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Afghanistan considering peace plan that would increase Pakistan's role

By Jonathan S. Landay

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The Afghan government is pursuing an ambitious new peace initiative in which Pakistan would replace the United States in arranging direct talks between the warring sides and the Taliban would be granted government posts that effectively could cede to them political control of their southern and eastern strongholds.

If implemented, the plan would diminish the role of the United States in the peace process, but would still leave Washington with input on a number of critical issues, including the terms for initiating negotiations. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Great Britain also would be involved.

The plan envisions ending the war by 2015 through a ceasefire and negotiations in the second half of next year, most likely in Saudi Arabia. Pakistan would help select the leaders of the Taliban and other rebel groups who would take part in the negotiations with the Afghan government. The effort, the plan says, should be conducted "through one consistent and coherent channel," a measure that would secure a role for Afghan President Hamid Karzai after the end of his term following April 2014 elections.

Another provision would give the insurgents a voice on "issues related . . . to the withdrawal" of the U.S.-led NATO force by the end of 2014.

The plan foresees the United States working with Kabul and Islamabad in determining which insurgent leaders would participate. The United States also would be critical to approving the removal of the insurgent negotiators from the U.N.'s list of terrorists.

Entitled "Peace Process Roadmap to 2015," the blueprint represents a decision by Karzai – in close coordination with Pakistan – to assume the lead in peace-making efforts following the collapse earlier this year of an Obama administration bid to persuade the Taliban to participate in direct talks with Kabul.

The new initiative comes amid persistent distrust between Karzai and the Obama administration and deep insecurity in Kabul over future U.S. support. Those concerns and the U.S. failure to arrange peace talks appear to have pushed Karzai closer to Pakistan, whose army and main intelligence service are widely believed to exercise significant influence over Taliban and other militant leaders based in Pakistan's border areas with Afghanistan.

The plan also comes as the ongoing U.S. combat troop pullout and cuts in U.S. financial aid to Afghanistan are fueling fears in both countries that violence and instability could worsen, spurring them to take matters into their own hands.

The blueprint, a copy of which was obtained by McClatchy, officially is the work of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, which is charged with overseeing government peace efforts. But it was drafted by Karzai and his inner circle over the past six months in coordination with Pakistan, according to a person familiar with the document who requested anonymity because of the matter's sensitivity.

The plan was presented to Pakistan and the United States during visits last month by High Peace Council Chairman Salauddin Rabbani, who Karzai named to the post after Rabbani's father, former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, was assassinated in May 2011.

The State Department declined to comment on the plan, refusing even to confirm its existence. However, a State Department official, who requested anonymity because of the issue's sensitivity, was authorized to say that, "The United States continues to support an Afghan-led peace process and welcomes initiatives through which Afghans sit down with other Afghans in pursuit of that goal."

The Afghan embassy did not respond to a request to discuss the plan.

"By 2015, Taliban, Hezb-e-Islami and other armed groups will have given up armed opposition, transformed from military entities into political parties, and are actively participating in the country's political and constitutional processes, including national elections," says the plan's preamble. "NATO/ISAF forces will have departed from Afghanistan, leaving the ANSF (Afghan National Security Forces) as the only legitimate armed forces delivering security and protection to the Afghan population."

Despite that optimistic forecast, however, the plan may rest on shaky legs. Its far-reaching assumptions not only could doom it to failure, but risk an all-out civil war before the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, completes its pullout.

"This is living in a dream world of wishful thinking," said Marvin Weinbaum, a Middle East Institute scholar who served as a State Department intelligence analyst on Afghanistan. "It is not based on anything that the Taliban has given us reason to expect."

A major assumption is that all insurgent leaders and their fighters will participate even though the Taliban have consistently rejected negotiations with Karzai, who they denounce as an American puppet. Moreover, the insurgency is far from being monolithic and many leaders are known to distrust each other and Pakistan.

Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar and other leaders based in Pakistan could come under pressure from the Pakistani military to take part if they balk. But such pressure could backfire, risking Afghan militants joining Pakistani Islamists fighting to topple their government.

