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Conference report

Talking while fighting: Conditions and modalities

Friday 10 – Sunday 12 December 2010 | WP 1087

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KEY POINTS AND LESSONS FOR AFGHANISTAN

During 2010, the potential role of political reconciliation in helping to end the conflict in Afghanistan became an increasingly prominent issue, and in early October of that year President Hamid Karzai opened the first meeting of the High Peace Council he established to start a dialogue with the Taliban. This conference examined the role of political reconciliation processes in ending internal conflict, assessing general lessons from seven case studies, and how those lessons might apply to the current situation in Afghanistan. The conference brought together policymakers, civilian and military practitioners, civil society representatives, and academic experts, from “host countries” that have or are still experiencing internal armed conflict as well as from the international community.

- **“Talking while fighting” is the norm during internal conflict.** The imposition of military solutions has become increasingly difficult, and talks are needed to address the political grievances that generally constitute the fundamental drivers of internal conflict. While governments in particular may often try to establish a dominant military position before engaging in a political process, launching different forms of political discussions and initiatives as early as possible can lay a critical foundation for exploiting the opportunity to engage in serious, transformational negotiations when the right conditions arise. Talks in Tajikistan, Nepal, Nagaland and elsewhere started and continued even through periods of extremely bitter fighting, as political and military initiatives have often been linked and undertaken in parallel. Secret, back channel contacts can be particularly useful during the earlier stages of political processes for enabling belligerents to gain a better understanding of each other’s positions.
- **The perception of military stalemate is not a sufficient condition by itself for a transformational political process.** Negotiations must also be seen as capable of delivering some element of the key objectives of the parties in conflict, especially given the interests that become entrenched behind continued fighting. However, a political process will not be effective if the military situation does not reinforce the perception that achieving goals through military means alone is impossible. As highlighted in Nagaland, Darfur and other conflicts, political processes should not necessarily attempt to achieve a transformational, comprehensive peace settlement if the conditions for such a settlement do not exist. They can instead create space for discussion, build trust, and broker agreements on easier issues.
- **If the conditions for official or comprehensive political negotiations do not exist, Track II processes can help generate forward momentum.** These Track II processes can include “proxy discussions” for the leadership of the parties in conflict. The Inter-Tajik Dialogue, which started when the civil war in Tajikistan was only a year old, brought together lower tier leaders from the belligerent parties who were freer to explore ideas for political reconciliation without making any commitments on behalf of the Tajik government or the insurgent factions. One year after the start of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue, an official negotiating process began. More recently in Darfur, initiatives have taken place to include in the political process there civil society groups who wield influence with rebel factions that are refusing to take part in peace negotiations.
- **The relationship between and sequencing of local political initiatives with a grand bargain at national level is an extremely complex question.** Tactical, local level reconciliation can be an important initial step in a political process, especially in a fragmented conflict environment. However, unless followed by a more sustainable national political reconciliation, these local steps will remain highly vulnerable. In Iraq, a

series of local, tactical ceasefires has been established without real reconciliation at the national level. The different groups in Iraq competing for power and resources have decided for now to give the political process a chance, but this could break down, and there needs to be real reconciliation in order to shape a stable political environment.

- **Just like military operations, political processes can generate new, and sometimes unanticipated, effects and dynamics.** The Tajik government tried to fragment the opposition through the use of political talks, but those talks ended up undermining the government's own hardliners. The start of a political process early in the Tajik civil war helped shift the stance of regional states from supporting the different belligerent parties to supporting the peace process. External mediators and experts held the firm conviction that the government of President Idriss Déby in Chad would always support the insurgency in Darfur, whose militarily strongest faction in recent years comes from the same ethnic group as Déby, but changing circumstances helped lead to a relaxation of tensions between Khartoum and N'djamena and reduced Chadian support for the Darfur rebellion.
- **Host nation stakeholders must be at the forefront of political processes even where a major international military intervention has taken place, but the involvement of external partners may also be critical.** In Iraq, Coalition forces undertook the initial military and political engagement with the Sunni Awakening movement before handing the initiative over to the Iraqi government's Follow-Up Committee for National Reconciliation, which in turn encouraged the Coalition to engage politically with Shia extremists as well as with the Sunnis. However, the negotiating process in the 1980's that shaped the terms for the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan provides a model of what not to do. Pakistan was viewed as representing the interests of the Afghan Mujahideen, who were not invited to participate in the negotiations, while the Soviet Union used the talks to provide a fig leaf for a withdrawal decision that was already taken.
- **External mediation can play a crucial role in helping to launch and assisting political processes, but there needs to be a clear, overall leader of mediation efforts.** Having a single, strong, clearly recognised lead mediator, such as took place in Tajikistan, is very important, and even more so when dealing with a complex, multi-level political process. The mediation team also needs to have a detailed understanding of the environment. Mediators in Darfur, not knowing who the key players were, brought rebel "leaders" into political talks who had very little military strength or support within Darfur, and thereby contributed to the political fragmentation of insurgent groups.
- **Bringing a sustainable end to the conflict in Afghanistan most fundamentally requires Afghan government delivery in two key areas.** Conflict drivers in Afghanistan stem to a very large extent from internal factors related to poor governance and corruption; improved Afghan government performance in this regard would significantly undermine the insurgency. While the elimination of insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan would deliver a major blow to the Taliban, it may be useful to note that India was unable to defeat the insurgency in Nagaland despite the Nagas loss of sanctuaries, training, and resupply in East Pakistan in 1971 when Bangladesh came into existence. The Afghan government also needs to begin an inclusive and transparent process to articulate a vision for stability in a highly pluralistic, multi-lingual country. The observation made during the Inter-Tajik Dialogue that "one of the main obstacles to peace is the lack of a common vision about what kind of country the Tajikstani people want their country to be" echoes strongly in Afghanistan.
- **The possibility of using the Inter-Tajik Dialogue as a model for Afghanistan should be examined.** Reflecting but not formally representing the views of the parties in conflict, informal "proxy discussions" could help give greater substance to a multi-level political process in Afghanistan in a much less threatening way for all of the internal and external stakeholders in the conflict than would be the case with formal negotiations. As occurred in Tajikistan, the mediation team could also use this type of Track II process to help explore how regional powers, and in particular Pakistan, might play a more constructive role in promoting stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan has a major

