Talking to the Taliban

There was worldwide relief when, six years ago, in the wake of the Al Qaeda attacks on America, western-backed forces dislodged the Taliban from government in Afghanistan. Now, with NATO severely stretched against the insurgents, it might be sound strategy to think the unthinkable. But is it really time to talk to the Taliban?

*Impetus for Engagement*

The recent attacks have not been completely conclusive of either Kerry’s or Karzai’s position. While Afghanistan is busy, the future of the country itself is uncertain. The situation is complex, and a thoughtful dialogue could be the best way to find a solution.
STABILITY IN AFGHANISTAN WILL NOT COME FROM DEALING WITH THE TALIBAN, BUT RATHER FROM CONCERTED PRESSURE ON PAKISTAN.

Of course, the gaps between Karzai and the non-Taliban remain large, especially over the presence of international forces in Afghanistan. There may be some key actors in Washington for whom any engagement with the Taliban or Hezb-i-Islami would be profoundly disconcerting. Furthermore, dealing with the Taliban has rightly been compared to grasping smoke, and realistically, there is little prospect that any meaningful deal could be struck.

But that said, even the public discussion of negotiation and engagement that has occurred so far is likely to complicate, potentially quite severely, the tasks of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and the Provincial Reconstruction Teams deployed in different parts of the country. At worst, it could allow direct attacks on Western forces, but it may also affect their functioning in a more insidious fashion.

To perform effectively, these units depend heavily on securing cooperation from locals. But why would such locals, especially those sitting on the fence, want to be active partners for the international community if they feel that the abandonment of Afghanistan's experiment with democracy is in the offing and could leave them even more exposed to Taliban intimidation?

As a higher level, negotiations with the non-Taliban are seen by many Afghans as opening the gates to a Tajik-ruled, Afghan-dominated state, while key political and resistance leaders who opposed the Taliban before 2001, and then agreed to relinquish their weapons, would likely move to re-arm themselves as quickly as possible, fearing a backlash by return of the hard-line core of the very forces that they for years stood almost alone in opposing. There is little doubt that they would find regional allies in Russia, Iran and Pakistan to assist their rearmament, and the scene would then be set for a truly disastrous outcome: the possible rekindling of large-scale conflict in many parts of Afghanistan.

Stability in Afghanistan will not come from dealing with the Taliban, but rather from concerted pressure on Pakistan – perhaps targeting the business activities in which Pakistan's military is increasingly entangled – to shut down Taliban operations as required by UN Security Council Resolution 1386 of December 2001. Such pressure has not so far been forthcoming. Washington fears total regime collapse in Pakistan, and circles in London see an ongoing need for effective police cooperation to deal with threats from radicalized Muslims in the British Midlands.

Nonetheless, such pressure can work, as long as it is applied in a careful, consistent and systematic fashion. Without this pressure, the long-term outlook for the region is grim: the Pakistani state is at grave risk of progressive Talibanization, all the more likely if Taliban are recklessly treated as sitting candidates to be welcomed to the corridors of power. Should this occur, we may all wonder what the idea of dealing with the Taliban was all about.