

US Talks with Taliban

Why negotiate with the Taliban?

By Amrullah Saleh

Most Afghans oppose extremism. Washington should support them, not sell them out

WASHINGTON's olive branch to the Taliban — no matter the excuses or justifications — amounts to the management of failure, not the mark of victory. Negotiating with the Taliban after more than 10 years of fighting means giving legitimacy and space to militant extremism.

The objective of NATO's post-9/11 intervention in Afghanistan was to starve militant extremism by defeating the nexus of al Qaeda and the Taliban. That now seems like a dream.

With support from Pakistan, the Taliban has managed to protract the fighting and create a strategic deadlock. The US military surge in 2010 weakened the Taliban, but it hardly pressured their strategic support across the Durand line in Pakistan. So the deadlock remains — chiefly because of Pakistan's unwillingness to cooperate fully with NATO, coupled with the fractured state of Afghan politics since the fraud-marred 2009 presidential elections.

Pakistan and the Taliban have no interest in producing quick positive results from talks. The Taliban has already gained certain advantages, including the possible transfer or release of their commanders from US custody, the opening of an office in Qatar, and the legitimacy to enter into mainstream politics at the time of their choosing. They will definitely use these preliminary gains to further their psychological influence over the Afghan populace. And they won't likely bargain away the gains they have earned by suicide bombings, ambushes and the marginalisation of civil society. Now that the Taliban has guaranteed its basic survival, it will fight for domination.

Washington's talks with the Taliban — taking place, on and off, in Qatar — come at a time when most anti-Taliban Afghan civil-society leaders have deserted President

Karzai. He is head of a heavily subsidised state whose pay master (Washington) is now largely bypassing his government to negotiate with the enemy. This raises the question: Who and what does President Karzai represent?

In a bid to make himself relevant, President Karzai has adopted a strategy of meddling. He has demanded that NATO halt night raids, hand over the Bagram detention facility, and place strict restrictions on security companies. He has also refused to echo NATO's mission goals and justifications, and he wanted the Taliban to

Striking a deal with the Taliban without disarming them will shatter the hope of a strong, viable, pluralistic Afghan state. The absolute majority of the Afghan people have wholeheartedly supported and participated in the democratic process, but they are now marginalised both by President Karzai and the international community

open an office in Saudi Arabia, not Qatar.

In return, NATO has accused Mr Karzai of corruption, of committing abuses of human rights, and of being detached from reality. Successful counter-insurgency work requires international troops and the host nation to be seen as unified; that is simply not the case here. Pakistan and the Taliban are more coordinated in their approaches

than are NATO and Afghanistan.

This is one of the key reasons why concerned anti-Taliban Afghans are creating a third force to ensure their rights and interests are represented and protected. They no longer see either President Karzai or NATO committed to those rights and interests. Though fragmented in their approach, these forces share a common goal: to counterbalance the growing influence of the Taliban and to fill the vacuum created by the declining relevance of Afghanistan's democratic institutions.

Certainly no Afghan political coalition can stop Washington from talking to the Taliban — but those talks won't bring stability. Talks and a potential ceasefire may provide the US and its NATO allies their justification for a speedy withdrawal, but it won't change the fundamentals of the problem in Afghanistan. Striking a deal with the Taliban without disarming them will shatter the hope of a strong, viable, pluralistic Afghan state.

The absolute majority of the Afghan people are against the Taliban and the domination of our country by militant extremism. They have wholeheartedly supported and participated in the democratic process, but they are now marginalised both by President Karzai, who controls massive resources with no accountability, and the international community, which is focused disproportionately on transition, withdrawal and the Taliban.

Afghanistan's neglected majority can provide a political alternative for the military mission in Afghanistan. Its inclusion, which the US could secure by pursuing reconciliation in a way that pressures President Karzai to respect the role of parliament and independent judges, would contain or push back the Taliban, increase the cost of war for Pakistan, and provide hope for post-transition Afghanistan.

By contrast, should that majority remain outside the strategic calculus, we'll see further fragmentation of political power and legitimacy in Afghanistan. That will weaken Washington's position and endanger the entire mission.

COURTESY THE WALL STREET JOURNAL