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The Nation

Karzai Seeks Deal with Taliban

Robert Dreyfuss

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When President Karzai of Afghanistan arrives in Washington next Wednesday, will President Obama applaud Karzai's efforts to negotiate a peace settlement with the Taliban, or will he tell the Afghanistan president to sit down, shut up, and remember that he's supposed to behave like a U.S.-installed puppet?

Lately, Karzai has been decidedly un-puppetlike. After meeting Obama at the end of March in Kabul, Karzai unleashed a series of angry, frustrated outbursts that included his only-partly-in-jest threat to join the Taliban. He also accused Washington of trying to undermine his efforts to negotiate with the Taliban. And he's scheduled a jirga, or council, for later this month to unite Afghan society – tribes, clerics, warlords – in support of a political approach to the Taliban leadership.

The United States is not amused. American policy is, as I wrote in an article for *Rolling Stone*, to shoot first and ask questions later, i.e., to deal the Taliban a series of punishing blows in the hope that Mullah Mohammed Omar, or at least some leaders of the Taliban, will come to the bargaining table. On this, I'm with Karzai: it's time to talk to the Taliban now, not later.

Usefully enough, in today's *New York Times* there's an important story that draws on leaks from the ongoing "interrogation" of Mullah Baradur [1], the Taliban's No. 2 official, who was seized by Pakistan's ISI and the CIA last January. (What the *Times* account leaves out is that Baradur was deeply involved in talks with Karzai and with United Nations officials about a peace deal,

and he may have even planned to attend Karzai's jirga. By arresting him, Pakistan undermined that negotiation, and the ISI made it clear that if there is any deal to be had in Afghanistan, it – the ISI – wants to be in charge.)

According to the *Times*, Baradur is providing the United States with a “nuanced understanding of the strategy that the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, is developing for negotiations with the government of President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan.”

Pakistan, adds the *Times*, has “tried to turn his arrest to their advantage and are poised to use him as a chip in bargaining between the Afghan government and the Taliban and, conceivably, even as a negotiator.”

And this:

“The Taliban would be ready to negotiate but under our own conditions,” a member of the Afghan Taliban's supreme command said in an interview. “To assume that they would hold the Taliban leadership hostage because of Mullah Baradar's arrest is not something that would cross our mind.”

On Monday, the *Washington Post* carried a story that said that Karzai's chief objective during his Washington visit is to get American support for talks [2]with the Taliban:

Karzai's advisers say one of his main goals for the May 12 meeting is winning President Obama's support for negotiating with insurgent leaders, and for a Kabul peace conference that has been delayed until after the visit. ... After months of delay, Karzai's government has clarified its position, sketching out a two-track plan: pursuing political accommodation with insurgent leaders, while at the same time enticing foot soldiers with jobs and foreign-funded development projects.

What's important here is that the United States, so far at least, has expressed no interest in the first of Karzai's tracks, that is, “accommodation with insurgent leaders.” In fact, top Obama administration officials have sharply criticized that idea. Instead they favor only the second track, making one-by-one deal with Taliban foot soldiers.

In diplomatic circles and in the U.S. military, the first track is called “reconciliation.” The second track is called “reintegration.” They are not the same thing. Certainly, they can be run in parallel. But there's precious little indication that the White House has any interest in reconciliation – quite the opposite. And that's despite the fact that, as the *Times* notes, the Taliban – and Mullah Baradur – seem open to the idea of a deal.

Of course, for the United States the problem is that the Taliban conditions its deal on the idea of a U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. Some leaders of the Afghan insurgency have said explicitly that President Obama's July 2011 timetable for drawing down U.S. forces in Afghanistan can serve as a starting point for negotiations. That was the point made in March, when a delegation from Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Islamic Party traveled to Kabul for peace talks with Karzai and the UN.

By all indications, the United States is pressuring Karzai to slow down the first track, reconciliation, and speed up the second track, reintegration. Because Karzai is so heavily dependent on U.S. military and economic support, it's hard for him to resist. But, because Karzai is an Afghan politician, who has to appeal to a population that is sick and tired of war, he'll be reluctant to abandon the idea of peace talks.

Negotiating a deal is fraught with difficulty, for lots of reasons. The Taliban are nasty individuals, and they'd dearly love to roll their forces into Kabul and reinstall their religious-fascist regime, if they can. In addition, the Taliban is not exactly a neatly disciplined force: there are factions within factions, and in fact most experts say that there are many "Talibans," so it's hard to imagine that talking to the Taliban involves one-stop shopping. Plus, many Afghans – including the old, anti-Taliban Northern Alliance – hate the Taliban with a passion and may resist a deal. Still, wars end with deals, and it looks like Karzai understands that. Does Obama?