

Supporting Negotiations for Peace in Afghanistan

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What is the policy brief about?

This brief looks in detail at the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan and examines some of the major challenges and impediments to ensuring a successful peace agreement with the armed groups of the country. More specifically, it highlights four themes which the international community can address with the incoming government in Afghanistan in order to support and advance the peace process.

Why is the topic relevant?

The peace process in Afghanistan has been ongoing for several years without having made any significant progress. During the past year, events surrounding the elections and the upcoming international troop withdrawal have significantly eclipsed any information in the media on the peace process. The process is in dire need of strategic reform and a surge in momentum to be able to achieve peace with the armed actors in the country and long-term reconciliation between the country's many diverse groups. This is particularly urgent in light of the new government, which should ideally lead the peace process, taking shape in Afghanistan. The international community must take advantage of the country's current military and political transitions in order to pressure the government on certain elements of the peace negotiations while at the same time assuring both the government and Afghan citizens of its continued support for the process.

For whom is it important?

This paper addresses national and international policy-makers concerned with Afghanistan's peace and conflict context as well as governments, think-tanks, research centres and national and international (non-governmental) organisations working in or on Afghanistan.

Conclusions

- ≡ The regional element of the war in Afghanistan, particularly the detrimental role of Pakistan, must be more openly and honestly addressed by the international community in order to both improve the relationship between Afghanistan's government and its international supporters and to build momentum for the peace negotiations.
- ≡ The peace process in Afghanistan must be made more transparent and a new, more realistic strategy should be elaborated by the government. This includes clarifying the concepts of 'reconciliation' and 'reintegration', clearly designating the ownership of the process and conveying more information about the process to the public.
- ≡ Afghan women must be secured a seat at the negotiating table with the Taliban to ensure that women's rights do not become a bargaining tool in negotiations. The women of Afghanistan must also be encouraged to advocate their demands more strategically, create a more unified platform and coordinate better with actors on the provincial and district levels.
- ≡ The peace process must move from discussion to detailed implementation, in order not to lose momentum for the process. Broader collaboration and joint initiatives between the government and civil society organisations would be highly beneficial in this regard.

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About the Author

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1 Introduction

In the last six months, most of the attention concerning Afghanistan has either been focused on the presidential, parliamentary and provincial council elections or on the upcoming withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Both of these events have been making national and international headlines for justifiable reasons. The Afghan population defied the doomsayers by turning out to vote in large numbers¹, and while the election process was conducted without major violence, it has since been marred by allegations of fraud and a substantial audit of the votes has been undertaken. In terms of the ISAF withdrawal, the discussion has mainly centred on President Karzai's refusal to sign the bilateral security agreement with the United States and what this means for the incoming president, the Afghan security forces and the future of the country in general. In the environment of transition that Afghanistan currently finds itself in, it is unsurprising that information and updates on the status of the peace process with Afghanistan's armed groups² have been so rare.

However, this lack of information may not be due simply to the fact that other, more pressing issues have stolen the spotlight, but may also be a direct consequence of the public weariness of discussing something that, despite many seemingly promising beginnings, has yet to materialise. Almost four years since the establishment of the High Peace Council³ – a body whose chief aim is to hold peace talks with the Taliban and other armed groups – there is precious little to show for the process. Even the much-vaunted Taliban office established in Qatar in June 2013 was shut down almost immediately in a whirlwind of confusion over the agreed terms of opening the office among the Americans, the Afghan government and the Taliban.⁴ Currently, on the eve of a new government in Kabul and the complete transfer of the country's security to Afghan forces, the peace process remains highly ambiguous with regard to actors, achievements and an overall realistic strategy.

In such a trying context, there aren't many measures that the international community could take in order to get the engines of the peace process started again in earnest. While Western influence over the Taliban is minimal, it is also enormously difficult for non-Afghans to understand the complex web of persons involved in the process and the roles they play. Ultimately, the peace process needs to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned in order to bring about a sustained peace with hope for eventual reconciliation. Nevertheless, with the instalment of a new government in Kabul, there are several messages the international community could and should deliver to this new government, as it (hopefully) moves to seek new and creative avenues of negotiation with the armed groups of Afghanistan.

These include (a) sufficiently acknowledging Pakistan's role in the conflict, (b) encouraging more transparency in the overall peace processes, (c) ensuring women an undisputed role in the negotiations, and (d) encouraging a more active approach by those responsible for the peace process.

