

# Conclusion

## Incremental peace in practice

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It is not possible in 2018 to talk to any Afghan who does not have direct personal experience of loss of life or livelihood as a result of violent conflict. Limbs blown off, children murdered, maimed or orphaned, elders decapitated, people raped, sons kidnapped, women abused, families separated, shops obliterated, schools reduced to rubble: pervasive, intense and violent suffering has devastated a nation. Afghanistan is not a 'safe country' to live in or return to, nor is it in any kind of post-conflict phase. It is embroiled in a network of wars that have become intractably interlinked.

But the contributions to this *Accord* publication clearly demonstrate that Afghanistan is not consigned to an inevitably violent future. Rather, there are two potential routes ahead: a continuation of this violence (the 'path of least resistance') or steps toward an incremental peace. Strong drivers continue to push in the direction of conflict. But new conditions like President Ghani's February 2018 peace offer to the Taliban and intense conflict fatigue on both sides suggest an alternate course is possible. Achieving such a shift would require a conscious choice by the major parties to the conflict and their supporters to claim responsibility and take tangible action.

### Rhetoric to reality

Moving beyond the peace rhetoric means acknowledging certain – sometimes uncomfortable – truths. First, the weaknesses *and* strengths demonstrated by both the Taliban and the Afghan government. The Taliban have established a reputation for efficient dispute resolution and for their stance against corruption, but their use of violent force to impose control of territory and their lack of unity undermine their wider credibility. The Afghan government has recently made some gains in terms of its macro-economic development strategy and has maintained a functioning state that has seen a peaceful, if problematic, transfer of power in 2014. But all state institutions are subject to endemic corruption, unemployment levels

are soaring and the war economy continues to serve the interests of many government officials.

Second, common interests are discernible between the two major parties to the conflict, and between them and the Afghan people. These include the end to the needless killing of Afghans and the establishment of an Afghan administration that is representative and insulated against the interference of outside powers. Additionally, statements by leaders of Taliban groups in this publication summarise some common positions on key issues among the armed opposition – from the realisation of a moderate Islamic government free of corruption and the abuse of power, to achieving justice for all citizens, no matter their rank or background.

Third, offsetting common interests are tensions between the parties that need to be identified, acknowledged and worked through systematically. Examples include the absence of trust in formal agreements or settlements, how to reintegrate former anti-government commanders into crowded and contested security sector, how to address issues of immunity from prosecution without sidelining justice, and how to ensure that women's position vis-à-vis the state is insulated and enhanced.

The fate of Afghan women's involvement in the country's transition out of war is illustrative of the challenges of breaking out of the current violent scenario. Despite significant gains in rights and political participation, opportunities for women are still limited and many remain wary of the consequences of a political process with the Taliban. Challenges are not restricted to involvement with the armed opposition, however. Dr Habiba Sarabi asserts in this publication that most High Peace Council members are men who do not listen to its female representatives nor support women's rights. Still, new leadership and strategy have recently reinvigorated the HPC, especially for women. Afghan women have two key roles in peacemaking – at the political level to ensure

achievements are not lost, and at grassroots level to convince male family and community members not to fight. Dr Harabi refers to a Dari proverb: 'No matter how high the mountain, there will always be a way up'! [*Koh harche beland basha, sir khud, yak ra darad*]

## Incentivising incrementalism

To begin tackling some of the critical underlying issues that will transform Afghanistan's future in the longer-term, lessons from the analysis and experiences documented in this *Accord* suggest that an immediate reduction of violence is a necessary precursor. Only after the establishment of a credible ceasefire can divisive root causes of conflict be dealt with in a systematic manner that facilitates broad participation. This provides the rationale for an incremental approach to peace, based on two sets of phased objectives: first, short-term, involving an initial end to violent hostilities; and second, long-term, involving the renegotiation of a social contract inclusive of all Afghans.

Realising a progressive approach to peace in Afghanistan requires a radical strategic shift which, to progress, must overcome policy inertia or resistance. This shift is radical on four counts. First, prioritising de-escalation of violence bucks the prevalent policy orthodoxy of maintaining military pressure as the key enabler for change – to deliver either the disintegration of the Taliban or Track 1 talks towards a grand peace bargain with the Afghan government. Such policy is based on a flawed analysis of key variables: the vulnerability of the Taliban to fatal fragmentation; the preparedness of the Taliban central leadership to enter into substantive dialogue with the government; or the capacity of the Kabul authorities and their international partners to cohere a systematic political process.

