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Making Peace with the Taliban¹

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On 28 September 2015, the northern Afghan city of Kunduz fell to the Taliban. Some 5,000 Afghan soldiers, police and militia were protecting Kunduz, but these quickly retreated as hundreds of Taliban swept into the city to join up with insurgents who had infiltrated beforehand. This was a hard won victory for the Taliban. Pouring fighters into the north, they had by degrees taken increasingly control of the districts around Kunduz city over the past two years, even compromising on their usual austere rule in order win over local support.² The Afghan government vowed to quickly retake Kunduz, but the army had to fight through Taliban held territory

¹ This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor and Francis in *Survival* on 25 November 2015, available online at <http://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2015.1116157>

² Joseph Goldstein, 'A Taliban Prize, Won in a Few Hours After Years of Strategy,' *New York Times*, 30 September 2015.

surrounding the city.³ Supported by US airstrikes and special forces, Afghan commandos began to clear the Taliban out of the city on 1 October.⁴ It took two weeks to achieve this.⁵

In seizing Kunduz, the Taliban achieved a key stated objective of their 2015 campaign, which was to capture a provincial capital. Appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee a few days afterwards, the commander of coalition forces, General John Campbell, 'absolutely' agreed with Senator John McCain when he observed that 'from a PR standpoint, it was a rather significant victory for the Taliban.'⁶ But however significant or spectacular it was, this victory does not alter the strategic reality of the war, which is one of stalemate. As we show below, neither side can win militarily. The Afghan army and police have no hope of wiping out the insurgency. Equally, the Taliban cannot win back Afghanistan through force of arms alone.

This creates a simple and compelling logic for peace talks as the only way to end the conflict. The past decade has seen a number of initiatives by the Afghan government to reach out to the Taliban. Most were designed to co-opt Taliban commanders or persuade Taliban fighters to abandon their military campaign, rather

³ Alissa J. Rubin, 'Afghan Forces Rally in Kunduz, But Fight is Far from Decided,' *New York Times*, 1 October 2015; Rod Norland and Jawad Sukhanyar, 'Taliban and Afghan Government Dispute Status of Kunduz,' *New York Times*, 21 June 2015.

⁴ Margherita Stancati and Habib Khan Totakhil, 'Afghan Forces Recapture Central Kunduz from Taliban,' *Wall Street Journal*, 1 October 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-forces-recapture-kunduz-from-the-taliban-1443678671>

⁵ Sayed Salahuddin, 'Taliban Announce Pullout from Kunduz,' *Washington Post*, 13 October 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-say-they-are-pulling-out-of-kunduz/2015/10/13/9f395af2-71cc-11e5-ba14-318f8e87a2fc_story.html

⁶ General John Campbell, Commander of US Forces-Afghanistan, testimony on US Military Operations in Afghanistan before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 6 October 2015, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?328585-1/general-john-campbell-testimony-us-military-operations-afghanistan>

than coherent and genuine attempts to negotiate peace.⁷ For their part, the Taliban have focused since 2006 on sustaining their military campaign in the face of growing western intervention. Nonetheless, the past five years have seen a discernible shift in Taliban strategy from one focused solely on fighting to include a diplomatic track. Thus the Taliban agreed to open a political office in Qatar, participated in occasional track-two events, engaged with a handful of governments, and participated in a sustained humanitarian dialogue.⁸ However, progress on peace talks was stymied by the Taliban refusal to negotiate with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, whose intent they distrusted, and who they considered a mere ‘puppet of the Americans.’⁹ The election of Ashraf Ghani as Afghan President in September 2014 has provided the opportunity to push forward with peace talks. At a time when many Taliban might be mistaken about the possibility of military victory, this article examines what can be done to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table and to keep them there.

Our study builds on numerous face-to-face discussions and commissioned interviews with senior Taliban figures, and for Semple, many years of studying the Taliban. We situate our analysis in the context of Taliban political culture, which presents a potential barrier to reconciliation. Our research also reveals a more pragmatic strain in Taliban thinking which is more open to peace talks.¹⁰ We approach our analytical task respectful of the challenge of understanding decision-

⁷ For a critical review of these early attempts to make deals with the Taliban, see Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2009).

⁸ This sequence of initiatives is described in detail in Michael Semple, ‘Peace Dialogue: the Afghan Case, 2001-2014,’ in Pernille Rieker and Henrik Thune, *Dialogue and Conflict Resolution: Potential and Limits* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 143-166.

⁹ This point was made clearly by four senior Taliban figures we interviewed individually over several hours in the Gulf in July 2012.

¹⁰ For previous discussion on this, see Michael Semple, Theo Farrell, Anatol Lieven and Rudra Chaudhuri, *Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation*, Royal United Services Institute, September 2012, https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Taliban_Perspectives_on_Reconciliation.pdf

making in what is an opaque organization operating in the context of a very complex and seemingly interminable conflict. We are also mindful of the inherent chanciness of war, where luck may favour one side and unforeseen events can have large consequences – the fall of Kunduz being a possible example.¹¹ Given uncertainty surrounding Taliban decision-making and the fickle hand of fate, pursuing on any single line of action to bring about an end to the conflict, including an attempt through a single negotiating channel to achieve a ‘grand bargain,’ faces a high risk of failure. Indeed, this was demonstrated when the United States focused all its energies on negotiating with the Taliban office in Qatar in 2013, only to see the talks abandoned before they even got off the ground.¹² Therefore, we propose a portfolio of actions designed to persuade the Taliban towards ending the armed campaign, and to develop the opportunities for talks take place.

Military Stalemate

The current war in Afghanistan re-started in earnest when the Taliban infiltrated back into the country in increasing numbers in 2005-06, just as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was deploying forces into the Pashtun heartlands of southern and eastern Afghanistan under the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. As we show below, ISAF tried to inflict a strategic defeat on the Taliban, and failed. Since December 2014 when the ISAF mission ended, responsibility for

¹¹ As the great theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz observed: ‘There is no human affair that stands so constantly and so generally in close connexion with chance as War.’ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited by Anatol Rapoport (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 116.

¹² Farrell discussions with senior US officials, Washington DC, February 2013; Matthew Rosenberg and Alisia J. Rubin, ‘Taliban Step Toward Afghan Peace Talks is Hailed by US,’ *New York Times*, 18 June 2013; Dan Roberts and Emma Graham-Harrison, ‘US-Taliban Afghanistan Peace Talks in Qatar Cancelled,’ *Guardian* 20 June 2013.

defeating the Taliban has fallen entirely on Afghan shoulders. NATO continues to provide material support to the Afghan security forces under its train, advice and assist (TTA) Resolute Support mission, as well as air support as required for Afghan operations, but the Alliance no longer has combat forces in the field. The Taliban have been suitably emboldened, declaring at the onset of their spring campaign this year that it aimed for ‘the complete liberation of our beloved homeland.’¹³

The big showdown

In the spring of 2009, President Obama appointed a new ISAF commander, General Stanley McChrystal, to turn around a failing war. He also approved a military surge that would see US forces in Afghanistan eventually rise from 34,000 when he took office to 98,000 by mid 2010. The bulk of these additional forces went to the south, where McChrystal had determined ISAF was most at risk of losing the war.¹⁴

McChrystal was under immense pressure to produce quick results – inside a year or two. Thus, he looked for somewhere to inflict a ‘strategic defeat’ on the Taliban, and thereby accelerate progress in the ISAF campaign. That place was Helmand, where the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade (2 MEB) had deployed as the first of the US surge forces, and the most powerful European force was based, the British-led Task Force Helmand (TFH).¹⁵ By the time McChrystal arrived, the 2 MEB was already

¹³ Robin Pagnameta and Eltaf Asefy, ‘Taliban Poised to Take 40% of Afghanistan,’ *The Times*, 23 April 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/asia/article4419478.ece>

¹⁴ Thus, in February 2010, there were 54,500 troops in ISAF Regional Command-South, and 44,500 in the rest of Afghanistan. See Rudra Chaudhuri and Theo Farrell, ‘Campaign Disconnect: Operational Progress and Strategic Obstacles, 2009-2011,’ *International Affairs*, vol. 87, n. 2, March 2011, p. 281.

