

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Can Pakistan Lead Afghan Peace?

By: Malou Innocent - December 13, 2012

Over the weekend, *McClatchy's* Jonathan Landay wrote that the Afghan government is pursuing a peace initiative in which Pakistan, not the United States, would arrange direct talks for a coalition government in Kabul. Afghanistan would cede political control in its south and east to the Taliban and grant the group government posts. This so-called "Peace Process Roadmap to 2015" reflects the painful reality of power dynamics on the ground. There are also a number of critical factors that might hamper its success.

For one, the Taliban claimed responsibility for last week's suicide bombing that wounded Asadullah Khalid, the chief of Afghanistan's intelligence service. The attack hardly bodes well for the Taliban's commitment to peace, much less the capabilities of Afghan intelligence.

Second, putting Pakistan in charge of a negotiated settlement contradicts the State Department's official stance of ensuring that any peace process be Afghan-led. Having Pakistan in the driver's seat not only reveals the real balance of power in the conflict, but also the extent to which competing interests between Islamabad and Washington augment the mission. Neither the United States nor Pakistan views the other as a reliable ally, and that the United States has had enormous difficulty reconciling Pakistan's interests with its own.

That tension has been one of the biggest underlying sources of the Afghan mission's vulnerability. Whereas years ago, Washington felt that it controlled the conflict and could pressure Islamabad as it saw fit, the situation seems to have reversed: Pakistan has come to feel that it can control the terms of reconciliation, and it is that perception that has tempered its eagerness to be more accommodating toward the United States.

Elements of its military and intelligence establishment have colluded with militants they viewed as vital to country's strategic interests, and for years they were reluctant to tackle their Afghan-bound militants more vigorously.

In addition, it is unclear how the majority of Afghans will feel about having their peace process led by a neighboring state that acts as a de facto sanctuary for armed militants ravaging their country. If anything, this peace plan rewards elements within Pakistan for their self-defeating support of Islamist proxies.

Finally, a major reason why achieving a peaceful end state in Afghanistan has been and will continue to be so difficult is that foreign-policy planners in Washington simply lack

the ability to solve region's most pressing geopolitical challenges. As I have previously written, the formation of a national government in Afghanistan must include a political buy-in from Islamabad. No question. Modern-day Afghan territories are tied culturally and politically to neighboring countries. Of course, the flip side of this interconnection is that it is incredibly difficult to cobble together a government in Kabul that has the support of all Afghanistan's neighbors.

For instance, the ongoing rivalry between Pakistan and India, and each country's incentive to use Afghanistan as a proxy battleground, will likely undermine the viability of any government in Kabul. Afghans generally like India, and India has provided nearly \$2 billion in development assistance to Afghanistan. But as the former U.S. commander in Afghanistan, retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal, wrote in his August 2009 assessment of the war, "[I]ncreasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan or India."

Regional diplomacy is often talked about as a path to an honorable exit from Afghanistan. However, as much as we may want a peaceful settlement of this conflict, it involves the difficult task of submerging the fundamental differences among neighboring states. Sadly, we have to prepare for the possibility that a lasting peaceful end state in Afghanistan may not be accomplished.