part to play in any political reconciliation process in Afghanistan, but the mistake made in the 1980's of allowing Islamabad to broker an Afghan peace agreement must not be repeated.

- **There is an urgent need to stop talking about peace in Afghanistan as an end goal and to put more emphasis on the process.** The conditions do not currently exist in Afghanistan for an official, comprehensive peace negotiation, but political contacts and discussions have been far more limited than in many other internal conflicts. Building on contacts that have been taking place between the Karzai government and Afghan insurgent groups, an invigorated multi-level political process should include all major Afghan ethnic groups, political factions, and key elements in society, as well as a more substantial role for the United States and NATO. A strong, cohesive external mediation team is vital in order to help start, manage, and coordinate this process.
- **It will be critical to find the right balance and sequencing between a very inclusive, public framework to build a common vision about Afghanistan's future, and more secret discussions.** The latter are needed to allow the belligerent parties to learn about each other's positions as well as to explore initial areas for negotiation, whether on humanitarian, security, or political issues. The international community has an important role to play in these exploratory discussions and eventual negotiations; the launching of new political initiatives should not wait until the point of withdrawal of international combat forces.

Introduction

1. 'Talking while fighting' has become the norm during internal conflict rather than an exception. This development stems from multiple causes. Most, albeit not all governments, are reluctant to use extreme levels of force against their own population, and many insurgencies have proven to be extremely resilient. International pressure, mediation, and sometimes military intervention may occur to end internal conflict due to humanitarian concerns and fear of broader regional or international consequences of continued fighting.

2. The imposition of a military solution to internal conflict has therefore become increasingly difficult. Political grievances are generally amongst the fundamental drivers of internal conflict, and require a political process for resolving them. Political objectives and demands either completely drove or played a major role in all seven case study conflicts discussed in this report.

3. The Naga insurgency in Northeast India is a secessionist movement that began in 1955 and is still not fully resolved, although a ceasefire has been in place since 1997. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal began in 1996 to overthrow the Nepalese monarchy and establish a "people's republic", drawing support from a population that as a whole suffered from poverty and inequality rooted in exclusion on the grounds of ethnicity, caste, class and gender, as well as geography. The Tajik civil war in the 1990's was a struggle for power between regionally based parties and groups who disagreed over whether the newly established state should be secular or Islamic, and authoritarian or pluralistic. Darfur has been a marginalised region within Sudan in terms of political influence, economic development, and educational opportunity, causing the start in 2003 of the rebellion there against the Khartoum government. El Salvador's civil war from 1980 to 1992 was a reaction against an authoritarian state system that monopolised political power and economic resources in the hands of small, landed elite in alliance with a powerful military. The conflict in Iraq following the US led invasion in 2003 was fundamentally a struggle between different communities for power and resources. With regard to the final conflict case study, Afghanistan in the 1980's, the Soviet invasion at the end of 1979 mobilised a mass opposition against it, but that invasion only took place due to mounting internal opposition to the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had seized power in a 1978 coup.

4. All internal conflicts are highly complex and unique. Solutions are consequently different, and there is no single path for a successful political reconciliation process to follow. Understanding the motivations, aspirations and objectives of all the parties are critical to the design of a political process. Yet, cumulative lessons from multiple conflicts can help to inform thinking about the political process in another.

Launching Political Processes while Fighting

5. Political reconciliation processes can occur at multiple levels. Official negotiations between high-level representatives of the parties in conflict are commonly referred to as a “Track I” process. “Track II” discussions can consist of a wide range of stakeholders from amongst civil society groups, religious communities, and opinion formers. Such Track II discussions, involving influential individuals and groups in society beyond “people with guns” can generate ideas for official negotiations, encourage Track I actors to engage in a political process, and help strengthen the legitimacy of any agreements that are reached in official negotiations. Sometimes a hybrid type process may take place, involving unofficial discussions between what are effectively proxies for the belligerent parties or for their senior leadership.