¹⁵ Farrell discussions with ISAF officers, ISAF Headquarters, 9-13 January 2010.

driving the Taliban out of Nawa and Garsmir districts in southern Helmand. He sought to capitalize on this momentum with a major offensive in central Helmand.¹⁶

Launched in February 2010, Operation Moshtarak, saw US Marine forces push into Taliban controlled Marjah district, and TFH eject the Taliban out of strongholds in the northern edge of Nad-e Ali district. In the largest air assault of the war, some 1,600 American, British and Afghan troops were lifted in waves of helicopters directly into Taliban held villages in Marjah and Nad-e Ali. Taliban defenses rapidly collapsed. The British were able to extend Afghan government into northern Nad-e Ali but the US Marines struggled to do likewise in Marjah.¹⁷ The failure to make progress in Marjah was a major embarrassment to McChrystal, who in the days leading up to Operation Moshtarak had told the world's media 'We've got government in a box, ready to roll in.'¹⁸ By May 2010, an utterly exasperated McChrystal said of Marjah 'this is a bleeding ulcer right now.'¹⁹

Military pressure on the Taliban increased when General David Petraeus assumed command of ISAF in June 2010, with a major offensive against Taliban strongholds in Kandahar province and intensification of the 'kill or capture' campaign by US and ISAF special operations forces. Where McChrystal had emphasized 'courageous restraint' by ISAF forces, to minimize the impact of military operations on the civilian population, Petraeus emphasized that ISAF forces would engage in 'relentless pursuit' of the Taliban. According to ISAF figures around 2,900 Taliban

¹⁶ Observations and briefings from Farrell visits to Lashkar Gah and Garmsir, Helmand, October 2009.

¹⁷ For an assessment of Operation Moshtarak based on extensive field research, see Theo Farrell, *Appraising Moshtarak: The Campaign for Nad-e Ali District, Helmand*, RUSI Briefing Note, June 2010, 13pp, https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Appraising_Moshtarak.pdf

¹⁸ Dexter Filkins, 'Afghan Offensive is New War Model,' *New York Times*, 13 February 2010.

¹⁹ Dion Nissenbaum, 'McChrystal Calls Marjah a 'Bleeding Ulcer' in Afghanistan Campaign,' *McClatchy Newspapers*, 24 May 2010.

were killed or captured by American and ISAF special operations forces from July to September 2010, including some 285 Taliban commanders, with most from Helmand and Kandahar.²⁰

Under McChrystal and Petraeus, widely recognized as the two greatest American war commanders of recent times, NATO will and resources were concentrated as never before on defeating the Taliban in the south. Yet ISAF failed to deliver the killer blow. Instead, the Taliban were dislodged from central Helmand for a time, with many fighters displaced to the northern districts. This created problems for ISAF forces elsewhere in the province, most especially in Sangin. In the winter of 2010-11 the Taliban returned to their old strongholds in central Helmand. The insurgents gave a fiery welcome to the new British battalion arriving in October 2010 to take over responsibility for Nad-e Ali. The battalion commander recalls 'a literal baptism of fire' with '36 prolonged engagements' in the first three days 'including a determined Taliban attack on the District Centre.'²¹ The US Marines who had taken over Sangin district from the British that winter had an even tougher time of it. One US Marine battalion (the 3/5) had suffered 25% casualties by December 2010, mid-way through its seven-month tour.²²

To be sure, the insurgents also suffered losses. One survey based on interviews conducted with Taliban commanders in Helmand in 2011-12 suggests that the Taliban attrition rate across the province that previous year was as high as

²⁰ Briefing by Commander ISAF, General David Petraeus, ISAF HQ, Kabul, 9 October 2010 (Farrell attended).

²¹ Lt Col. Colin Weir, 'Using Air Power in a Small War: A Battlegroup Commander's Reflections on Operations in Afghanistan – Winter 2010/11,' *Air Power Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, Spring 2013, p. 112.

²² Bing West, *One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War* (New York: Random House, 2014), p.129.

20%.²³ Moreover, the intensity of ISAF operations greatly retarded the Taliban's effort to develop shadow government in the province. However, as might be expected, the Taliban adapted to ensure the vitality of their military campaign. They took measures to strength strategic command and control of the insurgency and improve cooperation between Taliban fighting groups. Military commissioners were appointed for provinces and districts to give direction to and adjudicate between rival field commanders.²⁴ The Taliban also switched tactics from what were pretty conventional infantry assaults against ISAF and Afghan government bases from 2006 to 2008, to the more usual guerrilla methods of sniping and roadside bombs. This shift was formalized in a general order issued by the Quetta Shura in 2010 to all field commanders.²⁵ Alongside it came a centrally imposed training regime, supported by mobile training teams sent in from Pakistan.²⁶ This past decade the Taliban have also been very successful in undermining tribal opposition, and in exploiting local grievances towards abusive power-holders in order to mobilise support for their insurgency.²⁷

²³ Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004-2012,' *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 4, July 2013, p. 870. This paper is based on 53 interviewees with Taliban over 2011-12, conducted by Afghan field researchers (journalists by training) supervised by Giustozzi. 28 Taliban answered questions about the number in their fighting group killed in action over the previous year.

²⁴ Farrell and Giustozzi, 'The Taliban at War,' pp. 856-862.

²⁵ This was confirmed by thirteen Taliban interviewees. Farrell and Giustozzi, 'The Taliban at War,' p. 865.

²⁶ This was confirmed by five Taliban interviewees. Farrell and Giustozzi, 'The Taliban at War,' pp. 865-6.

²⁷ Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst, 2013); Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2014). Martin emphasizes the importance of local sources of conflict over the role of the Taliban, but equally his book shows how the Taliban are able to exploit these same local conflict dynamics.

Impossible victory

If the Afghan government with the full support of ISAF forces could not defeat the Taliban, what chance have the Afghan security forces operating on their own? The answer is none, of course. And so it has proven to be.

The first key test for the Afghan security forces was actually in 2013. ISAF deliberately adopted a far more backseat role in the 2013 fighting season to see if Afghan security forces could plan and conduct operations by themselves (as they would have to when ISAF had left).²⁸ An independent assessment in 2013 concluded that ‘the Afghan army showed that it can fight well’ and that the Taliban ‘could not tactically overmatch Afghanistan’s soldiers.’²⁹ To be sure, the report noted many challenges ahead for Afghan security forces: the army was very poor at logistics and maintenance; the police were often outgunned by insurgents; the air force was unable to provide close air support; and the security ministries in Kabul were not good at planning and budgeting. All of these problems remain true for today. However, the report concluded that the Taliban did not have a good campaign in 2013:

[the] insurgents were unable to seize and hold large swaths of terrain; they were unable to take and hold district centers or other notable political targets; they were limited in their ability to influence major population centers (occasional high-profile attacks notwithstanding); and they remain generally unpopular among the

²⁸ Farrell discussions with ISAF planners, HQ ISAF, Kabul, March 2013.

²⁹ Jonathan Schroden, Patricio Asfura-Heim, Catherine Norman, and Jerry Meyerle, *Were the Afghan National Security Forces Successful in 2013?* DOP-2014-U-006817-Final, Center for Naval Analysis, January 2014, p. 3.

Afghan populace.³⁰

The 2014 fighting season did not go quite so well for the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), who were even more on their own as NATO forces increasingly focused on the logistically demanding job of pulling out of Afghanistan and closing down bases across the country.³¹ In the south, the Taliban launched large-scale assaults in several districts in Helmand province. In late September, the Taliban overran Sangin capturing everything except the district centre and central bazaar; it was six months, before the ANDSF launched a counter-offensive supported by NATO air power to retake some lost ground. In October, the Taliban attacked the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, twice with massive suicide bombs. According to one estimate, the ANDSF suffered close to 1,300 killed in Helmand alone between August and December 2014, which amounted to almost 25% of total ANDSF combat losses in Afghanistan for 2014. Elsewhere the Taliban seized villages in the rural provinces of Uruzgan and Ghazni, and the provinces of Wardak, Kapisa and Logar surrounding Kabul. This enabled insurgents to twice ambush ANA convoys along the Kabul to Kandahar highway that were ferrying reinforcements for Sangin. The Taliban also made major gains in the north. In August 2014, insurgent forces were reported to be just five kilometers from Kunduz, the fifth largest city in Afghanistan. By January 2015 local officials admitted that the

³⁰ Schroden *et al.*, *Were the Afghan National Security Forces Successful in 2013?* p. 11.

