo with senior military and diplomatic representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States prior to the 29th Tripartite Commission held at NATO International Security Assistance Forces Headquarters, Kabul, Afghanistan August 17, 2013.

how to manage the safe passage of insurgents traveling from Pakistan to a potential negotiating venue. This emerging story of joint efforts to promote reconciliation was too often overshadowed during these years by Pakistan's continued hedging strategy in Afghanistan, and by the Afghan Taliban's use of safe havens inside Pakistan to support their attacks on Afghan, U.S. and other ISAF forces.

Talking to the Taliban

The United States' attempt to sustain a dialogue with the Taliban and pave the way for an Afghan-Afghan conversation about ending the war started with preliminary sessions with a U.S. "Contact Team" in Europe and the Gulf.¹⁸ I began to participate in these talks in mid-2011 and chaired the U.S. interagency team at the several sessions in Qatar until the Taliban ended the talks in March 2012.

One of the first questions I asked when I took on the SRAP responsibility was, "Who was sitting across from us at the negotiating table?" An impostor had already embarrassed NATO in 2010.¹⁹ Over a period of months, we became convinced that the Taliban representative, who was professional and focused throughout our interactions, had the authority to negotiate what we were trying to achieve: a series of confidence-building measures designed to open the door for the Taliban to talk directly to the government of Afghanistan.

These confidence-building measures included the opening of a political office for the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, where Afghans could meet to talk about how to end the war. We made clear to everyone that the office could not represent the headquarters of an alternative Afghan government in-exile (and certainly could not be called an office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – the Taliban's

name for the state they were seeking to establish), nor could the office be an insurgent recruiting station or a venue for raising money to support the insurgency.

The confidence-building measures (CBMs) also included the requirement that the Taliban make a public statement (or statements) distancing themselves from international terrorism and accepting the need for an Afghan political process. The CBMs also involved the possible transfer of Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo and the release of U.S. Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, a captive of the insurgents since 2009.²⁰

As we had more sessions with the Taliban's representative in Qatar, it became clearer that the Taliban's main objective was to get their prisoners released from Guantanamo. They were convinced they had leverage on the United States because they controlled Sergeant Bergdahl. Both sides tried unsuccessfully to use their prisoner(s) as a foundation for a larger arrangement.

In the end, we were unable to reach agreement with the Taliban on any part of this CBM sequence. Throughout the U.S. effort to get the Afghan government and the Taliban to talk directly, President Karzai remained very concerned that we would make an arrangement with the Taliban that ignored Afghanistan's interests. I did my best, supported by the highest levels in Washington and by Ambassador Ryan Crocker and his team in Kabul, to convince him that this was not our intent or in our interests.

When the Taliban announced on March 15, 2012, that they were suspending talks with the United States, observers gave several reasons, including the analysis that the Taliban leadership was having a hard time motivating their fighters. "Why should I fight," some

insurgents presumably asked, “when there are peace talks with the enemy?”²¹ The Taliban claimed that they were suspending talks because we had reneged on our promises about Guantanamo (untrue) and that, to keep faith with President Karzai, we had added some steps to the CBM sequence (true).

The attempt to open the Political Office in Qatar in June 2013, which failed after the Taliban misrepresented the name and purpose of the office, highlights the U.S. Administration’s continued interest in pursuing a political counterpart to the U.S. military strategy and getting Sergeant Bergdahl home, as December 2014 marks the end of ISAF’s combat role.²² Representatives of the Afghan government have met Taliban representatives at conferences and during Track II conversations, including, if press reports are accurate,

sometimes talking without the government’s permission.²³ Although there remains a high level of distrust in both Kabul and Islamabad about the others’ strategy, tactics and motivation, Pakistan’s new government has signaled interest in supporting an Afghan peace process, including by hosting President Karzai for meetings in Islamabad in August 2013 and then releasing some Taliban prisoners in early September, “to further facilitate the Afghan reconciliation process.”²⁴ There remain many uncertainties about whether there can ever be direct talks among Afghans about their future and a serious conversation may not be possible until after the April 2014 Presidential elections. President Karzai has recently demanded, as part of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) end game, American support for opening talks between his government and the



Pete Souza

President Barack Obama (center) with Afghan President Hamid Karzai (left) and Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari (right) during a US-Afghan-Pakistan Trilateral meeting in Cabinet Room. 6 May 2009.

