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## Secret US, Taliban talks at pivot point

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After 10 months of secret dialogue with Afghanistan's Taliban insurgents, senior US officials said the talks have reached a critical juncture, an international news agency said.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the US officials told Reuters they will soon know whether a breakthrough is possible, leading to peace talks whose ultimate goal is to end the Afghan war.

As part of the accelerating, high-stakes diplomacy, the United States is considering the transfer of an unspecified number of Taliban prisoners from the Guantanamo Bay military prison into Afghan government custody.

It has asked representatives of the Taliban to match that confidence-building measure with some of their own. Those could include a denunciation of international terrorism and a public willingness to enter formal political talks with the government headed by Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

The officials acknowledged that the [Afghanistan](#) diplomacy, which has reached a delicate stage in recent weeks, remains a long shot. Among the complications: US troops are drawing down and will be mostly gone by the end of 2014, potentially reducing the incentive for the Taliban to negotiate.

Still, the senior officials, all of whom insisted on anonymity to share new details of the mostly secret effort, suggested it has been a much larger piece of President Barack Obama's Afghanistan policy than is publicly known.

US officials have held about half a dozen meetings with their insurgent contacts, mostly in [Germany](#) and Doha with representatives of Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban's Quetta *Shura*, the officials said.

The stakes in the diplomatic effort could not be higher.

Failure would likely condemn Afghanistan to continued conflict, perhaps even civil war, after *NATO* troops finish turning security over to Karzai's weak government by the end of 2014. Success would mean a political end to the war and the possibility that parts of the Taliban - some hardliners seem likely to reject the talks - could be reconciled.

The effort is now at a pivot point.

"We imagine that we're on the edge of passing into the next phase. Which is actually deciding that we've got a viable channel and being in a position to deliver" on mutual confidence-building measures, said a senior US official.

There are slightly fewer than 20 Afghan citizens at Guantanamo, according to various accountings. It is not known which ones might be transferred, nor what assurances the White House has that the Karzai government would keep them in its custody.

Guantanamo detainees have been released to foreign governments - and sometimes set free by them - before. But the transfer as part of a diplomatic negotiation appears unprecedented.

The reconciliation effort, which has already faced setbacks including a supposed Taliban envoy who turned out to be an imposter, faces hurdles on multiple fronts, the US officials acknowledged.

They include splits within the Taliban; suspicion from Karzai and his advisers; and Pakistan's insistence on playing a major, even dominating, role in Afghanistan's future.

Obama will likely face criticism, including from Republican presidential candidates, for dealing with an insurgent group that has killed US soldiers and advocates a strict Islamic form of government.

But US officials say that the Afghan war, like others before it, will ultimately end in a negotiated settlement.

"The challenges are enormous," a second senior US official acknowledged. "But if you're where we are ... you can't not try. You have to find out what's out there."

If the effort advances, one of the next steps would be more public, unequivocal US support for establishing a Taliban office outside of Afghanistan.

US officials said they have told the Taliban they must not use that office for fundraising, propaganda or constructing a shadow government, but only to facilitate future negotiations that could eventually set the stage for the Taliban to reenter Afghan governance.

On Sunday, a senior member of Afghanistan's *High Peace Council* said the Taliban had indicated it was willing to open an office in an Islamic country.

But underscoring the fragile nature of the multi-sided diplomacy, Karzai last week announced he was recalling Afghanistan's ambassador to Qatar, after reports that nation was readying the opening of the Taliban office. Afghan officials complained they were left out of the loop.

On a possible transfer of Taliban prisoners long held at Guantanamo, US officials stressed the move would be a 'national decision' made in consultation with the US Congress.

Obama is expected to soon sign into law the 2011 defense authorization bill, including changes that would broaden the military's power over terror detainees and require the Pentagon to certify in most cases that certain security conditions will be met before Guantanamo prisoners can be sent home.

