

10 steps for peace in Afghanistan

An incremental strategy for the government of Afghanistan and international partners

Short-term steps to reduce violence

1. **Reorient strategy to prioritise the reduction of violence** as an essential foundation to create conditions in which underlying political issues can be addressed.
2. **Agree a joint commitment by the ANDSF leadership and NATO command to act in support of credible Taliban ceasefire or de-escalation steps.**
3. **Support local initiatives for the establishment and expansion of peace zones** in which Taliban opt to renew their ceasefire. Ensure that state support for such peace zones is guided by a national framework with appropriate incentives and safeguards.
4. **Build on Afghan government efforts to de-legitimise further political violence.** Support Taliban who cooperate in de-escalation in asserting the legitimacy of their rejecting violence. Refrain from obliging them to take stands which might compromise their status among their Taliban peers.
5. **Develop realistic options for Taliban groups that are cooperating in de-escalation to reduce their dependence on external support,** for example by expanding their access to urban-area health care.
6. **Ensure top-down and bottom-up elements of the incremental peace strategy work in sync.** Enhance Track One efforts to engage with the Taliban leadership alongside local engagement with Taliban through the peace zones.

7. **Establish a hybrid International Contact Group** comprising state and non-state membership to work alongside the Afghan High Peace Council, to marshal political support and resources for the incremental strategy and assist in monitoring compliance with violence-reduction commitments.

Long-term steps to renegotiate an inclusive social contract

8. **Launch a National Peace Dialogue to address the root causes of the conflict** with opportunities for armed and unarmed actors to participate. Include commitments to explore transitional justice measures and avenues for women's meaningful participation.
9. **Establish a high-level independent consultative group on political and economic reform and renewal of the social contract** which draws on deliberations in the National Peace Dialogue. Task the group with developing for the government a series of reform measures sufficient to address conflict drivers, with priority accorded to areas with potential for rapid, tangible progress.
10. **Establish a Peace and Security Commission** comprising senior national and international membership of men and women charged with ensuring that Security Sector Reform efforts accelerate and reinforce the peace process.

Rationale for incremental peace

Need and opportunity for a new approach

A radical change in approach is needed in Afghanistan to build peace incrementally over time. This starts with measures to reduce violence as an essential enabler for increased dialogue towards a more inclusive social contract. At present, Afghanistan faces two possible futures: 1) an indefinite continuation of the current conflict, which is the likely outcome of persevering with existing policies; or 2) gradual progress towards sustainable peace, which requires a significant policy shift.

An incremental approach can accumulate security, confidence and inclusion in phases and is the most viable model to break out of Afghanistan's violent stasis. This would pursue two objectives: 1) short-term – to reduce violence, which inevitably involves a central role for the conflict parties, principally the Taliban and the Afghan government; and 2) long-term – to develop a more broadly inclusive social contract representative of all Afghans, which is only achievable with involvement and ultimately endorsement across Afghan society – men and women. An incremental approach implies a phased set of agreements towards a more comprehensive settlement, rather than looking to negotiate a 'grand bargain' in a single document. Agreements would be sequenced from easy to hard over a period of years including institutional reforms and confidence-building running in parallel.

The opportunity exists now in Afghanistan for the strategic shift necessary to tip the balance away from violence. But this needs to be actively seized in terms of choices of strategy, planning and resourcing. President Ghani's February 2018 public offer of dialogue with the Taliban provides a constructive platform for integrated support around an Afghan-led peace programme. But subsequent developments reinforce the stark dilemma inherent in Afghanistan's current position and its future trajectory. Statements by Taliban factions documented in *Accord* suggest that the idea of achieving peaceful political status has resonance within the movement, without either surrendering or rejecting their identity as Taliban. The June 2018 Eid ceasefire further showed that the Taliban leadership has some capacity to deliver de-escalation across the movement and that there is enthusiasm among the membership to embrace it. But the Taliban leadership has remained sceptical of a political process and did not reciprocate the government's offer to extend the ceasefire. A persistent theme of the Afghan conflict has been the glaring gap between words and actions – with both sides

talking peace while intent on waging war. This shows why a major change of approach is needed to move beyond the peace rhetoric.