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Taliban. What is clear is that the need for an Afghan peace process is now squarely on the international agenda in a way it was not when Secretary Clinton spoke in New York in February 2011.

Conclusions

As I reflect on our attempt to talk to the Taliban in 2011-2012, here are several conclusions and questions which may be of some use to those who continue the work of the SRAP and, perhaps, others who will again face the question of negotiating with terrorists or insurgents on behalf of the United States.

Diplomacy must be backed by force; the use of force must back the diplomacy. Negotiations must be part of the larger campaign and must be seen to be so by everyone involved. As retired British General Sir Rupert

Smith has written, "The general purpose of all interventions is clear: we seek to establish in the minds of the people and their leaders that the ever-present option of conflict is not the preferable course of action when in confrontation over some matter or other [...] To do this, military force is a valid option, a level of intervention and influence, as much as economic, political and diplomatic leverage, but to be effective it must be applied as part of the greater scheme, focusing all measure on the one goal." Smith also writes, "We seek to create a conceptual space for diplomacy, economic incentives, political pressure and other measure to create a desired political outcome of stability."²⁵

During my tenure, I consulted closely with the Chairman and the Vice Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, and with Generals



Pete Souza

United States President Barack Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai exchange documents after signing the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement Between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at the Presidential Palace in Kabul, Afghanistan on 2 May 2012.

James Mattis, David Petraeus, and John Allen, military leaders of U.S. Central Command, and ISAF, in Tampa, Florida, and Kabul – not just about talking to the Taliban, but about how the diplomatic campaign supported the military strategy in Afghanistan and the region.

Working with the intelligence community, we consistently re-examined the possibility that the Taliban had entered a conversation in order to keep us busy or distracted or both while they continued to kill Afghans, Americans, friends, partners and allies, waiting for what they believed would be our ultimate withdrawal. We also recognized that our effort to engage in talks might only produce fissures in the Taliban and not Afghan-Afghan talks, especially as the Taliban were so focused on their Guantanamo prisoners.

The U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), signed by President Obama and President Karzai in Kabul in May 2012, was a key part of our effort to put the talks with the Taliban in the context of a comprehensive vision for a future partnership. The best statement of how important a peace process could be to America's larger national strategy is President Obama's statement in Kabul in May 1, 2012. The President said that the United States has five lines of effort in Afghanistan: fighting terrorism; training and assisting Afghan National Security Forces; building an enduring partnership with Afghanistan; supporting an Afghan peace process; and, working to create strong regional structure to support Afghanistan into the future.²⁶

The SPA sent an important message to the Afghan people: You will not be abandoned after 2014, and the U.S.-Afghan relationship in the years ahead will not be a solely military relationship. The Taliban will also pay close

attention to the fate of the BSA, which follows on from the SPA, and which President Karzai has so far refused to sign. Without a BSA, endorsed by Karzai or his successor, President Obama cannot keep even a minimum number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan after January 2015 to give the Afghans confidence that we will support them in protecting what has been achieved at such high cost, to pursue the still crucial counter-terrorism mission, and to train and ANSF. With no American forces deployed, U.S. allies and partners will have a much harder time supporting Afghanistan militarily.

It is hard to fight and talk at the same time. I underestimated this challenge in our own government and similarly underplayed it in initially analyzing the Taliban perspective. There is always a temptation in the interagency to paper over disputes, but we tried to remain committed to unity of effort because the President had made clear his desire to see what could be done to establish an Afghan-Afghan peace process. One example was the question of how to assess the relative priority between reintegrating individual Taliban fighters back into society and the possibility of a larger reconciliation process with senior insurgent leaders as part of an Afghan peace negotiation.

Some argued that the reintegration program, which had, with Afghan government support, successfully attracted several thousand Taliban out of the insurgency and back into society was all that was needed to end the conflict over time. The SRAP team supported the reintegration program but saw it as one part of a larger whole. I often described reintegration as "retail" (but still very important) and reconciliation that would take place as part of a larger peace process as "wholesale" as a way to bridge these differences in perspective.

