

Negotiation inevitable in Afghanistan

BY ERNIE REGEHR

It's now the conventional wisdom that all options in Afghanistan have become bad options. But one that still earns only occasional and sometimes grudging mention – negotiation – is different from the others in one important sense. It's inevitable.

In his frank assessment of the Afghan security assistance mission, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the new U.S. commander in Afghanistan, doesn't just call for troop reinforcements - he also raises the prospect of ending the war through political settlement with insurgents. It's the briefest of references, and he certainly doesn't say it's inevitable, but he does imply that it is likely: "Insurgencies of this nature typically conclude through military operations and political efforts driving some degree of host-nation reconciliation with elements of the insurgency. In the Afghan conflict, reconciliation may involve (government of Afghanistan)-led, high-level political settlements."

A "high-level political settlement" was supposed to have been negotiated in Bonn in late 2001 and was to be the foundation on which the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was mounted in 2002. The escalating war that has ensued is not a consequence of some parties to that agreement defecting from it. Rather, it is a consequence of key stakeholders never having been included in it.

Michael Semple, the European Union's special representative in Afghanistan in 2004-2007, puts it this way in his new report for the United States Institute of Peace: "It is now widely understood that the Bonn Accords did not constitute a peace agreement. They needed to be supplemented by a strategic pursuit of reconciliation in order to bring all Afghan parties to the conflict into the peaceful political process."

That "strategic pursuit of reconciliation" has not happened. After the overthrow of the Taliban government, the Bonn process, confirmed through two *loya jirgas*, that extraordinary and enduring Afghan institution for national consensus building, a new institutional and governance framework. Ahmed Rashid, the noted Pakistani journalist, describes Afghanistan's constitution, approved in 2003 at the second *loya jirga*, as "one of the most modern and democratic in the Muslim world."

Despite that, Afghanistan's growing insecurity is brutal testimony to the failure of the post-Bonn political/legal order to win the sustained loyalty of the Afghan population. The current election process has, so far at least, only added to that failure.

The international community's prevailing response has been to pointedly reject any new round of political/diplomatic efforts to rebuild a basic national consensus behind its public institutions. Instead, the focus has been on militarily defeating those outside the consensus. But, as McChrystal confirms with considerable force, military action has obviously not defeated the opposition nor has it delivered the expected modicum of security.

William R. Polk, a prominent American academic and advisor to Democratic presidents, has written an open letter to President Barack Obama noting that when foreign forces exit a counterinsurgency war, "almost always, those who fought hardest against the foreigner take over when he leaves." The longer the effort to defeat an entrenched insurgency by sheer force, even when force is supplemented by enlightened hearts-and-minds counterinsurgency tactics, the more difficult it is to find a moderate middle ground.

There have been important instances of the tactical pursuit of reconciliation in Afghanistan, but they are more properly described as co-option efforts – essentially attempts to entice moderate Taliban to switch sides. Such efforts are designed to bring advantage to the basic military effort, not to replace it. And those efforts at strategic, or what McChrystal calls high-level, reconciliation that have been tried, like those hosted by the Saudis, have not enjoyed the committed support, political and material, of the international community.

Negotiations will nevertheless come, because that is how the vast majority of insurgencies end. And the basic objectives of those negotiations will necessarily have to remain modest; a ceasefire in the fight for control of the central institutions of the state, followed by agreement on power-sharing arrangements and processes capable of mediating, without resort to violence, the myriad of political conflicts that are endemic to Afghanistan, indeed to all contemporary states.

The objective that is neither practical nor moral is the aim of simply transferring all the fighting duties from international forces to Afghans – in effect converting our long war into their endless war.

All the major contenders in the Afghanistan conflict now face the hurting stalemate of a war which they know they will not win and that they increasingly cannot afford – politically or financially. As that reality sinks in, Churchill's jaw-jaw will start to look a lot better than war-war. In anticipation of that realization, a high-level diplomatic phase, or what the British writer on the Middle East, Patrick Seale, proposes as "a dose of political shock therapy," needs to be launched.

Calling for “a bold attempt at a political settlement,” Seale envisions the U.S. facilitating a contact group of states which would summon a new loya jirga in which all sides of the Afghan conflict would be represented. This loya jirga would pursue an immediate ceasefire, he says, followed by negotiations toward a broader settlement and a decentralized form of government suited to Afghanistan’s regional and ethnic diversity. It would be challenged to forge credible regional security arrangements, to promote inter-communal reconciliation and power sharing at the national level, to set clear standards for basic rights, to facilitate ongoing support for peace-building efforts at the local level.

It’s obviously a daunting agenda, but it needs to be understood as a questions of when, not if, it will be addressed.

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