Building confidence

Renegotiating a new social contract is key to sustainable peace in Afghanistan but is currently blocked – primarily by a fundamental lack of confidence among the parties that precludes progress towards agreement on even the most basic issues. Lack of confidence is driven in the first instance by the pervasive violence affecting many parts of the country. It is further compromised by widespread mistrust of formal processes and agreements and perceptions that national institutions are corrupt and partisan, and by the dual system of governance in Afghanistan – with the government running the main population centres and the Taliban much of the countryside. The strength of Taliban military capability and the reach of their shadow governance demonstrate the extent of their power to challenge government authority in many parts of the country.

A reduction in violence would represent the single most important confidence-building measure to help launch dialogue on core issues. It is most likely to be achieved through parallel bottom-up and top-down de-escalation measures. Sub-national peace efforts in Afghanistan respond to the fragmented nature of the insurgency. They have shown early signs of success in the past in reducing violence in some parts of the country. But local initiatives have ultimately been undermined by resistance from the centre: by national authorities failing to follow through on locally-agreed commitments, or state institutions actively obstructing efforts to implement them; or by Taliban central leadership opposing government local reintegration programmes that did not offer political dialogue in parallel. This is why local and national measures need to be pursued together.

A peace process needs to engage with pro-peace elements of the Taliban 'brand', which has some currency among the Afghan population. The core message of the central Taliban leadership has wide popular resonance: that Afghanistan needs to return to law and order and the Taliban can deliver security and justice based on Islam. The movement presents itself as inclusive – not aligned with any group, ethnicity or political programme but following Islam. Its influence exploits public discontent with the government, mirroring its initial rise to power in the 1990s. Support for pro-peace discourse within the Taliban can strengthen the hand of commanders

who advocate for de-escalation, such as through the establishment of local peace zones. Peace approaches that promote ideas or images of repentant Taliban surrendering are counter-productive. The Taliban military remain undefeated and there is still significant esprit de corps in the movement. Progress depends on harnessing Taliban values and culture in favour of peacemaking, rather than waiting for partisans to renounce Taliban values and culture per se.

Reorienting strategy

The radical strategic reorientation required to realise an incremental peace in Afghanistan in practice demands difficult policy choices on three counts. First, it challenges the established policy orthodoxy of prioritising counter-insurgency, statebuilding and diplomacy as the key enablers for change. Second, Afghan and international partners need to better align strategies towards a mutual goal of political settlement, which demands significant strategic coordination among but also within individual state partners – neither of which has proved easy to date. And third, it necessitates a long-term strategy planned over several years, which implies slow as well as quick impact and non-linear progression. Conflicting priorities

among Afghanistan's neighbours have blocked a coherent regional peace strategy. External efforts to construct regional agreement around a unified 'grand peace' policy have not succeeded and risk backlash if pushed too assertively, while repeated failures to initiate Track One talks undermine confidence in the potential of dialogue to deliver results. But Pakistan's endorsement of the June 2018 Eid ceasefire indicates the potential to build regional consensus around a step-by-step process.

An incremental approach to peace offers short- and long-term dividends as an incentive for the required change of strategy. De-escalation could provide early security benefits as well as longer-term investment in confidence-building. Gradual transition to a political process would enable international and Afghan partners to progressively re-orient military resources to more cost-effective political and diplomatic engagement, thereby providing a credible pathway to drawdown. Unlike previous strategies, this approach puts Afghanistan centre stage. It faces external resistance such as derives from rivalry between Pakistan and India. Prioritising de-escalation can help to stem the supply of external support for instability in Afghanistan.

Ten steps for peace in Afghanistan

Details for effective implementation

The 10 steps for the government of Afghanistan and international partners to work together in an incremental peace strategy are fleshed out below.

Short-term steps to reduce violence

1. Reorient strategy to prioritise the reduction of violence as an essential foundation to create the conditions in which underlying political issues can be addressed.