Second, Afghan and international partners need to better align strategies ('ends, ways and means') towards a mutual goal of political settlement. This requires strategic coordination among but also within individual entities – neither of which has proved easy to date. Lt-General Douglas Lute in this publication describes how the United States leadership has struggled to establish the primacy of a political process to achieve peace in Afghanistan and the role of the military to support political action. Strategic inconsistency was exemplified by the killing of Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor in 2016, rather than seeing him as a potential interlocutor in dialogue. Looking ahead, Afghan and foreign peace partners can organise policies around President Ghani's peace offer. Identifiable, concrete steps towards a practicable de-escalation process as outlined below offer milestones for detailed planning.

Third, an incremental approach inherently implies a long-term strategy planned over years and not months. Such an approach involves committing to a peace process that will ultimately outlast the political terms of western governments' direct interest and investment in Afghanistan. But along the way it could also offer value for money – as well as for human and reputational resources – and accumulate peace dividends for Afghans and for international partners over time. De-escalation could provide both direct short-term 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.

Fourth, effective progress needs to combine local- and national-level initiatives. The insurgency exists on many levels. Felix Kuehn in this publication describes how the Taliban are not unified but include distinct groups with different policy perspectives. Still the main message of the central leadership that the Taliban can deliver a return to law and order based on Islam has broad resonance across the movement. While local peacemaking initiatives have enjoyed some partial success in recent years, as Julius Cavendish points out in this publication they have struggled to survive without national backing. Many locally agreed settlements in Afghanistan are also informal, and as Michael Semple asserts in this publication, the tradition of 'unwritten rules' in Afghanistan threatens the transparency of any formal settlement process as parties to any agreement could question whether some existing unofficial arrangement contradicts the terms they have just signed up to. An incremental peace in Afghanistan does not necessarily imply a single document like the Bonn Accords, but might more feasibly comprise a series of agreements sequenced from easy to hard and from local to national over a period of years, and including agreed reforms and confidence-building running in parallel.

## Incremental peace in practice

How then might a progressive peace in Afghanistan be put into action? Ultimately a peace process must be Afghan-led. Suggestions below for practical steps forward therefore describe ways in which international actors could work with the government of Afghanistan, organised into short- and long-term objectives of reducing violence and renegotiating an inclusive social contract.

## Short-term objectives: reducing violence

Reorient strategy to prioritise the reduction of violence as a necessary precursor to create the conditions in

**which underlying political issues can be addressed.**

The persistence of the violence in Afghanistan, sustained by the thriving war economy and both sides' demonisation of each other, precludes a meaningful political process. Concrete progress towards violence reduction can build momentum and confidence among the various parties to the conflict. A phased approach could explicitly align with, build upon and affirm President Ghani's 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 platform around which to coordinate support for an Afghan-led peace programme. International support can add credibility, accountability and resources to President Ghani's proposal and help it to withstand resistance and shocks. 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.

#### **Agree a joint commitment by North Atlantic Treaty**

**Organisation command and the leadership of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces to reciprocate any credible Taliban ceasefire or de-escalation steps.** This could help convince the Taliban of the reliability and breadth of commitment to de-escalation and provide a basis for joint planning for preparatory measures, and 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.

#### **Support the establishment of locally agreed peace zones.**

**These could set up temporary and territorially delimited cessations of hostilities** while the terms of a more permanent ceasefire could be renegotiated and the zone potentially expanded, providing a 'ground up' foundation for de-escalation. Implementation measures that can 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 would include providing protection for participating local groups and leaders in the provinces against any retaliation from potential spoilers in the area covered, including from local authorities and government-affiliated strongmen with personal agendas. Parallel progress towards reducing violence at a national level could help protect local initiatives from centralised spoiling tactics.

**Progressively isolate Taliban groups' reliance on regional economic and political support.** There is significant political will among 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 lay down arms 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.

#### **Increase support and resources for intra-Taliban dialogue**

in order to broaden cross-movement consensus to commit to de-escalate violence 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.

#### **Establish a *hybrid* International Contact Group to support**

**emerging Track 1 peace talks** comprising state and non-state membership to bridge gaps between short- and long-term peace objectives. A hybrid group could help to link mediation tracks, providing both international political leverage to support and advise the parties and a channel to connect negotiations to different communities. It can achieve this dual function through its composite membership. It can also provide technical support to advise on substantive agenda items.

