

# ISAS Brief

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## Afghanistan: The London Meeting

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### Abstract

On 28 January 2010, the international community met once again in London to discuss Afghanistan. The meeting was called by Gordon Brown, the British prime minister, and was attended by the representatives of 60 governments including Hillary Clinton, the United States (US) Secretary of State. On the eve of the conference, senior Afghan officials began to indicate that they were prepared to work with those in the Taliban movement who were willing to be associated with the government. This position, pushed for some time by Pakistan, seemed acceptable to Washington and other major capitals but with some reservations. President Hamid Karazi asked for US\$1.2 billion of donor assistance to help mainstream some of the Taliban. At the same time, General Stanley McChrystal, the US commander in Afghanistan, indicated that he was convinced that with the help of the additional troops that were on their way to Afghanistan, he could secure the main population centres and protect them from the insurgents? But doubts remain whether these moves will bring peace to the country and bring to an end a conflict that had lasted for more than three decades.

### Introduction

The international community involved with Afghanistan since the American attack on the country in October 2001 met again in London on 28 January 2010. The meeting was called by Prime Minister Gordon Brown of Britain and was meant to underscore the new strategy announced by Barack Obama, the US president. It was being called, according to the British leader, at a defining moment for Afghanistan's future. In his speech given on 1 December 2009 at the West Point Military Academy,<sup>2</sup> the American president had presented a three-pronged strategy for the country that had not known peace for more than three decades. One, the US and its NATO allies will place more troops on the ground to win back some of the more populous areas that had come under the control of the Taliban or were under threat. Two, it was not the intention of the US-led allies to prolong their stay in Afghanistan and become an occupation force. To give substance to that pledge, the president indicated that he would start pulling out his troops starting 1 July 2011. In other words, the military was given

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan> (accessed on 4 February 2010).

18 months to secure the more populated parts of Afghanistan. Three, the allies would place an equal amount of emphasis on rebuilding Afghanistan and the Afghan state. It was the third element in this three-pronged strategy that was the focus of attention of the gathering in London.

Even before the delegates attending the meeting arrived in London, the Independent Election Commission announced in Kabul that the elections for the parliament had been rescheduled and would not be held this winter but will take place later in the year. Several reasons were provided; each one of which the London conferees were supposed to address. The Commission could not ensure security for those that wished to participate in the elections either as candidates or as voters. Not enough resources were available to conduct yet another election in a country as large as Afghanistan so soon after the presidential election on 20 August 2009. The government was too preoccupied with other concerns to give much attention to another election. The Election Commission's decision was well received by the political parties in the country as well as by a number of foreign agencies that were helping Afghanistan in various ways. The Americans and their NATO allies did not wish to be distracted from the main mission – to bring the more populated parts of the country under their and the government's control.

### **Pulling in before pulling out**

There was one surprising development on the eve of the conference. President Hamid Karzai decided to invite those in the Taliban movement who were prepared to work with his government to join in the effort to rebuild the country. In an effort to build support for this position, he stopped in Turkey and met with Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan. The Turkish prime minister had also met with President Asif Ali Zardari who was visiting as well. It was clear that the discussions in Turkey were focused on the issue of national reconciliation, a position that Islamabad has favoured for a long time. That notwithstanding, Karzai wanted Turkey's support to ensure that Pakistan, which had supported dialogue with some Taliban, would not allow those that oppose such a move towards reconciliation to operate from its territory.

Pakistan's position was articulated clearly during a visit to the country by Robert Gates, the US Defense Secretary, who gave two contradictory signals in his private discussions and public pronouncements in Islamabad. On the one hand, he urged the Pakistani authorities to extend their successful operations in Swat and South Waziristan<sup>3</sup> to North Waziristan and Orakzai and, on the other hand, he declared that the Taliban were a part of the Afghan political fabric and will have to be accommodated in any kind of political structure that was meant to be durable.