³¹ At the height of US force levels there were over 800 bases in Afghanistan. By early 2014, this number had fallen to below 80 and was due to fall to 27 by October 2014. See Ian S. Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, *Brookings: Afghanistan Index*, 31 July 2015, figure 1.26, p. 15, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Programs/foreign-policy/afghanistan-index/index20150731.pdf>

Taliban had 'effectively surrounded' the city.³² Reflecting the worsening situation across the country, civilian fatalities caused directly by the conflict rose from under 3,000 in 2013 to over 3,600 in 2014.³³

The United States had planned to reduce its remaining forces in Afghanistan from 9,800 down to 5,500 by the end of 2015. This plan was quietly scrapped in the face of growing concern in Washington DC about the ability of the ANDSF to check a Taliban resurgence. The start of the Taliban's 2015 offensive, officially launched on 24 April, saw an immediate spike in armed activity with a 45% rise in insurgent initiated attacks, leading to a 33% increase in ANDSF casualties in the month that followed.³⁴ This year's offensive has seen the Taliban make gains in Helmand and Uruzgan in the south, and Kunduz, Faryab, and Badakhshan in the north.³⁵ Over three months of near-continuous fighting in northeast Uruzgan, the Taliban decimated local pro-government militia forces. Here, as elsewhere, abusive behavior by police and militia (including rape of children and murder of civilians), turned local communities against the government and gave the Taliban an easy in-road to the district.³⁶ In neighboring Helmand, the Taliban captured two districts, Now Zad in late July and Musa Qala in late August. The ANDSF retook Musa Qala four days later on 30 August, following a major battle in which some 200 Taliban were reportedly killed. However, it appears that the ANA left after only one day and the Taliban

³² Lauren McNally and Paul Bucala, *The Taliban Resurgent: Threats to Afghanistan's Security*, Afghanistan Report 11, The Institute for the Study of War, March 2015, pp. 13-17, 19-20.

³³ Livingston and O'Hanlon, *Brookings: Afghanistan Index*, 31 July 2015, figure 1.21, p. 13.

³⁴ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 30 July 2015, pp. 93, 96.

³⁵ 'Season of Bloodshed' The Taliban Are Waging a Fierce New Offensive in the North,' *The Economist*, 30 May 2015, <http://www.economist.com/node/21652338/print>

³⁶ Martine van Bijlert, 'Trouble in Khas Uruzgan: Insults, Assaults, a Siege and an Airlift,' Afghan Analysts Network, 2 September 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/trouble-in-khas-uruzgan/>

promptly recaptured the district centre. The district centre finally returned to government control when the Taliban pulled out to attack neighbouring Kajaki district.³⁷ A report by the Afghan Analysts Network in September 2015 estimates that of the 14 districts in Helmand, '8 are under full or significant Taliban control.'³⁸ Elsewhere, the Taliban launched their most spectacular attack in Kabul in June, when a massive car bomb was exploded outside the fortified Afghan parliament and seven gunmen attempted to storm the building; the attack was timed to coincide with parliamentary debate over Ghani's nominee for Minister of Defence, Mohammad Masoon Stanekzai.³⁹ And in July, the Uzbek warlord and Afghan Vice President, General Dostum, rushed to Faryab to mobilise his tribal militia to prevent a large Taliban force, reported to be up to 5,000 strong, from overrunning the province.⁴⁰

The high tempo of operations has predictably put great strain on the ANDSF. Official U.S. figures point to attrition in Afghan army numbers from 184,000 in February 2014 down to 176,000 in May 2015; the army (including Afghan air force) is now only at 87% of its approved end-strength of 203,000. In contrast, Afghan police numbers have risen slightly by a few thousand over the same period to 155,000 (which is 98% of their approved end-strength of 157,000).⁴¹ Underlying these numbers are very high desertion rates in the ANA and very high casualty rates in

³⁷ Correspondence with Carter Malkasian, 26 October 2015.

³⁸ Thomas Ruttig, 'The Second Fall of Musa Qala: How the Taleban Are Expanding Territorial Control,' Afghan Analysts Network, 3 September 2015, p. 3, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-second-fall-of-musa-qala-how-the-taleban-are-expanding-territorial-control/>; see also Sune Engel Rasmussen, 'Afghan Forces Retake Musa Qala from Taliban,' *The Guardian*, 30 August 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/30/afghan-forces-retake-musa-qala-from-taliban>

³⁹ Robin Pagnamenta, Tom Coghlan, and Eltaf Asefy, 'Taliban Takes Terror into Afghanistan Parliament,' *The Times*, 23 June 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/asia/afghanistan/article4477191.ece>

⁴⁰ Sune Engel Rasmussen, 'Afghanistan's Warlord Vice-President Spoiling for a Fight with the Taliban,' *The Guardian*, 4 August 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/04/afghan-vice-president-militia-taliban-general-dostum>

⁴¹ SIGAR, *Quarterly Report*, 30 July 2015, Table 3.6, p. 98.

particular in the ANP.⁴² Indeed, concerns about the ability of the Afghan National Police to cope with the insurgency led to the creation of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) in 2010, these being officially sanctioned and armed local militias that are reported to now number some 28,000.⁴³

The Afghan army numbers would be more worrying and police numbers more reassuring if we could have confidence in the reliability of these figures. However, we cannot. The U.S. Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction is blunt about this problem: ‘Neither the US nor Afghan government, however, really knows how many Afghan security forces actually exist. There are widespread cases of “ghost soldiers” who do not exist and whose pay is simply embezzled.’⁴⁴ The same is true for statistics on security force attrition rates and insurgent initiated-attacks, which are now dependent on ANDSF ‘operational reporting’ where previously they were compiled by ISAF.⁴⁵ This complicates the task of assessing the progress in the conflict.

However, there is enough evidence to show that neither side is going to be victorious. The Taliban do appear to have gained ground in 2014 and 2015, but there is no way that they can ever defeat the ANDSF; the Afghan army, in particular, is simply too large and too capable. As we discussed, the Taliban took a handful of

⁴² Joseph Goldstein, ‘Afghan Security Forces Struggle Just to Maintain Stalemate,’ *New York Times*, 22 July 2015.

⁴³ Proponents see ALP as offering a way for tribal mobilizing to resist Taliban encroachment while critics see ALP as officially sanctioned warlord militias whose abusive behavior turns local communities towards the Taliban. For a critical report, see International Crisis Group, *The Future of the Afghan Local Police*, Asia Report No. 268, 4 June 2015.

⁴⁴ Project for the Study of the 21st Century, *Rebuilding Afghanistan—Transparency and Oversight in America’s Longest War*, 27 July 2015, <http://projects21.com/2015/07/27/ps21-report-rebuilding-afghanistan-transparency-and-oversight-in-americas-longest-war/>

⁴⁵ In its latest quarterly report to the Congress, the U.S. Department of Defense expressed the problem in polite terms: ‘Due to the different collection and input methods, the data’s quality differs than during previous years when Afghan forces were typically partnered with coalition forces.’ U.S. Department of Defence, *Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, June 2015, p. 27.

district centers but they did not hold them for long – with the exception of districts in northern Helmand where they have strong support from local tribal groups and drug lords. Even here, the Afghan army was able to eject the Taliban from Musa Qala town at great cost to the insurgents; the problem was that the army did not stick around to defend the district centre.

The fall of Kunduz illustrated more fault lines in the National Unity Government than the fragility of the ANDSF. The National Unity Government was formed precisely one year before the Taliban captured Kunduz, following a bitterly contested presidential election between Ghani and his main rival Abdullah Abdullah. Following US intervention, it was agreed that Abdullah Abdullah would be appointed Chief Executive Officer, as a sort of prime minister role to President Ghani. Most accounts suggest that the two men get along but their respective camps do not. This rivalry was played out in Kunduz with the provincial governor, a Pashtun appointed by Ghani, at loggerheads with the deputy provincial governor and provincial police chief, both Tajiks appointed by Abdullah Abdullah.⁴⁶ The provincial governor was unable to reign in abuse by ALP who are protected by the provincial police chief. Thus, attempts to clear surrounding districts of Taliban became opportunities for ALP to go on ‘a looting rampage’ and, much like Uruzgan, this made it easy for the Taliban to consolidate their hold over such areas.⁴⁷ The population in Kunduz also grew increasingly disillusioned by ineffective and corrupt provincial government. Unusual in provinces in the north, Kunduz has a sizeable Pashtun population. Indeed, the city can be thought of as an Afghan ‘Londonderry’ – i.e., analogous to the most

⁴⁶ Borhan Osman, ‘The Fall of Kunduz: What Does It Tell Us About the Strength of the Post-Omar Taliban?’ Afghan Analysts Network, 30 September 2014.

