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## Politics in Afghanistan

Talking to the Taliban

**Stubborn field commanders and a wave of violence threaten Ashraf Ghani's attempt to woo the enemy**

July 13th 2015

FOR more than a century people have been flocking to the Pakistani hill station of Murree for relief from the sweltering summer temperatures of the plains below. It was a fitting venue for talks held last week between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which deemed it “the first meeting of formal peace negotiations”. The United Nations Security Council applauded it as a milestone and Pakistan is claiming the credit.

Lately Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's president, has been taking heat at home for having treated Pakistan too warmly. He had calculated correctly that having Pakistan's all-powerful army on side it would use its influence with the Taliban to broker peace talks—and perhaps even a ceasefire. Most Afghans, however, are in no mood to be neighbourly. Pakistan is widely loathed for aiding and abetting the Taliban, who are currently engaged in an especially bloody fighting season. (Afghanistan's latest national hero is a policeman who boasts of having killed no fewer than six “slaves of Pakistan” on June 22nd, during an assault the Taliban had launched against the parliament in Kabul.)

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Mr Ghani has been trying to moderate Afghanistan's traditional habit of blaming Pakistan for

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every terrorist outrage. To that end he has made a series of once-unthinkable concessions, and it has cost him dearly. When he struck an intelligence-sharing deal with Pakistan's reviled military spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI), it sparked particular outrage within Afghanistan's security establishment.

With little to show for his tilting, Mr Ghani has hardened his tone in recent weeks. In May he wrote a stiff letter to the Pakistanis demanding the arrest of Taliban leaders living in their territory. On June 2nd both countries hauled each other's ambassadors onto their respective carpets. That sort of scene was more familiar during the time of Mr Ghani's Pakistan-bashing predecessor, Hamid Karzai. Mr Karzai meantime has been busily setting himself up as the true defender of Afghan national sovereignty. Many in Kabul suspect he is positioning himself for another run at the presidency.

So the talks in Murree came in the nick of time for Mr Ghani. Little is known about the content of the discussion, but what few details have emerged suggest it was significant. The exchange of "views on ways and means to bring peace and reconciliation" began with a sunset iftar at which both sides broke the day's Ramadan fast. It did not end until the sehri meal, just before the next day's sunrise. Pakistani officials insist the Taliban present were "mandated" by their leadership, in contrast to meetings held in the Chinese city of Urumqi in May; a spokesman for the Taliban had dismissed those as being unauthorised. There had also been a meeting in Qatar in May, but the Taliban had insisted that remain a "track-two" affair, with no government representatives involved. They always refused face-to-face meetings with the government on the grounds that it was a puppet regime; they said they would only talk to its American paymasters. The discussions in Murree included Afghanistan's deputy foreign minister, Hekmat Karzai, a nephew of former president.

Chinese and American diplomats were also involved in the Murree meeting, highlighting the powerful international consensus over the need for a political deal to end the long war in Afghanistan. China has feared it could expand and influence the Muslim population in its western region of Xinjiang. Over the weekend the Chinese state press echoed the UN's celebration of these talks, awarding them the distinction of being the first direct contact between the two sides.

The Taliban are increasingly torn. Their field commanders, encouraged by the prospect of the American forces' complete withdrawal by the end of 2016, are not as open to negotiating as some of the movement's leaders living in Pakistan. Disheartened fighters are defecting to a local offshoot of Islamic State (IS), which is picking up support in eastern Afghanistan. IS has even won the backing of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a warlord infamous from the jihad of the 1980s and 90s who has been harrying the government in Kabul for the past 14 years, often in league with the Taliban.

Pakistani and Afghan officials say there will be further meetings after Ramadan has ended. Their talks could drive further defections from the Taliban. Even if they make real progress, further splintering would in effect open a new front. And the balance of opinion within the highest ranks of the Taliban remains mysterious. A Western official in Kabul noted that the delegates in Murree were all firmly linked to Pakistan's spy agency, the ISI. That implies that the Taliban's negotiators are not a representative group; many of their comrades are deeply resentful of

Pakistan's pushy generals. Murree may be cool, but Afghanistan's civil war is sure to stay hot through the summer.