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Ending Afghan War the Pashtun Way

By David Ignatius

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How do wars end in the tribal society of Afghanistan? That's one of the interesting questions that was highlighted by President Hamid Karzai's visit to Washington this week.

During their well-scripted press conference at the White House, both Karzai and President Barack Obama said they favored a process of outreach to the Taliban. And both presidents endorsed, as a start, the "peace jirga" that Karzai will host in Kabul in several weeks.

Obama described a basic framework for this peace process. He said it must be "Afghan-led," and that it should "open the door to the Taliban who cut their ties to Al-Qaeda, abandon violence, and accept the Afghan Constitution, including respect for human rights."

But these public comments skirted the hard questions about reconciliation. Of the 1,400 Afghans who will be invited to the jirga, will there be any senior Taliban leaders who could actually cut a deal? What role will Pakistan play in bringing to the table a Taliban leadership it helped create and sustain? How soon do Karzai and Obama see this process moving toward real negotiations?

Karzai's private discussions with Obama provided some new clarity on these issues, according to a senior administration official. The jirga will be a modest first step, setting a framework for later discussions. The Afghan leader envisions a Taliban dialogue that eventually will include the dominant Quetta Shura, headed by Mohammed Omar, and the faction headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The United States, meanwhile, is seeking Pakistan's help in drawing in the network directed by Sirajuddin Haqqani.

“It’s clear that any negotiation will have to take account of Pakistani interests in a constructive way,” said the administration official. “They’re telling us that they want to participate, and they are awaiting Karzai’s game plan.”

On the “how soon” question, Obama embraced his military commanders’ view that effective negotiation with the Taliban depends on “breaking their momentum militarily.” In other words, bloody the enemy now, so that it’s more pliable later. “We want to be in a better position to strike a deal,” says the official. That means serious talks probably aren’t likely until next year.

As the White House prepares its reconciliation strategy, it should ponder the Pashtun culture that spawned the Taliban insurgency. The US has often lacked this sense of cultural nuance, which is why we have made so many mistakes in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

One thing that should be obvious by now is that you don’t make much progress with Pashtun leaders by slapping them around in public. This is a culture that prizes dignity and detests humiliation. Attempts to shame people into capitulation usually backfire.

An obvious example is Karzai himself. He reacted to public criticism from General Jim Jones, the national security adviser, by throwing a tantrum last month, denouncing the West and threatening to join the Taliban. Last week’s White House visit was partly a piece of theater aimed at repairing the damage.

The Pashtun stress on dignity makes me wonder about the US strategy for softening up the Taliban on the way to reconciliation. That strategy is aimed at getting leverage in negotiations, but it could produce a bad result: The US will get bloodied, and the Taliban still won’t play ball.

The Pashtuns have a ritual for settling conflicts, as befits a warrior people who constantly seem to get into fights. The process is outlined on Khyber.org, a website devoted to Pashtun culture. Conflicts start because of an insult to a tribe’s honor, which requires a rite of revenge known as badal. The fighting continues until scores are settled and the combatants are exhausted.

It’s the mechanism of conflict resolution that’s intriguing, in terms of US strategy. Reconciliation begins with a process of repentance, known as nanawatey, in which the penitent party goes into the house of his rival and asks for asylum. In Pashtun culture, such a request must be granted; to spurn it would be shameful.

Once the desire for an honorable peace is clear, the tribal elders gather in a jirga and frame a temporary truce, known as a teega. The parties gather, agree to pay reparations, and the Pashtun code of generous hospitality, known as melmastia, takes over.

Obama said several times last week that he isn’t seeking a military victory in Afghanistan, but a political accord. If such an agreement can be reached, both sides will have to agree that insults have been avenged and honor has been restored. Otherwise, in that part of the world, people just keep on fighting.