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The Afghan Negotiation Tango

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U.S. policymakers seem to realize that negotiation will have to be part of any reasonably respectable conclusion to the U.S. military expedition in Afghanistan. They have repeatedly said as much. But even many who accept that reality insert a caveat about timing. Negotiations, yes, they say—but only after further coalition military operations have softened up the Taliban, so the Taliban will be more pliable in the subsequent bargaining. In his recent [incisive commentary in these spaces](#)^[3] about Afghanistan, Doug Bandow mentions the prevalence of this view, held by officials who “don’t want to talk until the United States has established clear military advantage.” Then Bandow mentions in passing a question that has gotten almost no attention: “What if the Taliban adopts the same strategy?” What is involved here is not just a hypothetical decision by Taliban leaders, but instead a recurring pattern exhibited by belligerents who are contemplating, or trying to negotiate, a peace while fighting a war (a subject about which I wrote a book over thirty years ago).

The starting point for understanding this subject is to realize that as with dancing the tango, it takes two, not just one, to negotiate. That means that everything that could be said about our side's preferences and responses regarding the situation on the battlefield and how that relates to peace talks could also be said, in mirror image form, about the adversary. And yet, that's not the way we tend to view fighting and negotiating. We usually view it as highly asymmetric. We see military setbacks to our side as the occasion for redoubling our effort to turn the war in our favor, but see military setbacks to the adversary as a reason he ought to be suing for peace. We believe we ought to persevere until we have achieved a clear military advantage, but we do not expect the adversary to persevere with a similar objective in mind. We Americans, being citizens of the successful superpower that the United States is, seem especially prone to this asymmetric thinking. Our tendency to define our interests in terms of the mission that our military, with its admirable can-do attitude, is striving to accomplish accentuates the tendency.

Holding the asymmetric view means possibly missing opportunities to negotiate a peace. The conditions for opening, not to mention successfully concluding, peace negotiations include neither side thinking it is doing so well militarily that it can accomplish its objectives directly through force and can dispense with negotiations. The conditions also include neither side thinking the war is going so poorly that it needs to take more time and expend more effort to turn the military situation around. The first year of the Korean War, in which the front line moved up and down the peninsula as one side or the other thought the war was going either too well or too poorly to want to talk, illustrated these patterns. It was only after the war settled into a stalemate that negotiations began.

Afghanistan doesn't have as clear a barometer of the war's progress as a front line moving north or south, but the same principles apply. Fighting until the other side is on the ropes will likely mean confronting an opponent who then will be determined to keep fighting until he gets off the ropes. To the extent there is a real asymmetry on these matters in the conflict in Afghanistan, it is in favor of the Taliban, who have the time even though we have the watches and who know that the United States is not going to be in Afghanistan forever.

Even without being cognizant of the opponent's calculations, fighting longer in the expectation of getting better terms from a softened opponent is not likely to be a cost-effective approach during the coming months in Afghanistan, where most of the details of any new political order are hardly the stuff of vital U.S. interests. When the opponent's calculations are taken into account, the softening-up approach seems even less cost-effective. It involves a situation in which it is not just the perfect being the enemy of the good, but the good being the enemy of the acceptable.

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