Achieving Durable Peace: Afghan Perspectives on a Peace Process

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Summary

While momentum continues to shift towards pursuing a peace settlement for Afghanistan, ambiguities remain in the US political and military strategy, and there are questions about the ability of the Afghan government to successfully lead a process and the insurgents’ interest in one. A burgeoning body of commentary focuses on international and US strategy, but to be durable a settlement will need to involve some broad-based political and social agreements among Afghans. This crucial intra-Afghan dimension of the process requires detailed analysis of the views of Afghan stakeholders.

This paper presents findings from a set of 122 interviews with Afghan leaders and opinion-formers in political, military, economic, and social arenas about their views on the conflict and the issues that a peace process will have to address. This work forms part of an ongoing project by three leading research institutions to identify and clarify through research and dialogue issues and options for Afghanistan to move towards durable peace.

Understandings of the conflict

Several themes are prominent among the interviewees’ understandings of what drives the conflict in Afghanistan. The first is that the conflict is driven by a combination of external and internal factors that interact in complex ways. However, as the conflict has gotten worse, the impact of the presence and behaviour of NATO troops and the illegitimacy of the Afghan government have become increasingly important, alongside longer-standing issues grounded in regional politics or factional competition.

Afghans across different groups perceive the United States as a belligerent in the conflict with its own interests, rather than solely the supporter of the Afghan government or people that it projects in public discourse. This view calls into question the sincerity and effectiveness of the US emphasis on the “Afghan-led” reconciliation strategy, and indicates the need for clearer US policy and signalling if Afghan stakeholders are to take the prospect of a negotiated settlement seriously.

There is also a crosscutting perception of the capture and division of the government among a small elite who act with a combination of ethnic, factional, economic and criminal motivations, and parts of this system develop interests in continued conflict. In this sense the conflict is not only a struggle for state power and resources between competing parties, it is also a legitimacy crisis stemming from a system of power and patronage distribution that is proving unable to manage societal and elite conflicts.
This capture and the widespread illegitimacy of many in power have also allowed leaders of all ethnic groups to stoke existing perceptions that other groups are benefitting disproportionately in the current dispensation. Such perceptions exist among all groups, generating an increasingly ethnic “negative-sum” politics. The 2010 National Assembly elections and the discourse of “political reconciliation” of the Government of Afghanistan has heightened these readings, deepening grievances the Taliban can exploit and exacerbating the potential for ethnic conflict.

**Substantive dimensions of a peace process**

For some stakeholders the US announcement of withdrawal without clear linkage to a peace process makes a process less credible, while for others confusion over withdrawal dates casts doubt on US objectives in the country. While some political leaders see a negotiation as undesirable and continued military action as the only option, many believe that a clear framework for NATO withdrawal, perhaps with other changes to military posture, and linked to the prevention of terrorism as offering possibilities for a peace process. Evidence on the Taliban suggests that full withdrawal of foreign forces may not be necessary for a settlement, but that a framework for withdrawal agreed with their leaders will be.

Given the illegitimacy of the government, alongside demands for the withdrawal of foreign forces and the prevention of terrorism, a peace settlement must address reform to be sustainable. Most reform prescriptions focus less on large-scale institutional restructuring of the state and more on balancing an over-centralized Presidency and increasing the legitimacy for appointments through a more transparent system. There are constituencies for decentralization and for parliamentarism that also emphasize fairly incremental reform, such as more roles for local councils and election of Governors.

Taliban reform proposals are as yet vague, but they may focus on elements of “reform” rather than straightforward participation in the illegitimate system of power-sharing. Most stakeholders believe that constitutional reform should not be a barrier to peace, but also that it is not the most pressing issue in getting a settlement; key principles of the constitution could be affirmed while considering changes through established or modified mechanisms in parallel with a peace process.

**The limitations of current peace plans**

Views on reintegration and the Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Program (APRP) vary from suspicion that it is a patronage device to doubts about its impact due to government incapacity to provide security and address the core grievance of foreign forces’ presence. At the same time, there are doubts about the fighting morale of Afghan National Security Forces while reconciliation initiatives by the government are ongoing or after NATO withdraws.

The High Peace Council is not suited to mediate an intra-Afghan process, nor is it likely to be empowered as a government delegation, and may best play a role in a Track II type process by advising and generating proposals.
Getting to a settlement: issues of process

The US is prosecuting its military strategy independently of the Afghan government, and must engage directly in negotiating a peace settlement because it has control over the central issue such a settlement must address: the withdrawal of NATO forces in return for a Taliban agreement on terrorism. The current public posture of the “Afghan-lead” is a barrier to signalling this kind of engagement. Opinions differ on Pakistan’s ideal role, but to balance Pakistani interests with Taliban autonomy, the US should probably support and participate in channels with both.

A peace process will likely entail discussion of the composition and future of the Afghan National Security Forces and a broad framework of demobilization or integration into security forces that can satisfy the security concerns of large groups of insurgents while not provoking remilitarization by other groups. Regardless of the mechanism, the current “transition” strategy for growing large Afghan National Security Forces and expanding local defence initiatives will almost certainly need re-examining in the context of a settlement process.

A durable settlement may not involve radical restructuring of the state. It will however have to address how people are seen to receive power and privileges. There is a tension between this necessary reform and using political appointments to accommodate power-sharing demands, and trying to resolve the conflict with power-sharing through Taliban appointments should not be more than an interim measure and only with careful consideration. Instead, the intra-Afghan peace process should be oriented towards broader inclusion of non-combatants, identification and facilitation of common and new interests. Exploring multi-track diplomacy, civilian commissions, ombudspersons, national dialogues and other means of including diverse interests should be a priority.

Specific mediation and logistical arrangements for the intra-Afghan process are less important to stakeholders than are their mutual acceptance by the parties, in keeping with Afghan customary practices. Elections are still quite widely considered a necessary and legitimate mechanism – including by some operational Taliban – for transitioning from interim to long-term arrangements, though there are problems with the electoral system. Indirect bottom-up methods such as those used in the Emergency Loya Jirga also enjoy legitimacy.

The findings of the interviews suggest a number of key questions about the likely structure of a successful peace process, and areas where further research may be useful. These include the development and communication of military proposals, balancing the interests of Pakistan, interim and longer-term security sector power-sharing, the inclusion of non-combatants in the peace process, and interim and transitional political arrangements.