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¹ While it is widely accepted that voter turnout for both rounds of the elections in Afghanistan was significantly high, exact figures remain disputed due to allegations of fraud and the use of outdated statistics by the Independent Election Commission. For a complete analysis in this regard, please see Ruttig, Thomas 2013: *Elections (31): Afghanistan's Confusing Election Maths*. Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), 19 June 2014, available at: www.afghanistan-analysts.org/elections-31-afghanistans-confusing-election-maths/

² Here I am referring mainly to the Taliban (officially Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan), but also to Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the so-called Haqqani Network, which is allied with the Taliban.

³ This brief emphasises the role of the High Peace Council in the peace negotiations in Afghanistan, specifically in light of the cooperation between the Berghof Foundation and the High Peace Council during the past year. The author acknowledges that other actors are and should be involved in the peace process. However, the HPC is the government-mandated body to carry out peace negotiations with armed groups and represents to a large degree the mainstream thinking of religious and governmental elites in the country.

⁴ See Osman, Borhan & Kate Clark 2013: *Who Played Havoc with the Qatar Talks? Five Possible Scenarios to Explain the Mess*. Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), 9 July 2013, available at: www.afghanistan-analysts.org/who-played-havoc-with-the-qatar-talks-five-possible-scenarios-to-explain-the-mess.

The High Peace Council (HPC) is a body within the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), a governmental program whose aim is to provide a way for insurgents to stop fighting and rejoin their communities, by renouncing violence and abiding by the Constitution of Afghanistan. The program is designed, implemented, and executed by Afghans and offers grants for projects to communities which are willing to accept the former insurgents. The HPC is composed of 70 members, all individually appointed by the President of Afghanistan, who are tasked with negotiating with the armed groups of the country, particularly the Taliban. Members of the HPC include National Assembly members, Ulema (Islamic scholars) Council members, and former Taliban. There are 9 female members of the High Peace Council. Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former President of Afghanistan, served as Chairman of the HPC until his assassination in 2011 in a suicide bomb attack by men posing as Taliban representatives interested in discussing peace with the HPC. His son, Salahuddin Rabbani, then took his place as chairman.

2 Sufficiently Acknowledging Pakistan's Role

On no other topic concerning Afghanistan is there more “talking past each other” than on the topic of Pakistan and the role it continues to play in the war. While most Afghans repeatedly emphasise the “external” element of the war, most international actors, from diplomats to aid organisations, continuously stress that the war is primarily an Afghan issue, which only Afghans can solve. This essentially points to a great mismatch between the two understandings of the root causes of the war, which over the years has developed into a political impasse, resulting in missed opportunities to jointly address these causes.

The Afghan government clearly has extensive work to do in terms of offering better services and justice provisions to its citizens, as well as limiting corruption and tackling the ongoing question of undemocratic commanders who have retained their guns and power over the years. Improving and increasing governance capacity, particularly for sub-national governance, would limit the dominant power networks currently in control and ease local frustrations in this regard. Sufficiently addressing these issues would significantly decrease the lure of fighting for the Taliban and other armed groups, and have a positive long-term effect on the peace process. Afghan society must also make more of an effort to stand unified as Afghans in order to bring about a broader and long-term reconciliation process within the country. Such a reconciliation process must go much beyond simply reconciling Taliban and armed groups with the government, but must also address the urgent need to reconcile the various ethnic and tribal groups in Afghanistan with each other. As reconciliation with the Taliban is perceived as a threat to certain ethnic factions and their political elites, and, as a governmental actor, the HPC represents the interests of many of these factions, there are limits to the political will to pursue the negotiation process with armed groups. That being said, considering that most of the training for armed groups in Afghanistan takes place next door in Pakistan, that weapons and bombs are often supplied through Pakistan, and that the Quetta Shura⁵ of the Taliban, as well as the leadership of other armed groups, continue to find refuge and protection in Pakistan, the continual emphasis of the international community on the war as purely an Afghan issue is insulting to the many Afghans who have suffered greatly from this war.

⁵ The Quetta Shura is an organisation comprising the top leadership of the Afghan Taliban, which is believed to be based in the city of Quetta, Pakistan since the Taliban was ousted from Afghanistan in 2001.

