

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

A Step Forward in Afghanistan, If We Are Willing to Take It

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November 1, 2011

The *Washington Post* [reports](#) the Obama administration has revised its Afghan war strategy to include “more energetic efforts to persuade” Afghanistan’s neighbors—including India, China, and the Central Asian republics—to “support a political resolution.” Just yesterday, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that the administration was also relying on Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency “to help organize and kick-start reconciliation talks aimed at ending the war in Afghanistan.”

This is good news, but also déjà vu. The administration called for “pursuing greater regional diplomacy” back [in 2009](#). It also said it would ask “all countries who have a stake in the future of this critical region to do their part.” Countries in the region do have a stake in Afghanistan’s future; America, however, has few effective instruments for submerging the differences among competing powers.

Take our relationship with Iran. It has made significant [inroads](#) with Afghanistan’s Hazara and Tajik communities and is [well-positioned](#) to be a key player in the region. But Tehran and Washington seem neither close to engaging in direct talks nor willing to make reciprocal concessions for the cause of furthering peace. The irony is that after 9/11, American and Iranian interests initially converged in Afghanistan: Tehran [cooperated](#) with Washington to overthrow the Taliban regime, and during the Bonn negotiations [helped broker](#) a compromise between President Karzai and the Northern Alliance.

America’s complicated relationship with Iran is one reason why what U.S. officials perceive to be in America’s best interests may not be synonymous with the pursuit of peace. Isolating Iran, or even Pakistan for that matter, will hurt the substance of negotiations, increase the incentive for these countries to sabotage peace, and hinder Washington’s ability to shape a coherent regional strategy. Even if Washington were to engage Tehran and Islamabad, they may very well decide to protract the bargaining process to convey that time is on their side (it is). One reason why the administration’s 2009 effort may have faltered was that Pakistan—a major player in Afghanistan’s internal affairs (to the consternation of many Afghans)—has come to feel that it can manage the terms of reconciliation. In fact, it is this belief that tempers Pakistan’s eagerness to be more

accommodating toward the United States, which is why the case for American humility is key when it comes to the subject of negotiations.

Peace will not be perfect. Problems will rise when competing interests collide on certain core issues. Nevertheless, all parties must be sufficiently dedicated to reaching a consensus on what constitutes a manageable settlement. After all, some countries will seek to stymie their enemy's provision of assistance to Kabul (i.e. Pakistan vis-à-vis India). Getting these countries to think otherwise will necessitate a shift in said country's perceptions of others' intentions.

U.S. officials [understand](#) the enormity of problems they confront in this vexing region. Proponents of peace are not blind to these difficulties. Unfortunately, much like the current nation-building effort, when it comes to regional engagement, U.S. officials could be making yet another ambitious commitment that is beyond their ability to carry out.