⁴⁷ Lola Cecchinell, ‘The End of a Police Chief: Factional Rivalries and Pre-election Power Struggles in Kunduz,’ Afghan Analysts Network, 31 January 2014.

divided city in Northern Ireland – without the security walls dividing the cityscape. The Taliban operation shrewdly exploited this ethnic geography. For their infiltration, they sought help from *naqileen* (i.e., migrant Pashtun communities) in the city and surrounding villages. Many residents cooperated with Taliban infiltrating the city in advance of the offensive. As the *New York Times* reported, ‘even pro-government residents and Afghan security officials now admit that part of the assault on Kunduz started from within the city: Many of the Taliban fighters had been hiding in people’s homes before they launched an inside-out offensive.’⁴⁸

To be sure, there were ANDSF failings in the defence of Kunduz, in particular, the lack of coordination between the ANA and the Afghan Civil Order Police in separate garrisons on either side of the city, as well as the failure to anticipate a new style of Taliban urban warfare. Hopefully Kunduz will serve as a wake-up call for the ANDSF to improve coordination, although this is dependent on whether rivalries within the National Unity Government are replicated in provincial appointments. Regardless, Kunduz shows that even if the Taliban can, with extraordinary effort and some good fortune, seize a provincial centre, they cannot hold it – just as they cannot stop the ANA from recapturing district centres. They have also been unable to replicate the success of Kunduz elsewhere. In the weeks following Kunduz, Taliban massed thousands of fighters in attempts to overrun on the provincial capitals of Faryab and Ghazni; in both cases the Taliban assaults were repulsed by ANDSF.⁴⁹ The Taliban are also unable to decapitate Afghan government through terrorist attacks in

⁴⁸ Alissa J. Rubin, ‘For Afghans in Kunduz, Taliban Assault Is Just the Latest Affront,’ *New York Times*, 7 October 2015.

⁴⁹ Agence France-Presse, ‘Afghan Forces Repel Taliban Attack on Ghazni as Offensive Spreads,’ *The Guardian*, 13 October 2015.

Kabul. Thus, both sides are locked in a military stalemate with no prospect for this to change in the foreseeable future. This conflict is not going to be settled by force.

Talks Take Off

When Ashraf Ghani was inaugurated as President of Afghanistan in September 2014, he clearly identified achieving peace as his top priority.⁵⁰ Karzai had made a rhetorical commitment to pursuing an accommodation with the Taliban, although he lacked a coherent strategy to back up this commitment. The new president brought a fresh strategic approach to the challenge of peace-making. The motivation for prioritising peace was economic and compelling. Ghani appreciated that there was no plausible scenario in which the Afghan state could attain fiscal sustainability while being locked into the level of security expenditure that he inherited.⁵¹ Ghani also rethought the mechanism for pursuing peace in what amounted to a strategic gambit.

Ghani's gambit

Ghani calculated that Pakistani support to the Afghan Taliban was critical to the movement's successful insurgency campaign. He thus set himself the challenge of bringing an end to Pakistan's proxy warfare in Afghanistan. He engaged in détente with the Pakistan military, by symbolically visiting their headquarters, promoting frequent top-level meetings between the Afghan and Pakistani military and

⁵⁰ Inaugural speech by Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai as President of Afghanistan, 29 September 2014, <http://president.gov.af/en/news/36954>

⁵¹ William Byrd, 'Afghanistan's Continuing Fiscal Crisis: No End in Sight,' USIP Peace Brief 185, 15 May 2015, <http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/05/15/afghanistans-continuing-fiscal-crisis-no-end-in-sight>

intelligence chiefs and offering to conduct security operations against Pakistani Taliban who attacked Pakistan across the frontier. The *quid pro quo* Ghani demanded of the Pakistan military was that they use their influence on the Afghan Taliban, to bring them to the negotiating table, and thus kick-start a process that might generate a ceasefire and political agreement.⁵²

Through his series of *détente* moves Ghani hoped to incentivise the Pakistan army to end support to the Taliban military's campaign and further to oblige the Taliban to enter peace talks. Ghani spoke openly of the need to bring an end to Pakistan's proxy warfare in Afghanistan. At the same time, he recognised that the Pakistan military's support for proxies was part of a broader regional strategy of confrontation with India and was not explicitly driven by an imperative to dominate or destabilise Afghanistan. The Ghani calculation thus factors in the notion that the Taliban will decide whether to talk based on their assessment of the prospects of the military campaign, but essentially relies on the Pakistan army persuading them that they cannot sustain that campaign⁵³.

The new Afghan strategic approach envisaged talks and ultimately a political agreement with the Taliban. But the tools which the government applied in trying to orchestrate the talks primarily related to Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and had little to do with placating or wooing the Taliban. Soon after the Afghan Presidential visit to Pakistan the military leadership gave an undertaking to Ghani that they

⁵² Jon Boone, 'Ashraf Ghani Visit May Mark New Chapter in Afghan-Pakistan Relations,' *The Guardian*, 14 November 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/14/ashraf-ghani-visit-pakistan-afghanistan>

⁵³ "Ghani's Gambit - can Afghanistan and Pakistan Ever Get Along?", Barnett Rubin, *New York Times*, March 19, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/19/opinion/can-afghanistan-and-pakistan-ever-get-along.html>

would indeed prevail upon the Taliban to attend direct talks.⁵⁴ Much of reconciliation-related activity in 2015 revolved around that undertaking. In February, the Taliban leadership was reported as having received a request from the Pakistan military to clarify their position on whether they would attend talks. The Taliban convened a leadership shura meeting to discuss the issue but avoided giving a clear response. Instead, the acting leader, Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, was reported as having referred the matter to supreme leader, Mullah Omar, and he deferred the decision pending receipt of a response.⁵⁵

While the Taliban delayed their response to the demand for them to enter peace talks, they went ahead with announcing their 2015 'spring offensive', in line with the pattern of previous years. Although the Taliban had sustained some military momentum during the winter period, as we noted, the announcement was followed both by a discernible increase in the tempo of attacks across the country and several high profile attacks in the Kabul area. The deferred Taliban response to pressure for talks and the escalating violence obliged the Afghan government team to address the issue of deadlines. The Afghan President had let it be known at the outset that his strategy included a deadline by which he expected Taliban to move towards talks but he avoided publicising when exactly that deadline would expire. However, Ghani's public statements in spring 2015 indicated that he was hopeful of starting a

⁵⁴ Jon Boone and Sune Engel Rasmussen, 'Talks Could Begin Between Taliban and Afghan Government After 13 Years Of War,' *The Guardian*, 19 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/19/talks-could-begin-taliban-and-afghan-government>

⁵⁵ Ankit Panda, 'Who's Negotiating With the Taliban Anyway?' *The Diplomat*, 20 February 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/whos-negotiating-with-the-taliban-anyway>

political process early enough in the year to avert the customary increase in violence.⁵⁶ The launch of the Taliban offensive put an end to this hope.

Ghani understandably maintained ambiguity on the deadline for his the onset of talks, while letting the Pakistan military and all others concerned know that the nascent process was threatened by the escalating violence. By early summer it seemed that the Afghan government's position that both sides cease or at least reduce fighting while entering talks had shifted to accepting that the fighting season would follow its normal course even if talks got underway.⁵⁷

Talks in China and Pakistan

A month after the Taliban's announcement of their offensive, Ghani's gambit seemed to generate its first tangible output. Kabul announced that government representatives had met with Taliban envoys in Urumqi, China, in a meeting hosted by the Chinese authorities and facilitated by the Pakistan Army. The discussions were preliminary and so Afghan officials did not claim any substantive progress. Rather, they emphasised that the significance of the Urumqi meeting lay in the fact that the Taliban had agreed to meet face-to-face with government representatives. Moreover the meeting was described as unofficial, and so neither side delivered a formal negotiating position.⁵⁸ But even this apparent step forward prompted efforts by the Afghan government and allies to determine the standing of the Taliban

⁵⁶ Sayed Sharif Amiry, 'Ghani Optimistic About New Taliban Peace Talks,' *Tolo News*, 21 February 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/18311-ghani-optimistic-about-new-taliban-peace-talks>

⁵⁷ Ayesha Tanzeem, 'Afghan President Asks for Patience in Search for Peace,' *Voice of America*, 10 May 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/afghan-president-asks-for-patience-in-search-for-peace/2762020.html>

⁵⁸ Edward Wong and Mujib Mashal, 'Taliban and Afghan Peace Officials Have Secret Talks in China,' *New York Times*, 25 May 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/26/world/asia/taliban-and-afghan-peace-officials-have-secret-talks-in-china.html>

delegation to Urumqi, which was headed by former Interior Minister Abdul Razaq Achakzai. Achakzai was known to be a member of the Taliban Leadership Council. However, the Afghan government was unable to confirm that he had a clear mandate from the rest of the Taliban leadership to attend. Indeed, shortly afterwards the Taliban official spokesman issued a statement rejecting that the meeting had even taken place.⁵⁹ The combination of the doubtful status of the Taliban delegation, plus the lack of any substantive engagement, meant that Ghani concluded that he had still not achieved his minimal objective of drawing the Taliban into direct talks.