The momentum for pulling the Taliban into the government began to build up as the opening day of the London conference came nearer. On the eve of the meeting, Omar Zakhilwal, Afghanistan's new finance minister<sup>?</sup> said that the Taliban could be involved across all levels of government. The minister said that his government will propose a two-pronged approach to the conference in London. He told the *Financial Times* in an interview that the government would like to begin with the "lower ranks" who are not ideologically motivated. "Not all of them are idolizing the Taliban. Quite a large group of them have sided with the Taliban

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<sup>3</sup> This subject was covered in an earlier brief. See Shahid Javed Burki, "Rescuing Afghanistan: Let the Region Take Charge", ISAS Brief No. 151, 22 January 2010.

because they were forced” or had economic reasons for joining the insurgents. They would be given incentives to switch sides by offering jobs, and protection. It will take somewhat longer to bring in the people occupying higher ranks but bringing them in will be the second prong of the strategy. “Negotiations could begin as early as tomorrow if we have an international backing at the London meeting” the minister went on to say to the newspaper. He believed the Taliban were ready to negotiate. “Even at this moment they do sense that it will be impossible for them to return to power”. He said that there were “really quite a large number of [Taliban] who have been coming to the government. With the right sort of assurances, credible assurances, you can see some defections.” While accepting that it will be difficult to work with the Taliban as partners in a government set up, “doing nothing on that front is not an option.” He said Pakistan, which was instrumental in the creation of the Taliban in the 1990s would have to play an important role in bringing about this reconciliation. Bringing the Taliban in will have a financial cost for the international community which the minister estimated at US\$1.2 billion of which US\$200 million will be immediate and another US\$1 billion will be used to enforce whatever understanding was reached with the group. “The cost of peace is many times lower than the cost of war. That is the argument we will present in London”.<sup>4</sup>

Would this strategy work by drawing in the Taliban in sufficiently large numbers to break the momentum the insurgency had gathered in the last 18 months? According to one assessment, “there is a renewed sense of confidence in the NATO mission after a year of drift in which the US and UK-led coalition, by their own admission, lost the initiative across the whole theatre. In the past year the number of NATO casualties has doubled...[But] Gen McChrystal wants to create ‘unstoppable momentum’ in the spring, with eight to 10 districts under control by July 2011.”<sup>5</sup>

Karzai’s move had the support of many Afghan elders, even in the areas such as Arghandab, where the Taliban had been very active. Controlling a mountain pass that leads into the southern city of Kandahar, Arghandab is a pivotal district in the counter-insurgency strategy advocated by General McChrystal that underpinned President Obama’s new approach to Afghanistan. It was general’s aim to drain the Taliban’s energy by denying its fighters access to main population centres in the country. According to one newspaper correspondent who visited the area to see what kind of reaction to expect to the Karzai initiative: “locals support the idea that talks with top Taliban leaders, or programmes to create work for low level fighters, could end the fighting even though there are big obstacles in the path of these initiatives”.<sup>6</sup> General McChrystal had identified 80 districts where he thought it would be possible to “work with (or, if necessary, against) local governors to reclaim authority and freedom of movement. Along with a possible amnesty to ‘non-terrorists’ insurgents willing to lay down their arms, this could pave the way to a settlement”.<sup>7</sup>

The Karzai government took another initiative before the London meeting to reach out to some of the Taliban leaders it thought it could work with. It requested the United Nations Security Council to remove five top Taliban leaders from its list of people subject to sanctions because of their alleged links with *Al-Qaeda*. The sanctions involve a ban on travel,

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<sup>4</sup> Serena Trilling and Fazel Reshad, “Prospect of Taliban talks raised”, *Financial Times*, (27 January 2010), p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Lionel Barber, “Allies rally their forces for spring offensive”, *Financial Times* (29 January 2010), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Mathew Green, “Elders press for early negotiations with the Taliban”, *Financial Times*, (27 January 2010), p. 2. ,

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

a freeze on assets held outside the country and an embargo on obtaining arms. The Security Council announced on 27 January that it had accepted Kabul's request. The leaders involved included Abdul Wakil Mutawakil who was Foreign Minister in the Taliban regime; Faiz Mohammad Faizan, Deputy Commerce Minister in the same cabinet; and Mohammad Musa, Deputy Planning Minister.

