

Political process in Afghanistan

What role for international partners?

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ABSTRACT

How can international partners provide effective support for a political process in Afghanistan?

A political solution to the armed conflict between the Afghan government and the Taliban must be Afghan-led. But international support is essential to build momentum and resilience.

There is a compelling moral and practical case to convince Western allies to work collaboratively and strategically, using their collective leverage to persuade conflict parties to engage in talks. A viable approach must acknowledge the multi-tiered realities of the

war, operating nationally, bilaterally and regionally, and also the incremental political logic of conflict resolution, working through a step-by-step process from informal dialogue and confidence-building, to military de-escalation and formal negotiations.

Lessons from past peacemaking efforts stress the need for: 1) a peace process necessitating a long-term commitment; 2) strategic prioritisation, to coordinate activities towards a common political goal; and 3) third-party facilitation, excluding external states currently operating in Afghanistan.



US soldiers investigate an insurgent fighting position overlooking routes used by locals as well as the US and Afghan Security Forces through the inhabited valleys of Paktya Province, 2008. © ZUMA Press, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo

Afghanistan's war, past and present, is multi-tiered. Myriad local and sub-national conflicts sit within and shape a national confrontation, which itself sits within and is shaped by a complex interplay of cross-border, regional and international tensions, conflicts, relationships and interests. While it is of course primarily an Afghan war, regional and international actors are central to its continuation and, therefore, its eventual resolution.

Officials and non-governmental actors in Washington, London and other capitals have attempted various initiatives to bring the belligerents into a political process, including bilateral and multilateral talks, Track 2 conferences, combatant reintegration programmes and economic inducements. But in the absence of an agreed and coordinated vision and public narrative, divergent interests and spoiler actions have undermined such efforts.

Recent signs of movement towards political dialogue, stimulated by President Ashraf Ghani's February 2018 offer of peace talks with the Taliban, are encouraging. But history shows that even the most promising political process can be derailed, not least in its nascent stages. Progress needs to be nurtured, to build momentum and resilience to withstand shocks. What, then, are the options for effective international support for a peace process in Afghanistan? A way forward is to develop a coherent and incremental approach that responds to the multi-layered realities of the conflict.

Obstacles

The challenge of finding a political solution to Afghanistan's war has been compounded by a lack of clear analysis of the conflict problem to be addressed, and by often competing policy imperatives. In the West, and especially in the US, there has been a tendency to blur the Taliban movement

and its erstwhile al-Qaeda allies, which are linked but distinct, making the argument for political engagement and dialogue harder to win.

This conceptual challenge has also fed into the wider tension between the counter-terrorist policy of Western states and their concurrent interest in starting a political process, resulting in conflicting priorities. The perceived emphasis on military force and operations, for instance, has created the impression that peace is not a priority. The abortive June 2013 opening of a Taliban 'political office' in Doha, on the other hand, generated cynicism about political outreach, damaged US-Afghan relations, and undermined negotiations over the proposed Bilateral Security Agreement to allow US and international troops to remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

Further complicating support for a political process with the Taliban are legitimate questions about whether it would involve compromises on some of the advances achieved in Afghanistan since 2001 on human rights, education, elections and the constitution. Moreover, there are concerns about the political cohesion of the Taliban and the credibility of its more moderate wing – which comprises mainly former Taliban officials and diplomats, many of whom are based in Doha. Would engaging or even reaching an agreement with the Taliban result in any tangible outcomes?

These complexities and ambiguities continue to cause great uncertainty about the prospects for any political process, including among Taliban leaders. Many of them interpret calls for a process as little more than a demand that they capitulate. This is despite the fact that the Afghan and US governments have continually stressed since 2011 that their three 'red lines' – that the Taliban

cut ties with al-Qaeda, renounce violence and support the Afghan constitution – were end-conditions rather than pre-conditions for negotiation.

Making the case

Political dialogue between the Taliban and Kabul faces resistance from many quarters inside and outside Afghanistan. Establishing a compelling case is key to build and sustain support. US President Donald Trump's revised Afghan strategy announced in August 2017 does not rule out a more assertive international effort to drive a political process forward. But his one-line reference to a possible 'political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan' suggests there is work to be done to convince the President and his National Security Council to commit.