The international community must openly and definitively acknowledge that this war is truly *not* just an Afghan war. This means making bolder statements than those simply referring to the long history of foreign military adventures in Afghanistan. There needs to be more recognition of the continuous suffering that Afghans face at the hand of foreign actors, particularly from Pakistan. In a society which places great importance on respect and recognition, such an acknowledgement could go a long way in improving Afghanistan's relationship with the international community and could help move past the formalities of discussing the conflict towards more action-oriented steps to bring about peace. Continuously repeating how only Afghans can solve their own problems does not actually help move the peace process along. On the contrary, the international community's refusal over the years to openly discuss Pakistan's obvious involvement has only fed suspicion among Afghans of a wider regional conspiracy against their country. From a Western perspective, this may seem somewhat overblown, but it is worth asking what effect such suspicion might have on the relationship between ISAF, Afghan security forces and Afghan civilians as well as on top-level political relationships. In an already complex conflict environment, such suspicion can dramatically limit the ability to solve the conflict and can indeed lead to new ones.

With this in mind, an open acknowledgement of Pakistan's involvement with the armed groups in Afghanistan will not magically lead to a break-through in the peace process. Rather, it could lead in the short-term to even worse relations with Pakistan. Such an acknowledgement may not even have a demonstrable effect on Pakistan's involvement in the war itself. There are clear limitations to the power and influence that international actors, specifically the US, have in Pakistan. Moreover, it is debatable to what extent even the civilian government of Pakistan has any control over its own country's military involvement in the war. Nevertheless, despite Pakistan's status as a nuclear power and its strategic importance for counter-terrorism beyond the borders of Afghanistan – often used as justification for not pressuring Pakistan on this issue – an open and honest approach could make a positive difference. It is imperative to publically recognise what the facts have been pointing to for the last decade and to assure the new Afghan government that steps will be taken to address the negative role that external actors are playing. A proper acknowledgement of this problematic could be offered in exchange for the Afghan government more vocally recognising *its* responsibility for solving Afghanistan's numerous problems and the urgent need to heighten governmental accountability towards its citizens. This could then translate into the new Afghan government taking action to address internal issues, including the numerous local grievances and factional rivalries fuelling recruitment for armed groups, rather than simply labelling the problem as foreign-driven. Moreover, such public recognition could potentially force Pakistan to take more significant steps in the long run to curb the flow of violence across its border.

3 Demanding More Transparency in the Peace Process

In any peace negotiations, there will always be those elements of the process that should be openly communicated to the public and the media, and those which should remain confidential. As every peace process is dramatically different, there are no clear-cut guidelines for deciding which elements of the process to share. However, there is a fundamental need to inform the public as much as possible about the process in order to ensure its continued interest and support. Without a certain level of transparency and the dissemination of regular information and updates, citizens may assume, at best, that the process has lost momentum and is not progressing. At worst, they may believe the government is conducting negotiations that – if communicated – would not meet the public's approval. In the case of Afghanistan,

public support for the current peace negotiations (not for the need to negotiate in general) is severely lacking, and this has become one of the factors affecting the relationship between the government on the one side, and civil society, the media, and Afghan citizens on the other.

Currently, the lack of public confidence in the High Peace Council to negotiate with the armed actors in Afghanistan is highly detrimental to the overall process. There are a number of reasons for this, including the legitimacy and composition of the HPC, which continue to be controversial. Not only are the HPC members regarded as close to the government and therefore not neutral and not acceptable to the Taliban as negotiation partners, but many of them also have a history of fighting the Taliban, which sheds doubt on their ultimate ability to negotiate with former enemies.⁶ Another complication is the rather limited achievements of the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), which is formally led by the HPC and intended to encourage insurgents to renounce violence and be reintegrated back into society. For many insurgents, however, “a fistful of dollars, a flimsy paper guarantee of security, and an invitation to once again live life on the margins”⁷ has proven insufficient incentive to renounce the Taliban.

Furthermore, the lack of consensus among government actors on what reconciliation with the insurgents means and the absence of a realistic strategy to achieve it greatly inhibits the peace process. The “Peace Process Roadmap”, released by the HPC in November 2012, reduces the conflict to one solely about economic factors and portrays reconciliation as a request for the Taliban to surrender in the name of peace.⁸ But sustainable reconciliation involves much more than laying down arms and receiving amnesty for previous crimes. A broader and deeper reconciliation process must involve not just the Afghan government and the Taliban, but also political opposition actors, civil society actors, the various ethnic and tribal groups in the country and regional actors. The new Afghan government must be encouraged to recognise that this lack of clarity on its reconciliation policy and overall strategy is neither enticing to the Taliban, nor does it build confidence among the public that the government and HPC are making the necessary steps toward peace. Continually emphasising the need for reconciliation without outlining how this can be achieved is one factor which has led to public disillusionment with the entire process.