6. The question of when to engage in political talks is a critical question that belligerent parties confront. There can be a strong inclination, especially on the part of governments, to wait for the establishment of a dominant military position that allows negotiating from a position of strength. There are substantial potential advantages to be gained, however, from engaging as early as possible in political contacts and discussions rather than trying to establish a dominant military position before doing so. Political processes can often last many years, but major breakthroughs are possible at key moments, such as occurred during the Tajik civil war in the 1990s or in the case of the decades long Naga insurgency in Northeast India. In the absence of political interaction that can start to build trust and mutual understanding of each party’s real needs, it will be extremely difficult to exploit the conditions for a fundamental breakthrough when they do arise. In Tajikistan, a Track II political process began when the civil war was only a year old, and greatly facilitated the conduct of the subsequent Track I, official level dialogue.

7. The purpose and form of political engagement between belligerent parties can therefore vary considerably. Political engagement can focus very narrowly on humanitarian issues. It can be largely exploratory in nature to establish the identities and feel out the views of key interlocutors. Particularly at these early, exploratory stages with intense fighting continuing, it can be critical for official level contacts to take place on a secret, back channel basis in order to allow the situation to mature. With blood being shed on all sides, it is more difficult for belligerents to engage in open dialogue or negotiations before having much sense of what can be achieved from them. Maintaining the confidentiality of talks at the early stages of a political process can also help build trust, and makes it more difficult for potential spoilers opposed to any political dialogue to disrupt the evolving process. It is important as well for belligerents to carry out gestures to help demonstrate sincerity. For example, when secret talks started between the Indian government and Naga insurgents, the government released an insurgent leader as a good faith concession. Several peace processes, including those in Nagaland and El Salvador, suggest that a higher level of demonstrated sincerity towards the peace process, and greater flexibility on pre-conditions, may be required of the state party to the conflict.

8. In Nepal, all parties were engaged in various back channel contacts. G.P. Koirala, head of Nepal’s largest constitutional party, held secret talks in India with the Maoist insurgents. These talks, although not successful at first, helped to build confidence and promote interaction with the Maoists. Even King Gyanendra opened his own secret channel to the Maoists in order to ascertain whether they were willing to show any flexibility regarding the role of the monarchy. The Maoists did have some flexibility, but it was limited to the creation of a constitutional monarchy with the Nepalese army coming under civilian control.

9. The achievement of a ceasefire is a frequent goal of “talking while fighting”. It is not uncommon for belligerents to use ceasefires to consolidate gains, to regroup and to rearm rather than to make progress towards a political settlement. The first phases of ceasefires in Nagaland saw this development occur. However, as part of later ceasefires an evolution took place in political positions. The most recent ceasefire in Nagaland has now lasted thirteen years, and it is unlikely that the Naga insurgents will ever go back to the jungle; they have cashed in the “peace dividend”. Strategic patience, where possible, can produce pay-offs as protracted negotiations lead to conflict fatigue.

10. Belligerent parties also commonly use political processes to try to divide the opposing side. India in particular has tried to implement a counterinsurgency strategy that combines political cooption and compromise, military force, material inducement, and attempts to split insurgent movements. In Nagaland, India has sought to use political negotiations to win over moderates and isolate hardliners, as well as to exploit clan and tribal rivalries to split the Naga separatist movement. In 1996 the Tajik government tried to use political negotiations to split the insurgent groups, and a period of tension took place between the insurgency’s political and military leaders, with the latter worried that their interests and needs were being ignored. However, the Tajik opposition managed to address this problem, and the process of negotiations in the end helped undermine hardliners in the Tajik government.

11. A major element in India’s practice of counterinsurgency is to treat ‘reconciliation as warfare’ and defeat the insurgency at the bargaining table. Every time that India carried out a military offensive in Nagaland, it then tried to return to talks or to launch a new political initiative. Two years after the Indian army first went into Nagaland in 1958, New Delhi took a major political step in creating a Naga state within India. This integration of political and military strategy paid off in a particularly substantial way in 1962 when China defeated India in their border war. If India had only been using a military approach in Nagaland without a parallel political process, the demoralised Indian army would likely have experienced a huge problem in handling the Nagas.

12. As highlighted in Nagaland, Darfur and other conflicts, political processes should not necessarily attempt to achieve a transformational, comprehensive peace settlement. If the conditions for such a settlement do not exist, these processes can seek to create a space for political discussion, build trust, broker agreements on the easier issues, and defer the most difficult problems to a later period.

13. The most basic condition needed for a transformational political process consists of a perception by all parties that they cannot achieve their core objectives through military victory, but that they will be able to achieve some important part of them through a political process. In Iraq, both Sunni and Shia insurgents were convinced by a mixture of sticks (counter-terrorism measures), and carrots (opportunities to become “Sons of Iraq”, not to be targeted, and a broadening political space) to move beyond insurgency and to participate in the elections.

