

Afghanistan: no holds barred. If sustainable peace is to be achieved, negotiations must be open to all.

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About the research

The withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan is set for December 2014. The legacy of the most recent intervention in that country is yet to be determined and may not be clear until many years from now. However, the nature of negotiations during this final year of armed security assistance and in subsequent years will dictate the likelihood of a sustainable peace being achieved. Yet opposition to such negotiations stemming from a misunderstanding of the negotiating parties threatens to curtail such possibilities.

In this study an analysis has been undertaken of the factors which encourage fruitful negotiations, namely: timing; engaging spoilers*; choosing the right people to negotiate with; and working in partnership with civil society organisations. The conclusion drawn is that policy makers should engage in genuine talks with the relevant stakeholders on Afghanistan's political stage, even if those organisations have been labelled as 'terrorist' (chief amongst these being the Taliban).

This research focuses on the nature of negotiations needed to bring about sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

* Groups and tactics that actively seek to hinder, delay, or undermine a conflict settlement through a variety of means and for a variety of motives.

Policy implications

- It is possible to reduce violence in Afghanistan through negotiations with the Taliban and other actors. This should be pursued as a matter of urgency.
- Talks are most likely to occur when the level of short-term violence has reached a point at which both sides perceive a 'mutually hurting stalemate'*. Governments should seek negotiations with those who are not defeated but who have realised that their aims are unattainable by violent means.
- There is no such thing as a singular point in time when negotiations are likely to be successful. Negotiators should be vigilant of and exploit all possible opportunities to negotiate.
- Negotiators must be prepared to accommodate the needs of 'spoilers'. Ignoring these actors' interests and needs will not advance progress towards peace.
- Both international and local actors (in particular, civil society organisations) must be mobilised to support the talks and the objective of achieving a sustainable peace, if a truly inclusive negotiation process is to take place.

* A point at which each warring party considers it to be more advantageous to negotiate than to continue fighting.

Key findings

- Fruitful negotiations in Afghanistan are more likely when:
 - negotiating parties are not close to defeat;
 - actors can see a 'way out' of the crisis situation; and
 - actors have a credible spokesperson to legitimately represent their views.
- Some actors will start to engage later in the process. An increase in violence can denote that negotiations are succeeding, rather than failing as might be expected (violence indicates that marginalised actors perceive the nearing of a conclusion to the negotiations which they want to influence themselves; therefore, they can generally be brought to the negotiating table at this later stage while violence continues outside the talks).
- The apparent complexity of terrorist organisations can be an advantage for negotiators as it gives them numerous points of access to an organisation's representatives.
- Civil society organisations often have the legitimacy to engage diverse actors and persuade them to reduce their violence.

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Further information

The full briefing paper on which this policy brief is based is freely available: Gilberto Algar-Faria, 'Understanding the conditions necessary for fruitful negotiations in Afghanistan', Foreign Policy Centre, September 2013, available online: fpc.org.uk/fsblob/1573.pdf

This study is the second stage of a broader study on unconventional negotiations; the previous piece focussed on how to negotiate peace between the United States and North Korea. The Afghanistan study looks at the relations between individuals and organisations within a state, while the North Korea study centres on relationships between states.

For a summary of the argument for negotiations with North Korea, see: Gilberto Algar-Faria, 'Bargaining for Survival: The Rationale Behind North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Programme', algarfaria.com, 17 May 2013, available online: <http://wp.me/p3vp0t-B>

To read more on the logic by which negotiations with states such as North Korea and Iran is not only plausible but necessary, see: Gilberto Algar-Faria, 'North Korea wants peace, and it should be given peace', Foreign Policy Centre, June 2013, available online: <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/1556.pdf>

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