As was to be expected, the immediate response to these moves from the higher levels of the Taliban movement was not very helpful in terms of beginning the process of reconciliation. A Taliban spokesperson, Zabiullah Mojahed, rejected claims that talks were underway. "There is no negotiation going on about reintegration plan or forming a political settlement...I don't think there is any chance of negotiations until the foreign infidel troops leave our country."<sup>8</sup>

Also on the eve of the London meeting, the NATO commanders met with the commanders of the Russian and Pakistani armies. "There was feeling in the room that we are getting it right", Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola told reporters after the talks in Brussels. General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, the Chief of Staff of the Pakistani army, who attended the meeting, was reported to have told his colleagues that they had keen interest in the success of the initiative. Kayani was said to be "incredibly in tune" with the approach of US General McChrystal. "That made me believe that the tide is turning", the Italian admiral said in his briefing.<sup>9</sup>

### **The London Meeting**

The London conference was, at best, a half success. According to one western official who attended the meeting "the conference was [about] bringing momentum behind the Karzai government" but was held before the Afghan leader had the time to show that he was changing the course he had followed in the past and had begun to move in the direction favoured by the United States and its NATO allies. In fact, Karzai took some wind out of the sails of the conference by announcing that "he will host another big international conference in Kabul in the spring and that will be a more serious test of how far he has gone on reform".<sup>10</sup>

Suspensions about the effectiveness of the Karzai administration to provide good governance was repeatedly voiced by the speakers at the conference. Western governments pressed the Afghan president to do more in terms of controlling corruption, reminding him that in its 2009 annual report, Transparency International had ranked Afghanistan along with Somalia as the two most corrupt countries in the world.<sup>11</sup> They wanted him to appoint a permanent corruption monitoring and evaluation commission. The Afghans would only accept an *ad hoc* arrangement.

It was clear that President Karzai's main focus was national reconciliation. In the meeting he said that he will hold a "*grand jirga*" to drive forward the process he had initiated aimed at making peace with some of the Taliban. However, the US and European participants in the meeting insisted that any understanding with the Taliban can only occur on the basis of strict conditions. These included "renunciation by insurgents of links with *Al-Qaeda* and of an

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<sup>8</sup> Serena Trilling and Fazel Reshad, "Prospect of Taliban talks raised", *Financial Times* (27 January 2010), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> <http://epaper.dawn.com/ArticleText.aspx?article> (accessed 28 Jan. 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in James Blitz and David Gardner, "Saudi Arabia offers to mediate with insurgents" *Financial Times* (29 January 2010), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Transparency International, *2009 Global Corruption Barometer*, Berlin Germany, 2009.

ideology that suppresses women”.<sup>12</sup> On the question of winning endorsement in his efforts to bring in some of the Taliban into his government, he won only partial support at the conference. Saudi Arabia offered to mediate between Kabul and the Taliban, provided the insurgents broke their ties with *Al-Qaeda*. In terms of assisting the Afghan government with financial resources it could use to bring in the Taliban, the conference participants pledged US\$140 million and placed it in a trust fund. The expectation that the conference would endorse a detailed plan for the pacification of Afghanistan by identifying the districts that would come under the control of the government along with a timeline was also unmet. The final communiqué was vague about both the number of districts and the timetable that was expected to be followed.

## **Conclusion**

Conferences are useful in dealing with post-conflict situations not for planning a strategy for winning the conflict. That is the job of the politicians working behind closed doors and of the generals who are given broad goals to pursue. The London conference did not prove to be an exception to that general rule. In this context there are three “unknowns”: how will most of the Taliban react to the government’s offer to work with them, how successful will the generals be on the ground by freeing and holding some of the more populated areas; and how effective will Pakistan be in stopping the Taliban, who will come under pressure when the snows melt, from slipping into its territory.

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<sup>12</sup> James Blitz, “Karzai to face pressure on strategy” *Financial Times* (28 January), p. 2.