The next result of the Kabul strategic initiative came in June, when the Kabul and Pakistan governments announced that they finally had succeeded in holding official face-to-face talks between the Taliban and Afghan government representatives in a cantonment in the Pakistani hill resort of Murree. This time official observers from the United States and China were present, signifying high-level international political blessing for the process. The Afghan government delegation was this time led by a deputy foreign minister and senior member of the High Peace Council and included members deliberately chosen to be representative of the multiple political tendencies present in the National Unity Government. The composition of both delegations indicated a certain seriousness of engagement. As one analyst noted, '[t]hose Taleban who participated in the four-hours Murree talks included figures of such seniority and authority that no room was left but to conclude the meeting had been endorsed, at least tacitly, by the movement's

⁵⁹ Statement by Zabihullah Mujahid, Spokesman of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 24 May 2015, <http://shahamat-english.com/we-strongly-reject-propaganda-of-meeting-with-representatives-of-kabul-administration-in-china/>

leadership.’⁶⁰ However after the conclusion of the meeting, participants provided conflicting accounts of the tenor of discussions, ranging from suggestions that the Taliban seemed to be ready to discuss a ceasefire, to claims that the Taliban provocatively said they were only interested in receiving the government's surrender. Communiques from the Pakistan hosts and the visiting Afghans concurred that the main outcome was an agreement to meet again.⁶¹

Despite the significant investment of diplomatic capital made in the Murree meeting by all four countries involved, doubts concerning the extent to which the engagement was formally authorised by the Taliban leadership recurred. These doubts were reinforced by the Taliban's official communications, on the website controlled by their Cultural Commission. In the wake of the Murree meeting this website carried ambiguous statements endorsing the principle of political contacts in pursuit of peace but claiming that the authorised body within the movement to conduct such contacts was the Political Commission's office based in Doha, Qatar. These announcements implied that the Taliban delegation in Murree may not have been competent to represent the movement. One interpretation is that distrustful of Pakistan, the Taliban Political Commission were opposed to the Murree talks. Nonetheless, under pressure from Pakistan, Mansoor 'gave a green light' for them to go ahead on condition that they stayed secret. When the talks were made public by the Afghan and Pakistan governments this strengthened the position of those in the

⁶⁰ Borhan Osman, 'The Murree Process: Divisive Peace Talks Further Complicated by Mullah Omar's Death,' Afghan Analysts Network, 5 August 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-murree-process-divisive-peace-talks-further-complicated-by-mullah-omars-death/>

⁶¹ Mateen Haider, 'First Round of Afghan Govt, Taliban Dialogue Concludes in Murree,' *Dawn*, 8 July 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1192941>

Political Commission who argued that it is they who should manage any future talks, far from Pakistan interference.⁶²

The Pakistan conundrum

Ghani offered the opportunity for Afghanistan to re-set its relations with Pakistan. Karzai believed that it was impossible for Afghanistan to have 'healthy relations' with Pakistan. For him, the series of trilateral meetings between him and Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari, chaired by British Prime Minister David Cameron, were a charade. At the third round of talks, held in February 2013, the two parties agreed to 'take all necessary measures to achieve the goal of a peace settlement over the next six months', with the clear inference that Pakistan would lean on the Taliban to enter into such talks. For Karzai, this preposterous goal spoke volumes about Pakistan sincerity.⁶³

Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban followed a strategic logic – as a bullwark against perceived growing Indian influence in Afghanistan – and just importantly, it made sense politically; Pakistan public opinion unquestionably sided with the Afghan Taliban in their armed struggle against the foreign invaders.⁶⁴ Ghani's gambit was therefore based on the assumption that Pakistan's calculations had changed. The growing assertiveness of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) had prompted a major offensive by the Pakistan Army against their strongholds in North Warziristan over the summer of 2014. In retaliation, the TTP attacked a Pakistan

⁶² Osman, 'The Murree Process.'

⁶³ 'Afghanistan and Pakistan Aim For 'Peace in Six Months,' BBC News, 4 February 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21310575>

⁶⁴ Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), pp. 444-449.

Army school in Peshawar in December, murdering 145 children.⁶⁵ Whilst the Afghan Taliban and TTP are completely different, Pashtun militancy in the border areas had grown to such an extent as to present a threat to the Pakistan state and to alarm public opinion. Ghani's view, therefore, was that Pakistan now had good reason to cooperate in ending the conflict in Afghanistan in order to improve security in Pashtun areas on both sides of the border.⁶⁶

Pakistan leverage over the Afghan Taliban is central to Ghani's gambit because the strategy relies upon persuading the Pakistan Army to oblige the Taliban to come to the negotiating table and ultimately to end their military campaign. It is also the factor that is most misunderstood and, arguably, which is inherently unknowable. The Taliban leadership is acutely aware that its military campaign is dependent upon retaining access to Pakistan territory. In effect the geography of the Taliban's insurgency straddles the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier. However analysts have struggled to describe the relationship between the Taliban and the Pakistan state convincingly. One tendency within the Afghan security establishment has talked up the extent of state support to the Taliban, in effect describing the Taliban as being so dependent upon Pakistan army support as to have no capacity for autonomous decision-making.⁶⁷ Analysts more sympathetic to the Pakistan army stress that its interaction with the Taliban is limited and leverage is minimal.⁶⁸ Even if

⁶⁵ Declan Walsh, 'Taliban Besiege Pakistan School, Leaving 145 Dead,' *New York Times*, 16 December 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/world/asia/taliban-attack-pakistani-school.html>

⁶⁶ United States Institute of Peace, 'A Conversation with H. E. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan,' 25 March 2015, <http://www.usip.org/events/conversation-h-mohammad-ashraf-ghani>

⁶⁷ Sanjay Kumar, 'Afghanistan's Ex-Intelligence Chief Reflects on Mullah Omar's Death,' *The Diplomat*, 30 July 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/afghanistans-ex-intelligence-chief-reflects-on-mullah-omars-death/>

⁶⁸ Lisa Curtis, 'How Pakistan is Tightening Its Grip on the Taliban,' *The National Interest*, 15 August 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-pakistan-tightening-its-grip-the-taliban-13588>

the reality is somewhere between these positions, so that Taliban are autonomous actors but obliged to observe a set of red lines, the underlying relationship between the Taliban and their hosts is inherently covert.

This poses major challenges for a strategy based upon persuading Pakistan to apply leverage on the Taliban, given that there is no agreement among the parties involved over the extent of the leverage, nor any means for them to monitor it. The Taliban received significant military support from Pakistan in its war against the Afghan state, and there is evidence that the Pakistan Army continues to back the Taliban.⁶⁹ Critics note the irony that the United States was giving hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid to a state that has been engaged in a proxy war against US forces.⁷⁰ Against this, there is deep resentment among the Taliban leadership towards Pakistan, both for how Pakistan bowed to US pressure following 9/11 (and handed over some Taliban to the Americans to be rendered to Guantanamo⁷¹), and for continued Pakistan interference since then in Taliban affairs.

The formal opening of the Taliban office in Qatar in 2013 was an attempt by the Taliban to escape Pakistan control. It was met with Pakistan displeasure: the brothers of Tayeb Agha, the then Head of the Taliban Political Commission, were picked up by the Pakistan Inter-services Intelligence agency (ISI) and held in gaol for a number of months.⁷² This episode reveals something of the methods by which the ISI exert pressure on the Taliban leadership. In response to this kind of harassment, a

⁶⁹ Thomas F. Lynch III, 'After ISIS: Fully Reappraising U.S. Policy in Afghanistan,' *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2015, pp. 119-144

⁷⁰ Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: American in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

⁷¹ This happened to the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan. Abdul Salaam Zaeef, *My Life in the Taliban* (London: Hurst, 2010), chapters 16-17.

