

Negotiating with the Taliban

Insights from before 2001

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August 2013

Research Conclusions / Executive Summary

Key findings of our research project on pre-2001 attempts to negotiate with the Taliban are as follows:

1. Successful approaches rested on personal relationships that managed to build rapport, rather than on institutional process.

Representatives of countries/organisations whose choice of strategy and behaviour complemented that of the Taliban appear to have had considerably better access and success. This often meant meetings were less goal-focused and less driven by process. These external interlocutors paid more attention to individuals, rarely or never employed threats, and instead sought to communicate concerns.

Agendas for meetings were sometimes perceived as a list of demands and not as discussion points. The Taliban reciprocated by mirroring their understanding of the strategy of their counterpart, which in turn was perceived as an unwillingness to engage in serious talks. For example, China faced increasing violence from militant groups in Xinjiang province in the late 1990s, but opted to explain the considerable problems this situation was causing and ask for the Taliban's help instead of making demands or accusations.

Implication/recommendation: The character traits and choice of strategy of the negotiator matter, as does his/her personal history. Individuals with pre-existing (positive) relationships with the Taliban can easily transfer their legitimacy to a different task or issue to be negotiated. Create regular fora for meeting and discussion with Taliban interlocutors regardless of agendas. Choose negotiators that place the emphasis on cultivating a relationship with their counterpart, and where possible remove constraints such as deadlines.

2. Countries that understood how best to engage the Taliban achieved the best results; context explains much of the Taliban's behaviour and decisions during the 1990s.

An understanding of the Taliban's idiosyncrasies -- their limitations, organisational evolution, their changing perception of the world around them and the underlying logic applied to this -- explains actions that seemed counterproductive or frustrating to Western diplomatic actors. Misunderstandings of the Taliban (and simplified characterisations of their behaviour as that of a retrograde, static movement) often played a central role in the

failure of diplomatic engagement. As an illustration, (unexpected) reversals of decisions often was an indication that an agreement hadn't been properly briefed to senior leaders.

Implication/recommendation: An in-depth understanding of the Taliban's history and familiarity with the background and biographies of key members is a precondition to be able to navigate the internal limitations of the movement as part of a negotiation strategy. Any diplomatic approach that hopes to be successful needs to consider internal dynamics within the Taliban. While some strategies can aid the political wing, others can lessen their influence and efficacy; it is possible, for example, to raise the status of an individual or group of individuals (even without meeting in person) when the perception of association is created.

3. The framing of issues was instrumental in determining how they were received by the Taliban, and how they engaged and responded.

The Taliban's response to issues that were raised during meetings was significantly influenced by how they were presented through formal or informal diplomatic channels. At times, the failure to reach an agreement was due to miscommunication and resulting misunderstandings that prevented both sides from reaching a clear understanding of one another. At other times, statements or demands were perceived as tactical moves and alternative motives were assumed; this eroded trust and led to a deterioration of the relationship. Appropriate post-meeting follow-through is especially important; the Taliban were frequently disappointed in this respect by the United States, and it contributed to the sea change of opinion among the senior leadership.

Implication/recommendation: Abstract discussions with the Taliban (about principles or normative discussions about 'right' or 'wrong') should be avoided. Instead discussions should focus on specific events, concrete situations and their current importance, in particular on how the negotiator, his government, nation or organisation is affected. Clearly communicate in as much detail as possible why this specific concern affects you and what they can do specifically. The idea of framing also becomes important when listening to counter-propositions; there is often considerably more flexibility within a proposition if the right framing is found to reconcile different positions.

4. A more-educated second tier of leaders operated amidst the Taliban's government. They were more approachable and facilitated better communication.

A set of the younger generation of Taliban was engaged in trying to influence policy during the late 1990s, often from positions as personal secretaries or deputy ministerial positions. Many of those involved in foreign relations had attended the Institute of Diplomacy, where they were encouraged to lobby within their respective ministries for closer ties with the West, and with the United States in particular. While the core values did not differ much from those held by the Taliban leadership, the younger generation seems to have had a greater capacity to facilitate 'cultural translation' between foreign dignitaries and the Taliban leadership. Engagement that didn't seek to or threaten to compromise their status within the movement was best, be it meetings and trips without difficult agendas or the good wisdom not to pursue negotiation tracks with only a limited possibility of being approved by home (i.e. Western) governments. The Taliban movement was built on personal ties and smaller groups; it was far from a homogenous uniform entity and smaller sub-groups held different priorities. Internal reform was already being contested and sought.

