

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on Oct 15, 2010): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/talks-about-talks-just-get-it-already-4234>

Talks about Talks? Just Get on with It Already

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| October 15, 2010

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Earlier this week, [a senior NATO official](#) ^[3] said that the coalition has facilitated contact between senior Taliban members and the Afghan government. Apparently, U.S. officials are not directly involved in these talks; they merely seek to “support” and “facilitate” talks between an ascendant, hydra-headed insurgent movement and America’s weak, ineffectual client. Unsurprisingly, this strategy has failed—repeatedly.

It is impossible to declare the truth or falsity of the claim that the coalition has facilitated

contact between senior Taliban members and the Afghan government. Supposedly, that has happened; however, the Taliban rejected these reports ^[4] as “baseless propaganda” and a tactic of psychological warfare. Quite honestly, all this “talk about talks” reminds me of that 1993-comedy film, Groundhog Day ^[5]: the protagonist wakes up reliving the exact same day over and over again.

Every time a senior U.S. or NATO official stands up and says, “very high-level Taliban members have reached out to the Afghan government,” what usually happens is that the Taliban issue a perfunctory denial and insist that they anticipate a victory.

No doubt, some militants might be interested in a negotiated settlement with the Karzai government. Some discussions have already taken place between Karzai and the Haqqanis and Karzai and Hekmatyar; these groups, of course, are quite distinct from the original Afghan Taliban, even though they associate with one another.

But still, for the sake of simplicity, there are three main problems regarding talks with the Taliban. First, to some extent, all of these groups, not just the Taliban, are decentralized, amorphous, and deeply entrenched. It is not at all clear that talking to high-level militants at the top of our organizational charts will lead to a cessation of violence in various pockets of the region.

Second, steps toward any meaningful settlement with these militant leaders must involve Pakistan—their main source of support. But as Senator Carl Levin (D-MI) wrote ^[6], despite the Pakistan military’s success rooting out militants in Bajaur, Mohmand, and Orakzai, as well as in areas around Swat (Upper and Lower Dir, Shangla, and Buner):

“[T]he Pakistan military continued to avoid military engagements that would put it in direct conflict with Afghan Taliban or al-Qa’ida forces in North Waziristan. This is as much a political choice as it is a reflection of an under-resourced military prioritizing its targets.”

Lastly, and this problem is more self-imposed than anything else, we seem to be aiming far too low—*literally*. President Obama and General Petraeus have said that the coalition is willing to accept mid- and low-level foot soldiers who renounce violence and abide by the Afghan constitution (reintegration), but they also say that the coalition must beat the insurgency on the battlefield in order to bring high-level Taliban to the negotiating table (reconciliation). This strategy assumes two things: first, that we can peel away enough low-level militants from the senior leadership; and second, that if we succeed in doing so, the senior leadership will still want to talk to us. This highlights a glaringly obvious problem with our current strategy: the White House and the Pentagon like to tell us *ad nauseam* that we cannot fight our way out of this war, yet they keep insisting that we must weaken the insurgency’s momentum before we engage in negotiations.

As the Obama administration prepares for its December review of the war, the primary focus will be on whether the current counterinsurgency strategy is working. Progress on that front has been slower than expected. For this and other reasons, a better gauge of progress would be measuring what types of political accommodations Karzai and the coalition can make with the Taliban.

As I mentioned ^[7] several months ago:

“For the U.S. and NATO, the red line in their nation-building endeavor is the Afghan constitution. Not only is this document the foundation of Afghanistan's democratic political institutions (wobbly and imperfect as they may be), but it also enshrines the legal and political rights of the Afghan people we ostensibly seek to protect.

...

Unless the Taliban acquiesce to the norms introduced since the 2001 invasion, there is little to stop them from committing actions in flagrant violation of any shared agreement.

...

In short, no agreement, law, treaty, or contract is self-reinforcing. And unless the United States is prepared to enforce the conditions of a power-sharing agreement, it should renounce its commitment to spread the legal rights articulated in the Afghan constitution.”

I endorse diplomatic engagement with most of America's enemies, including the Taliban. But I am also willing to admit that talks are not the panacea that they are made out be, and may even open a Pandora's Box. The agreement could fall apart after we leave, and if it did, that in and of itself would not pose a threat to the United States.

Still, I wish we could be debating the success or failure of talks, but there doesn't seem to be any talks taking place. Indeed, after nearly a decade at war, discussions between the Taliban and the Afghan government—America not included, mind you—“are in the very preliminary stages of discussions,” according to the NATO official cited above.

What seems absurd is that the Taliban want the withdrawal of foreign forces, and most Americans want the same. Yet U.S. officials are still dragging their feet and putting the burden of war on our men and women on the ground. They should accept that substantive peace talks take time; and the time to engage the Taliban is now.

More by

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