⁷² Interview with Taliban political leader no. 1, Dubai, August 2014. Interview undertaken by Afghan researcher supervised by Semple.

number of Taliban leaders have relocated with their families to Iran and the Gulf. This suggests that while Pakistan may be able to exercise some control over the Taliban through such crude means, it may not have much positive influence; put another way, as the Murree talks suggest, Pakistan may be able to get the Taliban to come to the negotiating table, but this is not to say that they can get the Taliban to negotiate.

Taliban Politics

Ultimately, the success of any peace negotiations will depend on the Taliban wanting to make peace. Any effort to influence this process faces the immensely challenging task of understanding Taliban intentions and decision-making. The Taliban Movement has organized itself as the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', constituted of formal structures with functional commissions at national, regional, provincial and district level. Embedded within these formal structures are various informal networks, such as the 'Haqqani Network' led by Serajuddin Haqqani. Serajuddin has extended the influence of his network across half of the country, even though the rest of the Emirate leadership does not formally acknowledge its existence. Likewise, commanders in the southwest with a tribal support base, such as Baz Mohammed and Mansoor Dadaullah are able to exert more influence than recognized in their formal Emirate positions. This complicates any attempt to discern 'what the Taliban want.'⁷³ Nonetheless, as we discuss, the Taliban has a powerful hierarchical doctrine that serves to contain the ever-present risk of organizational fragmentation. This

⁷³ Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *Lessons Learned: 'Islamic, Independent, Perfect and Strong': Parsing the Taliban's Strategic Intentions, 2001-2011*, AHRC Public Policy Series No. 3 (Swindon: Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2012).

doctrine is inimical to power-sharing, which would necessarily form the heart of any sustainable peace. At the same time, it means that the Taliban leadership would likely be able to deliver on a peace deal.

The Emirate after Omar

The revelation, in July 2015, that the movement's deputy had, for over two years, covered up the death of the original leader, both triggered a succession crisis and provided new insights into Taliban internal politics. During the period from early 2013 to July 2015 Mullah Omar's deputy, Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, had the consent of the movement's two top religious scholars, plus a handful of members of the leadership council, plus two male relatives of Mullah Omar, to keep the *ameer's* death secret and to continue to invoke his authority while running the movement.⁷⁴

The movement's cultural wing was able to produce multiple declarations mendaciously attributed to Mullah Omar, to justify leadership decisions. The cover-up demonstrated the Taliban's ability to act clandestinely and for the top leadership to engage in deception, not just of their rivals but of all those in the movement who did not belong to the ruling clique. It is significant that the period of the Mullah Omar cover-up coincided with key developments in the putative peace process, including the attempt to open an office in Qatar in 2013, and the launch of talks in China and Pakistan in 2015. Mansoor's hand is likely behind these tentative efforts at shifting from a Taliban strategy of fighting to one of 'fight and talk.' Taliban adherence to the doctrine of leadership obedience would have facilitated such a

⁷⁴ Interview with Taliban leadership figure August 2015. Interview undertaken by Afghan researcher supervised by Semple.

development, by enabling Mansoor to rule for the *ameer* while provoking little debate or dissent.⁷⁵

The first serious dissent within the Taliban leadership occurred in the wake of the revelation of Mullah Omar's death, with a group of veterans challenging the legitimacy of Mansoor's elevation to the position of *ameer*. The movement was split but unevenly so, with all the national structures and most of the military commanders declaring loyalty to Mansoor as new *ameer*, while his challengers could demonstrate little mass support. This demonstrated a sense of common purpose within the movement was sufficient that its cohesiveness survived and loyalty was transferred to a new leader, despite the record of deception. Mansoor's success in consolidating himself as *ameer* suggests that the Taliban leadership will continue to practise deception and dissimulation in their conduct of the 'fight and talk' strategy, and that the Taliban movement will continue to behave as an integrated organisation, whether pursuing the fighting or the talking components of this strategy.

The culture and politics of the Taliban movement indicate that its military commanders constitute the most important internal constituency. The movement has a long tradition of blurring the distinction between civil and military, as positions such as provincial governor embrace both military and civilian responsibilities. However it is possible to distinguish a large cadre of military commanders who are directly responsible for leading the insurgency in Afghanistan. Although the doctrine of leadership obedience dictates that the field commanders submit to the authority

⁷⁵ Thus in his 2015 Eid message, Mullah Omar supposedly endorsed the possibility of peace talks. Sune Engel Rasmussen, 'Taliban Peace Talks With Afghan Government "Endorsed" by Mullah Omar,' *Guardian* 15 July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/15/taliban-peace-talks-afghan-government-endorsed-mullah-omar>

of the movement's Pakistan-based leadership, in reality the leadership feels compelled to strive constantly to maintain the loyalty of the field commanders. This was illustrated during the succession struggle where Mansoor's success in consolidating himself depended critically on the relations he had developed in the military during his period as deputy. The fact that the military is powerful within the Taliban does not in itself preclude a settlement. Rather it dictates that the leadership patronise the military. Hitherto the simplest way it has found to do this is to sustain the armed campaign, which provides a pretext for channeling resources to the military. The leadership is also aware that it is vulnerable to accusations of 'selling out' and alienating the military if it were to pursue political engagement without taking them into confidence.

The central Taliban political concept, that of an Islamic Emirate, and the way that it has been realised after 2001, helps to shape leadership decision-making on issues of talking versus fighting. Western commentators have referred to the Taliban 'shadow administration.' However, for supporters of the Taliban Movement, the Islamic Emirate is not 'shadow' but real. The provincial and district level governors appointed by the Taliban, the judiciary, and the twelve national commissions (including the Military, Political, Financial and Cultural Commissions), constitute an alternative administration. In areas where the Taliban exert significant influence, the population is able to approach the Taliban for resolution of civil and criminal cases.⁷⁶ Indeed, when describing their system, Taliban frequently claim that the civilian population more readily approaches Taliban officials than government appointed

⁷⁶ Antonio Giustozzi and Adam Baczko, 'The Politics of the Taliban's Shadow Judiciary,' *Central Asian Affairs*, vol. 1 (2014), 199-224.

judges or administrators.⁷⁷ The Taliban's provincial and district commissions, acting under the authority of the Finance Commission, collect revenue to defray the expenses of maintaining the Taliban establishment and contribute to the armed campaign. Among supporters of the Taliban movement, including at least some of the civilian population in the areas where they exert influence, the legitimacy of Taliban officials is on a par with that of government appointees. Thus, as far as the Taliban is concerned, their Islamic Emirate already constitutes a Shariat-based system (that is, political system ruled by Koranic law) and they are incrementally extending its control across Afghanistan initially mainly in the rural areas. The idea of the Islamic Emirate as a work in progress means that the Taliban leadership do not have to consider victory as a binary variable, tied for example to the capture of the capital. Thus, their inability to take Kabul does not mean that the Taliban has to consider their campaign unsuccessful. Indeed, they take pains to show off how their Islamic Emirate is already a functioning reality, even without the badges of sovereignty.

The Taliban idea of Islamic Emirate has other implications for leadership strategic decision-making. The essence of the emirate lies in the role of the supreme leader. According to Taliban dogma, it is the existence of a single divinely guided leader which guarantees that the movement will serve the interest of Islam. When the Taliban last controlled Afghanistan they nested the Emirate within state structures, so that Mullah Omar retained his assumed Islamic title of *ameer ul momineen*, but exercised most of the constitutional functions of the head of state,

⁷⁷ See, for example, 'Statement delivered by the Delegation of Political Office of the Islamic Emirate in the International Pugwash Research Conference,' 2 May 2015, <http://shahamat-english.com/full-text-of-the-statement-delivered-by-the-delegation-of-political-office-of-the-islamic-emirate-in-the-international-pugwash-research-conference/>

according to established Afghanistan practice. Likewise one of the most constant themes in Taliban political practice has been insistence on the idea of the *ameer's* authority being absolute, indivisible and fundamental. During the 1990's, in their dealings with armed opposition, the one non-negotiable demand of the Taliban was that the opposition submit to the authority of the *ameer*. More recently, in the Taliban internal politics of the leadership succession, Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor's fundamental demand of dissidents and challengers was that they accept him as *ameer*, as the price for him being prepared to consider any other concession or compromise.

