

# Associate Paper

17 March 2011

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## Afghanistan: Shooting and Chewing Gum at the Same Time

**Jason Thomas**

*FDI Associate*

### Summary

In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, T.E. Lawrence wrote ‘... the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they act their dreams with open eyes to make it possible.’ While Lawrence’s extraordinary World War One mission was in Arabia fighting the Turks, his comment epitomises the mindset one is confronted with in Afghanistan when negotiating with the Taliban. The key question is how to look them in the eye and negotiate while fighting at the same time. It has, however, been done before in conflicts such as the Korean War, Northern Ireland and Vietnam.

### Analysis

Even when engaged in war against another tribe, lines of communication in Afghan tribal society are maintained. Dialogue between elders from rival tribes is often what resolves disputes, not military defeat. The key to these negotiations is not just that they are a balance of hard and soft power, it is that they occur at the local level or with leaders who are directly connected with the local population. They are not conducted using the top-down approach upon which the ISAF-NATO Command appears to be focussed, or with individuals who, after years of hiding in Pakistan, have little in common with local Taliban.

Negotiations with the Taliban must first of all be at the local District level and not left to the Quetta Shura and President Hamid Karzai. Second, General Petraeus should increase the use of hard power to drive a lethal spear into the foreign insurgents; and third, as long as the local Taliban leaders do not allow foreign insurgents into their area or permit non-state actors such as al-Qa’ida to re-establish themselves, then the ISAF-NATO forces should not interfere in their community.

If this bottom-up approach were to be seriously implemented, the biggest test will be the enforcement of such an arrangement – for one thing is omnipresent in Afghanistan and that is an Afghan’s propensity to see if foreign forces (whether they be foreign insurgents or ISAF-NATO) have the courage to fulfil their promises.

### ***All politics is local***

Not only is conflict 80 per cent political and 20 per cent military, the 80 per cent in Afghanistan is 100 per cent local. Major Jim Gant was correct in stating that ‘a strategy in which the central government is the centrepiece of our counterinsurgency plan is destined to fail. It disenfranchises the very fabric of Afghan society.’<sup>1</sup> Kabul and President Karzai are so far removed from local society that their negotiations with distant Taliban leaders from Pakistan are unlikely to succeed. The tyranny of distance is not just physical, it is also psychological.

Part of the mistake in the current top down level of strategic thinking in relation to negotiations is that we continue to come at it from a Western democratic mindset. In an anthropological perspective, and at the risk of being elitist, it is anachronistic. We forget that Western democracy has been developed over a long period of history, including numerous revolutions and civil wars that eventually resulted in founding principles cemented in documents such as the *Magna Carta* of 1215, the Bill of Rights of 1689, which followed the deposing of James II, and, of course, the oldest written constitution in the world, the 1787 Constitution of the United States of America. Citizens in every local town in the United States have had over 220 years to recognise and respect their constitution within a free and open society.

Afghan tribes and villagers experienced democracy for the first time in 2004. Yet this has not diminished the primacy of local power and authority in resolving disputes and negotiating local issues. It could well be that because the introduction of democracy, constitution and rules of law to Afghanistan was through foreign intervention rather than an organic revolution, it will take even longer to cement a top-down approach to the rule of law.

Stepping back for a moment, the obvious difference between the insurgency in Afghanistan and that of other civil conflicts in Algeria, Vietnam, Malaya and East Timor is that these insurgencies were a momentous struggle to displace a deeply corrupt government or to break the shackles of colonialism. The motive for the insurgency in Afghanistan is neither of these. The foreign Taliban demand adherence to no ethnicity, no nationality nor necessarily have the same reasons to fight. Some are religiously motivated, such as the Madrassah students from across the Pakistani border in the North-West Frontier Province. Others are “Western home-grown” Islamic students or converts to Islam from Europe who were fighting like many of the foreign elements which entered Iraq to join the al-Qa’ida insurgency and kill Coalition soldiers.

All this reinforces why, combined with a deep and sometimes radical interpretation of Islam, a Western model of governance may never override Afghan local politics, especially when it is infested with foreign extremism.