Concrete progress towards violence reduction can build momentum and confidence among the various parties to the conflict. The enthusiastic response to the June 2018 Eid ceasefires provides 'proof of concept' for the potential of violence reduction. Strategy has so far relied on regional diplomacy and attempts to trigger Track One talks in pursuit of a 'grand bargain'. Progress has been too easily blocked by opposition within the Taliban leadership and the approach offered no way of tapping into the significant pro-peace sentiment within the movement, the existence of which was affirmed during the June ceasefires.

A phased approach could explicitly align with, build on and affirm President Ghani's February 2018 peace offer that the government of Afghanistan will deal with the Taliban movement as a 'political actor' once it goes on ceasefire. This provides a viable framework for coordinated support for an Afghan-led peace programme. In effect, it would operationalise and channel resources to President Ghani's proposal. International actors in discussion with the President could elaborate criteria that a ceasefire or de-escalation of violence needs to meet before it is considered credible.

Implementation imperative: build broader support for the violence reduction process among actors invested in the status quo or fearful of potentially detrimental change; and define what is meant by 'political actor' in relation to President Ghani's peace offer and how this may affect attitudes – of the Taliban and others – both to de-escalation and to more inclusive political processes and their potential outcomes.

2. Agree a joint commitment by the ANDSF leadership and NATO command to act in support of a credible Taliban ceasefire or de-escalation steps. Senior-level

support from the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation could help convince the Taliban of the reliability and breadth of coalition commitment to de-escalation. It could also provide the basis for joint planning for preparatory support and coordination mechanisms. Implementation measures could include conditional prisoner release, temporary de-listing of sanctioned Taliban and safe-conduct or security guarantees. Implementation support mechanisms could include an international working group led by an agreed third party to develop lists of potential prisoners for prioritised release and conditions for negotiations on temporary de-listing. Potential rewards and wider benefits of ending violence would then need to be communicated between the parties through existing channels and public diplomacy.

Implementation imperative: develop protection measures for senior members of the Taliban movement who may be vulnerable to retaliation by hardliners for their cooperation in advancing the peace process. Possible measures could include temporary accommodation in a neutral third country and provision of security support on their eventual return to Afghanistan.

3. Support local initiatives for the establishment and expansion of peace zones in which Taliban opt to renew their ceasefire. This would start with temporary and territorially delimited cessations of hostilities while the terms of a more permanent ceasefire could be renegotiated and the zone potentially expanded. Measures to incentivise participation could include compensating local groups that agree to de-escalate violence in the absence of a broader Taliban commitment – recognising the connections between local and national peace processes. This could include providing protection for participating local groups and leaders in the provinces against any retaliation from potential spoilers in the respective area, including from local authorities and government-affiliated strongmen with personal agendas. Central support for such local initiatives should include channeling humanitarian and development resources to ensure the local population benefits and purging malign elements within local administration or security forces whose abuse of power has fomented conflict. Parallel progress

towards talks to reduce violence at a national level could help protect local initiatives from centralised spoiling tactics.

Implementation imperative: identify means through which Taliban operations might be visibly separated from those of Islamic State in Khorasan or other insurgent groups who do not intend to commit to de-escalation and who still may pose a credible threat to international security. Incentivise potential spoilers to afford co-operating Taliban due respect and safety, for example through the provision of local development projects for their constituent local communities.

4. **Build on Afghan government efforts to de-legitimise further political violence.** During 2018 the Afghan government invested in a series of *ulema* gatherings designed to challenge the Islamic legitimacy of the ongoing Taliban campaign. The initiative has so far provided a platform for clerics already aligned with the government, which has made it easier for the Taliban to reject their status. Building on these efforts requires figures who have had standing within the Taliban movement to make the case that violence is no longer warranted. Even if the leadership is not amenable to moral arguments, the nurturing of a Taliban pro-peace discourse can strengthen the hand of commanders who advocate within the movement for the establishment of peace zones.

Implementation imperative: there is a long Afghan state tradition of propaganda based on images of repentant insurgents surrendering. Exploiting this kind of photo-opportunity in the peace process with Taliban will backfire as their military are undefeated and there is still significant esprit de corps in the movement. Progress depends on harnessing Taliban values and culture in favour of peacemaking, rather than waiting for partisans to renounce those values and culture.

