Time to talk to the Taliban

Even the Bush administration begins to realize no military solution is possible

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Signs coming out of Washington are that a significant policy shift on Afghanistan has taken place.

Even two years ago, the prospect of talking to the Taliban was unthinkable for the Bush administration, which insisted that the movement was a spent force.

Escalating violence in the country that killed 8,000 people in 2007 has apparently altered that perception, with administration officials now speaking of the need to support "dialogue" with the movement.

Of course, such a dramatic about-face is not without precedent, as the United States is not just talking to some of the Sunni insurgent groups that fought and killed U.S. soldiers in Iraq, but it is allied with them. Plans for Afghanistan are not so ambitious – yet.

Sources in the administration indicate that it has quietly expressed its support for an Afghan government program that aims to split moderate Taliban from the movement and bring them out of the cold.

The program, which provides amnesties to combatants in exchange for their disarmament and pledges of loyalty to the state, has actually been in operation for several years, but the U.S. and most other Western countries, including Canada, have chosen not to support it.

Endorsing the program, in the eyes of many Western policy-makers, would be tantamount to negotiating with terrorists. Such a narrow-minded position has been a major impediment to the development of political solutions to the Afghan conflict.

The reality in Afghanistan, which the U.S. change of strategy tacitly recognizes, is that there is no military solution to the conflict. The only viable prospect for peace is a
negotiated settlement.

Other NATO countries, like the U.K., came to this conclusion sooner, but have adopted a much different and less constructive approach. The U.K. military has actively sought to reach out to the Taliban in their area of operations in the restive southern province of Helmand, often unilaterally without the Afghan government's involvement.

Earlier this month, reports emerged in the Canadian media that the Canadian Forces was also seeking to make contacts with moderate Taliban in neighbouring Kandahar province, an approach the opposition New Democratic Party has enthusiastically advocated.

However, mini-bargains with the Taliban in the south made by foreign actors rather than the Afghan government will not bring lasting peace and could harm efforts to achieve it. Such approaches only undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government, which Canada and its allies have spent billions of dollars and far too many lives to establish.

Making deals with the Taliban at the local level will only promote the perception, which many Afghans already hold, that Western countries, not the democratically elected Afghan government, is the real power in Afghanistan.

Rather than numerous mini-bargains negotiated by external actors, what Afghanistan needs is one grand political bargain negotiated by the government.

It is important to remember that Afghanistan lacks a grand bargain or peace agreement. The Bonn Agreement, which launched the Afghan reconstruction process in December 2001, was not a classical peace agreement as it did not involve all the parties to the conflict.

Rather, it only assembled the actors on the right side of the "war on terror," those Afghan factions that aided the U.S.-led coalition to unseat the Taliban regime. Such an agreement remains a prerequisite for sustainable peace.

However, achieving it now, which involves reaching out to the Taliban, will be much more difficult than it would have been six or even three years ago, when the Taliban were still regrouping after the fall of their regime.

The reason is that the Taliban now feel in a position of strength. They believe momentum is on their side. This is reflected in the uncompromising demands that they have presented to the Karzai government, which include the acceptance of Taliban control over all of southern Afghanistan, the reimposition of their own brand of Sharia law and the withdrawal of most international actors from the country.

Such conditions are non-starters for the Afghan government, leaving NATO with little option but to continue military operations until the government is in a more advantageous negotiating position.

There is a major push behind the scenes in Kabul to develop a coherent international donor position to support the Afghan government's reconciliation efforts.

While the Afghan government's Taliban reconciliation program has succeeded in drawing in hundreds of low-level fighters over the past few years, its ability to penetrate the middle and upper ranks, let alone disrupt the integrity of the Taliban movement as a whole, has been limited.
One of the reasons for this is a lack of resources. A program capable not only of providing political amnesty but economic and social assistance to reintegrate Taliban fighters into Afghan society could prove to be a major incentive for the militants to lay down their arms.

Positions in the state administration will likely also have to be offered to draw in senior Taliban actors. This move to establish a coherent and unified international policy in support of the Afghan government's political reconciliation efforts is a major step toward the resolution of the Afghan conflict.

This, after all, is not a war that can be won on the battlefield alone. We can only hope that this realization has not come too late.

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