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## Pressure Mounts on All Parties in Afghan War to Begin Talks

By ALISSA J. RUBIN

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As American troops press the [Taliban](#) in their desert and mountain redoubts, Western diplomats, Taliban leaders and the Afghan government have begun to take a hard look at what it would take to start a negotiation to end the fighting.

Efforts to start peace talks have yielded little in the past. Nonetheless, interest in a political track is growing as pressure mounts to find a palatable way to reduce the military commitment here and as public support for the war ebbs in the United States and Europe.

“The environment is shifting,” said a Western diplomat here, who echoed a number of others interviewed. “If the Taliban make a decision they are interested, things could move quite quickly.”

Publicly, at least, the Taliban have always stated that they will not negotiate before foreign troops leave the country. Now, however, some Taliban leaders have signaled that they will be open to talks sooner if their security can be guaranteed, and rank-and-file fighters appear increasingly eager to see an end to the war.

For their part, United States officials have also been adamant that they will not talk to top Taliban or other insurgent leaders they consider to be “irreconcilable.” But recently they have quietly begun reducing the obstacles to talks.

In February, Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), in a speech at the [Asia Society](#) in New York, appeared to recast longstanding preconditions for talks: that the insurgents lay down their arms, accept the Afghan Constitution and separate from [Al Qaeda](#). Instead, she described them as “necessary outcomes.”

Officially, the State Department played down the change in language, but a senior Western diplomat in Washington, who was familiar with the strategy behind Mrs. Clinton’s speech, said: “It was not intentional to explicitly make preconditions into outcomes. But the text now leaves room for interpretation, which opens doors.”

Intentional or not, the speech was read in Kabul as giving a green light to other Western countries to start laying the groundwork for talks.

“The seismic shift here was Hillary Clinton’s speech,” said a diplomat here. “This is liberating for other countries who want to try to facilitate a negotiation.”

It is the American nod that many have been waiting for. Several countries, among them Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have tried to serve as peace brokers, but without the imprimatur of the United States. That the Americans are signaling that they are open to talks “is a paradigm shift,” said Rangin Dadfar Spanta, President [Hamid Karzai](#)’s national security adviser.

The Afghan government insists that the preconditions for talks remain the same but supports diplomatic efforts that would lead to negotiations, and it appears willing to provide amnesty and security for the Taliban leaders so that they can participate in talks unhindered.

The High Peace Council, which was appointed by Mr. Karzai, recently wrote letters to the Quetta Shura and the Peshawar Shura, two of the Taliban’s leadership organizations, inviting them to talk. A member of the council, Hajji Deen Mohammed, said the Taliban shuras replied with questions about whether the council had true autonomy and could ensure the safety of insurgent leaders.

“We are working on this process to find a location or safe haven for the Taliban to go there with protections and guarantees to talk to the Americans and the world,” said Arsala Rahmani, the former Taliban minister of higher education and now a member of the High Peace Council.

American officials in Washington said that allowing the Taliban to open an office in Turkey was a possible measure under active consideration, but that no decisions had been made.

“We have gotten approval for an office from Turkey, and if we have an office, then the world can come and the Taliban can come and within a week, once it’s set up, they will be talking,” said Mr. Rahmani, who is one of a handful of former Taliban officials who maintain contacts with the Quetta Shura.

Mr. Rahmani, however, is viewed as a moderate. When asked, a member of the Quetta Shura insisted that there were no talks at all. Several diplomats in touch with the Taliban indirectly said members of the leadership could not be seen to be reaching out to the West because then they would lose their ability to persuade Taliban foot soldiers to keep fighting.

The Taliban would also consider it vital that some of its leaders be removed from the [United Nations](#) sanctions list, which would allow them to obtain passports and travel outside Pakistan, where they are based, so that they could be part of negotiations, said Western diplomats.

Removing them from the list would also build confidence that American and Western officials were negotiating in good faith, as would releasing one or two high-profile Taliban fighters who are in detention in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, the diplomats said.

But the effort is fraught as well. Each application for a Taliban member’s removal from the list requires voluminous documentation and approval by each [United Nations Security Council](#) member. Russia, which fought a nine-year war with the Afghans, has been skeptical of efforts to remove any of them.

Another looming problem is Pakistan. The Taliban’s fortunes are intertwined with that of the Directorate for [Inter-Services Intelligence](#), or ISI, which helped to create the Taliban in the 1990s, but now the Taliban feel trapped by Pakistan. Some senior Taliban leaders have tried to negotiate with the Afghan government without Pakistan’s approval, including the No. 2 Taliban commander, Mullah [Abdul Ghani Baradar](#), who was arrested in Pakistan last year.

Other Taliban commanders, too, have been detained, threatened or even killed by Pakistani security forces, to press them to keep fighting.

The “Taliban won’t go for peace talks either in Pakistan or [Afghanistan](#),” said Hajji Qar Mohammed, a senior tribal leader in Quetta who is close to the Taliban.

“In Pakistan the ISI won’t let them talk freely and say what the leadership wants, and in Afghanistan the Taliban leadership doesn’t trust Karzai’s administration,” he said.