



Afghanistan Talking to Taliban

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*Who guessed that it was a Pandora's box
We'd opened in that Era of Cold War,
And that some day it would be our own Ox
That Talibanish terror came to gore
Who knew, when back then we started this fuss,
Their Chickens, would come home to roost ... with
us.*

Larry Eisenberg, NYTimes, November 21, 2008.

Hindu Kush and the North Western frontier mountain range is a huge ledge of mountains perennially snow-capped and extending 1600 miles in a huge north-south wall dividing Pakistan and Afghanistan. There are few militarily useful passes, the most famous being the Khyber Pass and the Durand Line arbitrarily carved up a demarcation between the two countries – has long served as a haven for the people of these mountains, a motley mix of several tribal groups from both sides of the border. Today, this range serves as a breeding ground for the Taliban-led insurgents, who are fighting against the American-led coalition of troops in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, who were removed from power in the immediate aftermath of the American-led invasion of Afghanistan, fled across this craggy sierra and into Pakistan. There, in villages nestled in veiled valleys away from prying eyes, they regrouped and replenished – clandestinely nurtured in a string of madrassas, religious schools, by various external forces including Pakistan's ever-elusive intelligence agency, the ISI. In 2006, they made a comeback in Afghanistan, taking advantage of a long drawn out and failing war, Afghan grievances, a booming narcotics trade and a weak and unpopular national government. Today, the Taliban have effectively

reached within a few miles of Kabul (last month, they even managed to successfully conduct suicide bomb attacks on several government buildings in Kabul), and their influence extends across the entire swath of territory from central Afghanistan to eastern Pakistan up to Lahore. One report by the Senlis Council, an international thinktank focused among other things on the Afghanistan crisis, suggested that the Taliban might have control over 72% of Afghanistan in 2008, a significant jump from 54% in 2007. In light of this increasing menace, the Obama administration recently decided to boost the troop count by 17,000. Despite his predecessor's zero-tolerance policy, President Obama has also decided to extend overtures to the Taliban to try and seek a comprehensive approach of engagement to the problem of growing instability in the region.

Talking to the Taliban, while high-minded in principle, is over-idealistic in reality. There are several problems and too many nuances that need to be addressed before such an idea can even be considered. If however, for simplicity's sake, we were to mull over such a proposal, several questions need to be answered.

I TALKING TO WHOM? AND WHAT?

The Taliban are not a monolithic organization, as is commonly believed. Today, the insurgency comprises of a loose amalgam of guerrilla groups, followers of warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, foreign fighters, bandits, drug traffickers and other cartels along the Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal belt.

At the very basic level, there are two different factions of the Taliban today – one group, which is

the Afghan Taliban, comprising mainly of Afghan Pashtuns fighting the soldiers of Operation Enduring Freedom and NATO-ISAF, and who have generally kept away from the larger Jihadi agenda. Led by the Pakistan-based elusive one-eyed cleric Mullah Muhammad Omar, theirs is a nationalized fight.

There is also the Pakistani Taliban, who are guided by leaders interested in retaining and extending their influence of power, who want Afghanistan to return to its pre-911 status and who are also more Islamist in agenda. The relationship between the two groups extends only as far as one needs the other. "There are only some links between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban," says Shanthie D'Souza, of the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in India, "They have sanctuary in Pakistan, should they need it. They have tactical linkages, not strategic linkages. They don't have the same thinking and not a whole lot in common as far as ideology is concerned. Things like suicide bombings are being carried out by foreign fighters, not Afghans who are opposed to the idea."

Taliban leaders based in Pakistan today are finding it increasingly difficult to control their rank and file in Afghanistan. Some rogue elements

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have formed their own groupings, and take orders from local commanders. Moderate factions within the Taliban have been marginalized. Given such fissures within the Taliban organization, it is next to impossible to ascertain who to invite to reconciliation meetings, and who not to. While various players like Saudi Arabia, USA and the UK have been trying to engage with various Taliban elements, given the organization's decentralized and amorphous nature, any successes in co-

opting the Taliban are highly localized and not widespread.

