

Reconciliation with the Taliban – issues and dilemmas

Mahrukh Khan *

In a desperate bid to save a stumbling military campaign, U.S. policy is coming to another full circle in Afghanistan as Washington attempts to promote reconciliation through deals with the Taliban. The real question to be asked in this context is what the shape and content of any such negotiations will be. Moreover, there is dire need to analyze the costs and benefits of such an approach.

U.S. and NATO forces need to be able to sufficiently pressurize extremist elements in order to negotiate with them on their own terms. According to a report published by the *Heritage Foundation*, “premature talks with the Taliban leadership could easily backfire (since) insurgents are more likely to negotiate if they fear defeat on the battlefield.” The U.S. ought to consider using soft power in addition to military might; this would involve targeting and influencing Taliban elements to create cleavages between the Taliban and Al Qaeda for swift success. It is also equally important to address the root causes of extremism which create hurdles in the way to any kind of reconciliation.

The process of reconciliation refers not just to the insurgents and extremist elements in Afghanistan but also to the population at large. Tackling problems such as discrimination against tribes and conflicts over land and water need to be strongly embedded in the process since socio-economic aspects of reconciliation involving the general public are as important as political reconciliation.

Though Kabul has introduced a broad national reconciliation programme which gives equal representation to minorities in Afghanistan’s political mainstream, concrete results are yet to be produced. Its effectiveness remains under the scrutiny of the U.S., NATO and the Afghan government. Oversight of some of the main issues at hand and substantial governance deficiency in Kabul to develop an active mechanism to address the causes of isolation at the local and national levels has made the effort of reconciliation with the population excessively difficult.

In these circumstances, the most challenging factors facing the U.S. and NATO forces are:

* *The writer is Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.*

1. Influencing and developing trust with the population by providing them economic incentives and opportunities.
2. Developing rifts between Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives in the region.

In order to overcome these challenges, some strategies are under consideration and others are already in the implementation phase..

Paying soldiers

The idea behind such a policy is simple; if fighters cannot be defeated, then they can be bought. Providing monetary incentives to soldiers is becoming a common strategy among U.S. and British forces that bribe local fighters and pay them in dollars – always an attractive incentive – in order for them to give up fighting. The purpose is to buy loyalties of Afghan tribes as well as luring in local or middle-ranking Taliban commanders to give up violence in return for cash.

Positive motivation

Influencing the Taliban and other militants so that they switch sides - otherwise commonly known as winning the hearts and minds of the population – is an important challenge facing the U.S. and NATO forces as well as the Afghan army. The Taliban have ruled in Afghanistan for some time now and people are wary of siding with foreign forces and earning their wrath. There are basically two main sectors in Afghanistan that the Taliban use for recruitment and for motivating people to fight foreign entities. First, the motivation is driven out from a Salafi, anti-West ideology that presents a doctrine according to which foreigners are referred to as 'infidels', justifying war against them as Jihad. Secondly, motivation is also driven out of the emotional trauma that parts of the public have suffered at the hands of foreign invasions.

Jobs, education and socioeconomic opportunities

Providing socioeconomic incentives is one of the major strategies currently being employed. The idea is to funnel millions of dollars in foreign aid to villages that organize neighbourhood-watch programmes to help with security and confidence building. This would later help to avoid civilian confrontation when the U.S. and NATO forces leave Afghanistan since a community-based security system would be in place.

Induction of locals in government representation

According to the aforementioned *Heritage Foundation* report, "the idea of induction of high-level Taliban figures in government is likely to fail. Granting the senior Taliban leadership a share of the power in Kabul would almost certainly eventually lead to the Taliban retaking national power and implementing policies similar to those they pursued throughout the 1990's." Local representation in the government is a most important strategy which can be utilised for greater benefits in the long run. However, rather than

providing representation to landlords from different provinces or giving a larger number of seats to insurgents, it is better to choose individuals from within the general population - people who relate to the area and the locals better.

Humanitarian programmes

The main strength of guerrilla insurgencies is popular local support without which they are vulnerable and can be identified easily. In order to motivate people to stop helping the Taliban either due to fear or even other reasons, it is important for the foreign forces and the Afghan government to introduce humanitarian programmes at district and local levels to gain widespread trust. Better medical facilities, a steady supply of food and empowerment of women at the local level are some key areas that need to be targeted. This can be done directly by the Afghan government or by recruiting local representatives from every village or even by the number of international NGOs working in the country.

Conclusion

In short, reconciliation is a long and difficult process that requires time and patience. A policy of engaging high-ranking Taliban commanders has its own dangers; high-level militants will only come to terms when they are in a position of weakness. To build momentum it is necessary that the U.S. and NATO initiate efforts from an individual level. Reintegration involves more than simply giving money to the Taliban. At a minimum, U.S., Kabul and NATO forces should address three main concerns:

1. Providing jobs and other business and economic opportunities.
2. Addressing root causes of extremism such as education, tribal rivalry and discrimination.
3. Providing security to people.

The main challenge to a successful reconciliation process remains that of creating a split between the Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives. The overall strategy will be much easier to implement once this goal is achieved and Al Qaeda has been driven out since the Taliban have benefited principally from the relationship over the years. This cooperation has given them the capability to fight in large numbers, provided them with finances to buy arms and ammunition, introduced suicide bombing as a war strategy and provided trainings for suicide attacks and target killings.

Many Taliban factions have now realized that coming into the political mainstream is a better option. According to an article in the *New York*

Times, the Hizb-e-Islami group, since clashing with Taliban elements, has already come forward and pursued talks with U.S. and NATO forces. The report noted that the delegation was headed by former Prime Minister Qutbuddin Helal who is a deputy to Gulbuddin Hekmetyar. Hizb-e-Islami is one of the three major Taliban groups that are acknowledged to be major security threats. However, it is generally believed that because of differences between the three groups, which until recently were working together; Hizb-e-Islami has come forward to negotiate with the regime in Kabul.

In some ways this has justified the new strategy of reconciliation with extremists in Afghanistan. It remains to be seen whether this will be a sustainable strategy; as this paper has argued, many steps need to be taken to incorporate local populations within the policy at large if this indeed is to be the case.