Simultaneously fighting and talking was also hard for the Taliban. While we met with a representative of the Taliban Political Commission, who seemed interested in a negotiated end to the conflict, the Taliban Military Commission appeared to want to continue the fight: they could not understand why they should give up what they considered they had achieved at great cost in a political settlement. The Taliban also were unconstrained in how they fought, using the most brutal tactics and efforts, such as suicide bombing, attacks on schools and hospitals and the “green-on-blue” or “insider” killings, which they correctly recognized had a substantial impact on morale in ISAF countries.

When and how to fight and talk simultaneously is also heavily influenced by external events and time-lines: a U.S. election for example, or the time it would take for the various parties to comprehend the impact of the outcomes of Istanbul, Bonn, Chicago, and Tokyo. I often told the SRAP team that our effort to sustain a dialogue with the Taliban might have been undertaken a year too soon and that in mid-2013 or early 2014, someone would be back trying to talk to the Taliban or some part of the group. Perhaps the attempt to restart talks in Qatar in June 2013 supports that prediction.

While the objective is to shape events, it is crucial to be able to react to the unexpected. We often found ourselves reacting to Taliban actions, which in their brutality called into question their commitment and capacity to create a peace process. Unexpected events in the United States, such as the accidental burning of Korans and the release of videos showing U.S. soldiers urinating on Taliban bodies gave the insurgents free rhetorical ammunition. But the event that, for me, had the most

unforeseen consequences was the murder in September 2011 of the then Chairman of the HPC, Burhanuddin Rabbani. Whoever committed this act had a diabolically accurate sense of how damaging Rabbani’s murder was for the peace effort. What I did not immediately understand was that our challenge would be multiplied because Rabbani’s chief assistant, Mohammad Stanekzai, who was severely wounded in the attack, then spent weeks at a military hospital in India. We realized how much we had missed Stanekzai’s wisdom and courage on his return.

The capacity and the commitment of the allied partner are critical considerations. President Karzai’s objective in the two years I was the SRAP was to expand Afghanistan’s sovereignty. In many important ways, this was exactly what we were also seeking, but President Karzai’s efforts created tension on issues like U.S. support for an Afghan peace process, negotiations on the Strategic Partnership Agreement (and now the BSA) and the question of who should be responsible for holding Afghan prisoners in Afghanistan and for how long. The February 13, 2014 release by Afghanistan of 65 prisoners from the Parwan Detention Facility has refueled this controversy. The Taliban also made much of corruption, which many perceived had infused Afghanistan, especially its financial system, with the Kabul Bank scandal being a prominent example.

The question for the future is whether the government of Afghanistan will meet the obligations it undertook in the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, including its emphasis on a legitimate election in April 2014 and, crucially, focus on women’s rights and protections.²⁷ If they do so, the generous pledges made in Tokyo by donors need to

move from pledges to real money. Another key consideration is whether Afghans will fight to protect what they have achieved at such great cost to themselves, Americans and our friends, allies and partners, and whether to carry out this struggle they will support the Afghan National Security Forces. To support this fight, the international community must meet the commitments it made in Chicago to keep these forces funded and trained.

President Obama faces the challenging question of how many U.S. troops to leave in Afghanistan after December 2014 to support the Afghan National Security Force and fight terrorism. A robust number will be an essential signal to Afghans and promote contributions from other allies, friends and partners. The Taliban will be astute judges of whether Afghans have the will to fight and whether we have the will to support them.