14. The surge in US forces in 2007 had a major psychological impact in reversing the perception that the Americans were defeated and on their way out. Sunni insurgents came to realise that they could not defeat the US, but that they were at risk of being slaughtered by Iranian-backed Shia militias. The surge, coupled with political outreach to the Sunni Awakening movement and military support for it, allowed the US to exploit the overreaching of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its alienation of Iraq’s Sunni population.

15. Political breakthroughs in other conflicts followed the realisation that military victory was not possible. In Tajikistan mutual exhaustion from fighting on the part of both government and insurgent groups constituted a critical element in the achievement of a political breakthrough. In Nepal, attempts to treat the Maoist insurgency as a law and order problem

through a succession of security operations all failed, and the government was not making any significant headway in containing the insurgency. A general clamour from all sides for a political solution started growing in light of the continuing violence and loss of life. In El Salvador, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) undertook its largest offensive in 1989 and succeeded in capturing considerable parts of the country as well as penetrating into the capital, San Salvador. However, this offensive did not succeed in overthrowing the government or even in triggering a general uprising against it, underscoring for the FMLN the limits of its military option. On the other hand, the FMLN's strong show of force also made it apparent that the government would not be able militarily to defeat it. The parties to the El Salvadorean civil war signed a peace agreement in January 1992.

16. Even when the conditions for a serious negotiating process are present, increased fighting can still form a common part of that process as the parties attempt to strength their bargaining position by gaining a stronger military position. Thus, in Tajikistan the start of political negotiations resulted in escalated fighting. Talks in Tajikistan, Nepal, Nagaland and elsewhere have continued even through periods of extremely bitter fighting.

17. The perception of military stalemate will not be sufficient to take forward a political process, however, unless that process is also seen to be capable of delivering some element of the key objectives of the parties in conflict, especially given the interests that may have become entrenched behind continued fighting. In the absence of tangible political results that appear within reach, hardliners amongst the belligerent parties will be encouraged in efforts to undermine the evolving process, and a political agreement needs to be acceptable not only to the belligerent parties but to their constituencies as well. Those engaged in political reconciliation must carry out continuous, effective communication with the population highlighting opportunities and gains from the political process.

18. Third party mediators who have the trust of all belligerents can assist the political process in many different ways. They can help identify what the needs of each side are, and consider whether the main objective of the political process should be a comprehensive agreement or something less ambitious. They can try to convince the different sides that there is more to be gained from compromise than from the pursuit of maximalist objectives. The mediator may assess as well the degree of unity or fractures within insurgent movements, and try to help the more moderate members of these groups either to win over or to isolate hard line elements. Mediators need to maintain maximum flexibility and not publish their strategy or road map, which will tie their hands as well as potentially give the initiative to extremist groups.

19. Mediators must also bear in mind that while the government in place may not be nearly as strong as desired in terms of providing effective governance, limiting corruption, and establishing its overall legitimacy in the eyes of the population, it is the only government available and no benefit will come from publicly denigrating or demonising it. The mediator needs to support the government in place and maintain a minimum of discretion and confidentiality, especially given that there is considerable asymmetry in the availability of information about the parties in conflict. For example, with respect to Afghanistan, the Taliban are well aware of all the tensions between NATO and the Afghan government, but the latter have much less information about what is happening inside the Taliban.

20. Third party mediators created the Track II Inter-Tajik Dialogue, and then Track I negotiations in Tajikistan took place under UN mediation. In order for third party mediation to be effective, however, that mediation itself must also be well coordinated. In Tajikistan, the UN special envoy played a central mediating role that encompassed the various UN agencies, regional organisations, key observer countries, NGOs, and the track two Inter-Tajik Dialogue. This widely recognised central coordinating role of the UN special envoy

prevented duplication as well as competition between mediation initiatives. The UN special envoy in turn engaged in extensive consultation and information sharing with all internal and external stakeholders to the conflict. The mediation effort in the Tajik civil war was an exceptionally well implemented one.

21. Effective coordination of mediation efforts has been a problem in some political processes, creating additional complications. In Darfur, for example, the dual UN-African Union responsibility for mediation has made it more difficult to maintain the same message and present a unified face. Having a single, strong, clearly recognised lead mediator seems to work best, and even more so when dealing with a complex, multi-level political process.

Internal Actors: Unity, Fragmentation, and Multi-level Processes

22. There are a very large number of internal actors with a potential stake and role in talking while fighting. Fragmentation amongst all the belligerent parties to internal conflict is a common phenomenon. As already seen, parties in conflict often attempt to create greater fragmentation in the other side in order to weaken it, but high levels of fragmentation can make a political reconciliation process far more difficult and complex to conduct. Some political processes have created greater unity within the belligerent parties, while others have produced the opposite effect.

23. In addition to the belligerent parties, other groups in society will have a stake in a political process and may be able to exert influence over it. This great diversity of potential internal actors further complicates the difficult issues of who should participate in political processes, what the goals of those processes should be, and how to link local and national political reconciliation. Multi-level processes can be very valuable in dealing with an extremely high level of complexity in the internal conflict environment.