Why, then, do President Karzai – a Pashtun – and the ISAF-NATO command, continue to pursue a top-down approach by seeking to engage with Pakistan-based Taliban leaders with little or no connection to local tribes or even the local Taliban? Having presidentially-

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<sup>1</sup> Gant, J., 2009, ‘One Tribe at a Time: A Strategy for Success in Afghanistan’.

appointed Governors and District Sub-Governors has only made local politics more treacherous because the tribal elders, Taliban leaders and village citizens have had no say, either democratically or in the traditional sense, in the appointment of these individuals, many of whom are corrupt.

It could be argued that top-level negotiations put pressure on the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), and spread rumours among the Taliban ranks that the leadership is losing heart for the fight. This paper does not suggest an either/or approach. The point is to place as much emphasis on pursuing local solutions as is being placed on the current top-level negotiations.

### ***Local Taliban, Warlord or Governor – Take Your Pick***

We know that the violence in Afghanistan is inflicted by several groups. There are the Pakistan-based foreign insurgents who are funded, fuelled and armed by the ISI and who are a mixture of radicalised foreign extremists being provided with sanctuary in the border areas of Pakistan. Many acts of violence, revenge and intimidation are blamed on the Taliban but are not always the work of the local Taliban. More often, the various warlords, drug barons and criminals wage horrendous violence on anyone who stands in their way. They also have zero interest in peace and stability. In fact, their reason for being is contingent upon mayhem.

As mentioned earlier, there are also the un-elected Governors and Sub-Governors who have almost no affinity with their local populations. Worse still, the local populations have no ability to retain or eject these officials in a plebiscite. The local Taliban know all about counterinsurgency. The dilemma facing the Taliban Commanders in places like Ghazni, when considering whether or not to permit large cash-for-work projects in their area, was that on the one hand they recognised the political credit for allowing locals to work for cash yet, as the Taliban in Quetta relayed back to me through intermediaries, ‘we do not want these men to work, because they will not have time to fight.’ Some Taliban leaders are even encouraging reconstruction projects in areas where the corrupt Provincial Governor is only interested in lining his own pockets with international aid money instead of rebuilding the lives of local people. The former Governor of Ghazni was furious when he discovered that the first large-scale cash-for-work project in the province that he agreed to meant paying the labourers directly, and not through his office.

Vanda Felbab-Brown, from the Brookings Institute, makes a number of obvious points in her 2009 paper *Negotiations and Reconciliation with the Taliban: The Key Policy Issues and Dilemmas*.<sup>2</sup> She uses the example of the Chora district in Uruzgan Province, a violent region with a strong Taliban presence, where an effort to sponsor reconciliation and address discrimination has been successfully employed. It is local issues, such as the paucity of good governance, tribally-motivated discrimination, the lack of dispute resolution mechanisms and rule of law, and the corruption of the Afghan police and government officials that have

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<sup>2</sup> Felbab-Brown, V., ‘Negotiations and Reconciliations with the Taliban: The Key Policy Issues and Dilemmas’, Brookings Institute, 2009.

alienated so many from the government, not the division of national power, that is central to fewer local men joining the fight.

If the local Taliban agree not to host al-Qa'ida or other trans-national terrorist organisations in their local district, then what is the difference between them, a warlord or a Governor, in the context of Afghanistan?

The simplicity of life in Afghanistan is a camouflage for an ability to prevail against asymmetrical and conventional threats. It also hides the significance of external cues in an otherwise complex environment that would appear to be irreconcilable. This is because the local people, not the foreign Pakistan-based insurgents, continue to maintain the code of honour that has prevailed against all foes, domestic and foreign, from the beginning of tribal history in Afghanistan.

### ***Lessons from other conflicts***

The United States and United Kingdom are both experienced at fighting while negotiating at the same time. The United States continued to negotiate while fighting in Korea and Vietnam. The Korean and Vietnam wars involved two years of negotiations in the former conflict and five years in the latter. The UK engaged in hard and soft power during the 30 year-long conflict in Northern Ireland.

One of the unsung heroes of the Korean War was Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy, the first head of the United Nations delegation to the Korean Armistice Conference. In his diary, Admiral Joy sets out how difficult it is to negotiate while fighting. He was prevented from implementing his belief.

