

Negotiating with the Taliban: an Indian perspective

Perceiving Pakistan's growing centrality to diplomacy in Afghanistan, the West has planned its policy of identification and engagement with the moderate Taliban. But India believes that in war there is no substitute for victory. Therefore, it has reasons to be wary of the idea of a political reconciliation with the Taliban. Crafting peace in Afghanistan requires the US not to overplay Pakistan's sensitiveness towards Kabul, rather to be more attentive to Indian security concerns vis-à-vis Pakistan. Simply protecting its own interests in the region may not help the US in its mission.

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AS A PRICE FOR ITS SUPPORT in the global war on terrorism, Pakistan urged the US to engage with moderate elements of the Taliban. The Obama administration has made this reconciliation initiative an integral part of its Af-Pak strategy and is flirting with that hoary old chestnut of 'good' Taliban, 'bad' Taliban. Behind Pakistan's efforts to protect the so-called moderates has been an intention to preserve its dominant influence in Afghanistan and prevent the complete elimination of the Afghan Taliban, which it created as a strategic asset. In the present context, the Obama administration is more political and it is willing to concede that, from their perspective, the war in Afghanistan is unwinnable and therefore some level of negotiation and compromise is now unavoidable. In fact, the US and its allies have given a clear indication that they are willing to make a distinction between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and deal with the former, or at least some sections of it.

A lesser evil

Presently, the Taliban is a major threat to Afghanistan and a destabilising factor in the South Asian region. However, a dialogue with the Taliban or the incorporation of its moderate elements into the process of governance seems to be the only available alternative left for the US to bring peace in Afghanistan. By negotiating with the moderates, the US hopes to isolate those hardcore, ideologically driven, full-time fighters within the Taliban movement who contribute to the present unrest in Afghanistan.

The US does not see the Taliban as a threat to international security. The primary, perhaps the only, concern of the US has been to eliminate Al-Qaeda, which has a global, anti-US, jihadist agenda. The US strategy, therefore, focuses on what it perceives as the 'real' threat – Al-Qaeda – and considers the Taliban a lesser evil in comparison. According to the US, Al-Qaeda is a bigger threat because of its 'proven links with international terrorism while the Taliban is identified with Islamist ideology, not directly with terrorism'.¹ The Taliban, then, is treated as a different force with an obscurantist Islamist ideology. However, by tying the Taliban to a fundamentalist ideology rather than directly with terrorism, the US fails to see the thin line that divides fundamentalism and terrorism.

The US is searching for 'good' Taliban who can be weaned off violence in return for a share in power. However, the US feels that the uncompromising core of the Taliban, with their radical ideological leanings, must be met with force and defeated. These moderates that it seeks are mainly foot soldiers, who have taken up arms simply for money and lend support to the hardcore to stay safe; they are the less ideologically motivated sections within the enemy's fold.

Since the Taliban is extremely heterogeneous, the US expects to succeed in including local, non-ideologised leaders of the insurgency in the political reconciliation process that it hopes will isolate the leadership of the radical Taliban.² The Western strategy has been to turn short-term military momentum into long-term success in Afghanistan by isolating the hardcore section. But isolating the moderates will prove difficult, for the simple reason that the leadership of the Taliban in Afghanistan is not in the hands of the moderates and fear of offending their seniors will keep many moderates from negotiating.³

Indian worry

For a variety of reasons, India has cautioned against treating any faction of the Taliban as moderates and rejects the idea of negotiating with them. The Indian government takes the line that anyone subscribing to a fundamentalist ideology cannot be good and fundamentalists must not be and cannot be appeased. The Taliban are viewed as a regressive force with an anti-modernist ideology. It takes the view that they have made Islam more conflict-prone and have a tremendous capacity for extremism. India believes that a resurgent Taliban means brutal governance, a paralysed economy, denial of basic human rights and international isolation. There are also fears that cultivating moderates could embolden Pakistan to exploit its proximity to Taliban.

Second, it is almost impossible to make a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban and trying to do so is not only deceptive but could further complicate the situation in Afghanistan. It is certainly unlikely to stem the scourge of transnational terrorism. The US intention behind making such a distinction is a way of ensuring Pakistani cooperation, by accommodating its security concerns in Afghanistan. Even Pakistan's suspicion about India's presence in Afghanistan has led the US to underplay India's role in the country.

Furthermore, India is concerned that the search for moderate Taliban could see these elements fall under Pakistan's influence and control, in turn lending a helping hand in Afghanistan to fulfilling Pakistan's strategic ambitions in the region and in ensuring effective control over the country.⁴ This particular Indian worry stems from the fact that the Afghan insurgency has no broad popular base but is linked to clandestine support from Pakistan. Bringing so-called moderates back into the political process could enhance Pakistan's influence in Kabul because of its control over the Pashtun leadership, many of whom are members of the Taliban.

Pakistan's military planners view Afghanistan as a strategic space in the event of a war with India and to control this space they need the help of the Taliban. It is argued that 'once Pakistan acquires the strategic depth through these moderate elements of Taliban and is assured of peace on its western border; it may concentrate its entire energy and attention to the eastern border with India'.⁵ The Indian government fears that accommodations with the moderates would result in a re-emergence of fundamentalist forces in South Asia and the return of an extremist regime to Kabul.

