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The Nation

More Secret Talks with the Taliban

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On the eve of President Karzai's peace jirga in Afghanistan, a national council that will include clergy, tribal leaders, warlords, and other "stakeholders" in that country's star-crossed political constellation, it appears that talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban are accelerating.

"A Maldives government official says that the Afghan government and the Taliban are meeting in the Indian Ocean archipelago for talks.

"Government spokesman Mohamed Zuhair says 15 representatives of the Afghan government and seven Taliban members met Thursday, nearly four months after a first round of talks in the Maldives.

"Zuhair says he's been asked not to disclose the location or the names of the participants.

"He says the talks will last until the weekend with a day off Friday."

Karzai's jirga, which has been acknowledged only grudgingly by the United States, is aimed at creating the political framework for official talks with the Taliban. By bringing together all elements of Afghan society, Karzai is trying to establish himself and his government as legitimate representatives for those talks, using the jirga to do what the fraud-marred election last

August failed to do. In particular, Karzai has to win the backing of the old Northern Alliance, the anti-Taliban formation supported by India and Iran, for the negotiations with the Taliban.

Interestingly, Steve Coll of the New America Foundation, who's long been a skeptic about the usefulness of talking to the Taliban, says in the latest issue of *The New Yorker* [2] that the United States is foolish not to support talks: "Whether talks succeed or fail, it's hard to understand why the U.S. would refuse to even try."

Coll raises a key point, namely, that talking to the Taliban means, in effect, talking to its principal sponsor, Pakistan. Pakistan, of course, created the Taliban in the early 1990s as a tool for checking India's influence in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's military and its intelligence service, the ISI, continue to support the Taliban to this day. Afghanistan is concerned that the United States might be willing to hand Afghanistan over to Pakistan as the price of a peace settlement, and India, too, fears the same thing. (India is willing to open talks with the Taliban as well, in part to reduce the chances that Pakistan is able to play kingmaker in post-American Afghanistan.) As Coll points out:

"In March, two Pakistani generals met with Karzai and signaled that they could help cool down the Taliban insurgency if the Karzai government would, according to a senior Afghan intelligence official, 'end' India's presence in Afghanistan."

Frankly, it isn't clear whether or not Pakistan will end up with the lion's share of influence in Afghanistan when all is said and done. Most likely, it will, because Pakistan has the inside track via its connections with the Taliban and because it shares a long, porous border with Afghanistan (and India doesn't). At the same time, Iran will be a player, since Tehran is building up vast influence in and around western Afghanistan and in Herat. But it shouldn't be too difficult for President Obama to seek a deal involving India, Iran, Pakistan and Russia, among other players – Saudi Arabia comes to mind – in a plan to end the war. If only he weren't so all-fired intent on supporting General McChrystal's foolish counterinsurgency war.

Speaking of which: the Taliban is back at nearly full strength in Marja [3], the rural hamlet of 60,000 that was occupied by U.S. forces in February, amid great publicity and congratulations all around. (Oops.) And it's not looking good for the U.S. invasion of Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban, this summer. The American military isn't calling it an invasion, of course, preferring to describe the deployment of 10,000 U.S. troops to the city and surrounding districts as a slow, tidal buildup of forces. Meanwhile, the Taliban has launched two major assaults on the twin strongholds of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan [4] – "back-to-back strikes at symbols of American power in Afghanistan," according to *Los Angeles Times* -- sending a team of guerrillas and suicide bombers against Bagram air base north of Kabul and deploying a suicide bomber in a van that struck a U.S. convoy in the Afghan capital, killing five U.S. troops.