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The Diplomat

US Considering Afghan Ceasefire?

Robert Dreyfuss
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Hillary Clinton has raised the question of a US ceasefire in Afghanistan. It may be recognition that there's no military solution to this decade-old conflict.

An all-star delegation from the United States, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, CIA Director David Petraeus, special envoy Marc Grossman and a brace of top military officials has just completed a sweeping tour of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia.

And, while most of the focus of attention centred on Clinton's blunt warnings to Pakistan in the wake of recent high-profile attacks on US targets – including the American embassy in Kabul – conducted by the Pakistan-based and Pakistan-allied Haqqani group, there was another side to the US delegation's visit.

Although Clinton, Petraeus, and the others may have read the riot act to Pakistan's military and its intelligence service, the Inter-Service Intelligence, the Americans made it clear over and over that they want to strike a political deal to bring the Taliban, the Haqqani group, and other insurgents into a settlement of the conflict. And for the first time in recent memory, Clinton specifically mentioned the idea of an Afghan ceasefire.

In a lengthy interview with a roundtable of Pakistani journalists, Clinton responded to a question about Pakistan's concerns over the perplexing US policy of both fighting the insurgents and

simultaneously seeking a dialogue, which the United States has recently taken to calling a policy of ‘fight, talk, build.’ Said Clinton:

‘To go back to the question about fighting and talking, I think that some of our Pakistani counterparts are concerned that that won’t – that’s not an effective way to proceed, that maybe what first needs to be done is try to negotiate a ceasefire. That’s just an example of the discussions that are going to be held. And that is something that we want to discuss, we want to hear the views of, but it’s done in the context of overall agreement about where we’re trying to head.’

For years, many analysts of the war in Afghanistan have argued that a unilateral ceasefire by the United States, coupled with an offer to talk to the Taliban and its allies, would be a true test of the Taliban’s willingness to make a deal. Since the start of the war, the Taliban’s principal demand has been the withdrawal of foreign forces. On various occasions, spokesman for the Taliban and its allies, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of the Hezb-i Islam party, have hinted that the projected 2014 withdrawal timetable, combined with a ceasefire, might kick-start talks. One prominent analyst, Gilles Dorronsoro, a former scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, has repeatedly suggested that a partial US withdrawal, linked to a ceasefire, is the only route to a meaningful dialogue with the Taliban.

The paradox of the ‘fight, talk, build’ strategy was highlighted when Clinton confirmed, for the first time, that Pakistan helped to broker talks with the Haqqani group.

Asked by a Pakistani reporter about recently published reports of a US-Haqqani dialogue, Clinton said:

‘In fact, the Pakistani government officials helped to facilitate such a meeting. And we want more coordination between the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan for what must be, with respect to the conflict in Afghanistan, an Afghan-led effort. But Afghanistan cannot do it without both Pakistan and the United States. We believe that there is now an opportunity for us to begin talking... We have reached out to the Taliban, we have reached out to the Haqqani network, to test their willingness and their sincerity. And we are now working among us – Afghanistan and Pakistan and the United States – to try to put together a process that would sequence us toward an actual negotiation. I hasten to say that in my discussions with Pakistani officials, they hold the same view that we do. We don’t know whether this will work, but we believe strongly we must try it.’

It’s apparent that with the 2014 deadline looming ever closer, the United States is desperate to find a political accord that can provide at least a fig leaf of stability to cover the US pull-out, not unlike the uneasy, Iran-brokered ceasefire in Iraq that has allowed the United States to begin the final withdrawal of its forces there. It’s ironic that Clinton would raise the idea of an Afghan ceasefire, since for years the United States has expressed great displeasure about Pakistan’s series of ceasefire accords with the Pakistani Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

It's doubly ironic because one of the chief, stated purposes of the Clinton-Petraeus visit to Islamabad was to push Pakistan to crack down on the Haqqani group's safe haven in North Waziristan. 'This is a time for clarity,' said Clinton, speaking of Pakistan's tolerance for insurgents' bases in FATA and elsewhere. 'There's no place to go any longer.'

Belatedly, however, the United States has openly recognized the reality that the Taliban, Haqqani, and Hekmatyar are heavily influenced, if not controlled by, the ISI. As a result, as angry as American officials might be over Pakistan's reckless alliance with violent factions to ensure its place in Afghanistan's future, Washington apparently is gradually coming to terms with the idea that in order to find a political solution to a war that has no military solution, it has to come knocking at Pakistan's door.

To be sure, the United States has a lot of cards to play, including Pakistan's military and economic dependence on US aid. Ultimately, however, Pakistan isn't going to abandon Afghanistan to a ruling coalition that shuts out the Pashtuns in favour of the mostly non-Pashtun Northern Alliance and its allies in India and Iran. That means that, in concert with a ceasefire designed to coax the Taliban to the bargaining table, the United States must do a lot of work in the diplomatic arena to bring Pakistan, India, and Iran – along with Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia – to the negotiating table, too.