#### **Overcoming impediments to implementation**

De-escalation requires a number of facilitative measures to overcome implementation challenges. These include building broader support for the violence reduction process among actors invested in the status quo or fearful of potentially detrimental change. Also, defining what is meant by 'political actor' in relation to President Ghani's peace offer and how this may affect attitudes – of the Taliban and other political actors – to the de-escalation process. Moreover, identifying means through which Taliban operations might be visibly separated from those of Islamic State of Khorasan or other insurgent groups that do not intend to commit to de-escalation and that still may pose a credible threat to international security.

In addition, it will be necessary to 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. Further, in order to secure sustainable commitment to any peace process at the local level it will be important to develop alternatives to the Taliban's regional political and economic support that are persuasive enough to incentivise total

or partial shifts away from reliance on regional funding. And there remains the challenge of building Taliban trust in the High Peace Council or other government-affiliated interlocutors and being able to deliver on supporting financially and with security provisions any agreements that are reached between groups.

De-escalation measures also 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, but facilitating Afghan rural communities' involvement could also bolster the Taliban's local popularity. While Taliban groups control a significant proportion of the country, this is not a relative measure of their local popular support once levels of violence decrease. Taliban leaders need to consider other ways in which they might bolster their peacetime legitimacy. International donors could help, meanwhile, by making solid political and resource commitments to candidate vetting, providing technical and political support to speed up the vote-counting process and a clear statement of non-intervention after the presidential results are released.

### **Long-term objectives: renegotiating the social contract**

Securing a ceasefire requires parallel efforts to facilitate agreement on an inclusive social contract representative of all Afghans. In this regard, international actors should support the government of Afghanistan to prioritise the following four tasks:

**Develop a high-level independent consultative group on political 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 external experts on priorities for inclusive change, including on controversial issues such as decentralisation, gender equality, and a revision of the electoral system and the criminalised economy.

**Launch a National Peace Dialogue** to address the root causes of the conflict, providing opportunities for transitional justice measures and building on proposals developed in the high-level consultative group. This would see the proposals discussed by communities across Afghanistan and responses gathered and compiled into a Peace Strategy.

At this point, the consultative group would take on the role of developing a series of recommendations to the Afghan government for how the Strategy might be implemented.

**Establish a Peace and Security Commission** comprising senior-level national and international male and female membership, 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, as well as developing mechanisms for selective integration of former insurgents. 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.

**Commit to large-scale economic reform** including the enhanced monitoring of customs, prevention of land-grabbing and reduction of parliamentary privileges. Rather than function as a symbolic or dramatic gesture based on imprisoning high-profile individuals, this should involve 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.

### **Overcoming impediments to implementation**

Longer-term measures also come with interrelated implementation challenges. First is the need to ensure the independence of the consultative group and publicly communicate its commitment to impartiality and transformative change, while also establishing its influence to effect reform – for example through the credibility of its membership, the authority of its mandate and the legitimacy of its methodology to consult widely. Second, it is imperative to offer the Afghan people the opportunity to voice and document key grievances that have resulted from Afghanistan's protracted conflict. Third, technical innovations need to be developed within economic reform programmes that are implementable with limited resources but also sophisticated enough to withstand efforts to undermine them.

### **Rebuilding relationships**

While renegotiating a new social contract is key to sustainable peace in Afghanistan, prospects for agreeing a comprehensive peace settlement are blocked for the foreseeable future. Lack of confidence among the parties is the main impediment to progress on even the most straightforward negotiable issues, driven in the first instance by the persistent violence affecting many parts of the country. Confidence is further compromised by chronic lack of trust in formal processes and agreements, by the prevalent perception 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.

An incremental approach as recommended here that builds security, confidence and inclusion over time presents a more viable alternative model to break out of Afghanistan's predicament. This would be likely to involve a phased set of agreements towards a more inclusive settlement, rather than looking to land a 'grand bargain' from the outset. It would aim to gradually build the parties' confidence and willingness to consider ambitious measures or embrace compromise, recognising the importance of rebuilding relationships between the parties in expanding the possibility of agreement.

A phased programme of implemented reforms and cooperative relations cultivated through dialogue has potential to address the issues that have underpinned 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 non-violent 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