Afghanistan: Searching for Political Agreement

Executive Summary

THE PAPER IN A NUTSHELL

• Despite the best efforts of the coalition, military force has so far failed to decisively defeat the Taliban. Military operations in Marjah and Kandahar are equally unlikely to alter the course of the war. With the political and security situation in Afghanistan continuing to deteriorate, the coalition today faces the risk of an endless engagement accompanied by an intolerable loss of life and unsustainable cost. The best hope for stability would be to negotiate a broad agreement with the Taliban leadership to form a national unity government, with guarantees against radical groups returning to Afghanistan. The opening of negotiations hardly guarantees results, but once a power-sharing agreement is in place, the situation in Afghanistan should begin to stabilize.

VITAL STATISTICS

• The transfer of responsibilities to Afghan forces is currently set to begin in 2011 and be largely complete by 2014. The aim is to build an Afghan army of 240,000 and a police force of 160,000 within five years. However, this goal is unrealistic due to Afghanistan’s weak institutions and unpopular government. Transferring security responsibilities to the Afghan state will likely not be possible in the foreseeable future.

• Meanwhile, the Taliban is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. The current number of insurgent fighters exceeds 30,000 and there are millions of young, rural Pashtuns in the pool of potential recruits.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY MAKERS

• Set appropriate preconditions for talks: A cease-fire during negotiations, which could last for months, would encourage contacts at the local level between Taliban commanders and local authorities, strengthening the chances of an agreement and deescalating the level of violence.

• Invite the right players to participate: The selection of participants will largely determine the success of the negotiations. Initial negotiations ought to include only the essential actors: the Karzai government, Pakistan, the Taliban, and the United States (representing the coalition).

• Support a power-sharing agreement: This quartet should negotiate an agreement that includes a new political contract between the Taliban and other Afghan political forces. To achieve a lasting peace, the agreement should emphasize a power-sharing arrangement, rather than the regional division of Afghanistan.

• Insist on firm guarantees against the return of al-Qaeda: A political agreement with the Taliban is meaningless for the coalition without guarantees that al-Qaeda and other radical groups will not return to Afghanistan. The coalition must seek to obtain—preferably with UN approval—the right to strike non-Afghan groups operating from Afghanistan, thereby establishing a legal base for future counterterrorism operations.

• Withdraw support for militias: The United States should immediately end the practice of privatizing security in Afghanistan—whether through militias, deals with individual tribes, or private companies. Once constituted, these armed groups are extremely difficult to control and their presence undermines Afghanistan’s already fragile institutions.

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