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Dialogue with the Taliban

SYNOPSIS

The international community has watched in horror as the Taliban roll out rigid and intolerant policies by the day. The current lack of engagement of the Taliban by the international community is not producing positive results. The international community has significant leverage over the Taliban, but has not created a mechanism to use that leverage to influence decision makers in the group and achieve better outcomes. This report attempts to chart such a path.

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About the Authors



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Obaidullah Baheer is a lecturer at the American University of Afghanistan, and has an MA in international relations from the University of New South Wales, Australia. He is also a visiting scholar at the New School in New York. He started his career as a Software Engineer but soon moved on to International Relations. His final thesis was titled “A Study of the Structural and Ideational Factors Hindering Negotiations with the Taliban”. The thesis led to an invitation to an international conference regarding Afghanistan’s possible peace settlement. He was also invited as a guest lecturer at UNSW to lecture on Afghanistan’s War. Baheer leads a bread distribution campaign under the name of “Save Afghans from Hunger”. He is an adviser at the National Development Corporation.

Problem

The Taliban's successful blitzkrieg and abrupt takeover of Kabul took all actors by surprise. Beyond everything else, the uncertainty pushed most of the Taliban's political opponents to flee the country, which paved the way for the Taliban to set up a single actor political structure with few political alternatives. The non-Taliban political figures and parties still present in Afghanistan today have rarely been acknowledged or viewed as viable partners by the new regime. They have little to offer the Taliban in exchange for political participation as well.

Whilst the international community still holds much leverage – and in areas where the Taliban is quite desperate – there has been little progress in using that leverage to achieve any positive changes in the group's conduct. Yet, given the lack of any sustainable political alternatives to the Taliban in Afghanistan today, the international community including Canada needs to modify its approach toward engaging with the Taliban, with the goal of achieving positive results. This engagement should have three goals: (1) to empower the non-Taliban political sphere to create grounds for political plurality within the country, (2) to re-establish norms (i.e. human rights, free speech) that are absent in Afghanistan today, and (3) create channels for direct communication with Taliban policy makers, in order to communicate the international community's expectations of the regime, with the objective of alleviating the suffering of ordinary Afghan citizens.

Essential Background

Both the Taliban and the international community are responsible for the failure in effective engagement. On their end, the Taliban do not seem to have a unified vision of what they can guarantee to the international community, or what they are willing to achieve through diplomatic engagement. This is partially due to lack of experience, but much more because of the internal incongruence of visions among the leadership. Different groups within the Taliban have different views of what their sacred values are, and what they are willing to compromise over. The hardliners often argue that too much compromise would lead to large scale defection towards rival groups, such as the so-called Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK). This concern appears to be unfounded since previous defection only occurred when the common enemy of foreign forces was motivating all fluid insurgencies. Given that ISK now primarily targets the Taliban and treats them as apostates, it would be a drastic change for Taliban fighters to switch to ISK.

On the international community's side, there are very large perceived costs to engaging with the Taliban, and many world leaders fear that any engagement would serve to legitimize the group. This hardline approach also prolongs the current political and economic crisis within Afghanistan. Though some countries have engaged through Track 2.0 programs, the mediators (Qatar, UAE, etc.) in charge of such programs have little access to the actual decisionmakers in the Taliban, and oftentimes attempt to appease the Taliban rather than pushing them on important issues.

Strategies and Solutions

The international community needs to play a more active role in Afghanistan lest the Taliban turn it into a perpetual pariah state. The need to contain the humanitarian crisis and prevent Afghanistan from falling back into active conflict should push the international community to engage the Taliban

in a meaningful way and use its leverage to enable an organic mechanism of positive change within the country.

This can be done through little reputation cost to the international community and the Taliban alike. By starting a Track 1.5 diplomacy program, the international community can, in partnership with non-governmental partners who deploy within Afghanistan, establish direct lines of communication with the Taliban leadership. Rather than inviting Taliban delegations to third countries and achieving little with the world watching, track 1.5 diplomacy not only would put decisionmakers on both sides face-to-face on important topics, but would also be a means to better understand the internal workings of the Taliban.

The issues with the current model of meetings with Taliban delegations in third countries is ineffective in a few ways:

1) The delegation of the Foreign Ministry presents a bottleneck to a possible expansion of the range of contact with Taliban interlocutors and decisionmakers.

2) The Taliban's decision-making process is presented as a black box, which makes it difficult to predict outcomes and evaluate responses to external pressure.

3) There is no access to sub-groups within the Taliban that could internally advocate for behavioral modification. Without this access, it is impossible to identify potential allies within the Taliban.

By inviting different Taliban leaders to attend private sessions, governments could establish direct contact with those individuals without a reputation cost on either side. The topics of these sessions would have to be of mutual interest for the Taliban and the US, at least initially, in order to be appealing to the leadership. These individuals could then serve as interlocutors for future dialogue, as the Taliban would need these interlocutors to facilitate contact with the international community. These interlocutors could also be part of the conversation with Taliban, so that their voices and opinions might be heard in a safe and controlled environment. The eventual political plurality of Afghanistan is a long path, but this approach could be an important cornerstone to jumpstarting the process.

In addition to this official political process, the other vital path forward is to hear from local and diverse Afghan voices. This can be done through events that invite scholars to present policy papers and meet with policy makers regarding pressing issues facing Afghanistan and Afghan citizens today. That way, any decisions Canada and its allies make will be informed by Afghan perspectives.

Recommendations for Canada

Canada, as a vital partner of NATO and a close ally of the United States, can complement US efforts of engagement with the Taliban or can lead an initiative of its own to create a Track 1.5 diplomacy program with the Taliban. This approach would allow the Canadian government to exert influence, safeguard its interests, and incur minimal reputational costs. It could also serve as an important strategy for managing future evacuation processes and improving human rights outcomes in Afghanistan by increasing influence over the Taliban's decisionmakers.