It is important to be clear about how much influence to give other countries, organizations, and individuals who are trying to help. The conversation with the Taliban was surrounded by facilitators, enablers, supporters, and critics. The German government worked closely with us as we pursued Taliban contacts. The government of Qatar hosted Taliban representatives and encouraged the direct negotiation. The Saudi government worked hard to get the Taliban publicly to break with al-Qaeda. The Turkish government supported the regional effort, and encouraged contacts with the insurgents, including providing medical care and shelter to Taliban “moderate,” Agha Jan Motasim after he was wounded in a shooting in Pakistan.²⁸ The UAE government worked closely with the SRAP team on issues related to both Afghanistan and Pakistan and hosted meetings of the International Contact Group. Prime Minister

David Cameron, Foreign Secretary William Hague and other senior British officials kept close tabs on the possibilities and encouraged rapid movement. Other European countries played confidential facilitative roles. The United Nations had its own contacts with the Taliban and others and provided counsel and perspective. The UN Security Council was active both in reforming and managing the sanctions on Taliban travel. The SRAP team was also contacted by numerous groups and individuals who provided insights and the ability to pass messages. There was also an active Track II effort underway in Europe and in the Gulf, where Taliban representatives met informally with private and official contacts, including SRAP team members. I favored multiple contacts with the Taliban as long as everyone told the Taliban that we were in contact with one another so that the Taliban did not believe that they had individual leverage.

It is important to be clear about how much influence to give other countries, organizations, and individuals who are trying to help.

The neighbors matter. While easier to prescribe than accomplish, the main task with Pakistan remains to convince them that their real struggle is with the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), and that chaos in Afghanistan is bad for Pakistan because it will surely be exploited by the TTP. U.S. leaders need to keep pressing for an end to the safe havens Pakistan either provides or tolerates for the Afghan Taliban. Enforcing that requirement is complicated, however, by the U.S. military’s need for the Ground Lines of Communication (GLOCs) to exit Afghanistan.

The Central Asian states must also continue to be engaged. Their fears: narcotics trafficking, terrorism, lawless borders; are real and need to be addressed through a regional approach founded on the commitments made in Istanbul and after, with the support of the international community. Beijing has taken up the “New Silk Road” mantle. Following trips to the region by his two immediate predecessors, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited four Central Asian countries in September 2013, “eclipsing,” according to the Washington Post, “the American vision of a New Silk Road.”²⁹

We need to remain open to the option of talking with Iran about Afghanistan; some, but by no means all, of our interests overlap. When I became the SRAP, the Iranians sent a message through an American non-governmental organization that they would receive me in Tehran to discuss Afghanistan. I was authorized to respond that I would meet an Iranian representative in Afghanistan or in a third country. We passed this message three separate times in mid and late 2011 but never received a definitive response.³⁰

It is vital to understand what has been done beforehand. The SRAP team set out to interview people who had been involved in talking to insurgents and those who had set up peace negotiations in the past. We built up a library of information and plans, including models ready in case there was a rapid, broader attempt to negotiate peace. Although there is much academic and practical literature on the question of how wars end and how to speak to insurgents, some scholars and practitioners have looked more deeply than others into these issues.³¹

Create as much public consensus as possible, especially on Capitol Hill. Pay close

attention to local opinion. Just as we worked hard to keep allies, friends, and partners fully informed of our activities, we also paid particular attention to briefing the Congress at every opportunity and consulting with members as necessary. While we greatly benefitted from our interactions with members of the House and Senate and took seriously their advice and concerns, we did not succeed in convincing senior leaders of the Senate or the House that transferring Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo to Qatar was the right course of action.³²

Given the requirements of secrecy involving the negotiation, we also did our best to keep up a public conversation on the need for an Afghan peace process, including having Secretary Clinton reiterate our willingness to engage in a dialogue in a speech in early April 2012, after the Taliban broke off the talks a month earlier.³³

Talking to the Taliban was not a major issue in the 2012 U.S. Presidential campaign; in fact, some columnists and observers generally supported our effort.³⁴ We regularly engaged the Afghan press, parliament, civil society, and the opposition, both directly and through the U.S. Mission in Kabul, but many Afghans, especially women, remained deeply troubled by the possibilities of anyone talking to the Taliban. Given their history and the Taliban’s tactics, this was understandable and they constantly and properly reminded us not to make decisions for them about the future of Afghanistan. Secretary Clinton met civil society representatives often, including in Bonn and Tokyo.