24. Iraq experienced multiple strands of insurgency and sectarian conflict, consisting of different groups of ex-Baathists and Sunni nationalists excluded from political power and employment, and further aroused by the international military occupation; the foreign led AQI, responsible for extreme acts of violence against both the Shia population and foreign military forces; the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia created by Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and strongly opposed to the presence of foreign military forces as well as responsible for many atrocities committed against the Sunni population. Other Shia militia groups did not target foreign forces but also carried out anti-Sunni violence, and significant militia infiltration of Government of Iraq (GOI) security forces took place.

25. Even while the Sunni Awakening movement was turning against AQI and increasingly allying with US forces during 2007, political progress with JAM did not go very far, as the movement was too suspicious of the US to talk to Americans, and the GOI did not have the capability to engage effectively with JAM. Following the sharp reduction in AQI driven violence against Iraqi Shias as a result of the Sunni Awakening and improved provision of human security on the part of Coalition military and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), JAM's criminality and extreme violence led to a substantial decrease in its support amongst the Shia population. In the summer of 2007 his weakened hand led Al-Sadr to declare a ceasefire in JAM operations against both the Coalition and GOI. This JAM ceasefire was welcomed by GOI and the Coalition, who communicated that JAM itself was not an "enemy", only "criminals" were who violated the ceasefire.

26. In 2007, some Sadrists under threat from Sunni extremists in West Baghdad had become willing to work with the GOI. Much of the political reconciliation process in Iraq was driven at the local level, and succeeded because it could respond to local level interests. For this approach to work, the government must be able to protect people at the local level from irreconcilable insurgents who are still threatening violence. Tactical, local reconciliation can be an important initial step in a political process, especially in a

fragmented conflict environment, and work for the short term. There has effectively been a series of local ceasefires established in Iraq, but a more sustainable national political reconciliation is still lacking. Although insurgents have entered into the political process and begun competing in elections, they have not as yet achieved their objectives from this political participation, leaving a fragile situation.

27. The conflict in Darfur has seen even greater fragmentation than in Iraq, as insurgent groups became heavily splintered during 2005 and 2006. In the aftermath of the failed 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement some twenty different factions emerged from amongst the rebel movements. The international mediation team inadvertently abetted this fragmentation, as it had insufficient knowledge of who the major players were amongst the Darfur insurgent groups. International mediators therefore brought into peace talks insurgent “leaders” who in fact had very little support within Darfur or military strength, making an already fragmented environment considerably more so. Even the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), which in 2008-2009 became the most militarily powerful of the insurgent groups, is thought to represent only about 4% of Darfur’s population.

28. International mediators have devoted vast amounts of time to working between these different groups in order to bring them into the peace process and keep them there. Because the mandate from the UN Secretary General was for a comprehensive agreement, each insurgent faction had substantial leverage in making demands as the price of its participation in political talks.

29. There was consequently considerable tension in Darfur between the UN mandate that seemed to exclude a partial approach starting with one or two rebel factions and building up from there, and the inability to obtain comprehensive participation on the insurgent side. As in the case of Iraq, the relationship between and sequencing of local political initiatives with a grand bargain at national level has been an extremely complex question.

30. The extreme fragmentation in Darfur and great difficulties in bringing insurgent groups to the bargaining table has effectively undermined the viability of a comprehensive Track I political process. This Track I impasse has led to new thinking about the role of civil society in the political process. International mediators working on Darfur had initially focused above all on talking to “people with guns” as the key to achieving a peace agreement, and accorded less priority to civil society groups even while recognising that they carried significant weight.

31. The tribal system in Darfur constitutes the traditional base of power there. Armed rebel groups have undermined this system, but they also have relationships with the tribes, resulting in a complex mix of power structures. Civil society in the context of Darfur has some half dozen components: official civil society organisations based largely on tribal affiliation, traditional tribal leaders, camps of internally displaced persons (IDP’s) and refugees, women, youth, and nomads. These civil society groups in Darfur can even in certain cases serve as proxies for rebel factions that refuse to enter into the political process. The representatives of IDPs and refugees have formed new, tribally defined power structures that in some cases act as the popular wings of armed rebel groups. Their participation in a Track II process can to some extent compensate for the absence of rebel factions and even exert pressure on their leaders to enter into Track I negotiations.

32. While in Darfur thinking turned only in 2009 towards the potential role of civil society in helping to drive forward the Track I negotiations as well as in contributing directly to a parallel Track II dialogue, the Tajik civil war provides a very good illustration of the potential value of a multi-level political process. Although in Tajikistan civil society was not the initial focus of the Track II dialogue, a similar interest was present in trying to find proxies who

could represent the views of the belligerent parties at a time when the leaders of those parties were not ready to enter into a formal Track I negotiation.