What the Taliban want is another perplexing question with no easy answers. Some want to address local grievances; others want a return to the brief period prior to 9/11 when the Taliban controlled Afghanistan in the late 90's, and the establishment of a caliphate. In the nebulous space where the Taliban and Al Qaeda elements mix, there are also those driven by global jihadist aspirations. All in all, most people agree that the demands of the Taliban hardliners can never be met because it would mean a radical Islamization of the Afghan constitution and gross violations of human rights especially women's rights among other things.

The moderates are much less ideological. According to some, the idea of a moderate Taliban might even be paradoxical and a misnomer. "A 'moderate Taliban' is a very bizarre term," says Joanna Nathan of the International Crisis Group, "They are not sitting around debating fine layers of theology late into the night. They're mostly people committed to fighting for local reasons. They're not fighting for ideology. So there's not really anything such as a 'moderate Taliban.'"

The Taliban has become a brand name, which the leaders are running like a franchise, and to whom people are turning to, to address very local grievances. According to Nathan, "It's simply farmers picking up the gun to fight one day and then going back to doing their harvest the next." There are a lot of crossovers, plenty of new recruitment and loss of personnel to other rival factions. So much so that Nathan describes it as a "fashion show of sorts, where they come, twirl around and then go." In such a disjointed, non-coherent setting it is difficult to address every single Talib's needs.

II WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

Assuming that the Taliban do attend a roundtable of sorts, getting others to sit on the same table would be as tricky a process as any other. There are several actors currently at work who could, only theoretically, be involved:

The Afghan National Government

A power sharing deal between the government and the Taliban, while ideal, is bound not to work. With the national government propped up on the finances and fire power of foreign countries, and with the general perception among the Afghan population of the regime being puppets of western nations, the national government suffers from a lack of credibility. Rampant corruption, power distribution among former warlords, and a weak national policing and armed force has only exacerbated the problem. The government's writ today does not extend beyond the boundaries of Kabul. In fact, it was in response to the many failures of the government at the provincial level that the Taliban re-emerged as a vying opposition force. The Taliban view themselves as winners of the modern war in Afghanistan, and they are driven very much by a winner-takes-all ethos. "Why would the Taliban talk if they know they're the ones who are succeeding," according to Ashok Kumar Behuria, a professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, "A winning force would not like to talk. Why should they talk to a losing party? All talks about talks with the Taliban will have to factor in this dimension."

According to Vishal Chandra, an Afghanistan expert at the IDSA, "If Kabul wants to negotiate with some elements of the Taliban, they are negotiating from a very weak position. That makes the whole idea of talking with the Taliban a very uncharitable idea in my view. It won't work in the long run." No one is sure if the Taliban is even willing to yield any political power to the Afghan government.

US and NATO

While the US and NATO collectively possess the military wherewithal to deal with enemies in conventional wars, given the complex nature of the Afghan conflict and the lack of coordination between the US and its NATO allies, efforts to deal with the Taliban crisis have been severely undermined. For starters, there are major differences in how to deal with Afghanistan's drug economy, a major source of income for the Taliban-led insurgency. While the American government has practiced aerial crop-eradication, many European nations are opposed to this idea of spraying chemicals to kill the opium crop because many innocent farmers are losing their only means of livelihood without any real alternatives. This leads to a loss of goodwill among

the locals, and disenchanting farmers are in turn supporting the Taliban who encourage them to grow poppy to sustain themselves. In general, there has also been a lackadaisical attitude by Americans towards the drug problem in Afghanistan mainly because it is not showing up on the streets of major American cities. Like Mr.

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Chandra puts it, "The Americans are not directly hit by the Afghan opium war as such. It's the Europeans who are hit more. Americans are victims of the Colombian drugs", rather than Afghan opium that makes its way into markets in Europe.

