

Taliban: separate strands (Afghanistan and Pakistan)

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FOR those in favour of talking to the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), there are few debating points more useful than the fact that the US and its allies support exactly such a strategy in Afghanistan.

But while the argument sounds persuasive, it's wrong.

Wrong, because the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban may share a name but they are very different beasts. And they have given out very different signals about what they are prepared to concede in any negotiation.

We know this because for the last few years senior representatives of the Afghan Taliban in the Gulf charged by the movement's political commission to conduct back channel talks have told foreign diplomats some quite surprising things.

Contrary to the bravado of the Taliban's public propaganda, they say they know that an outright military victory is impossible and compromise essential. We are told they are desperate not to be responsible for triggering a renewed civil war.

For the most part these conversations have been confidential. But in 2012 they outlined their thinking to some academics, including Anatol Lieven and Michael Semple. According to their report, the Taliban officials said the movement has made peace with democracy and is prepared to renounce Al Qaeda and prevent its return to Afghanistan.

The most amazing concession for a movement supposedly waging jihad against foreign occupation is their willingness to accept the long-term presence of US military bases, which they recognise will be necessary to help sustain the Afghan National Army.

Many Pakistanis falsely interpret US enthusiasm for talks as a sign of a desperate search for a face-saving exit from the region.

Actually the US is exploring what looks like the makings of an acceptable deal. If they can pull it off then post-2014 Afghanistan will be a far less difficult and expensive problem to manage.

But if nothing comes of it, Plan B is already being put into effect: a foreign-financed Afghan security force strong enough to hold the Taliban-led insurgencies at bay.

Despite the encouraging words from the Taliban's interlocutors in the Gulf, the West is not putting all of its chips on a negotiated settlement in the near term.

That's sensible because this side of 2014 it is going to be very difficult for Taliban pragmatists to persuade fighters on the ground that the time has come to compromise on cherished goals. Unlike

their leadership, most foot soldiers are convinced they are on the cusp of victory, largely because they have come to believe the movement's own propaganda.

All of this starkly contrasts with the situation in Pakistan where PTI chairman Imran Khan has loudly signalled the political class's desperation by repeatedly saying there is "no other option" except talks. Professing such weakness immediately undermines Pakistan's negotiating position.

While agreement on a Doha political office came about after years of debate in Kabul and Western capitals, the idea for a TTP office in Pakistan has been described by one senior PTI figure as simply Khan "thinking out loud".

And is there anyone that can truly speak for the TTP, a group made up of a bewildering multitude of groups? The Afghan Taliban are not completely solid either — they are the leading partners in a coalition which includes the Haqqani Network and Hizb-i-Islami. But it is nothing like the constellation of jihadi groups in Pakistan.

A single man, Mullah Omar, continues to exert strong control over the Afghan movement. The Lieven report argues that his support could be enough to make a deal stick.

There are many other differences. Islamabad's pleas for talks are met with appalling acts of savagery and no one knows who exactly is responsible. At least the Afghan Taliban officially claim not to target civilians (even though they do).

Unlike the Quetta Shura, there is no indication that the TTP, or any other of the terror grouplets attacking Pakistan, has any serious political thinkers among its ranks who accept the futility of continued fighting.

Kabul and its foreign partners have also been clear and consistent about what is expected of the Taliban if there is to be a deal. In particular, they insist the constitution has to be respected.

By contrast Pakistani leaders have been all over the shop.

The final statement of the all-party conference said nothing of red lines or preconditions. Political leaders only asserted the primacy of the country's Constitution after a torrent of media criticism triggered by the killing of senior army officers and the bombing of All Saints Church.

Strong narratives matter. In the 1980s Britain's security services may have been in secret contact with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), but publicly the prime minister was adamant she would never talk to terrorists.

That the British government did finally open formal talks is another point often made by those in favour of something similar in Pakistan. But the differences between the two conflicts are more striking than the similarities.

Before talks began pragmatists within the IRA had to realise they were in a stalemate and then persuade enough of their comrades that they could never win the armed conflict.

Stalemates, as peace building experts argue, are ripe conditions for negotiations.

It's a truism that nearly all insurgencies end in talks, including the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s, which is regarded as a textbook example of how counterinsurgency should be done. But the timing and conditions have to be right. They can't be wished into being by desperate politicians.

Most of the time creating the right conditions for talks requires long and expensive military struggles. According to a 2008 study the average length of a successful post-1945 counter-insurgency campaign is 14 years.

There is a flicker of hope that Afghanistan might be approaching the right conditions for a peaceful outcome. But Pakistan is not Afghanistan, and the TTP is not the Afghan Taliban.

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