5. **Develop realistic options for Taliban groups that are cooperating in de-escalation to reduce their dependence on external support.** There is significant political will among some Taliban groups to relinquish ties to their supporters in their respective cross-border regions. This could be capitalised upon through the development of a set of potential inducements for those groups committing to pause fighting that include not only the provision of livelihood alternatives but also local prestige and

respect through the upholding of Taliban positions of influence in the community. For example, access to healthcare for the wounded is a key issue for Taliban, which could be addressed for those complying with the requirements of a peace zone. This could be supported by developing where possible a localised map of Taliban resource or capital extraction and livelihoods in order to better understand regional variations in the war economy and develop strategies to tackle these with locally-tailored alternatives.

Implementation imperative: develop economic alternatives that are persuasive enough to incentivise total or partial shifts in reliance on regional funding and to account for inevitable gaps in any mapping that is undertaken. Develop viable options that adequately compensate for local groups' existing ability to sustain themselves as influential actors in the region.

6. **Ensure top-down and bottom-up elements of the incremental peace strategy work in sync.** Maintain Track One efforts to engage with the Taliban leadership, alongside local engagement with Taliban through the peace zones. Use both channels to communicate with Taliban about the incremental peace strategy as an integrated approach which avoids fragmentation and offers paths for the whole Taliban movement to come on board – in line with the President's February position. Seek leadership level participation in violence reduction and the National Peace Dialogue (see step 8. below). Use both Track One and local engagement with the Taliban to seek their cooperation in broadening cross-movement consensus for de-escalation and explore key areas for mutual accommodation. This could be facilitated at the sub-national level by High Peace Council representatives in coordination with respected local interlocutors, bringing together for example neighbouring regional groups of Taliban towards a series of bilateral agreements.

Implementation imperative: build Taliban trust in the High Peace Council and other government-affiliated interlocutors and deliver financial and security support for any agreements that are reached between groups. Develop thinking around key agenda items for Track One dialogue, such as: security, respect and basic needs for combatants and victims; property, economic rights and the illicit economy; the structure of government and consolidation of electoral democracy; and ethnicity, social inclusion and equality of opportunity. This should be advanced consultatively among relevant Afghan and international men and women.

7. Establish a hybrid International Contact Group comprising state and non-state membership to work alongside the Afghan High Peace Council. A hybrid group could help link mediation tracks, providing both international political leverage to support and advise the parties and a channel to connect negotiations to different communities locally. It can achieve this dual function through its composite membership. It can also provide technical support to advise on substantive agenda items.

Implementation imperative: agree credible membership and terms of reference for the Group that is supported by the parties, local communities and mediation support structures.

Long-term steps to increase dialogue towards an inclusive social contract

8. Launch a National Peace Dialogue to address the root causes of the conflict with opportunities for armed and unarmed actors to participate. Include commitments to explore transitional justice measures and avenues

BOX 1

Islamic State in Khorasan

The Afghan government and the Taliban insurgency are the protagonists of the armed conflict in Afghanistan and the primary focus for dialogue to reduce violence. But several armed groups are active in Afghanistan alongside the Taliban while the Taliban itself comprises multiple sub-groups with varying levels of allegiance to the central leadership and different attitudes towards conflict and peace.

Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK) province is the most notorious armed group currently operating in Afghanistan. It has developed into a significant rival to the Taliban, although there are also instances of local collaboration between the two. Devastating suicide bomb attacks in Kabul in early 2018 demonstrated ISK's spoiler capacity to derail democratic progress, and the level of indiscriminate ISK violence holds some niche appeal among the most extreme elements of the Afghan insurgency. But ISK currently still has limited strategic significance or influence, including in relation to any political process. De-escalation initiatives with the Taliban will involve the movement verifiably dissociating itself from ISK and other armed groups opposed to meaningful dialogue. There is no prospect of accommodation with ISK, but progress on incremental peace with the Taliban will boost the ability of the Afghan state to counter ISK.

for women's meaningful participation, building on proposals developed in the high-level independent consultative group (see step 9. below). Communities across Afghanistan would discuss and respond to proposals, which would be gathered and compiled into a Peace Strategy. This could be passed on to the high-level consultative group to develop a series of recommendations to the Afghan government for how the Strategy might be implemented.

