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# Talks with the Taliban: A Positive Step

As world leaders convened yesterday in London for discussions on Afghanistan, there is growing agreement that the coalition must negotiate with the Taliban in order to militarily withdraw from the country.

Overall, you've got to hand it to Obama. He and his national security advisors have crafted a face-saving way out of the Afghanistan quagmire just one year into the administration. Let's just hope this effort succeeds and we can begin to bring our men and women in uniform back home.

Substantive steps have already been taken to reintegrate the Taliban into a power-sharing government. If the removal of former members of the Taliban regime can split the movement between its "reconcilable" and "irreconcilable" elements, the move could be a step toward broader regional cooperation.

During the negotiations with the Taliban, there might be some hiccups.

First, the fact that leaders from the 400,000-strong Shinwari tribe have vowed to support the United States against the Taliban is welcome news. But even if the coalition were to integrate the insurgency's ground commanders, foot soldiers, and even whole tribes, without the insurgency's leadership on board (the West appears reluctant to talk directly to senior leaders) there is nothing to stop jihadi groups (or individuals) from recruiting more militants to their cause. Getting the support of Afghan tribes draws from the Iraq experience, and could prove fruitful; however, tribes in Afghanistan have a notorious history of switching sides and the strategy could further undermine the goal of a centralized Afghan state.

Second, the insurgency is not monolithic. It's not clear that the numerous jihadist outfits commanding Afghanistan's insurgency all desire the same ends.

Finally, negotiations with insurgents neither resolve the ongoing rivalry between Pakistan and India nor decrease either country's incentive to use the region as a proxy battleground. This broader regional context is the underlying source of the Afghan mission's vulnerability. In many ways, Afghanistan epitomizes the fate of countries too weak to withstand meddling from external powers; Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, the Central Asian Republics, and others have had an incentive to manipulate Afghanistan's internal ethnic divisions. The orientation of countries in the region--rather than the desire of random insurgent groups--is what threatens the long-term viability of any government in Kabul.

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