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Coming to Terms With the Taliban

By Philip Giraldi

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Washington's playbook has been reduced to "drop back and punt" in Afghanistan. Everybody knows that there have been on-again off-again talks to obtain a political settlement, but there has been much speculation over what exactly is taking place since the Taliban ostensibly ended negotiations in March over U.S. hesitation to release five senior prisoners held at Guantanamo. The talks were nearly invisible in the press, even though their existence was confirmed by the Afghan and U.S. governments as well as by the Taliban itself. Such talks are the *sine qua non* for American departure from the country in 2014 because without an agreement a prolonged civil war with continued U.S. involvement is virtually guaranteed.

U.S. special envoy Marc Grossman has been engaging in shuttle diplomacy in Qatar, where the Taliban have a political office, as well as in Islamabad, Berlin, and Kabul to try to stitch together a post-2014 settlement, but he has not been able to claim any breakthroughs. The State Department and the intelligence community are acutely aware that without an agreement the situation in Afghanistan will eventually degrade into a major strategic defeat. The best current estimate by the CIA suggests that the wind-down by NATO forces over the next two years would produce an Afghanistan that is one-third controlled by the Taliban when the last foreign soldiers depart, with a gradual erosion of remaining support for the government in Kabul and eventual regime change. The Taliban too are having problems with falling morale and rising casualties, but they are able to exploit their safe havens in Pakistan to keep the government and NATO forces off balance. They are also

boasting that they withstood the highly publicized U.S. surge of last year. The Taliban see themselves as winning the conflict and are reluctant to renew negotiations except as a ploy to buy time.

There have been continued secret talks in Germany seeking possible re-engagement through defining minimum conditions for the four parties involved—the U.S., Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Taliban. The Taliban have demanded the withdrawal of all foreign soldiers from Afghanistan, while the U.S. continues to insist that no terrorist groups be allowed to use the country as a safe haven. Afghan President Hamid Karzai knows he has been dealt a weak hand and wants a political transition formula replete with guarantees, while Pakistan is pushing for the repatriation of all Afghan refugees and full control of the border between the two countries.

U.S. intelligence assessments are increasingly pessimistic about the capability of Afghan forces to resist a post-2014 Taliban *coup de main* without considerable outside assistance, and that is where the problems come in. Washington is unwilling to leave behind a large residual force to guarantee a peace settlement, and the only other player able to put boots on the ground if necessary is Pakistan, which is proving uncooperative. It is on very bad terms with both Washington and Kabul and would prefer a weak and divided Afghan regime that it could manage, though it would not like to see the disruption that a civil war would produce.