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U.S. Commander Says Conditions Improving for Afghan Peace Talks

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The commander of American-led military forces in Afghanistan said Wednesday that prospects for reconciliation between Afghans and Taliban militants are improving, although former officials and experts are concerned that U.S. diplomatic resources for negotiating a solution are inadequate.

A comprehensive offer by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani late last month, coupled with a recent Taliban request for talks with the U.S., come as the U.S. and its allies start a military campaign with thousands of new forces.

“We have a moment where the objective of our campaign and reconciliation are in play, so this is significant,” Army Gen. John Nicholson, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in the country, told reporters here Wednesday.

However, questions about Washington’s willingness and capacity to negotiate have been raised by former officials and experts, some citing departing Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s decision last year to eliminate the post of senior envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

“If there was the prospect of real substantive talks being launched, the U.S. would need someone to work on this full time,” said Laurel Miller, who until 2017 served as the State Department’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. “The fact that there is not such a person now suggests it is not a priority or the process is not there yet.”

Mr. Tillerson’s ouster on Tuesday added a new wrinkle to diplomatic prospects in Afghanistan. Mr. Tillerson was fired by President Donald Trump, who nominated Central Intelligence Agency Director Mike Pompeo to replace him. Mr. Pompeo, once confirmed, would have to install his own senior aides and organize any U.S. diplomatic effort.

Talk of a political settlement in the 16-year-old war comes as Mr. Ghani faces a national election later this year. It also comes amid pressure in the U.S. to show progress in Afghanistan through Mr. Trump’s new strategy, announced last August, to send more troops as advisers and not remove them until conditions improve. He sent nearly 4,000 additional troops last fall to join the roughly 10,000 already deployed to Afghanistan.

The Taliban haven’t formally responded to Mr. Ghani’s offer of reconciliation, which Gen. Nicholson said he takes as a positive sign. The group did publish an open letter last month urging

the U.S. to negotiate and small numbers of the Taliban have hinted they are interested in talks. American officials, however, have insisted that any settlement must be Afghan-led.

Meanwhile, some elements of the Taliban are fracturing, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, said on a two-day visit here this week.

“All wars come to an end,” Mr. Mattis said on Tuesday. “You don’t want to miss an opportunity because you weren’t alert to an opportunity, so you want that door open.”

Besides the special envoy post, the State Department has a number of other officials with responsibilities for Afghanistan. The new U.S. ambassador in Kabul, John Bass, is experienced and well-regarded, but has limited experience there. Alice Wells, the principal deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, is among officials who would lead U.S. efforts to reach a diplomatic settlement with the Taliban.

Ms. Miller, the former special representative, said a difficult negotiation requires “a prioritized, well-resourced diplomatic effort.”

“It’s not just a question of having a few people in the State Department working on it,” she said. “They have to have clear political backing.”

State Department officials insisted they have enough manpower to support peace talks.

“As part of the South Asia strategy, the State Department is well situated to carry out our diplomatic mission in Washington, Afghanistan, Pakistan,” a State Department representative said in a statement. “We remain very actively engaged in supporting the Afghan government diplomatically and militarily, and continue our engagement to achieve a durable political settlement to the conflict.”

Other experts on the conflict said the U.S. has emphasized the military fight over diplomatic efforts.

“We have been much more clear about the fighting piece than the talking piece,” said Andrew Wilder, the vice president of Asia programs at the United States Institute of Peace. “To really move it forward, it really does need more diplomatic attention.”

Other nations and parties in the region won’t see the U.S. as a credible negotiating partner until it invests not only in a military effort but a civilian effort to bring the Taliban to the table.

“I don’t think there is a strong belief in the region that we want a politically negotiated end of the war,” Wilder said.

Given the complexities of Afghanistan and the difficulty of negotiating with a nonstate group—rather than an enemy government—there is little to suggest that Kabul would benefit from a better, U.S.-led diplomatic strategy, said Erik Goepner, a retired U.S. Air Force colonel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is now a visiting research fellow at CATO Institute think tank.

“If your argument is that we need to give a try, then a diplomatic surge makes sense,” Mr. Goepner said. “But there is no reasonable expectation of a political settlement because of sanctuaries in Pakistan, a population that will always be susceptible to revenue streams from insurgencies, an incompetent security force and a corrupt government.”