Despite the complex challenges, some things are clear. Decisive military victory is highly unlikely. State-building initiatives will prove reversible in the absence of an eventual settlement. The human and financial cost of the war is vast. Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have been killed or wounded. In the first five months of 2017 alone, Afghan security forces reportedly suffered 2,531 killed and 4,238 wounded. Over 3,500 international troops have lost their lives. The US has spent over \$800 billion since 2001. Without a credible political process, President Trump could yet enter the 2020 US election having spent another \$100 billion, and likely having lost more service members, with no appreciable change in the strategic situation.

There is a clear and obvious moral argument to be made. But to win over sceptics it also needs to be articulated in more hard-headed terms. It should be framed so as to make clear that the best way to ensure an eventual transition out of Afghanistan and a reduction in the enormous bill for the local security forces will be a political process that tackles the root causes of the interconnected conflicts described above – and does so in a way that respects the service and sacrifice of Afghans as well as of international troops. A strong case can also be made for political intervention on the basis that the Afghan war is now highly internationalised. The conflict plays into wider tensions between India and Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, India and China, and the US and Russia, among others. The risks of broader instability are high, and the impact that this could have on Western security interests are considerable.

Looking forward, the literature tells us that a peace process is likely to gain momentum when a 'mutually hurting stalemate' exists. This requires three conditions. First, that the conflict is deadlocked. Second, that the parties to the conflict recognise this to be the case. This

occurs when the actors perceive that the likely costs of attempting further military gains exceed the benefits. Perception that an outright military victory is unlikely is not sufficient – actors will use military operations to increase their leverage, too. Only when this becomes too costly will they begin to seek alternatives. Third, the actors must believe that a viable alternative path exists to achieve their core interests. An alternative path only becomes viable when sufficient confidence exists that the other party (or parties) can make and keep credible commitments. This step alone could take years to unfold. There is no reason to wait for some magic moment of insight to strike the actors. There is a critical requirement to act now.

Although many voices on the side of the Afghan government and Taliban recognise – even if only privately – that there is no military solution to the conflict, both sides still believe they can still advance their negotiating leverage through military action and battlefield gains. The 'uplift' of US forces announced in August 2017 has clearly given the Afghan government new hope of forcing the Taliban to sue for peace. For their part, the Taliban are likely to exercise patience to see how intense this latest military push will be. Meanwhile, they are likely to continue seeking territorial gains and to secure a major population centre, such as Kunduz or Lashkar Gah.

Political process in practice: steps and levels

To build on positive signs of headway towards a political process, an expanded international initiative to support dialogue should proceed along interrelated and phased steps. These would need to function on multiple levels to be effective, matching the multi-tiered nature of the conflict. The steps begin with dialogue and confidence-building measures. This foundational first step is key to progress in current conditions and so is the focus of attention here. Advancement on step one facilitates movement on steps two and three: limitations on military activities leading to a general ceasefire; and finally more formal negotiations.

The three levels correspond to the dimensions of the conflict where international facilitators can make a reasonable difference: first, regional – Afghanistan's neighbours plus India, China, Russia, and also the US; second, bilateral – Afghanistan and Pakistan; and third, national – the Afghan government and the Taliban. Given the complex and dynamic nature of the conflict, a third-party facilitator would be well placed to ensure efforts are coordinated and mutually reinforcing – as discussed in more detail below. Critically, international actors must avoid poorly coordinated and overly high-profile 'rushes to failure' – such as the attempted opening of the Taliban's Doha 'office' in 2013 – that have undermined earlier efforts.

Step one would need international engagement at all three levels to find agreeable confidence-building measures in order to establish the credibility of all parties to deliver tangible progress. Confidence-building measures, if carefully crafted, can begin while the conflict is ongoing and accelerate both the recognition of stalemate and a viable alternative path. Measures in step one could include cooperation on polio vaccines, for which there is some precedent, or on reducing civilian harm. A gradual intensification and constant evaluation of confidence-building measures would reduce the risk of ceding political and military advantage or creating unrealistic expectations. Starting small and building toward more significant measures has the potential to create important momentum and credibility, and offers a practical, low-risk, high-payoff way forward.

