



SADF COMMENT

From Feint to Strategy: Revealing the Taliban's Rationale in Joining the Peace Talks

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On October 18, senior members of the Afghan [Taliban claimed](#) that [some rounds](#) of informal secret peace talks between their militant organisation and the Afghan government took place in [September](#) and earlier this month in Doha, Qatar. Since 2013 the Jihadists are running a political-diplomatic office in the Gulf state, '[officially legitimised](#)' by the movement leadership and by the blessings of Washington. Describing itself as a liaison office (for the reestablishment) of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the 'political' Taliban representation is rather an additional reason for conflict than a contribution for a peaceful settlement. Nevertheless, the Doha office of the Jihadists [hosted already similar peace negotiations in the past](#). But reports regarding the recent meetings are largely differing: The Taliban under its new leader [Haibatullah Akhundzada](#) explicitly dismissed their participation in the claimed negotiations, whereas the National Unity Government (NUG) of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah neither confirmed nor denied the happenings of the meetings. The U.S., which was purportedly involved as well, [merely expressed](#) - as usual - their support for political solutions for Afghanistan, meaning an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process negotiated settlement of the armed conflict between Afghan government and insurgency movements.

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The unwillingness to confirm officially the negotiations is not a surprise. All parties have their particular reasons to keep the talks secret. Earlier the [NGU faced heavy criticism](#) after striking a deal with [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's organisation](#). Also known as the 'butcher of Kabul', Hekmatyar is responsible for massive human rights violations. Despite the authorities' announcement that power-sharing is not part of the arrangement, he will most likely be granted with impunity for his acts. This could anger Afghans and therefore deepen the already [existing rifts](#) within the NUG. The Taliban have probably still to deal with the consequences of the internal power struggles and fissures which followed the official announcement of the death of the Taliban spiritual leader (Commander of the Faithful) [Mullah Mohammed Omar](#). In his last years, he apparently favoured a political instead of a military solution for Afghanistan conflict. Subsequently, the Taliban movement found itself in a [deep identity-crisis](#), not only because of the death of Omar but also because of the question: to fight or not to fight. Against this backdrop, Taliban spokesman [Zabihullah Mujahid](#) sharply rejected reports of the talks, saying "they were propaganda aimed at creating divisions within the insurgency".

It is interesting to note that Islamabad, who was part of the four-nation initiative or [Quadrilateral Coordination Group \(QCG\)](#) of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China for reconciliation in Afghanistan, is now obviously excluded from any ongoing talks between Taliban and NUG. The major reason is Pakistan's ongoing support for terrorist activities in Afghanistan. Most of the latest terror attacks on Afghan soil are either conducted by Pakistani-based terror groups (cross-border terrorism) and/or by (pro-Pakistani) militant organisations based in Afghanistan. Both types of groups are enjoying

different kind of state-sponsorship: logistics and financial support, equipment, training facilities, and safe havens, granting of political and diplomatic protection.

According to the Guardian, [six Taliban commanders](#) as well as some Afghan officials confirmed the existence of secret talks. Taking in consideration the trajectories of former ‘peace initiatives’, it seems the reported current secret ‘peace talks’ will be hampered by the same question which derailed its predecessors: the problem of ‘negotiating the non-negotiable’. Despite the change of government from Karzai to NUG, there is not much change in the basic determinants: The Taliban - in spite of the advent of the rival [Islamic State \(IS\)](#) in Afghanistan - are [getting stronger](#) and having [more territory](#) under its control; the international community, in spite of its financial promises, is reducing its engagement in the country; the current NGU suffers from severe rifts. Most importantly, the demands of the Taliban as preconditions for peace and reconciliation are illusory and unrealizable.

However, based on the naive illusion that one can negotiate and implement an agreement in a sustainable manner with ideologically indoctrinated fundamentalists, the aforementioned negotiated deal with the politician and warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar seems to give the NUG and the US the semblance of some room to restart negotiations with the Taliban. Here, we can find one of the most disturbing features of the whole issue: the notion that the Taliban are willing to participate as a trustworthy stakeholder in the political-administrative system of Afghanistan. Otherwise we have also a deliberate or unintended forgetfulness of Taliban’s untrustworthiness for keeping agreements as well as its adamant ideological Jihadist mind-set. One must recall that the Taliban movement is anti-democratic in nature and against each governance structure which is not in line with their narrow interpretation of Islam and Sharia

law. The Taliban categorically reject democracy, negotiations and especially consensus-based political decision-making. In other words, deliberative political processes requiring compromises and opening exceptions are excluded from the fundamentalist Taliban mentality. Extremist ideologies do not allow room for dissensions. Disagreements and disputes, which are inherent to the democratic process, are seen as a threat that can weaken the power and efficiency of the ideology that holds the Taliban together. The movement experienced this situation already [after the death of Mullah Omar](#). It resulted in heavy infighting. Therefore, democratic competition would deteriorate the movement's coherence and promote fragmentation. For the Taliban, it is both in its nature and is a survival condition to dismiss democracy.

Taking the recent military activities into account - namely including the second major attack on the [northern city Kunduz](#) and [military activities against Lashkar Gah](#) (provincial capital of southern Helmand province) - one shall conclude that the Taliban are not interested in any political reconciliation and integration. Instead, forced assimilation, humiliation, oppression and elimination, continue to be the trademark of the Taliban in areas under their occupation. Summing up, the fact that the Taliban are not seriously interested in sustainable peace turns a future 'non-war' scenario in Afghanistan unlikely.

Further to this, the crux of the matter is that the Taliban understand 'talks' not as 'peace negotiations' but rather as a tool to broaden the armed struggle. The talks are seen as an extension of their militant activities into the political arena. In other words, the current round of 'secret peace talks' is interpreted by the Taliban as an additional opportunity to undermine Afghanistan's democracy from within and to push their Islamic fundamentalist agenda in the

political-administrative structure. The tremendous rise of highly radicalized Islamist clerics in the Afghan state and society during the last years prepared the ground for the Taliban to regain political leverage.

Therefore, after being ostracised by the international community for a long time, the Doha office and the respective talks have given the Taliban legitimacy as a political actor in its own right, not only domestically but also internationally. The NUG and the US should understand that when Taliban use political instruments this does not mean that they will stop their armed operations against the Afghan state and its people as well as the remaining foreign troops. This is rather seen as ‘double approach’: combining military with political methods in order to regain power in the country.

Some would say, however, that the Taliban attach more weight to talks than they did three years ago. We believe the initial willingness of the Jihadists to join talks was a political feint. The current demise of the NUG and the rising ‘democratic apathy’ among the Afghan people may have given the Jihadists, however, the option of co-option of the political establishment and arena. The presence of Mullah’s Omar son [Mohammad Yaqoob](#) as well as his brother and former Taliban chief [Mullah Abdul Manan Akhund](#) may indicate a will to give more credibility to the talks and can also be seen as an indication of a co-option of the ‘political establishment strategy’. Participation of the Taliban in secret or open peace talks shall not be necessary seen as a political decoy but rather as a strategy to prepare the ‘war from within the institutional system’ in Afghanistan.