33. The Track II Inter-Tajik Dialogue started in March 1993 when violence in the civil war had just passed its peak intensity. That first meeting of the Dialogue brought together seven individuals from different factions in the civil war. The seven reportedly “could barely look at each other”. This Track II process grew out of the US-Soviet (later Russian) Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force, and started when an initiating team from the Task Force contacted over one hundred Tajikistanis about engaging in a dialogue. The selection of participants was designed to include broad representation from all of the belligerent parties, consisting of lower tier leaders from those parties who were freer to explore new ideas without making any commitments on behalf of the Tajik government or the insurgent factions.

34. After initial meetings in which the participants vented feelings about the origins and conduct of the civil war, the Dialogue started tackling concrete issues. A critical problem that emerged very quickly was the fragmented nature of the anti-government insurgency, and so the inability for anyone in the Dialogue to represent the “opposition”. The Track II process therefore created an incentive for the opposition to formulate a common platform, which then led to the creation of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) alliance. Discussions on this common opposition platform led pro-government participants in the Dialogue to feel that a basis for formal negotiation had been established. A UN-mediated Track I negotiation began in April 1994, and while a variety of elements contributed to this breakthrough, a high-level Tajik government official commented that “After six meetings of the Dialogue, it was no longer possible to argue credibly that negotiation between the government and the opposition was impossible”.

35. Often when an official negotiation begins the Track II process will stop, but the Inter-Tajik Dialogue continued in parallel and was able to contribute in a variety of ways to the peace agreement that ended the civil war in 1997. A continued Track II process can be useful as a kind of “think tank”, feeding in ideas and linking different issues in ways that may not happen in the official negotiations. The Track II process can also serve as a training ground for negotiations at the official level. Having a large number of societal stakeholders involved in a Track II process may further contribute by helping to achieve greater legitimacy for the resolution of key issues, but there needs to be vigorous coordination of this type of multi-level, interactive process to avoid duplication of effort or working at cross purposes. This requirement underscores the importance of a strong, lead mediator and cohesive mediation team.

The Roles of Regional and International Powers

36. Regional and international powers have tried both to support and undermine political reconciliation processes. Belligerent parties have often received arms and other forms of support from external powers, who have sometimes encouraged them to maintain uncompromising, maximalist positions. Regional and international rivalries have typically underpinned the role of external powers in helping to foment internal conflict rather than resolve it. If not included in efforts to be “part of the solution”, regional powers in particular will almost always be “part of the problem”. While the withdrawal of external backing for an insurgency may not be fatal to it, hostility towards or support for a political reconciliation process on the part of the leading external powers appears to be a determining element in the success or failure of the process.

37. The impact of external support for insurgent groups has varied widely depending on a range of factors. China and Pakistan provided substantial training and equipment to the Naga insurgency, with the start of Chinese assistance undercutting political negotiations in the mid 1960s. East Pakistan provided an invaluable Naga safe haven for regrouping, training, and resupply. However, tribal factionalism weakened the Naga’s ability fully to

exploit Chinese and Pakistani support, and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 brought an end to Naga use of East Pakistan as a sanctuary. Despite this massive setback to the Naga insurgency and further splits in the movement, India was unable to defeat the insurgency, and it was not until another twenty-six years had passed that the current, sustained cease-fire came into place.

38. In El Salvador, the United States provided military assistance to the government while the FMLN received support from the Soviet Union, Cuba, and the Sandinistas in neighbouring Nicaragua. The end of the Cold War and the election defeat of the Sandinistas cast considerable doubt over the likelihood and extent of continued external support for the FMLN. Nonetheless, the FMLN still had access to huge arms caches, and if not for the mutual perceptions of military stalemate that arose out of its 1989 offensive, together with the opening up of a political outlet for the resolution of grievances, it is unlikely that the FMLN would have abandoned its armed struggle. Washington, which during most of the 1980's did not support a negotiated settlement and encouraged the El Salvadorean military to resist concessions, became much more interested in a political process once the Cold War ended, and in 1990 the UN took on a decisive mediating role.

39. In some cases, third party mediators have been able to bring about a shift in the position of external actors from one of support for the belligerent parties to at least partial support for the process. During the Tajik civil war, neighbouring states were providing military, financial and other support either to the Tajik government or to the different rebel factions. The UN mediation team consulted regularly with these countries, coordinated next steps with them, and invited them to participate as observers in the peace negotiations. This deep involvement in the political process on the part of the regional governments helped build a positive attitude on their part towards the political process, and they shifted to using their influence to help encourage the Tajik parties to reach compromises.

40. International mediators also confronted a very complex regional environment over the conflict in Darfur, a focal point for proxy wars that exacerbated the conflict there. At one point, Libya, Eritrea, Egypt, South Sudan, and Chad were all supporting different Darfur insurgent groups, as Sudan managed to antagonise all of its neighbours, who in turn used the insurgents to settle scores with Khartoum. Initially, mediators attempted to bring all of the regional countries into political discussions over Darfur. However, this approach proved unproductive, and later efforts to shape a regional environment more supportive of the peace process focused on Chad as the most significant backer of the rebellion in Darfur.