A subsequent advance within step one would be to seek agreement on broad-brush principles on which further dialogue could be built. There is arguably already a basis for this. International actors, the Afghan government and the Taliban leadership are all under some bottom-up public pressure to bring greater stability to Afghanistan; all three want to see foreign fighters withdrawn from Afghanistan, whether Arabs or Americans; and all three are committed to seeing corruption reduced and governance practised in light of Afghan tradition and Islamic values. All international players can also agree, at least rhetorically, that it is in their interests to see a sovereign, stable and neutral Afghanistan – even if the more difficult issues of distribution of political power and any long-term international troop presence would need to be considered later in the process.

Step one could also include a well-coordinated and clearly supported dialogue process at Tracks 2 (unofficial) and 1.5 (quasi-official), undertaken ‘quietly’ with minimal media coverage. This could help generate momentum at the national level. The Track 2 event held in Chantilly in France in 2012, which was attended by members of the Taliban leadership, caused tensions in Kabul. But it also exposed some Taliban leaders to other contrasting Afghan voices and gave the movement’s more pragmatic figures a status and platform they otherwise lacked.

These initiatives are not without risk. But both the Afghan government and the Taliban will need to see something positive ‘on the table’ if they are to be able to sell any form of engagement to their sceptical constituencies. In support of the Afghan government’s successful negotiation of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s return to Kabul and culmination of his faction’s insurgency, the international community was able to lift sanctions on members of the armed group. This showed that international partners can react quickly and

constructively when required, and how quickly the policy edifice seemingly preventing progress can be undone. The Hekmatyar deal is no template for negotiations with the much larger and more powerful Taliban movement – but it shows what can be achieved with enough resolve.

International actors also need to seek bottom-up opportunities to support progress on dialogue at the national level. Efforts to reform local government and local High Peace Council structures have been important and need to continue. But to complement these, a potentially effective innovation around step one would be for international actors to dedicate more effort to understand and collectively tailor their support for local level peace initiatives. Insurgents and officials have found accommodations locally in the past that have genuinely reduced levels of violence [see article on Brokering local settlements, p. 74].

Given the reduced international footprint in Afghanistan today, mobilising adequate and effective support for local initiatives would be no mean feat. One way forward would be to consider ‘trial de-escalation zones’ at a sub-provincial level, perhaps leading to local ceasefires. Afghan government engagement could be monitored and constructively supported. Positive popular pressure for peace generated by such initiatives could be channelled upwards to both the insurgent and government leaderships.

Building momentum: international leverage

The US and its allies have a number of points of leverage over the key actors. Together, they have potential to bring their considerable diplomatic and political authority to bear in an effort to cajole, persuade and engage all parties, and help establish conditions in which a political process might grow.

On the Taliban side, there is evidence that the movement’s leadership recognise that they do need to engage the US and wider international community politically, for example their agreement to establish and maintain their Doha ‘office’. Taliban leaders recall the heavy cost of their isolation when in power and there have been signs that the more politically savvy among them know that if the movement is to survive into the long term, it must evolve into a position whereby it can benefit from the enduring support that Afghanistan needs to recover.

More generally, the movement’s leaders continue to seek the international recognition and respect they believe their movement deserves, given what they see as its central role in rescuing Afghanistan from the horrors of the civil war in the 1990s. As such, despite the understandable frustrations, there remains continued practical and

symbolic utility in the Taliban's 'office' in Doha remaining open, as a future channel for contact and dialogue, and a platform and outlet for the movement's more pragmatic leaders. Closing the political office, as some have suggested, sends a powerful statement to the Taliban that nothing is to be gained from pursuing peace.

With regard to the Afghan government and the wider array of powerful political players in Afghanistan currently, the US and its allies could do more to leverage the extraordinary levels of assistance that they continue to provide to ensure that there is an unrelenting focus on getting a political process under way. The US and its international partners have a reasonable right to insist that the Afghan government supports plausible opportunities to bring the conflict to a durable peace.