Implication/recommendation: Much as there are international actors who can serve as facilitators for negotiations and communication, there are individuals amongst the Taliban, at times in positions as high as secondary or tertiary tier, who can be engaged to find solutions. While this engagement is highly sensitive and prone to compromise their status by association, this sub-group holds the possibility to find a way to work internally with others to change course and develop working strategies.

5. The less surprise the better. False expectations of outcomes and agreements can undermine efforts.

The Taliban's senior leadership seemed most amenable to attending (or hosting) meetings where the details had been mostly discussed and agreed upon beforehand. Misunderstandings happened when high-level meetings were forced on senior negotiators or leaders of the Taliban without the prior discussions — presumably hoping to take a shortcut to decisions being taken; it should not have been surprising that agreements signed at those meetings quickly collapsed or were not honoured.

Implication/recommendation: Decisions of the Taliban's leadership are rarely final, but rather a momentary expression of the status of the talks. What may appear as setbacks, where negotiators seem to revert on their earlier concessions, should not be regarded as such. At times negotiators seem prone to overstep their mandate and this should be expected. The appropriate response is not to point towards broken promises and apply pressure but to seek a renewed solution that addresses the new problem that has arisen. Work as much as possible to prepare the final terms of meetings where high-level

delegates are invited, especially when the outcomes will be shared publicly. Limit expectations of meetings where preparations are not made.

6. The choice of initial topics of conversation, in particular during first meetings, determined success to a large extent. It was hard to unmake a reputation in the Taliban's eyes.

This was a cultural characteristic of the movement. Meetings followed an amount of informal protocol in which the counterpart was evaluated. First impressions count everywhere, but seemingly more so with the Taliban.

Implication/recommendation: Take care to ensure a relationship is built before contentious issues are raised. Just as the Taliban are likely to begin encounters by outlining the evolution of their movement time and again, discussions benefit from starting with matters of general concern, where blame is not attributed to either side or to both sides. Health, education and poverty are challenges the Afghan people face and that should be addressed.

7. Internal power dynamics among the Taliban meant that strategic leaks by the West and public discourse made it harder to reach successful agreements.

Tensions between the different power centres in the Taliban government of the 1990s and sensitivities over public reputation and the wider Islamic world meant that once the specifics of debate and discussion were made public it was far harder to get the Taliban to reach an agreement. They seemed aware of this, and there are several negotiations that were expressly shielded from this kind of pressure. Countries that do not control their media outlets often found that unwanted pressures were brought in the middle of sensitive negotiations; some thought that public discussion of this kind might force the Taliban's hand, but in reality it often merely constrained possible outcomes.

Implication/recommendation: Public messaging via the media should be avoided, since it limits the Taliban's ability to navigate and act within their internal power structures. Pressure strategies enacted in the public were universally unsuccessful during the pre-2001 period. Where possible, efforts should be taken to create strategies that allow for the saving of face.

Conclusion

A simple comparison of 2013 with 2008 suffices to show just how far the debate on the possibility of engaging the Taliban politically has come. A shift in diplomatic and internal policy was followed by a push to make that idea acceptable for broader public opinion (in the UK, at least). The notion that British or US government representatives would seek to meet with and discuss politics with the Taliban is much less politically toxic than it once was. Pakistani internal calculations also seem to have shifted to a position such that there is increased real support.¹

Given that efforts in Doha are currently stalled, now is an excellent time to take stock of the developments of the past year and to put into place new initiatives and lines of action that can be pursued over the autumn and winter months. These have traditionally been good months for sowing the seeds for future action, and the pivotal importance of 2014 as a year of transition offers further reason to make this a priority.

This report sought to examine Taliban perceptions of negotiations as well as identify the kinds of behaviours that lent themselves to successful political approaches pre-2001. The period was characterised more by diplomatic failure than anything else, but there were groups and countries that were able to engage the Taliban in a useful way.