President Obama and Secretary Clinton were clear about the fundamental premise of the diplomatic campaign: the war in Afghanistan was going to end politically and

we would either shape that end or be shaped by it. Shaping the end involved using all of the instruments of U.S. non-military power in South Asia, including the 2011-2012 diplomatic campaign to create a regional structure to support Afghanistan, the NSR economic initiative, and the attempt to negotiate with the Taliban to try to open the door for Afghans to talk to other Afghans about the future of Afghanistan. It was a worthy effort even recognizing that it did not result in a set of CBMs, that the Taliban continue their fight, that Sergeant Bergdhal is still a captive and the concept of a prisoner transfer was poorly received on Capitol Hill.

One more point is worth making; the moral ambiguity involved in talking to insurgents was clarified by our commitment to American values and the way those values define U.S. diplomacy. We believed that any arrangement we managed to make with the Taliban would have to meet not just the standards set in Secretary Clinton's Asia Society speech but also American commitments to tolerance, pluralism, and the rule of law. In the end, it came down, for me, to the conviction described by Berti Ahern, the former Irish Prime Minister, who is quoted by Mitchell Reiss: "You ask yourself," said Ahern, "Can I stop the killing for the next decade? I can't stop the killing of the last decade... so there's one acid test: Are these people willing, if circumstances were different, to move into a political process? The reward is there aren't so many funerals."³⁵ **PRISM**

Notes

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² Many have written on this subject, For example, George L. Argyros, Marc Grossman and Felix G. Rohatyn, *Embassy of the Future* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007) and Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, *Smart Power* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007). Secretary Clinton's *Leading Through Civilian Power: The First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* (Washington, DC: Department of State, December 2010) speaks directly to the whole of government concept and is dedicated to Holbrooke.

³ See, for example, Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2000) and Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos* (New York: Viking, 2008).

⁴ President Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," U.S. Military Academy at West Point, West Point, New York, December 1, 2009.

⁵ Hillary Clinton, "Remarks at the Launch of the Asia Society's Series of Richard C. Holbrooke's Memorial Addresses", The Asia Society, New York, February 11, 2011.

⁶ Henry Kissinger, "How to Exit Afghanistan Without Creating Wider Conflict", *The Washington Post*, June 7, 2011 and conversations with the author.

⁷ I have described the 2011-2012 diplomatic campaign more fully in "Seven Cities and Two Years" in the *Yale Journal of International Affairs* (Summer 2013), 65-75, from which I have drawn for this essay. My thanks and recognition to the *Yale Journal*. <http://yalejournal.org/2013/06/12/seven-cities-and-two-years-the-diplomatic-campaign-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/> A skeptical view of whether the State Department is capable of purposeful activity is in Dr. Kori N.

Schake's, *State of Disrepair* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2012). See also Marc Grossman, "The State Department: Culture as Destiny", Roger Z. George and Harvey Rishikof, *The National Security Enterprise*, (Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC 2011), 84.

⁸ "Declaration of the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan" (Istanbul, November 2, 2011).

⁹ "Afghanistan and the International Community: From Transition to the Transformation Decade" (The International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, December 5, 2011).

¹⁰ NATO, "Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan" (Issued by the Heads of State and Government of Afghanistan and Nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, Chicago, May 21, 2012).

¹¹ "The Tokyo Declaration: Partnership for Self-Reliance in Afghanistan, From Transition to Transformation" (Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan, July 8, 2012) and "Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework" (Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan, July 8, 2012).

¹² Hillary Clinton, "Remarks on India and the United State: A Vision for the 21st Century" (speech given at Anna Centenary Library, Chennai, India, July 20, 2011).

¹³ Cheryl Pellerin, "DoD, U.S. Agencies Help Afghanistan Exploit Mineral Wealth," *American Forces Press Service*, July 30, 2012.

¹⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011), 14.

¹⁵ For this section on Pakistan, I have again drawn on my article in *The Yale Journal of International Affairs* (Summer 2013), 65-75.

¹⁶ Mark Mazzetti, "Pakistan's Public Enemy," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 14, 2013, 30-35 and 40-41.

¹⁷ Zahid Gishkori and Huma Imtiaz, "Pak-U.S. Ties: Parliament Unanimously Adopts Revised Recommendations Draft," *The Express Tribune*, April 12, 2012.