Ten years after the repressive Taliban government was toppled, a hoped-for political resolution has become central to US strategy to end a war that has killed nearly 3,000 foreign troops and cost the Pentagon alone \$330 billion.

Bold attacks from the Taliban-affiliated *Haqqani network* have undermined the narrative of improving security and raised questions about how well an inexperienced Afghan military will be able to cope when foreign troops go home.

In that uncertain context, officials say that initial contacts with insurgent representatives since US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly embraced a diplomatic strategy in a February 18, 2011, speech have centered on establishing whether the Taliban was open to reconciliation, despite its pledge to continue its 'sacred *jihād*' against NATO and U.S. soldiers.

"The question has been to the Taliban, 'You have got a choice to make. Life's moving on,' the second US official said. "There's a substantial military campaign out there that will continue to do you substantial damage ... Are you prepared to go forward with some kind of reconciliation process?"

US officials have met with Tayeb Agha, who was a secretary to Mullah Omar, and they have held one meeting arranged by Pakistan with Ibrahim Haqqani, a brother of the Haqqani network's founder. They have not shut the door to further meetings with the Haqqani group, which is blamed for a brazen attack this fall on the US embassy in Kabul and which US officials link closely to Pakistan's intelligence agency.

US officials say they have kept Karzai informed of the process and have met with him before and after each encounter, but they declined to confirm whether representatives of his government are present at those meetings.

Officials now see themselves on the verge of reaching a second phase in the peace process that, if successful, would clinch the confidence-building measures and allow them to move to a third stage in which the Afghan government and the Taliban would sit down in talks facilitated by the United States.

"That's why it's especially delicate -- because if we don't deliver the second phase, we don't get to the pay-dirt," the first senior US official said.

Senior administration officials say that confidence-building measures must be implemented, not merely agreed to, before full-fledged political talks can begin. The sequence of such measures has not been determined, and they will ultimately be announced by Afghans, they say.

Underlying the efforts of US negotiators are fundamental questions about whether - and why - the Taliban would want to strike a deal with the Western-backed Karzai government.

US officials stress that the 'end conditions' they want the Taliban to embrace - renouncing violence, breaking with al Qaeda, and respecting the Afghan constitution - are not preconditions to starting talks.

Encouraging trends on the Afghan battlefield - declining militant attacks and a thinning of the Taliban's mid-level leadership - are one reason why U.S. officials believe the Taliban may be more likely now to engage in substantive talks.

They also cite what they see as an overlooked, subtle shift in the Taliban's position, based in part on statements this year from Mullah Omar that, despite fiery rhetoric, indicate some openness to talks. They also condemn civilian deaths and advocate development of Afghanistan's economy.

In July, the Taliban reiterated its long-standing position of rejecting talks as long as foreign troops remain. In October, a senior Haqqani commander said the United States was insincere about peace.

But US officials say the Taliban no longer wants to be the global pariah it was in the 1990s. Some elements have suggested flexibility on issues of priority for the West, such as protecting rights for women and girls.

"That's one of the reasons why we think this is serious," a third senior US official said.

Karzai has been more ambivalent, ruling out an early resumption in talks. He said Afghanistan would talk only to Pakistan 'until we have an address for the Taliban.'

The dust-up over the unofficial Taliban office in Qatar, with a spokesman for Karzai stressing that Afghanistan must lead peace negotiations to end the war, suggests tensions in the US and Afghan approaches to the peace process.

Speaking in an interview with CNN aired on Sunday, Karzai counseled caution in making sure that Taliban interlocutors are authentic -- and authentically seeking peace. The Rabbani killing, he said, "brought us in a shock to the recognition that we were actually talking to nobody."

NATO commanders promise they will keep up pressure on militants as the troop force shrinks, they are facing a tenacious insurgency in eastern Afghanistan that may prove even more challenging than the south.

"Wars end, and the end of wars have political consequences," the second official said. "You can either try to shape those, or someone does it to you."