Taking a historical perspective, the Taliban have tended to want relatively little from negotiations. Aside from the fact that most diplomatic engagement during the 1990s was not initiated by the Taliban — they had to deal with many enquiries and agendas from other countries/entities — recognition and affirmation seems to have been their key desire from international engagement. They would have been happy to take money/aid, in part because Afghanistan couldn't have survived without the support provided by the United Nations and others, but they wanted this on their own terms. Above all, they sought to be treated as equal partners, if not in terms of international significance and clout, but in the sense that they would receive acknowledgement that their very existence was legitimate and that their government was real. Translated into the current/ongoing situation, political engagement gives them legitimacy which not only would help validate their sense that the past 12 years have not been in vain, but also internally in that talks would help shore up nagging doubts and dissent that have been voiced over the past year or two.

Seven main lessons for the present day have emerged from our survey of pre-2001 international political engagement with the Taliban. Unlike in the Executive Summary, they are presented with the action step first:

- 1. Cultivate personal relationships** — The only time when Taliban interlocutors were able to relax into a meeting was when relationships were allowed to develop

¹ Needless to say, this shift is still one which prioritises their own internal policy goals, but it seems that there is considerable overlap, at least in the short-medium term.

informally and personally. Those who were able to spend time engaging the Taliban in a personal dialogue (along with whatever specific issues were part of the agenda) saw more success. Representatives of countries/organisations whose choice of strategy and behaviour complemented that of the Taliban appear to have had considerably better access and success. This often meant meetings were less goal-focused and less driven by process. These external interlocutors paid more attention to individuals, rarely or never employed threats, and instead sought to communicate concerns.

2. Better understanding means smarter engagement — Misunderstandings of the Taliban (and simplified characterisations of their behaviour as that of a retrograde, static movement) often played a central role in the failure of diplomatic engagement. An in-depth understanding of the Taliban's history and familiarity with the background and biographies of key members is a precondition to be able to navigate the internal limitations of the movement as part of a negotiation strategy.

3. Deal in specifics, not principles — Discussions of principles fed into and encouraged the Taliban's tendency to become defensive and to adopt rigid positions. The best approach tended to be one that made each issue as specific and tangible as possible; even better was when negotiators managed to convey why the specific issue was important for them and what action points would help them. The Taliban's response to issues that were raised during meetings was significantly influenced by how they were presented through formal or informal diplomatic channels. The idea of framing also becomes important when listening to counter-propositions; there is often considerably more flexibility within a proposition if the right framing is found to reconcile different positions.

4. Engage the Taliban's political wing — The Taliban's political wing, more fragile than is often assumed, saw their political capital decline over the period of pre-2001 rule. Their failure to deliver meaningful and tangible results meant that they lost standing within the movement. A similar dynamic is at play with the Doha Talibs (and the various roving individuals). Unhelpful behaviour(s) that marginalise their influence includes arranging meetings that serve no wider purpose or strategy; getting them involved in initiatives on which they most likely can't deliver (or in which it seems unlikely that you can't); compromising them and their status (through any number of ways, most of which are well-known); or even talking about them in public.² Contact and engagement (without involving them in political deals that have no guarantee of success) helps to empower them. Track-two dialogue is useful, but too much time away from the political circuit and they will start to lose credibility. Perhaps most important is ensuring that they remain out of the limelight.

² Use of the phrase and designator "the moderates" probably played a not insignificant role in marginalising these actors during the 1990s and early 2000s. The vehemence with which this categorisation is rejected to this day should indicate how harmful its use is, at least in diplomatic/public interaction.

5. Avoid raised expectations — The Taliban's senior leadership seemed most amenable to attending (or hosting) meetings where the details had been mostly discussed and agreed upon beforehand. At times negotiators seem prone to overstep their mandate and this should be expected. The appropriate response is not to point towards broken promises and apply pressure but to seek a renewed solution that addresses the new problem that has arisen. Work as much as possible to prepare the final terms of meetings where high-level delegates are invited, especially when the outcomes will be shared publicly. Limit expectations of meetings where preparations are not made.