Taliban Doctrine and Pragmatism

It is hard to see a sustainable peace deal that does not involve some kind of power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban. Afghans are well familiar with power-sharing compromises, whether from the coalitions of the differing mujahideen parties in the mid-1990s or the current National Unity Government. However, such arrangements sit uneasily with the Taliban's doctrine of the supreme *ameer*. Moreover, political coalitions have tended to fracture and fail in Afghanistan. In this sense, the National Unity Government is following a well-worn path. Thus the inherent doctrinal and pragmatic unattractiveness of coalition may make continuing with the military campaign the most attractive strategy, allowing Taliban at least to retain their incremental Emirate.

At the same time, there is a more pragmatic strain in Taliban thinking that is unsatisfied with the Emirate as it stands, and understands the need for compromise if the Taliban is to return to government. This view recognises that the limitations of

Taliban political power, as much as military power, make a solely Taliban national government unsustainable. The Taliban recognize, in particular, that much has changed in terms of public attitudes towards them. As one Taliban leader noted in October 2014:

The High Commission [Quetta Shura] doesn't have any strategies or plans in order to take over Kabul once again as they believe that a lot of changes have taken place in the past 12 years which has resulted in people no longer having the same opinion about the Taliban movement and it will make it harder for people to accept the Taliban.⁷⁸

It is further evident from discussions with senior Taliban figures that they have thought about the practicalities of how power-sharing might work, including the division of cabinet posts.⁷⁹ This more pragmatic view is to be found, in particular, within the Taliban's Political Commission. Senior leaders within the Political Commission eagerly anticipated the onset of peace talks following Ghani's inauguration.⁸⁰ Indeed, it appears that informal talks occurred between Ghani and a representative of the Political Commission in 2014.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Interview with Taliban military leader no. 10. Interview undertaken by Afghan researcher supervised by Semple. The interviewee went to disagree with the Quetta Shura's view on this.

⁷⁹ Discussions with former Taliban minister and former Taliban deputy minister, Gulf, July 2012.

⁸⁰ Interview with Taliban political leader no. 2, Dubai, August 2014. Interview undertaken by Afghan researcher supervised by Semple.

⁸¹ Interview with Taliban political leader no. 1, Dubai, August 2014. Interview undertaken by Afghan researcher supervised by Semple.

It is not clear how much sway these more pragmatic ideas hold with the Taliban's core leadership in the Quetta Shura. As we noted, the Quetta Shura must be attentive to the views of the military base. Perhaps not surprisingly, many Taliban field commanders are suspicious of Taliban diplomats in the Political Commission. One senior Taliban military figure observed in October 2014 that '[a]t the moment, the political group is against war and specially in present and they want Taliban to participate in one of the peace making processes. Whereas, the military group are against the political group and think that the only way to progress is through fighting.'⁸² Another senior Taliban leader told us that 'a lot of military commanders believe that there is no difference between the Afghan government and members of the Taliban Political Commission.'⁸³ A different Taliban leader took a more balanced view, recognising that there were differences of opinion among military commanders – some think that the Political Commission misrepresent the Taliban and distract it from fighting, while others recognize the virtue of the Political Commission in developing 'very good relation[s] with the international community.'⁸⁴

The Taliban doctrine of obedience to the leader has more practical implications in that it has been a key factor in protecting the movement from fragmentation. The Taliban Movement was unique among major Afghan political-military forces in that it survived two decades without experiencing any significant split. Furthermore there is a recognisable command chain stretching from the

⁸² Interview with Taliban military leader no. 6. Interview undertaken by Afghan researcher supervised by Semple.

⁸³ Interview with Taliban military leader no. 17. Interview undertaken by Afghan researcher supervised by Semple.

⁸⁴ Interview with Taliban military leader no. 12. Interview undertaken by Afghan researcher supervised by Semple.

Pakistan-based leadership to each district of Afghanistan.⁸⁵ The movement's cohesiveness both defines the way it makes war and suggests how it could make peace. The fact that the Taliban have a cohesive national structure means that it is meaningful to talk of a national level military campaign, with coherent objectives and a strategy, on a scale which represents a credible threat to the Afghan state. The fact that there is an empowered leadership means that potentially, should that leadership decide to shift to a strategy that places more emphasis on peace talks, it could credibly represent the whole of the movement and, with due efforts to maintain the confidence of the military, even move towards a ceasefire. In short, the Taliban leadership could make good on a peace agreement.

At the same time, the Taliban leadership are concerned about the risks of fragmentation from entering peace talks. An important complicating factor here is the Taliban's ties to various other jihadi groups, and most importantly to Al Qaeda. During the Taliban diplomatic initiative through its Political Commission in Qatar, the movement's representatives have generally stressed that the Taliban's political objectives are restricted to Afghanistan. As part of the agreement allowing for the opening of a Taliban mission, the movement gave a statement stating that it would not allow Afghan soil to be used for attacks on other countries.⁸⁶ However, the Taliban military meanwhile have developed their cooperation with the range of militant groups, relying upon them for military expertise and claiming responsibility for military operations or terrorist attacks which they have undertaken. The links

⁸⁵ This is discussed in greater detail in Farrell and Giustozzi, 'The Taliban at War,' pp. 855-861.

⁸⁶ In private discussions with us, senior Taliban leaders stated that the movement would be prepared to renounce Al Qaeda as part of a future peace deal. See Semple *et al*, 'Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation,' p. 3.

between the Haqqani family and Al Qaeda are especially deep.⁸⁷ In the spirit of openness in communications which the Taliban adopted during the succession struggle, their official media organs acknowledged the oath of loyalty which Zawahiri, head of Al Qaeda, took to the new Taliban *ameer*. The extensive Taliban links with international jihadi allies impinges on strategic decision making because these groups are inimically opposed to any settlement in Afghanistan short of a Taliban victory. Any Taliban move towards substantive talks would risk alienating the movement's allies and potentially pushing them into open opposition.

A further complicating factor is the emergence of Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan. The UN mission in Afghanistan reports IS as being present most provinces in Afghanistan, but it has 'dominant presence' in only one, Nangarhar, and most of these IS fighters are in fact 'rebranded' TTP from Pakistan.⁸⁸ The main difference between the IS-Taliban relationship and that between the Taliban and Al Qaeda and affiliates is that IS has directly challenged the Taliban's claim to leadership of the jihad in Afghanistan. The Taliban has responded to that challenge by publicly warning IS that it is undermining jihadi unity and by launching concerted attacks on groups affiliated to the organisation wherever they emerge in Afghanistan.⁸⁹ The number of fighters pledged to IS in Afghanistan is a fraction of those affiliated with the Islamic Emirate. Nevertheless, the Taliban have started to factor IS into their strategic decision-making, as witnessed by the Taliban campaign

⁸⁷ Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012* (London: Hurst, 2013).

⁸⁸ Statement of General John F. Campbell USA, Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on The Situation in Afghanistan, 6 October 2015, Version 1.9_FINAL, p. 14; Joseph Goldstein, 'US Steps Up Airstrikes in Afghanistan, Even Targeting ISIS,' *New York Times*, 15 July 2015.

⁸⁹ Mujib Mashal and Taimoor Shah, 'Taliban's New Leader in Afghanistan Moves to Quash Dissent,' *New York Times*, 6 September 2015.

against them. Faced with a prospect of entering substantive talks and a peace process, the Taliban leadership would be concerned with the risk of fighters, who disagreed with the process, defecting to IS.

A new strategy: influence and hedge

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in June 2015, Afghan experts James Dobbins and Carter Malkasian made the case for peace talks. The alternative, they argue, is ‘a long war of attrition that would ravage the country, upend regional stability, and strain the budgets of the United States and its allies.’ We agree completely. Our analysis of the war supports the view that neither the Taliban nor the Afghan government is capable of outright military victory. Providing the Washington perspective, Dobbins and Carter outlined ‘five concrete steps’ that the United States should take ‘to keep the negotiations moving forward.’ These are to continue to provide financial and military support to the Afghan government, to work behind the scenes to strengthen the National Unity Government, to put pressure on Pakistan to get the Taliban to negotiate, to be prepared to accept the compromises that will be necessary for peace (including changes to the Afghan constitution), and to keep a sizeable force in Afghanistan until the deal is done and dusted.⁹⁰ These all seem sensible steps to us.