Implementation imperative: establish a national dialogue that can magnify women's collective influence while also upholding internal diversity. Incorporate a consultative transitional justice component as a means to offer communities the opportunity to voice and document key grievances that have resulted from Afghanistan's protracted conflict in a process that provides opportunities for substantive follow-up.

9. Establish a high-level independent consultative group on political and economic reform and renewal of the social contract. There is an urgent need to begin reassessing the fundamental character and role of the Afghan state – not least because its current failings and loopholes are central drivers of violent conflict. It is imperative that the government of Afghanistan, with the support of its international partners, commits to an overhaul of the existing political system. A high-level consultative group made up of senior Afghan women and men policymakers could provide advice, facilitate relationships and gather inputs from across Afghan society and from external experts on priorities for inclusive change. These could include controversial issues such as decentralisation, women's equality, and a revision of the electoral system and the criminalised economy. The economic reform agenda would include the enhanced monitoring of customs, prevention of land-grabbing and reduction of parliamentary privileges.

The group would be structured to insulate it from the political cycle, allowing it to work impartially and long-term, with continuity between administrations and the possibility of putting major reforms to a vote. Economic reform should not imply symbolic gestures to prosecute high-profile individuals, but rather innovative technical and institutional reform measures that disrupt corrupt practices. Future punitive measures could include public threats of international sanctions against individuals who continue to orchestrate corrupt activities that extract state resources for personal gain.

Implementation imperative: guarantee the independence of the consultative group and publicly communicate its commitment to impartiality and transformative change, while also establishing its influence to affect reform – for example through the credibility of its membership, the authority of its mandate and the legitimacy of its methodology to consult widely. Support the group to develop technical innovations that are sufficiently cost-effective to be implementable with limited resources but also sophisticated enough to withstand efforts to undermine them.

10. Establish a Peace and Security Commission comprising senior national and international men and women charged with ensuring that Security Sector Reform efforts reinforce the peace process. This commission should develop measures for enhancing the confidence of former combatants and the wider populace in the security forces, develop mechanisms for selective integration of former insurgents as well as procedures for vetting personnel on human rights grounds. It should monitor the compliance of security forces with the spirit of a peace process and any re-profiling of the forces necessary to maintain broad confidence.

Implementation imperative: manage and make space for the selective integration of former insurgents amid simultaneous restructuring that would necessarily see some security sector officials at the higher ranks replaced or asked to retire.

Enabling change: transforming relationships

An incremental approach would aim to gradually build the parties' confidence and willingness to consider ambitious measures or embrace compromise, recognising that rebuilding relationships between the parties plays a vital role in facilitating and expanding possibilities

BOX 2

Peace and elections in Afghanistan

Peace initiatives need to navigate forthcoming elections in Afghanistan. It is in the Afghan government's interest to ensure that as much of the country as possible is able to participate in both parliamentary and presidential polls. High levels of violence and the willingness of the Taliban to target the electoral process constitute a major threat to efforts to hold free and fair elections. Claims about Taliban willingness to facilitate elections in areas they control are periodically made but rarely substantiated. Fully inclusive elections will only be possible when violence has been greatly reduced and access to the hinterland for electoral personnel and other actors has been restored. In effect, the absence of peace ensures a continuing democratic deficit in Afghanistan.

for agreement. A phased programme of implemented reforms and cooperative relations cultivated through dialogue has potential to address the issues that have driven violent conflict in Afghanistan for decades. A progressive approach to settlement could build on reforms rather than compromising on them.

An early suspension in fighting could help create an enabling environment conducive to such a sustained process of dialogue and reform. A sincerity test for armed groups looking to join a political process would be their preparedness to sign up to the suspension of violence. Until now, any 'peace process' in Afghanistan has lacked both the strategic ambition and coordinated political will to take appropriate action. There is scope for a sustained and resolute move towards incremental peace that could, over a period of years, repair and renew the relationship between Afghanistan and its people.

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflict and promote peaceful societies. Our *Accord* series informs and strengthens peace processes by documenting and analysing the lessons of peacebuilding.

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