Shared objectives with regard to peace are especially important given the risk that misaligned interests and objectives between Western states and their allies have damaged peace initiatives in relation to past conflicts. There is a significant risk of this happening in Afghanistan today with the 2019 Afghan presidential elections looming, as candidates may seek advantage in undermining any nascent political process initiatives.

In the final reckoning, there can only be an 'Afghan-led' political solution to the national dimension of the Afghan conflict, a point all international actors have recognised in recent years. Evidence from across the world suggests that the capacity of external actors to 'screwdriver' a deal is very limited, and would only result in further instability in the long term.

But that does not mean international actors are discounted. Steps one (dialogue and confidence building), two (reductions in military activities) and three (formal talks) will all require international support in some form to get traction. There is a need to ensure that an Afghan-led process does not become one that excuses international actors from taking action, or provides an opportunity to those in Afghanistan and the region who do not see it as in their interests that a political process progresses.

International third-party facilitation

Any renewed international effort, especially of the kind involving regional diplomacy, will require strong political leadership. The investment in human resources and the injection of political capital must be commensurate with the task at hand. A third-party facilitator – UN or independent – would, we believe, be very well placed to begin to develop the foundations across the three levels of engagement described above for a credible peace process to begin.

It would of course be critical to build a respected and expert team to support facilitation, which would need to be empowered to bring together the various key actors. Such a team could build up slowly and, if appropriate, draw in other international actors and allies, whether from other Muslim states or organisations, or from countries that have gone through similar multi-decade processes, such as Colombia or the Philippines. Any third-party team would also need to be able to draw on the diplomatic, conflict resolution and mediation human resources and expertise required to take such a complex political process forward. Some of that skill base and experience may be best drawn from the NGO and peacebuilding community, where they have made important contributions to peace efforts such as in the Philippines or Nepal.

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Lessons identified – and learned?

The costs of continued conflict in Afghanistan are huge. While vital to the overall effort, the military campaign alone will not bring stability, and nor will state-building efforts prove sustainable for as long as their fundamental legitimacy is disputed by an armed element of the Afghan population. We have argued here that an internationally supported peace process is the best way to ensure the gains made since 2001 are sustained.

The challenges to taking forward an Afghan political process are undoubtedly enormous. The exclusivity of Afghanistan's current political settlement will need to be carefully recalibrated and the Taliban and their national and regional supporters, who believe themselves to have been excluded since 2001, will need to be brought back into the political fold.

As noted, any progress towards a recalibrated Afghan and regional political settlement will require difficult choices and compromises, and potentially significant trade-offs on contentious indigenous and international issues. At the same time, there is a need to avoid too much discussion of end states. While a set of underlying shared principles may provide a helpful basis for dialogue, it will be impossible to forecast the precise outlines of a future settlement now, and attempts to do so will only serve as poison pills.

If a renewed commitment to peace in Afghanistan is made, international policymakers must reflect on the following lessons identified from other conflicts, and develop their strategy around them.

Recognise the need for a peace *process*. The nature of the Afghan conflict suggests that there will probably not be a clear moment at which peace is 'achieved'. The step-by-step process outlined above holds far more realistic prospects of sustainable progress towards reductions in violence over the next several years than well-intentioned efforts to broker national-level ceasefires and one-off peace deals. International actors will need to make a long-term commitment. Following 40 years of war, it may take almost as long to achieve a more equitable and stable political settlement.

Avoid a rush to failure, while recognising that the longer international engagement in a political process is put off, the harder it will become to get going. The Afghan war economy is already powerful, the leverage of international

actors is diminishing and the insurgency shows signs of becoming more fragmented and radical. But the short-term viability and impact of each step of the peace process needs to be considered carefully.

Establish third-party facilitation infrastructure and processes that can devote full-time attention to the challenges outlined here. International states currently operating in Afghanistan need to recognise that despite laudable efforts to broker peace, they can never act as 'honest brokers'. An expert mediation support team could help bring together key actors, where appropriate engaging international partners from other Muslim states or organisations, countries with practical past experience of peace processes, or civil society expertise.

Prioritise the political process ruthlessly. Minimise the unintended consequences of other strands of activity and synchronise interventions towards a common political goal, while acknowledging that policy and strategy tensions will always exist.