6. Always act with the long-term in mind — Take care to ensure a relationship is built before contentious issues are raised. Just as the Taliban are likely to begin encounters by outlining the evolution of their movement time and again, discussions benefit from starting with matters of general concern, where blame is not attributed to either side or to both sides. Health, education and poverty are challenges the Afghan people face and that can be addressed as 'safe' discussion material.

7. Pressure is sometimes necessary, but don't back people into a corner — Pressure tactics seems never to have worked; the instrument of pressure being wielded was almost always too blunt. Contrast the Pakistani ability to exert targeted and specific pressure against the Afghan Taliban, such as was applied prior to the official opening of the Doha office. Things like sanctions weren't as effective (and became counterproductive) because they weren't finite and since the Taliban could weather them out with relative ease. Incentives had some use while negotiating with the Taliban, but more as a means to sweeten the general mood and interface between two countries rather than as a means to a specific end. See, for example, how China delivered a variety of tangible benefits for the Taliban during the late 1990s without the expectation of a specific Taliban response. Incentives also only seem to have worked if the time in between making the suggestion and the delivery was very short. American engagement with the Taliban was hampered by their failure to deliver on hints or promises, and they lost significant trust in this way.

The key implications of all of this for how Doha and the political engagement can be best pursued at this point are as follows:

— A long-term perspective — thinking five years ahead at the bare minimum — allows for better calculation and decision-making. It also makes the bumps in the road along the way easier to stomach.

— Engagement must mean meeting with individuals more often, and on a more personal basis. Such meetings must, where possible, be much less goal-oriented and instead take the opportunity to familiarise each other with their differing perspectives. This can take the form of a discussion of history, in which each party can explain where they're

coming from in an environment open enough to tolerate debate of this kind without tarnishing specific policy goals, for example.

— As part of this longer-term perspective, encourage track II religious dialogue, but ensure to position yourselves as far away from it as possible. The environment out of which the Taliban operate is not going away, either in Afghanistan or in Pakistan and the wider Muslim world. The more exposure religious elites have to a variety of worlds and environments (not to mention opinions and perspectives) the better. Support of this kind will pay dividends over the long-term.

— Work on bottom-up mechanisms, since they currently doesn't exist. The High Peace Council is an ineffective means of targeting this, and similarly using Pakistan as a proxy for bottom-up engagement is a non-starter for serious movement. Unfortunately, international actors are no longer really in a good place to encourage this, and efforts will be seen as interference by Karzai. Third-parties can be invaluable here, however, and we aren't really talking about anything beyond planting the seed. This is arguably an approach that could have the biggest impact. Look beyond 2015 — you will still need a network inside Afghanistan, one that has the potential to carry influence within Pakistan.

— Rekindle political engagement with the Taliban through trusted third-party mediators. Care should be taken that this does not conflict with partner countries' initiatives, the wider strategy or to upset the Palace in Kabul, but there are a number of individuals that can facilitate an approach that prioritises bottom-up engagement as much as the top-down approach that has so far been emphasised. Many such individuals have been under-utilised thus far, and while some are now busy with what is happening in the Arab world, all both continue to be concerned with where Afghanistan is headed, and have essential skill sets and specialisms that the Foreign Office or US State Department cannot replicate.

As we have explored in this report, the Taliban's paradoxical organisational structure — how and where decisions get made, and how power is cultivated and wielded — was highly influenced by the matter at hand, the personalities involved and the perception of the issue, as well as possible fallout. This means that political engagement is complicated, with every experience a unique instance, but it also offers lots of opportunity for productive engagement. Failure is not guaranteed, and there are options for useful action to be taken.

The past few years have seen great motion from within the Taliban, far beyond standard rhetoric. Their cooperation with the Ministry of Education along with support for health programmes demonstrates this. While the 2014 deadline might be regarded as arbitrary, its effect is considerable; the withdrawal of foreign troops ends the status quo. All actors in Afghanistan must find a new formula with which to navigate the future. All parties, including the Taliban, are aware of the opportunities and dangers that lie amidst this transition. The prospect of a return to the mujahideen wars of the 1990s is an incentive for all sides to seek a political solution. International efforts to find a political solution over the

next 5-10 years will play a pivotal role in how Afghanistan will emerge from its latest phase of state-building.