Lastly, there is a great deal of confusion over who actually “owns” the peace negotiations. While the US government loses no opportunity to label the negotiations as “Afghan-led”, it simultaneously disregards and overrides the Afghan government’s opinions and positions in its own, separate military negotiations with the Taliban. The Afghan government then applies the same cold shoulder to the political opposition and civil society, limiting any potentially positive role that these actors could play in negotiations. The Taliban, for its part, has repeatedly emphasised its disinterest in negotiating with the Karzai government, which it considers illegitimate. In addition, the unpredictable role of Pakistan hinders the Afghan government in its ability to sufficiently take the lead in the peace negotiations, leaving it to cry foul at Pakistan’s involvement while imploring the international community to “do something about Pakistan”. In light of these circumstances, it appears a bit overzealous to currently speak of the process as Afghan-owned. Furthermore, the government’s various haphazard attempts over the years to negotiate with persons it thinks are sincere Taliban representatives has led not only to embarrassment and failure, but also to disaster, for instance in the case of Rabbani’s assassination. Such events hardly encourage confidence in the process.

Generally speaking, there is a great urgency to make the entire peace process – or processes – in Afghanistan more transparent. With the establishment of a new regime in Kabul, this is an excellent opportunity to rethink and redesign the process, perhaps with a restructuring of the High Peace Council,

⁶ Sheikh, Mona K. & Maja T.J. Greenwood 2013: *Taliban Talks: Past, Present and Prospects for the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 16-17.

⁷ International Crisis Group 2012: *Talking About Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan*. Asia Report No.221, 26 March 2012, 24. For a detailed analysis of the problems with the design and implementation of the APRP, see also Sheikh and Greenwood, 19-22, and Derksen, Deedee 2011: *Peace From the Bottom-Up? The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program*. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

⁸ Osman, Borhan 2014: *The Future of Peace Talks: What would Make a Breakthrough Possible? Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN)*, 23 January 2014, available at: www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-future-of-peace-talks-what-would-make-a-breakthrough-possible.

and to elaborate a new strategy that is both realistic and acceptable to the public. Key issues in this new strategy would be:

- 1) Clarifying terminology, such as the terms ‘reconciliation’ and ‘reintegration’, and elaborating a realistic and detailed strategy of how to achieve them,
- 2) Clearly designating ownership of the peace process and the role each actor should ideally play,
- 3) Establishing a continuous and reliable stream of information to the public on the achievements or setbacks in the process, including information on the HPC’s various activities in relation to peace negotiations.

This regular stream of information could potentially change the relationship of the government with the media, which is currently hostile with regard to the peace process. It could also enable the citizens of Afghanistan to judge for themselves the current status of the process without relying on rumour or hearsay. Moreover, it would be extremely beneficial to have neutral third-party involvement – perhaps from the United Nations or the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation – to negotiate a final settlement. Since the conflict involves various international actors and has complex regional dimensions, the Afghan government should accept that it is unlikely to “get the job done” without third-party assistance.

Overall support for a negotiated settlement is very high among the public in Afghanistan. Because such support is so essential to the sustainability of an ultimate settlement with the Taliban and other armed groups, it should under no circumstances be gambled with. But the current intransparency of the process and the lack of strategic communication with the media and citizens are severely undermining the process and its potential to achieve peace.

4 Ensuring Women a Place at the Negotiating Table

When discussing the terms of a possible peace agreement with the Taliban, three so-called “red lines” are continuously mentioned, referring to the elements of an agreement on which the Afghan government will not compromise. These red lines are what is expected from the Taliban and include the renunciation of violence, severing ties with terrorist networks and respecting the Afghan constitution. On the surface, these red lines sound simple. However, in reality, the third point may prove tricky, for it is the Afghan constitution that, among other progressive elements, guarantees the equality and rights of women. There has been much speculation in the international media that the Afghan constitution will need to be amended in order to reach a final settlement with the Taliban.⁹ It is therefore assumed that the government may, in the face of Taliban pressure, sacrifice the rights of women and introduce stricter regulations. This view is shared by many women in Afghanistan, who, quite frankly, do not trust their own government to stand up for their rights during negotiations. Afghan civil society organisations working on women’s behalf continuously stress the importance of having international support for their cause. This is partly because they believe that their own government will not provide that support if not internationally pressured to do so.