41. Chadian President Idriss Déby belongs to the same Zaghawa ethnic group from which JEM in Darfur is drawn. JEM is not the only Zaghawa based rebel group, but as noted above, in recent years it has become the most militarily active of the Darfur insurgent factions. Sudan retaliated for the support of Déby and his family to JEM by assisting Chadian rebels opposed to the Déby government. External mediators and experts had held a firm conviction that Déby would always support his fellow Zaghawas in JEM. However, evolving circumstances affecting both Sudan and Chad led to a common desire on the part of both governments to calm the conflict in Darfur. These developments included decreases in the global price of oil, leaving both governments with reduced revenues, elections in Chad, and the inability of the rebellions in both Darfur and Chad to dislodge the governments in place. A change in the head of intelligence in Sudan was also critical, as intelligence was a major policy driver. With assistance from bilateral diplomacy on the part of France, a relaxation of tension between Chad and Sudan took place and reduced Chadian support for the Darfur rebellion.

42. In Nepal, India played a central role in facilitating an agreement between the seven constitutional parties and the Maoists. India was concerned about the impact of Nepal's insurgency on its own Maoist guerrillas, and hoped that by bringing Nepalese insurgents into a political process it might help New Delhi to mainstream its Maoists. The Nepalese

Maoist leaders lived in India during most of the period of insurgency, and without India's covert support a political dialogue would not have been possible.

43. With regard to conflicts where outside powers have intervened, it is critical for the host nation and internal stakeholders to lead the political process, with international actors playing a facilitating rather than a controlling role. Although in Iraq Coalition forces undertook the initial military and political engagement with the Sunni Awakening movement despite much concern on the part of the GOI about the creation of a "Sunni Army", Baghdad subsequently became involved in the process with the establishment of the Implementation and Follow-Up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR) in mid-2007. The IFCNR in turn encouraged the Coalition to engage politically with Shia extremists in the same way that it was doing with the Sunnis, creating complementary roles in the political process between the GOI and its external support.

44. On the other hand, the negotiating process leading to the 1988 Geneva Accords that set the terms for the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan overlooked the internal dimension of the conflict and treated it as stemming entirely from the Soviet invasion. The UN mediation team conducted proximity talks between the Afghan and Pakistani governments. The Afghan Mujahideen did not participate in the negotiations, and Pakistan was treated as representing their interests. This was hardly the case in reality, and Pakistan attempted to undermine Mujahideen groups that had solid support within Afghanistan while reinforcing the role of those who were dependent on the Pakistani military and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency.

The State of Play in Afghanistan and Lessons from the Conflict Case Studies

45. The insurgency in Afghanistan is extremely complex, combining ideology, ethnic and tribal rivalries, nationalism, and a very heavy dose of criminality. Insurgent organisations include the Taliban (Quetta and Peshawar Shuras), the Haqqani group, the Hezb-e-Islami, Hekmatyar group, and Al-Qaeda, which still provides advice and financial support to the others. Afghan insurgent groups benefit from sanctuaries over the border in Pakistan as well as support from Pakistan's intelligence services.

46. According to one point of view, some 80% of the conflict drivers in Afghanistan stem from internal factors related to poor governance and corruption. A somewhat different line of analysis places greater weight on the external drivers of conflict, and argues that Pakistani support for Afghan insurgent groups and their use of the border area as a safe haven represent virtually insurmountable obstacles to the curtailment of the insurgency. This viewpoint argues that the United States should threaten to reduce or eliminate its financial assistance to Pakistan unless Islamabad withdraws its support for Afghan insurgent groups. While the ending of Pakistan's support for Afghan insurgents would be an extremely important development, it may be useful to observe that India was unable to defeat the insurgency in Nagaland despite the Naga's loss of sanctuaries, training, and resupply in East Pakistan, and their weakened state due to fragmentation.

47. Although the context of the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship is very different from that of Sudan and Chad, it may nonetheless be useful to note as well the firm conviction held by experts on the conflict in Darfur that the Déby government in Chad would always be hostile to Sudan and support its fellow Zaghawas in JEM. A possibly relevant lesson from the Tajik civil war is that the start of a political process helped shift regional states from a stance of supporting the different belligerent parties in conflict to one of supporting the peace process. Thus, as seen in both Darfur and Tajikistan, evolving dynamics can sometimes bring about change in the seemingly immutable positions of regional actors.

48. Political engagement between the different parties to the conflict in Afghanistan has been extremely limited to date. President Karzai formed a High Peace Council in the fall of 2010 and periodic contacts have taken place between the Afghan government and insurgent groups, but it is not clear whether these contacts have included any substantive discussions. NATO involvement in the political process has been very largely limited to supporting local, tactical initiatives focused on convincing fighters to disarm and reintegrate.

49. Many obstacles exist to any near term establishment of a political breakthrough. The ideological hard core of the insurgency is not reconcilable. There may currently be a military stalemate within Afghanistan, but the parties to the conflict arguably do not recognise its existence. At least some elements of the Taliban in particular may still believe that they can prevail militarily, not least due to the projected withdrawal of international combat forces and to the uncertainty surrounding the ability of the Afghan National Army and Police to assume responsibility for Afghanistan's security. There does not appear in any case to be a situation of mutual exhaustion from fighting that helped lead to a political breakthrough in Tajikistan, nor has there been any clear failure of a major military initiative. NATO's current political strategy is premised on first achieving a dominant military position over the Taliban in order to enter any negotiations from a position of strength. The international context is also very complicated; in addition to Pakistan and the international partners of the Afghan government, Iran, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia and China all have interests in Afghanistan.