¹⁸ This story is told in *Pakistan on The Brink* by Ahmed Rashid. Viking, New York 2012, pages 113-136. See also Karen DeYoung, "US-Taliban Talks Reached Tentative Accord", *The Washington Post*, December 23, 2011; Karen DeYoung, "US to Resume Talks With Taliban", *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2012; "As US-Taliban Talks Stall, Hope for Solution Dims", *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2012; Lyse

Doucet, "The Ball is Now in the Taliban's Court", BBC February 15, 2013.

¹⁹ Rashid, 129

²⁰ Sargent Bergdahl's parents told his story in the May 15, 2012 issue of *Time*.

²¹ Sami Yousefzai and Ron Moreau, "How Afghan Peace Talks are Splintering the Taliban", *Newsweek*, February 13, 2012, <http://www.newsweek.com/how-afghan-peace-talks-are-splintering-taliban-65667>.

²² For recent reporting and analysis see Stephen Biddle, "Ending the War In Afghanistan", *Foreign Affairs*, (September/October 2013), 49-58; Josh Rogin, "Here's Why America's Only P.O.W. Was Suddenly Shown Alive", *The Daily Beast*, February 12, 2014; Anne Gearan and Ernesto Londono, "Taliban Prisoner Swap Possible", *Washington Post*, February 18, 2014.

²³ Bailey Cahall, "Afghanistan's AG Removed for Meeting Taliban Without Permission", *Foreign Policy Magazine*, AfPak Daily, August 19, 2013.

²⁴ Pamela Constable, "Pakistan Frees 7 Afghan Taliban", *The Washington Post* September 8, 2013, A-10; Rod Nordland and Sharifullah Shak, "Afghanistan and Pakistan Release Taliban Militants", *The New York Times*, September 8, 2013, 12.

²⁵ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*, (New York: Vintage, 2007), 272 and 409.

²⁶ Remarks by President Obama, "Address to the Nation from Afghanistan", Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan, May 1, 2012.

²⁷ Biddle, *Foreign Affairs*.

²⁸ Pamela Constable brings the so far unsuccessful effort to have Agha Jan Motasim lead an "alternate Taliban" up to date in "Suicide bombing continue surge in lethal Taliban attacks", *The Washington Post* September 1, 2013.

²⁹ Simon Denyer, "China Charting Two New 'Silk Roads', Bypassing U.S.", *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2013.

³⁰ Former Iranian Ambassador Seyed Hossein Musavian says that that Iran "extended an official invitation" to me to visit Tehran just as I started as SRAP, although I had this only from a U.S. NGO. Musavian says we "dismissed" the overture. In fact, as I have noted here, we reached out three times to Tehran to open a dialogue. Since I was not likely actually to go to Tehran, no one will know what might have been accomplished had we found a venue acceptable to both sides. I regret that we were not able to open this channel. Seyed Hossein Musavian, "Engage with Iran in Afghanistan", in *The National Interest*, May 30, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/>

commentary/engag-iran-afghanistan-8528 and conversations with the author.

³¹ Mitchell B. Reiss, *Negotiating With Evil: When to Talk to Terrorists*, (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2010); James Shinn and James Dobbins,

³² *Afghan Peace Talks: A Primer*, (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2011); Anatol Lieven, "Afghanistan: The Best Way to Peace", *The New York Review of Books*, February 9, 2012, pp. 30-32 and conversations with the author; Ben Connable and Martin Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2010); Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time* (New York: A Free Press, 1988).

³² "Taliban Gitmo Deal is Swap for a Westerner", Josh Rogin, *The Cable*, March 13, 2012. http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/13/exclusive_taliban_gitmo_deal_is_swap_for_westerner

³³ "Remarks to the World Affairs Council 2012 NATO Conference" by Secretary of State Clinton, Norfolk, Virginia, April 3, 2012.

³⁴ See, for example, David Ignatius, "Romney's Misfired Zinger on Taliban Talks", *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2012 and Steven Hadley and John Podesta, "Enough Already: It's Time to Talk to the Taliban", <http://www.foreignpolicy.com>, January 18, 2012

³⁵ Reiss page 244