Perhaps one of the only ways to ensure that the Afghan government does not sacrifice the rights of women enshrined in the Afghan constitution during future negotiations with the Taliban is to ensure that women also have a seat at the table. Unfortunately, this is rarely mentioned when discussing negotiations

⁹ See for instance: The Economist 2012: *Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban: To the Table*. 15 December 2012, available at: www.economist.com/news/asia/21568428-signs-grow-renewed-if-cautious-enthusiasm-talks-afghan-taliban-table; and BBC 2013: *Afghan President Karzai to Boycott Talks with Taliban*. 19 June 2013, available at: www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22973111.

and seems to be a top priority neither for the Afghan government nor for the international community. Considering that there are only nine female members of the 70-member High Peace Council and their influence within the council is limited at best, this does not bode well for the official presence of women on the future negotiation team.

The reasons why the international community should support female participation in peace negotiations worldwide are numerous. First and foremost, women constitute half of the population, making them an invaluable resource. It would be negligent to overlook their capacities and, most importantly, their commitment to peacebuilding. Secondly, particularly in conflict countries, women's involvement in shaping peace helps guarantee its sustainability for future generations. Last, and certainly not least, the promotion of women's rights, including the representation of women at all levels of decision-making, is mandated by international law – laws that the government of Afghanistan has agreed to. Nevertheless, women worldwide are regularly excluded from peace negotiations often because there is little understanding about their knowledge and capacity to engage and effectively contribute to negotiating (and building) peace. Furthermore, there is much confusion around the term “women's issues”, which are often confused with “women's rights”. While attaining equal rights for women in society (such as the right to run for office, the right to have custody of children, the right to inherit land, etc.) is extremely important to women, in peace negotiations, many women stress other issues such as security, jobs, health, development, and education – all issues that are equally relevant for men. In general, the impact of the decisions made at the negotiating table is rarely considered through the experiences of the women who have to live with these decisions. Thus it is imperative that any decisions about women's future made at the negotiation table should never be made without their direct involvement.¹⁰

If the international community does not push for a place for women at the negotiating table with the Taliban, there is no guarantee Afghanistan's government will. Instead, it is likely that the international community would ultimately witness a peace agreement signed with the country's armed groups to the detriment of women. This, at best, would be a huge disappointment, and would reduce any potential joy over a peace agreement. At worst, it would create an international outcry, in the wake of which the international community would find it hard to defend its position. Considering the energy and resources which the international community has spent over the last 12 years on improving the situation for women in Afghanistan, it would be a terrible waste if any of the achievements were squandered – not to mention devastating for the women of Afghanistan. The only way to ensure that women's rights do not become a bargaining tool in negotiations with the Taliban is to secure women a seat at the table themselves.

That being said, Afghan women, just like women worldwide, are not politically and ethnically homogenous, which makes it challenging to organise and unite around common causes. It is therefore imperative for the women of Afghanistan – in the form of women's organisations and their activists – to advocate their demands more strategically and create a more unified platform. The token women representation in bodies such as the HPC is insufficient. The women of Afghanistan must on the one hand take advantage of the current strong international support for their concerns and on the other hand demonstrate their integrity and influence within Afghan society to counteract the perception of their cause as solely a foreign-driven agenda. This is necessary to deal not only with the possible demands of the Taliban at the negotiating table but also with the very conservative elements within the Afghan state and its institutions. The international government should therefore better assist Afghan women's organisations and leaders in improving their coordination and united action with each other, particularly with actors on the provincial and district level.

¹⁰ Anderlini, Sanam Naraghi 2007: *Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why It Matters*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 4, 61-63.

5 Encouraging More Action

In response to many of the dilemmas facing Afghanistan, very often the solution proposed by the government, politicians and the Kabul elite is to convene a conference, workshop or meeting in order to discuss the matter. This is, of course, inherently good, as pursuing avenues of dialogue on any theme is usually a positive step and a lack of communication is very often one of the root causes of conflict anywhere. However, there comes a time in any discussion when the focus needs to shift from talking to realizing tangible results. While in Afghanistan there is often a plethora of good ideas to pursue, there is at times little understanding of the urgent need to create a workable plan to *implement* these good ideas.

Afghanistan has a long tradition of using the forum of large gatherings – historically men – to discuss important and current issues and to reach agreement and consensus. We see this today with the continuing modern use of the *Loya Jirga*, most recently in November 2013, to discuss the bilateral security agreement with the US. On the international stage as well, there has been no shortage of international conferences over the years to discuss specific topics such as development aid, regional cooperation or the future of the country in general. However, although this discussion may be judged beneficial and worthy, if a concrete plan with steps for implementation is not one of the items being discussed, much of the momentum for resolving the issue may unfortunately be lost.

