



[Enough Already](#) **It's time to talk to the Taliban.**

BY STEPHEN HADLEY AND JOHN PODESTA | JANUARY 18, 2012



Over the past two years, the United States has made enormous strides in Afghanistan. The U.S. military has undertaken a devastating campaign against al Qaeda and its affiliates, as well as members of the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This military pressure has made Americans safer -- Osama bin Laden and dozens of other top al Qaeda leaders are dead, U.S. and NATO troops casualties are down in Afghanistan, and the Afghan government has been given the breathing room it needs to bolster its security forces and its governing institutions.

U.S. policy is now entering a new and complex phase of this conflict, where diplomatic efforts in support of a robust political strategy for Afghanistan and the region will

become even more essential. This effort should not become a political football in the coming election season -- it needs strong bipartisan support here at home.

U.S. political leaders, Democrats and Republicans alike, and our military commanders, have consistently argued that the conflict in Afghanistan will not end by military means alone. The elimination of al Qaeda's safe havens and the establishment of long-term peace and security in Afghanistan and the region -- the key U.S. national security objectives -- is best assured by a sustainable political settlement that strengthens the Afghan state so that it can assume greater responsibility for addressing the country's security and economic challenges.

This broad political settlement must include all elements of Afghan society -- opposition groups, non-Taliban Pashtuns, ethnic and religious minorities, women, and civil society. Many of these groups are currently excluded by a government in Kabul that they rightly view as corrupt, closed, and unaccountable.

Efforts to reach a settlement should include an approach to Taliban elements that are ready to give up the fight and become part of the political process. Such an approach would not -- as some have suggested -- constitute "surrender" to America's enemies. Rather, convincing combatants to leave the insurgency and enter into the political process is the hallmark of a successful counterinsurgency effort.

The [decision](#) by Taliban representatives to open a political office in Qatar presents an important opening for such diplomatic efforts. Afghan President Hamid Karzai [initially opposed](#) this new political office and recalled Afghanistan's ambassador to Qatar last month, but he has since [thought better](#) of the idea. Karzai's decision to gain support for talks with the Taliban from a traditional loya jirga was another step in the right direction.

We are not blind to the potential pitfalls of the diplomatic path. First, the Taliban is a decentralized movement with many different voices and wings -- some of which may be open to talks, and others that may be irreconcilable. An early stage of diplomacy involves testing which Taliban representatives have the authority to speak for which parts of the movement.

Afghan politics pose another significant challenge. After two bitterly disputed and imperfectly conducted elections in Afghanistan, the relations among different Afghan factions are fraught with tensions on all issues, including diplomatic outreach to the Taliban. Many elements in Afghanistan's parliament and government rightly fear that negotiations could turn out to be a back-door route to exclude other Afghan factions and return the Taliban to power. No one in Afghanistan wants such an outcome -- nor should anyone in the United States.

The Karzai government's rocky relationship with the United States poses another obstacle. While the Obama administration has expressed great frustration with the Karzai government over its high-levels of corruption, President Karzai has made inflammatory statements critical of the United States and NATO. Discussions of a proposed U.S.-

Afghan "strategic partnership" have stalled over the U.S. military's use of night raids and the control of prisoners, and this dispute could have spillover effects into any diplomatic outreach to elements of the Taliban.

But the strategic partnership agreement is also an opportunity to offer a long-term commitment to Afghanistan of diplomatic, economic, and military support -- including a U.S. military presence after 2014 -- in return for commitments by the Afghan government to pursue specific political reforms that address its lack of checks and balance, impunity, and narrow base of support. This might provide some confidence to the Afghan people to pursue the broader political settlement that is so critical for long-term peace and stability.

Finally, there is Pakistan. Getting Pakistan on board will be no easy task. But if outreach to the Taliban is to be successful, Pakistan will have to be a part of the process. Pakistan has the ability to sabotage any long-term peace in Afghanistan by preventing insurgents from negotiating with the Afghan government and by providing safe haven, weapons, training, and funding to insurgent groups that can weaken, if not overthrow, the Afghan government. It is in neither the U.S. nor Pakistan's interest to escalate this conflict, however. U.S. diplomacy should test Pakistan's intentions and willingness to play a positive role in bringing peace to Afghanistan.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has described the U.S. strategy as "fight, talk, and build" -- and that is exactly what the United States and its allies have been doing. U.S. and NATO troops have been fighting bravely for more than 10 years, and diplomats and development specialists have risked their lives providing crucial support to Afghans working to rebuild their society. The goal of this process should be an agreement by all Afghan parties to renounce violence, break with al Qaeda, and respect the Afghan constitution -- including its human rights provisions, notably the rights of women and all ethnic groups. Now, after years of painstaking quiet diplomacy, it is time to see if such an outcome is possible.

The current war in Afghanistan has gone on for more than a decade, and Afghanistan has suffered from more than 30 years of internal conflict. Bringing this war to an end won't happen overnight -- some elements of the Taliban continue to use their own "fight and talk" strategy, as we have seen from the recent attacks on NATO troops. But a lasting peace will not come to Afghanistan unless the United States uses all of the tools at its disposal -- including the full force of American diplomacy.

WASEEM NIKZAD/AFP/Getty Images

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