In an incident underscoring the hurdles, two Taliban factions claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb attack on Thursday that wounded Asadullah Khalid, the chief of Afghanistan's intelligence service. Karzai on Saturday alleged that the attack was planned in Pakistan, but he denied that the Taliban were responsible.

The new plan would preserve Afghanistan as a parliamentary democracy, denying the militants the Islamic rule for which they've spent years fighting.

It also appears to ignore warnings from politicians of the former Northern Alliance against giving the Taliban and their allies power that they hadn't won in elections. The Northern Alliance, dominated by ethnic minorities, battled the Taliban, which is made up primarily of the dominant Pashtun ethnic group, until the 2001 U.S. invasion. Many former alliance members now head Karzai's political opposition and hold key army, police and intelligence posts.

"Any Afghanistan reconciliation effort will have to address varied and complex ethnic concerns," acknowledged a U.S. official, who requested anonymity in order to discuss the issue.

Finally, the key role that the plan confers on Pakistan could inflame suspicion among many Afghans that Islamabad plans to exert influence in a post-war Afghanistan – especially to block a pro-India tilt – by placing former insurgents in cabinet posts, ministries, provincial governorships and positions like police chiefs and district administrators.

"The northerners won't buy this," said Weinbaum, referring to former Northern Alliance leaders. "So what you get then is the beginning of a civil war."

Pakistan is widely despised in Afghanistan, particularly by minorities who dominate the country's north, because of its sponsorship of the Taliban's bloody nationwide takeover in the mid-1990s and the support and sanctuary that they and other insurgents allegedly still receive from the Pakistani army and the army-run Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, or ISI.

In principles governing the new peace process, the plan reiterates Afghan and U.S. demands that the Taliban and other insurgents cut ties with al Qaida and renounce violence.

But in a shift that could raise concerns among human rights and women's groups, the plan changes what had been a demand for the insurgents "accept" the Afghan Constitution to one that they "respect" it.

"Any outcome of the peace process must respect the Afghan Constitution and must not jeopardize the rights and freedoms that the citizens of Afghanistan, both men and women, enjoy under the Constitution," the plan says.

The plan comprises five steps. The first step, which now appears underway, calls for Pakistan to end cross-border shelling of Afghan villages and to free Taliban detainees. Nine were released last month after Rabbani's visit, and Pakistan has agreed to free more.

In the first half of 2013, Afghan, U.S. and Pakistani officials are to agree on terms for removing Taliban leaders "willing to engage in peace talks" from a U.N. terrorism list and giving them safe passage. Pakistan would "facilitate direct contact" between Afghan officials "and identified leaders of the Taliban and other armed opposition groups."

Afghan, Pakistani and U.S. officials would "explore and agree to terms for initiating direct peace talks" between the sides "with a focus on Saudi Arabia as the venue."

The negotiations would begin in the second half of 2013 "preferably through one consistent and coherent channel, with the aim of securing agreements on priority issues, such as ending violence, allowing space for the provision of basic public services, e.g. education, humanitarian aid, and security the conduct of the upcoming elections," the plan says.

The sides would agree to a ceasefire and terms for the release of Taliban prisoners by the government "in return for their agreement to disengage and renounce violence."

The sides also would "reach an understanding on issues related to security and the withdrawal of international forces." and agree on rules for the insurgents' participation in 2014 provincial council and 2015 parliamentary elections.

Another provision would confer considerable political power on the insurgents by allowing them to become cabinet members, provincial governors, district administrators, police chiefs and other key officials.

"The negotiating parties to agree on modalities for the inclusion of Taliban and other armed opposition leaders in the power structure of the state, to include non-elected positions at different levels with due consideration of legal and governance principles," the plan says.

That provision, combined with one for an agreement "creating immediate space for education and humanitarian and development aid and public services," could effectively cede political control of the Taliban's southern and eastern heartland to the insurgents. The agreements would

be implemented in the first half of 2014, and the final phase, set for the second half of 2014, would be used to build international cooperation on preserving the long-term stability of Afghanistan and the region, the plan says.