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Washington ready to negotiate with Mullah Omar

By Dean Nelson

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Washington is ready to negotiate with Taliban leader Mullah Omar and now regards his involvement as crucial to the prospects for peace in Afghanistan, Hillary Clinton has said.

Her comments been taken as a significant shift in American policy from moves to divide the Taliban-led insurgency and isolate Mullah Omar, the man who sheltered Osama bin Laden as he plotted the September 11 attacks, to an acknowledgement of his leadership.

It follows the disclosure earlier this month that American officials had met leaders of the Haqqani Network, the powerful Taliban faction blamed for some of the most devastating attacks on American and Nato forces in Afghanistan, including last month's attack on the US embassy in Kabul in which seven were killed and 19 wounded.

Earlier this week the faction's commander Sirajuddin Haqqani warned Washington that only the Quetta Shura, led by Mullah Omar, could negotiate a peace deal and that his fighters would not be divided from its leadership.

In an appearance before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Mrs. Clinton said the United States would continue to "fight, talk and build" in Afghanistan and Pakistan to "test whether these organisations have any willingness to negotiate in good faith".

She said there was "evidence going both ways" on its intentions, citing the Haqqani Network's response to a Pakistan-brokered meeting in August between US officials and Ibrahim Haqqani, the brother of the group's top leader Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Doubts were raised too over the Taliban leadership's intentions following the assassination last month of former Afghan President Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, by a suicide bomber sent to Kabul with a "message of peace" from the Quetta Shura.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said his government would hold no further talks with the Taliban unless Pakistan, which it regards as its patron, acts as guarantor.

Mrs Clinton said the Haqqani meeting not a "negotiation" and that no subsequent meetings have followed it, but stressed any future negotiations with the Taliban would need the Quetta Shura's blessing.

"The negotiations that would be part of any Afghan-led peace process would have to include the Quetta Shura and would have to include some recognition by the Quetta Shura which, based on everything we know, is still led by Mullah Omar, that they wish to participate in such a process ... We are pursuing every thread of any kind of interest expressed," she said.

Her change of tone follows earlier exploratory talks with a senior aide to Mullah Omar in Qatar and German earlier this year and appears to have been influenced by her visit to Pakistan last week, where she met army chief General Kiyani and President Asif Zardari. Sources close to the Pakistan military said General Kiyani warned her that "if this game is to end in success for the United States, they have to take these people [the Taliban] on board."

Afghanistan and Pakistan analyst Arif Rafiq said Mrs Clinton's comments marked a significant change. "Hillary Clinton's public statements prior to the recent Pakistan visit noted a desire to split Quetta Shura elements from Mullah Omar. I think they [now] recognise that though talks have yet to yield tangible dividends, attempts to split the Taliban have failed," he said.