In the peace process in Afghanistan, continuous communication and dialogue is clearly of utmost importance. But part of this communication involves determining concrete steps to achieve certain goals, such as increasing transparency, developing a more comprehensive concept of reconciliation or establishing a more concrete role for women in the peace negotiations. Once these concrete steps have been determined, they must then be carried out by qualified and reliable parties. For many of the elite in Kabul, the (political) will to implement the ideas may be there, but the capacity and know-how to do so is lacking. It is here that Afghan civil society organisations could play a beneficial role, if the relationship between civil society actors and the government were not so troubled. Up until now, cooperation with civil society has been seen as merely a subcontracting of projects rather than the broader collaboration and joint initiatives which could be directly used to implement the concrete steps of the peace process.

The international community should encourage the Afghan government to focus to a much greater extent on the *how* of specific elements of the peace negotiations rather than just on the *what*. Asking our Afghan partners more targeted questions about *how* certain aims will be achieved will perhaps encourage them to give more consideration to the details of implementation. This includes asking who will carry out the tasks, what the envisioned timeline is, what the specific success indicators are, what setbacks are to be expected, etc. The focus should not just be on the future vision for a peaceful Afghanistan, but more specifically on how to make this vision a reality. Furthermore, the international community must learn to capitalise better on the broad support for a peace process which the majority of Afghans share. By focusing only on government-run initiatives for peace, much of the capacity of local communities and local leadership to support the peace process remains untapped. Encouraging the new Afghan government to make better use of the local capacities for peace, including local civil society actors and provincial peace committees of the HPC, would be a step in the right direction and would greatly increase the sense of Afghan ownership over the entire process.

6 Conclusion

The road to a negotiated peace settlement in Afghanistan is long and rocky, and those who travel it will certainly encounter various obstacles and setbacks. Due to the little success achieved so far, after four long years of false starts, it is difficult to fight disillusionment and hopelessness about the entire process. However, while some analysts are predicting the worst for Afghanistan in terms of the admittedly challenging political and military transitions that the country is currently undergoing, these transitions also have the potential to breathe new life and new momentum into the peace process – but only if the opportunities are seized to do so. As the citizens of Afghanistan prepare for a new government and a new future without the presence of international troops, the time may be ripe for a new strategy for peace. This new strategy must be open and transparent and must encourage the involvement and ownership of all citizens. This is the only way that the overwhelming public support for a negotiated settlement can be capitalised on. The international community has an extremely important role to play in this respect. Not only is it imperative for donor countries to voice their continued financial support for both the country’s development and military assistance to the Afghan armed forces, but all countries with an interest in a peaceful Afghanistan need to demonstrate their unwavering, yet critical, support for a negotiated peace process. Allowing the process to flounder, as it has for the last several years, in a confusing entanglement of actors and approaches, has served neither the cause of peace nor the path to get there.

7 Recommendations for national and international policy-makers

- **The regional element of the war in Afghanistan, particularly the detrimental role of Pakistan, must be more openly and honestly addressed.** It must be definitively acknowledged that the war is not just an Afghan war and that Afghans have suffered greatly at the hands of foreign actors. Such public recognition could greatly improve Afghanistan’s relationship with its international supporters and build momentum for the peace negotiations. Furthermore, such an acknowledgement could encourage more recognition on the part of the Afghan government of its essential role and responsibility for addressing Afghanistan’s problems and making the government more accountable to its citizens.
- **The peace process in Afghanistan must be made more transparent and a new, more realistic strategy should be elaborated by the government.** This includes clarifying the concepts of reconciliation and reintegration, clearly designating the ownership of the process and conveying more information about the process to the public. The involvement of a neutral third party to negotiate a final settlement would be highly beneficial.
- **Afghan women must be secured a seat at the negotiating table with the Taliban to ensure that women’s rights do not become a bargaining tool in negotiations.** This is essential in order to avoid a peace agreement that is detrimental to the women of the country, thereby squandering many of the achievements of the last 12 years. The women of Afghanistan must be encouraged and supported to advocate their demands more strategically, create a more unified platform and coordinate better with actors on the provincial and district level.

- ≡ **The peace process must move from discussion to detailed implementation, in order not to lose momentum for the process.** Good ideas and the political will to implement them must be met with the capacity and know-how to do so. Broader collaboration and joint initiatives between the government and the civil society organisations of Afghanistan would be highly beneficial to implement any concrete steps of the peace process. The Afghan government must be encouraged to make better use of local capacities for peace, thereby increasing the sense of Afghan ownership over the entire process.

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