Our article complements Dobbins and Carter by exploring the Taliban perspective on peace talks. Our research into Taliban ideas on the conflict shows that there is at least some support within the movement for an end to the fighting based on an Afghan political compromise. However, despite at least four years of

⁹⁰ James Dobbins and Carter Malkasian, ‘Time to Negotiate in Afghanistan: How to Talk to the Taliban,’ *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2015-06-16/time-negotiate-afghanistan>

concerted efforts to draw the Taliban leadership into a negotiated settlement, the Taliban movement continued to prioritise fighting over talking, and so escalated their armed campaign. Any political strategy to end the armed conflict should be based upon a clear understanding of why the reality of a military stalemate in the war did not generate impetus towards a settlement.

The factors which prompt the Taliban to fight on include the imperfect information available to Taliban strategic decision-makers, the intrinsic contextual uncertainty on key issues such as durability of US support to Kabul, a political economy within the movement favouring fighters over diplomats, and an inherent Taliban tendency to take an optimistic view of their military achievements and capability. An ingrained political culture of tactical and strategic deception compounds the issues of imperfect information and uncertainty. The epitome of this was the Taliban's success in maintaining the fiction of Mullah Omar being in charge for over two years. The result is that the Taliban leadership is both chronically suspicious of the real intentions of other actors and confident of its own ability to deceive its opponents.

The dominant theory holds that a conflict will be 'ripe' for the onset of peace talks when both sides are locked in a 'mutually hurting stalemate.'⁹¹ However, when one side has military momentum – as ISAF had in 2009-2011 and the Taliban have now – the temptation is to fight on in the misplaced hope of victory. Moreover, such momentum gives added voice to those in the movement opposed to peace talks.

⁹¹ William I. Zartman, 'Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond,' in Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman, eds., *Conflict Resolution after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000), pp. 225-250.

Up to now, international efforts to generate movement towards a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan have been characterised by dependence on a single main line of action, with little effort to integrate that with supporting actions. In a situation of imperfect information and uncertainty, this may be precisely the wrong approach. For four years from 2011 to 2014, international effort towards an Afghan peace settlement focused on trying to start negotiations through the movement's Political Commission in Qatar. This track was essentially superseded in 2015 by international encouragement of the Afghanistan-Pakistan détente and promise of Pakistan leverage bringing the Taliban into negotiations.

An alternative approach to pursuit of a negotiated settlement, which takes into account the inherent difficulties of interpreting the Taliban response, would be to 'influence and hedge'. Such an approach would involve multiple lines of action designed both individually and cumulatively to increase the chance of the Taliban embracing a settlement. This is required because poor information means that it is impossible to calibrate the amount of pressure delivered by any single line of action. The prime example of this is the current main line of action, the Afghan-Pak détente, which depends upon the Pakistan army applying leverage to the Taliban. In reality, little can be known about how much leverage is applied or how successful a determined Taliban leadership is at withstanding that leverage. Thus, supporting lines of action can try to influence Taliban towards negotiations, in case the main line of action is not in itself sufficient.

The hedge component is based on the notion that, even if multiple tools are used to orchestrate a settlement, it still may be unattainable. Hedging actions are required to secure the next best alternative. In the absence of a settlement between

a united Taliban movement and the Afghan government, the next best alternative is likely to be a reduction in the intensity of the insurgency, with some parts of the Taliban movement renouncing the armed campaign. A strategy of 'influence-and-hedge' would create opportunities for the preferred outcome of a comprehensive settlement and discrete end to violence, while ensuring that if that proves unattainable, at least the government should not face an intensified armed campaign waged by a united movement.

The range of actions available for the influence side of the strategy starts with the initiative prioritised by Ghani, namely, international support for Pakistan's attempt to leverage the Taliban into negotiations. As Dobbins and Carter highlight, Washington has an important role to play. Following Kunduz, the Obama administration has decided to 5,600 troops in Afghanistan beyond 2016.⁹² The Taliban have consistently maintained that all foreign troops must be out of Afghanistan before a peace deal can be reached. However, private discussions with senior Taliban pragmatists reveal that some within the movement understand that they will have to accept a long-term US military presence.⁹³ Thus the size and profile of the US military force in Afghanistan provides key leverage in future peace talks with the Taliban. It would be most unhelpful for the United States to give away this bargaining chip before the talks have been concluded.

Complementary actions could include dialogue, fomenting of debate, social mobilisation and orchestration, all calibrated to influence the Taliban leadership towards negotiating an end to the fighting. Dialogue, outside of the main negotiating

⁹² Matthew Rosenberg, 'Obama to Announce Halt of US Troop Withdrawal,' *New York Times*, 15 October 2015.

⁹³ Semple *et al.*, 'Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation,' p. 4.

track, would seek to build the leadership's confidence in the possibility of settlement and challenge the assumptions underlying the decision to fight on i.e. it seeks to address information and uncertainty. Approached in this way, interaction with the Taliban's Political Commission in Qatar and low profile contacts with members of the leadership can be complementary to rather than compete with a main negotiating track through Pakistan. Opportunities to foment Taliban internal debate could include work with Taliban prisoners who are stakeholders in progress towards a settlement, and are well networked with their comrades outside of jail. Social mobilisation opportunities draw upon the dependence of the Taliban on key non-Taliban Afghan constituencies, most notably Afghan refugee communities and traders in Pakistan, pro-jihadi *ulema* and communities in Afghanistan where the Taliban operate. These constituencies too have some capacity to leverage the Taliban leadership towards settlement. Finally orchestration involves influencing Taliban internal politics in favour of those members of the leadership supportive of peace talks. The state actors involved, principally Afghanistan and Pakistan, have some experience of this form of orchestration and the succession struggle within the Taliban provided a classic example of an orchestration opportunity, if it had been a priority for either state. There have of course been attempts to influence the Taliban over the years. The point of placing them within an influence-and-hedge strategy would be to ensure a coordinated approach, pushing towards an agreed effect.

Hedging seeks to harness the potential of Taliban to reduce violence, even in the absence of a comprehensive settlement. Some hedging actions are based on significantly different assumptions from the influencing actions. For example, those pursuing negotiations depend upon Taliban maintaining the movement's

cohesiveness, to ensure that the movement can deliver on a deal. But in the absence of a deal, a break down of cohesiveness may reduce the movement's capacity to deliver violence and open the way for constituencies within the movement to support a ceasefire. Examples of the kind of hedging actions possible include a reinvigorated counter-narrative to challenge Taliban claims to be waging a legitimate jihad. 'Strategic reintegration' is the term used for deals to rehabilitate senior figures. Such reintegration deals should be designed to boost the prestige of the senior Taliban who have ceased fighting and enable them to dispense patronage and build support within the movement.

Based on the idea that hedging should challenge the Taliban leadership's attempt to integrate the movement nationally, there are opportunities to pursue local de-escalation of the conflict, by addressing grievances and alienation that have driven specific fighter networks into the insurgency. Remarkably little effort has been put into this - the Sangin Peace Accord in 2011 being a rare example.⁹⁴ A three-day workshop we held in Dubai with senior Taliban and Afghan government figures in early 2013 found that there were unexploited possibilities for declared local ceasefires, and that this could be designed around joint Taliban-Afghan district security commissions to monitor adherence to ceasefire agreements.⁹⁵ At the time, ISAF had no policy on local ceasefires, dismissing it as a wholly Afghan matter. Of course, the Afghan government would need to ensure that ceasefires are not tactical ploys by local insurgent networks looking to regroup and resupply, and for this

⁹⁴ Mark Beauteument, 'Negotiated Agreements in Tactical Transitions: The Sangin Accord 2011,' in Timothy Clack and Robert Johnson (eds), *At the End of Military Intervention: Historical, Theoretical and Applied Approaches to Transition, Handover and Withdrawal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 323-359.

⁹⁵ Michael Semple and Theo Farrell, 'Designing an Afghan Ceasefire: A Provisional Report of the Professors Group', March 2013, confidential report.

reason they ought to be supported in the context of a larger effort to negotiate an end to the conflict.

Influencing and hedging should be located them in the same strategy, and pursued simultaneously and synergistically, rather than waiting for the outcome of efforts at negotiation before deciding whether other efforts are also necessary. In the opaque world of Afghan insurgency an influence-and-hedge approach tries to reduce violence even without full knowledge of how the Taliban will pursue their campaign. Such an approach may offer less certainty than is comfortable for policymakers, but it is more realistic and likely to succeed.