Lack of consensus, war weariness and dearth of military prowess are among the several issues plaguing American and European involvement in the region. The Taliban are aware of this and are playing their cards tactfully. Their strategy is popularly labeled as the "war of the flea", with the aim that the enemy will suffer "a dog's disadvantages: too much to defend, too small, ubiquitous and agile an enemy to come to grips with." The Taliban strategy is to wait out western patience and sustainability. This makes the US and NATO unsuitable candidates for the roundtable.

Pakistan

Traditional supporters of the Taliban and those responsible for the rise of the Taliban movement in the first place, today Pakistan finds itself in a quandary. Unwilling partners in a war on terror, Pakistan is severely hampered by internal structural problems with regards to its own state politics. Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan has been labeled by military analysts as "strategic depth", a reference to a warped vision of the Pakistani state to have a friendly and sycophantic Afghan government in place, which they could

use as a balance of regional power against India, Pakistan's traditional enemy. Hence a stable Afghanistan is never in Pakistan's best interests.

Historically, the Taliban and the Pakistan government have maintained strong ties. This is why Pakistan turned a blind eye to the territorial control of regional warlords and the string of extremist madrassas operating along its western border. Today however, the Pakistani Taliban has a "reverse strategic depth" in Pakistan, according to Dr. Behuria, "It is the Taliban which is creating problems for Pakistan in the tribal terrain." The Taliban have grown into a Frankensteinian monster beyond the control of Pakistan, and in turn threaten to "bite the very hand that fed it."

Tribal Chiefs

Afghanistan historically is a patriarchal society with tribal chieftains having the last word on all matters of dispute, justice, etc. Many experts have grappled with the idea of using these very chiefs to try and rein in the Taliban. The idea of a village head is very colonial, having its roots in the era of British imperialism in the subcontinent. Recent events in the region however, have changed the dynamics of this relationship between the people and their heads. Religion has gained a stronger footing, evidenced as far back as British secret service reports from the 1930's and 1940's. "The Pashtun is a slave of the mullah," says Dr. Behuria, "The tribal Pashtun is divided between his loyalty to the tribal community on the one hand, and to Islam on the other. But he is more of a slave to the mullah than to the tribal sardar."

Events of the 1980's and 1990's were also responsible to accelerate this change, when the mullahs came to the fore, and later when the Taliban drove out corrupt warlords who practiced sodomy and brutalized the population. Hence, the tribal chiefs no longer possess the same authority over people as they did earlier.

III

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT TO NEGOTIATE?

There are few incentives that the Taliban can be given. Their agenda is a radical one, as characterized in their past actions and modern demands to covert Afghanistan into a fundamentalist Islamic state with the implementation of the Islamic Sharia, wipe out

minority groups, remove women from all seats of power and restrict their authority.

There is also a high level of distrust and suspicion among the Taliban towards the Afghan government or any other foreign power. This is partially based in religion, and part of it has to do with past failures on the part of western governments. In 2001, the Taliban successfully managed to implement a ban on opium in order to gain international legitimacy. However, this did not happen and only three countries recognized the Taliban government as an acceptable government. With the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban have been further ostracized. David Loyn of the BBC explains that this segregation of the Taliban from the peace process is detrimental to long-term security in Afghanistan, and the Taliban need to be engaged in some form: "One of the biggest problems with policy makers since 2001 has been that they've treated the Mujahideen as all good and the Taliban as all evil; and the ex-Mujahideen could take whatever they wanted, and the Taliban were excluded utterly. The demonization of anyone is a problem." The Taliban have never been proscribed and any recognition of even their very existence in the political process could theoretically kick start a reconciliation process.

In conclusion, it should be noted that while several advances have been made to try and integrate the Taliban into the peace process, no retaliatory statements for power sharing or peace making have ever come across from the Taliban leadership. For any reconciliatory process to work, it is first important to "drain away their recruitment pool" according to Mrs. Nathan. As long as the Taliban can continue to tap into unemployed, illiterate and frustrated youths in Pakistan, Afghanistan or elsewhere in Central Asia, it is impossible to curb the number of suicide or other attacks that continue to scourge the region.



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