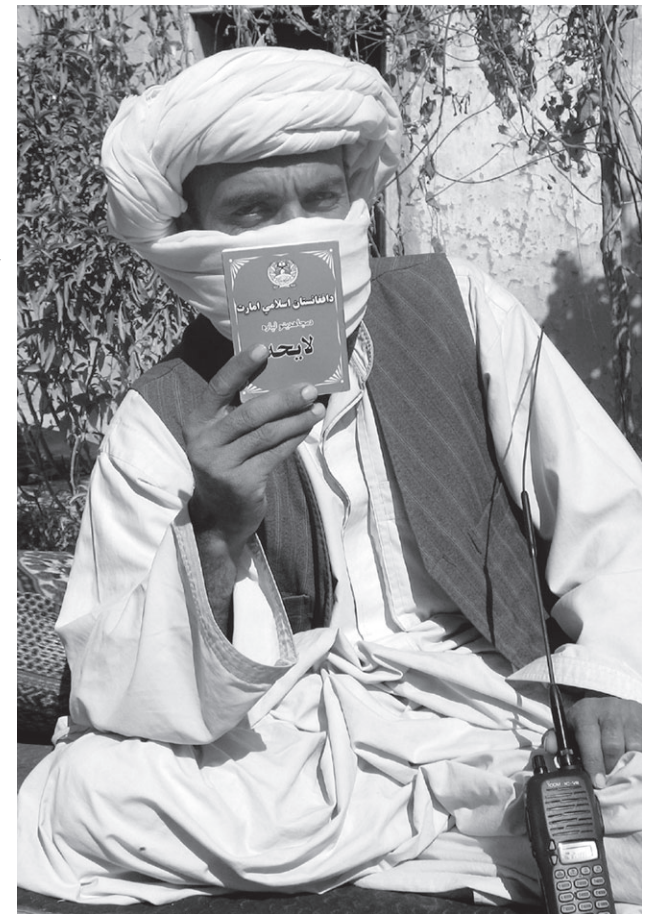
India is wary of the Pakistani offer to mediate with the Taliban. This offer departs from Pakistan's previous reluctance to approach the Taliban. If Pakistani political and military leaders remain ambivalent about a clean break with all Taliban variants, it would be unwise on the part the US to accept any kind of mediation. What Pakistan can offer, however, is their influence over the Haqqani network, whose forces are battling with the American and NATO forces in Afghanistan. In return for trying to rein in the Haqqanis (Jallauddin and Siraj), Pakistan will be looking for a friendly Afghanistan and for ways to stem the growing Indian presence and influence there.

Rather than negotiating with the moderates, the international community should stress the need for a problem-solving approach while making efforts to promote development, capacity and enhancing internal security in Afghanistan. The hardcore Taliban can be isolated by winning the trust of the local Afghans. The international community must stay engaged until the Afghan government is capable of providing security, justice and development. Bolstering the Kabul government's capacity for better governance by transforming Afghanistan into a democracy would help stabilise the country.

There are concerns that a rehabilitation of the moderates reignite fears and insecurity in the minds of the Afghans. A sense of security is a vital prerequisite of good governance and providing good governance is essential to fighting an insurgency. An Afghan government too weak to provide governance and infrastructure will create a socio-political space for radicalism. The increased military presence in Afghanistan is a clear sign of the international community's commitment to establishing effective governance, to enhancing the spirit of the Afghan people to fight the jihadis and to secure Afghanistan's future as an independent country in its own right.

Deceptive distinction

The Obama administration is drawing a deceptive distinction between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, ignoring India's genuine concerns. Obama should be aware that both moderates and hardliners share a common ideology. There is also a nexus between the Taliban and the Pakistani ISI. India fears that a political deal with any of the elements of Taliban will only strengthen the Pakistani military and the global jihad network. Therefore, the United States must remain circumspect about the ulterior motives of the Pakistani military establishment.



Overplaying Pakistan's sensitiveness in the running of Afghanistan would enhance the nuisance capabilities of the ISI in complicating the military situation there. 'Pakistan's dilemma on Afghanistan, therefore, is to be found in the military leadership's convictions'.⁶

The US war in Afghanistan can only be successful if the Pakistani military's sanctuaries and sustenance infrastructure for the Afghan Taliban is dismantled. The surge, bribe and run policy adopted by the US is unlikely to buy peace in Afghanistan. Any military surge must be backed by political strategy which would ultimately defeat or render the Taliban irrelevant to the aspirations of the ordinary Afghan people. Quitting is not an option. Obama's goal, therefore, must be to break the back of the Taliban, significantly reducing their military capabilities. The US should rather search for a credible Afghan partner having support of the Afghan people, not of these moderate fundamentalists.

Conclusion

A wrong selection for negotiation may reverse the trend in spite of a new winning strategy. Many see the US desperation to reach an agreement with the moderates as a part of its exit plan prior to 2012. Cutting a deal with the Taliban sends a signal that the US is not winning the war in Afghanistan. The staying power of the US in Afghanistan depends on how it understands the global nature of the Taliban threat. India, on the frontline of the global fight against terrorism, will definitely bear the brunt of this myopic US attempt at a political reconciliation with Taliban, which is an integral part of the Af-Pak strategy. It would be prudent for the US to systematically include India in crafting this strategy. 'The West would be better served if it takes India's concerns into account'.⁷ However, if the US remains determined to bring a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' jihadis, it will neither reduce the threat of terrorism in the sub-continent, nor weaken the spirit of Taliban as a fighting force.

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