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## Talks with the Taliban Are Inevitable, But Who Will Be at the Table?

By Tony Karon

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The fact that Afghan President Hamid Karzai has [told the Wall Street Journal](#) he's held three-way negotiations with the U.S. and the Taliban should come as no surprise: the U.S. has said that within two years it will end its already decade-long military entanglement in Afghanistan's civil war, and the Taliban is anything but defeated. Indeed, militarily, the U.S. has been spinning its wheels in Afghanistan for years, now, it's a long-established conventional wisdom that Washington's best hopes for leaving behind even a modicum of stability require a political settlement with the insurgents. The question being fought out on the ground for the past four years has simply been on what terms a negotiated settlement would be forged, and who would be at the table. Where once the U.S. had insisted on the Taliban laying down arms and embracing the constitution that brought Karzai to power as preconditions for talking to the insurgents, it has come around to accepting those erstwhile preconditions as the desired outcomes of such talks.

Now, with the diplomatic pace quickened by the U.S. withdrawal deadline, Karzai — who wields limited leverage of his own — is making sure he's not sidelined by talks between Western powers and the Taliban, which had reportedly begun some time ago at an exploratory level, mediated by Qatar.

The optimistic spin on Karzai's announcement highlights the fact that the Taliban is now talking with Karzai, whom it had previously dismissed as a "puppet" of the U.S. The Taliban, of course, denied talking to Karzai, though they have publicly confirmed their talks with Washington. Even if the Taliban had agreed to include Karzai in talks, though, there remains considerable grounds for skepticism that it would accept the Afghan constitution drawn up under Western tutelage after the U.S. invasion (and therefore the legitimacy of Karzai's government).

It's not clear just how committed the Taliban leadership is to these conversations, and there remains considerable opposition within the movement to seeking a political settlement right now — for the simple fact that many in the Taliban believe they're actually winning the war. And as is the case of any insurgent army facing a foreign expeditionary force, the Taliban knows time is on its side. The most recent U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Afghanistan, details of which were leaked last month, revealed the consensus in Washington's intelligence community that Karzai's regime would not survive a NATO pullout in 2014. The insurgents are likely to concur, and Karzai's own actions suggest that he may not disagree: The Afghan President is agitating for the Obama Administration to conclude a strategic partnership agreement with his regime that would keep a permanent U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014 — knowing full well that such an outcome has, until now, been a deal-breaker for the Taliban.

And the Taliban is not exactly feeling the wall at its back, right now. The surge of U.S. reinforcements ordered up by President Obama at the start of his presidency has failed to turn the tide against the insurgents, and neither the U.S. nor the Karzai government is able to win the hearts and minds of enough of the population to make a go of counterinsurgency. U.S. troops are certainly able to suppress the Taliban presence in certain areas for periods of focused deployment, but the gains are unsustainable once they move on to confront Taliban concentrations elsewhere. While many U.S. military leaders still whistle a happy tune, others are willing to speak more bluntly: Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis, writing in this month's edition of *Armed Forces Journal*, painted a bleak picture of "the absence of success on virtually every level" of a U.S. mission he'd just spent a year assessing on the ground:

I saw the incredible difficulties any military force would have to pacify even a single area of any of those provinces. I heard many stories of how insurgents controlled virtually every piece of land beyond eyeshot of a U.S. or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) base.

I saw little to no evidence the local governments were able to provide for the basic needs of the people. Some of the Afghan civilians I talked with said the people didn't want to be connected to a predatory or incapable local government.

From time to time, I observed Afghan Security forces collude with the insurgency.

And so on, in a blistering critique of the gulf between official pronouncements and the reality on the ground. The notion — on which the 2014 withdrawal plan is ostensibly based — that the Karzai government's security forces will fill the gap left by the departing NATO troops two years from now is obviously a fanciful tale intended for domestic consumption in a country that may have trouble understanding just what has been achieved as it winds down the longest foreign war in its history with the designated enemy still very much in the field.

The Taliban's resilience, of course, doesn't necessarily put it in a position to overrun Kabul, much less conquer all of Afghanistan. Remember, even when the Pakistan-backed Islamist movement was in power, the northern third of the country remained in the hands of the Northern Alliance, the predominantly ethnic Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara coalition backed by India, Iran and Russia. The U.S. invasion tipped the balance against the Taliban, but it soon bounced back, with support and sanctuary provided by Pakistan, unwilling to reconcile itself to an Indian-allied government taking root on its western flank. The hubris of the Bush Administration sustained an unfortunate illusion that Pakistan shared U.S. objectives in Afghanistan; having abandoned that illusion, the Obama Administration nonetheless faces the challenge of accommodating Pakistan's interest in negotiating a peace agreement.

Pakistan has far more leverage over the Taliban than any other player, and it has previously made clear — by, for example, arresting Taliban leaders holding talks with Karzai and the U.S. independent of Pakistan's okay — that it will not allow the negotiation of any agreement to which it is not (at least tacitly) a party. In the game of musical chairs over the negotiations, Karzai has kept his options open, withdrawing from talks with the Taliban late last year and vowing to negotiate only with Pakistan. Karzai visited Pakistan on Thursday, following his *Wall Street Journal* announcement, but it remains unclear whether Pakistan has given its consent. If so, such talks could launch a process towards ending the war, long and difficult though it will be. The Taliban's fighting men are not convinced they have any need to sue for peace; the Northern Alliance, which remains the basis of the only significant indigenous fighting capacity ranged against the Taliban, is still fiercely skeptical of any move by Karzai to treat with their old enemy; and President Obama in an election year may find it difficult even to meet such basic confidence-building steps as freeing Taliban fighters from Guantanamo.

Meanwhile, spring is just weeks away, and with it another fighting season. That's a metaphorical table at which Karzai holds no significant cards, while the Taliban believes that as long as it enjoys Pakistan's patronage, its hand is sufficient to prompt the U.S. to fold first.