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U.S. pushes to restart peace talks with Taliban

By Karen DeYoung and Anne Gearan

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The Obama administration has launched a post-election push to restart moribund peace talks with the Taliban, despite resistance from the U.S. military, mixed signals from Pakistan and outright refusal by the militants themselves, according to U.S. officials.

Senior White House and State Department officials reiterated the administration's negotiating position — including its willingness to exchange prisoners with the Taliban — to a reluctant Defense Department at a meeting of national security deputies two weeks ago.

The same message was conveyed by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to Pakistan's foreign minister Monday in Brussels, along with an appeal for Pakistani cooperation with a separate negotiating effort by the Afghan government.

Douglas Lute, President Obama's top adviser for Afghanistan and Pakistan, is scheduled to meet with Pakistan's army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, Tuesday morning in Brussels, where Clinton is attending a NATO meeting.

Relations with Pakistan have slowly improved this year, capped by a hard-won deal to reopen transit points from Pakistan for the resupply of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Both sides have emphasized improvements in counterterrorism coordination, while tacitly ignoring Pakistan's demand for a stop to U.S. drone strikes in Pakistani territory.

But many in the U.S. military's command headquarters in Afghanistan remain doubtful of Pakistan's willingness to use its relationship with the Taliban to help forge a political solution to the war and are reluctant to include Pakistan in any of their planning for the drawdown of U.S. combat forces or for a follow-on military presence after 2014.

As a result, an administration official said, Pakistan has been getting an inconsistent message about how serious the administration is about peace talks and a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan of up to 10,000 troops.

After more than a year of sporadic talks, the Taliban cut off the U.S. negotiating channel in March, accusing the administration of unilaterally changing the terms of a potential prisoner swap. The exchange included five Taliban members being held in the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. soldier held by Afghan militants in Pakistan since 2009.

Even if the Taliban had wanted to re-engage, officials said, administration policy had been largely frozen because of presidential campaign concerns and the military's concentration on the summer fighting season in Afghanistan.

"Now we've had the election, the fighting season is over" in Afghanistan, "and we're starting to get little reports here and there that the Taliban are coming around," said the administration official, one of several who discussed the internal debate on the condition of anonymity.

The recent deputies meeting was designed "to make sure everyone explicitly supported" administration negotiating policy, the official said.

A State Department official, speaking separately, said: "I think it's important to remember that ... if [the Taliban] wanted to get back into conversations, we'd be prepared to do so."

The administration has also encouraged Afghan President Hamid Karzai's efforts to forge a peace deal with the Taliban, including through bilateral dialogue with Pakistan.

After long dismissing the Karzai-appointed High Peace Council as irrelevant, Pakistan last month hosted its chairman, Salahuddin Rabbani, in Islamabad, and subsequently released at least a dozen Taliban members held prisoner.

The prisoners' names were on a list that Afghanistan had presented of militants it thought could be useful in negotiations. But U.S. officials, while lauding the release, have expressed concerns that the Taliban members were not handed over to the peace council, as requested, but simply let go. It remains unclear whether they have rejoined the fight in Afghanistan or blended back into Pakistani or Afghan society.

The released prisoners did not include the most senior Taliban member the Afghans had asked for, Abdul Ghani Baradar, a former military commander and senior aide to Taliban leader Mohammad Omar. Baradar was arrested in Pakistan in early 2010, reportedly because Pakistani officials wanted to prevent him from becoming involved in peace talks it did not control.

Pakistan has long been ambivalent about a political deal between the Taliban and Karzai or the United States. Pakistan wants a say in Afghanistan's political future because of tribal and ethnic links and the nations' long border. Pakistani officials also think that India, with U.S. support, is trying to build influence on their western flank in Afghanistan.

"We'd like them to go to the Taliban and say, 'Hey, you guys need to go back and get talks started again,'" the administration official said of Pakistan. "But the question continues to be whether [Pakistan] has both the willingness and the ability to do so."

Although Taliban political and military leaders live in Pakistani sanctuaries, U.S. intelligence officials think the militants resent Pakistan's efforts to control them.

One roadblock to the Karzai initiative is that Taliban leaders have repeatedly refused to talk with his government, insisting that it is a U.S. puppet and that they will speak only to Washington.

As it edged toward a deal to exchange Guantanamo prisoners for Bergdahl late last year, the Obama administration insisted that the Taliban first make two public statements, rejecting the international terrorism practiced by al-Qaeda and supporting democracy in Afghanistan. Neither statement has been forthcoming.

In June, the administration sent new feelers to Taliban negotiators through the government of Qatar, which has served as a gobetween and hosted the earlier talks. There has been no response.

As Clinton met with Pakistani officials, David D. Pearce, tapped to replace the administration's outgoing special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, traveled to both those countries. Pearce will also stop in Qatar, where Taliban negotiators have remained since U.S. talks there ended early this year, to "tell Qatari interlocutors that we're ready to move if [the Taliban] say the right words," the administration official said.