Like dealing with leaders within the Afghanistan tribal system, only firmness would induce the Communists to agree to a ceasefire that would last. Consequently, the North Koreans saw that the UN Command's position was constantly open to change and, therefore, appeared to be weak. Just like the Taliban, the North Koreans hoped that time and intransigence would erode American resolve.<sup>3</sup>

In 2009, particularly from the United Kingdom, comparisons began to emerge between the Taliban and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland. Yet the reality of what happened in Northern Ireland was much more complex. Timing was everything and talking to the IRA was often counterproductive: undermining moderates and encouraging the terrorists to think that they had the initiative. Western negotiators can also dream with their eyes wide open. It was only in the 1990s, after nearly thirty years of violence that the right conditions for dialogue were meticulously established. Crucially, this was only after a long-haul security campaign had fought the IRA into a state of acquiescence.

Not surprisingly, the implementation of any peace deal is more difficult than the effort required for signing the peace deal in the first place. In the case of Afghanistan, deals and

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<sup>3</sup> Goodman, A. E., (ed.), *Negotiating While Fighting: The Diary of Admiral Joy at the Korean Armistice Conference*, Hoover Institution Press, 1978.

double-deals are part of survival. Negotiations have always been at the local level, rather than resolving a national crisis.

How many civil wars do we know of that resulted in lasting peace? In most cases, combatants chose to walk away from the negotiating table and return to war. In *Committing to Peace*, Barbara F. Walter points out that civil war combatants almost always chose to return to war unless a third party stepped in to enforce or verify a post-treaty transition. In those instances where a third party assisted with implementation, negotiations almost always succeeded, regardless of the initial goals, ideology or ethnicity of the participants. If a third party did not assist, the talks almost always failed.<sup>4</sup> Bosnia is a good example, where it took the intervention of the United States and United Kingdom, along with the UN, to not only deliver hard power, but also to bring about a negotiated settlement and then to keep that settlement in place. The challenge in the case of Afghanistan is who would be that third party. That is, you need a third party to enforce coercion and, at times, demonstrate incentives in co-operation.

### **Conclusion**

Not only do we need a better strategy to fight and negotiate at the same time, we need to identify if a reliable third party with enough regional clout can be brought into the negotiations to enable them to be successful. What makes Afghanistan more difficult is that these negotiations need to take place at the local level. Most importantly, given our long and costly experience with warlords and corrupt Governors, a local peace deal with the Taliban may prove just as effective. If the local Taliban could guarantee that they will not permit transnational terrorists to remain in their districts, the international community could, in return, offer to respect their right to live their own lives. That could be a better indication of success than the pursuit of an incorruptible Afghan Government. The key question is how to enforce this agreement over the long term.

A continuation of hard power is required, and that is only now reaching its full capacity with the implementation of the troop surge. Unfortunately, all the political signals are that troops will begin to be drawn down in the middle of 2011. That is not long enough to deliver the required hard power deep enough into local areas to make negotiations truly effective.

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**About the author:** Jason Thomas was born in Wollongong, NSW and in 1996 completed his Master of Arts (with Distinction) at Otago University, Dunedin, New Zealand. On graduation, Jason became a campaign strategist and advisor to senior political figures in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

In Afghanistan, Jason implemented counterinsurgency activities with US and Coalition forces. In 2009, he delivered \$3 million worth of medical equipment to the civil war area in Sri Lanka, work which also

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<sup>4</sup> Walter, B.F., *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

involved negotiating with the Tamil Tigers. In 2005, Jason was nominated Citizen of the Year and awarded a Paul Harris Fellowship for his efforts in initiating a Sri Lankan post-tsunami relief effort. In 2006, Jason was a Queen's Relay Baton Runner for the Commonwealth Games and, in 2008, he implemented the Kokoda Track Project for disadvantaged youth. Jason is a PhD candidate at Curtin University.

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Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.  
Desborough House, Suite 2, 1161 Hay Street, West Perth WA 6005 Australia.  
Tel: +61 8 9486 1046 Fax: +61 8 9486 4000  
E-mail: [lluke@futuresdirections.org.au](mailto:lluke@futuresdirections.org.au) Web: [www.futuresdirections.org.au](http://www.futuresdirections.org.au)