50. There are signs that at least some Taliban are interested in obtaining political recognition for their movement, in conducting direct negotiations with the United States, and in gaining freedom of decision-making and movement from Pakistan. Yet, even if there are "reconcilable Taliban" who want to negotiate, Islamabad does not appear ready to allow them to do so in any kind of independent way, as reflected in Pakistan's arrest of Mullah Baradar, the Quetta Shura's second highest ranking leader, after he had been engaged in secret discussions with the Afghan government. Moreover, as indicated by the case of the "impostor mullah", the identity of key, potentially "reconcilable" leaders with whom to negotiate is not completely apparent. The mediation experience in Darfur that helped create a messy fragmentation of insurgent groups underscores the potential pitfalls of trying to begin a formal negotiating process without possessing a sufficiently deep understanding of the terrain.

51. Despite these difficulties, some degree of rebalancing and linkage between the military and political tracks in Afghanistan is urgently needed in order to establish a foundation for eventual peace talks, even if a formal negotiating process does not start for a considerable period. A more robust political process should arguably be broader than has been the case to date and include stakeholders from the different Afghan ethnic groups, political parties, and society at large, as well as the United States and NATO. Both Afghans and international experts express concern about the consequences of a potential peace deal that either the Afghan government or NATO might broker directly through Pakistan, with Islamabad "delivering" the Taliban. Such a process, effectively outsourcing Afghanistan's security to Pakistan, would to a considerable extent echo the unstable Geneva Accords of 1988 and would again be unlikely to produce an outcome acceptable to a broad range of Afghan stakeholders. A peace deal brokered with Pakistan could well be rejected by non-Pashtun ethnic groups in Afghanistan as well as by other regional actors.

52. The conflict case studies discussed in this report point towards a number of potential approaches and principles for taking political processes forward that could be useful to consider in Afghanistan. These conflicts experienced a considerably greater level of political contact and initiatives than has been the case to date in Afghanistan. The start of a more substantive political process in Afghanistan does not require an end to fighting there, and the need exists to stop talking about peace as an end goal and to put more emphasis on the process.

53. The kind of Track II discussions that took place in Tajikistan provides one potential concept for how to help launch a more meaningful political process in Afghanistan. As in Tajikistan, such a Track II process could bring together individuals from the parties in conflict who are well below the senior leadership level. They could reflect but not formally represent the views of the Kabul government, NATO, and Afghan insurgent groups. Since this Track II process could explore the nature of the divisions between the parties to the conflict and potential compromise approaches to them without constituting a decision-making forum, as was the case in Tajikistan, it would be less threatening to all of the internal and external stakeholders in the conflict. Darfur also points towards the possibility of including in this kind of “proxy discussions” groups in society beyond those doing the actual fighting, but who may have important influence with or access to them.

54. A strong, credible, and cohesive external mediation team would have a critical role to play in taking this Track II process forward. As in Tajikistan, the mediation team would firstly need to help identify and make contact with possible participants, and to maintain close consultation on that process with regional powers. The mediation team could also conceivably help in facilitating the kind of secret, back channel contacts that have played a key role in the earlier stages of many political processes to end conflict. If and when an evolving political process moved onto multiple levels, including official negotiations between high-level representatives of all of the belligerent parties, the mediation team would need to coordinate between them.

55. A major choice arguably confronting Afghanistan and its international partners is whether to continue pursuing a political strategy towards the insurgency based almost exclusively on its further fragmentation, combined with reintegration initiatives at the local, tactical level, or to formulate a broader approach. In Iraq, local, tactical level ceasefires have left a fragile situation that could break down in the absence of real reconciliation at the national level. As seen in other conflict environments, high levels of fragmentation can make a national political process more difficult to carry out, without by itself weakening insurgent movements enough to defeat them, or even to render them largely irrelevant. A political reconciliation process may also offer more discriminating ways to fragment insurgent groups than do military operations, by peeling away more moderate elements from hardliners who refuse to consider any compromise solutions.

56. Ending more than three decades of conflict in Afghanistan, or at least reducing it to a manageable level, will likely require a combination of improved governance on the part of the Afghan government, continued military pressure on insurgent groups, a more constructive stance from Islamabad, and an inclusive, national political reconciliation process. The observation in the Inter-Tajik Dialogue that “one of the main obstacles to peace is the lack of a common vision about what kind of country the Tajikstani people want their country to be” echoes strongly in Afghanistan. In this perspective, by far the most critical elements in ending the conflict are for the Afghan government to deliver much improved performance, and for it to begin an inclusive, transparent process to articulate a vision for stability in a highly pluralistic, multi-lingual country.

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