[**Giving peace a chance**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1636979/giving-peace-a-chance)

[Maleeha Lodhi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8829/maleeha-lodhi)Published July 26, 2021 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.

EVEN though the Taliban continue their rapid military advance in Afghanistan, the window has not yet closed for diplomatic efforts to promote a negotiated settlement between the warring parties.

Two days of senior-level intra-Afghan [talks in Doha](https://www.dawn.com/news/1635724) earlier this month yielded a joint declaration for the first time. This did not mean the two parties had even started negotiations on substantive issues. For that reason, the meeting was a disappointment. But the statement did mark a modest step forward in outlining principles to guide them towards a peaceful solution. It affirmed the goal of a negotiated and inclusive settlement and vowed to protect the civilian infrastructure, prevent civilian casualties and cooperate on humanitarian assistance. Both sides also committed to remain “engaged in negotiations at a senior level until a settlement is reached”.

However, lack of discussion of substantive issues laid bare the yawning gap between the two sides, who continue to maintain maximalist positions and have shown little willingness to compromise. The Taliban apparently made substantive negotiations contingent on release of their prisoners and delisting of their leaders and entities from the UN’s sanctions list — their immediate priorities. The Kabul delegation’s call for a ceasefire was turned down by the Taliban as was an apparent proposal for an interim government, whose details were not however spelt out. Later, Taliban spokesman and member of the negotiating team Suhail Shaheen [said](https://www.dawn.com/news/1636492) they would agree to a ceasefire only when a “new negotiated government” was installed. He too did not elaborate on what that involved other than President Ashraf Ghani’s removal.

The inconclusive round of talks in Doha raises afresh the question of whether the peace process can make meaningful progress at a time when the Taliban are on the ascendent while Kabul’s representatives doggedly stick to their positions and President Ghani appears increasingly isolated within his own government. As the Taliban are now in a far stronger position, a key question is whether they are simply playing for time in the talks as they continue with their military offensives and seize more territory.

Despite the Taliban’s military advance the window is still open for diplomatic efforts to promote a political settlement.

There seem to be two views of this in Pakistan — probably mirroring similarly divided opinion among the international community. The first is that the Taliban are not interested in serious negotiations until they take control of the country. Only then will they offer talks from a position of uncontested power and on their terms. The other view is that the Taliban are aware of the risk they run in going for a military takeover — losing international legitimacy and the recognition they secured after the Doha agreement with the US. Therefore, they would want to explore through the intra-Afghan process whether they can achieve their objectives by negotiations rather than military force.

The Taliban’s statements lend plausibility to the second view even though this will be tested in Doha in the weeks ahead. In his [message](https://www.dawn.com/news/1635808) before Eid the Taliban’s supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada declared that in spite of military gains he “strenuously favours” a political settlement. In similar vein, a Taliban spokesman told *CNN* that “a military takeover is not an option” for them. The Taliban have of course been repeatedly warned by the international community not to impose a military solution. The international consensus, which includes Pakistan, is opposed to such an outcome. In any case, until the Taliban gain unchallenged control of the country the window for diplomatic efforts, however narrow, will remain open. So long as Afghan government forces do not collapse in the face of the Taliban’s military assaults, diplomacy will have a chance.

So, how should the international community take advantage of this window? How can the Doha talks be made to move beyond tactical issues towards substance? Clearly a concerted effort is needed by the international community to press both parties to negotiate seriously before time runs out and a fully blown civil war erupts. So far diplomatic efforts aimed at promoting this objective have been fragmented with different countries initiating separate efforts towards this aim. This is illustrated by recent talks hosted by Iran and earlier by Russia and the proliferation of ‘tripartite’ groups on this count. It is now urgent for a unified initiative that mounts pressure on both Afghan parties to make the admittedly difficult compromises to reach a negotiated settlement.

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The best vehicle for this is the extended Troika comprising the US, China, Russia and Pakistan. The Troika has held three meetings since October 2020, one of them virtually and the last one in May. The joint statement issued then reiterated that there is “no military solution in Afghanistan and a negotiated political settlement through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process is the only way forward for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan”. The US is reported to be in favour of calling a meeting. This was apparently conveyed to Islamabad by US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad when he [visited Pakistan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1636099) last week. China and Russia have to be consulted, but they should be supportive.

The extended Troika also needs to encourage Iran to join it in a renewed diplomatic push. Tehran is apparently reluctant if Washington leads it. In fact, Pakistan should host and lead it at this critical juncture and invite Iran to join in. It can also explore co-hosting this with the UN if that helps to bring in Iran. If this meeting can be convened the extended Troika plus Iran can collectively exert pressure on the Afghan sides to accelerate efforts for a political settlement. In so doing, both incentives (international legitimacy, delisting and future assistance) and disincentives (withholding recognition, assistance) should be laid out to goad the two sides towards serious negotiations, underlining that time is now their common enemy.

The alternative to a diplomatic push is the Afghan ground situation dictating a messy outcome. With militias being mobilised by warlords to resist the Taliban and the Taliban having “strategic momentum” according to a top US general, what lies ahead is fierce fighting that can plunge Afghanistan into a fully fledged civil war. This is certainly not the outcome regional states and the international community would want. Nor is it one that the long-suffering Afghan people deserve.

*The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.*

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