

Reconciliation and research in Afghanistan: an analytical narrative

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Introduction

The idea of pursuing negotiations with the Taliban, or ‘reconciliation’ as it has been termed in the Afghan context, is now supported by all major Western nations operating in Afghanistan, even if the implementation of the policy has been fraught with difficulties and only tentative progress toward formal negotiations has been made.¹ Talking to the Taliban² has become one of the most controversial issues of the war. The subject has generated heated debate, particularly in recent years as the possibility of talks has risen. In 2007, a leading Afghan expert, Professor William Maley, could state that talking to the Taliban would be ‘an extraordinarily high risk strategy’ and that ‘we may all rue the day when the idea of dealing with the Taliban was first mooted.’³ This reflected the opinion of most Western governments from the time of the 2001 intervention. Yet, within the space of roughly three years, key figures in the United Kingdom (UK) government would be openly pushing for talks, and around a year later, on 28 November 2010, United States (US) officials first formally met with Taliban representatives. How had this fundamental policy shift come about and what role did research, expert knowledge and scholarship play?

‘Very little’, might be the intuitive answer. Sceptics would likely point to the apparent failure of military operations to seriously stem the Taliban’s expansion and the resulting concern among Western policymakers. Pursuing a political settlement appeared the only viable course that might preserve stability and prevent the Taliban dominating large parts of Afghanistan. Given these conditions within which officials operated, evidence of research influence can perhaps be considered all the more

remarkable. It might be assumed policy would be driven more by, at best, professional diplomatic judgement, intuition and political acumen and, at worst, short-term expediency, reactive decision-making or subjective assumptions. Moreover, the political sensitivity and associated secrecy surrounding talks with rebel groups and terrorists, especially in the post-9/11 context, is a well-known feature of foreign policy, potentially limiting access into officialdom for those lacking appropriate clearances. The potential for outside expert opinion to affect decision-makers might be assumed to be low.

Nevertheless, a closer analysis reveals a more nuanced and complex story and one in which research⁴ and expert knowledge has coalesced, sometimes prominently, with other key drivers to spur policy change. Here we are concerned with the broad adoption of reconciliation by international actors, principally the US and the UK, rather than detailed issues surrounding potential negotiations or more recent developments. This article does not provide a comprehensive history of reconciliation, engage with issues related to its implementation or question whether policy was wise or practicable. Rather it seeks to explore how Western approaches evolved and the ways policymakers have engaged with relevant research and analysis.

This case is interesting in two other principal respects. First, it reveals the difficulty and complexity of, yet also the opportunities for and routes to, achieving research influence in conflict-affected environments. Such contexts are typified by, amongst other things, the fast pace of events, high levels of risk and the existence of numerous actors with varying levels of authority possessing multiple political agendas not necessarily geared toward a central strategic objective. Second, the case also strongly conveys the reciprocal, non-linear and dynamic relationship between research, policy change and the subsequent further evolution of research.

The article presents an analytical narrative, based on in-depth interviews and documentary analysis, of the major phases of policy approaches to reconciliation up to and including 2011, exploring the development of policy positions and the way research has or has not influenced and interacted with policy. In general terms, the policy has evolved through initial rejection to near complete embrace of *exploring* the potential for negotiations. This shift did not happen overnight but evolved through a number of iterations, and was adopted at different points by members of the coalition.

Triumphalism and Hubris: 2001-06

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a statement by the American Episcopalians implored the US government to 'wage reconciliation' in response, but it was unclear on whom such reconciliation should be waged.⁵ Perhaps it could have included the supposedly 'moderate' Taliban that Pakistan was trying to persuade the Bush administration to engage with?⁶ Indeed, coaxed by Pakistani military intelligence, the CIA mistakenly believed it might be possible to woo defectors who would 'rise to denounce Mullah Omar [the Taliban leader], hand over bin Laden to the Americans, and join a new coalition government in Kabul.'⁷ President Bush delivered an ultimatum to the Taliban on 20 September to hand over all Al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan or face military action.⁸ The Taliban refused and instead suggested talks, which the US promptly rejected.⁹ Further attempts by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were made during the bombing campaign to promote a compromise. Well-crafted initiatives along these lines might have succeeded: apparently, top Talibs, including influential commander Mullah Baradar, sent a letter of surrender to Karzai in late 2001.¹⁰ Although the US administration did leave a bridge open to the Taliban should they choose to 'do the right thing' and split with Al-Qaeda,¹¹ such initiatives were unlikely to succeed given America's resolve to punish those who had been either directly or indirectly responsible for the horrifying and audacious attacks that September.

US-led forces ousted the Taliban in December 2001 and an Interim Administration was installed through the UN-brokered Bonn Agreement. In the first months after the 2001 military intervention up to the Emergency Loya Jirga in June 2002, the international consensus was that the Taliban had been comprehensively defeated and it was neither necessary nor wise to pursue negotiations. While 'national reconciliation' was mentioned in the Bonn Accords, it was meant only in the very loose sense as creating the foundations for lasting peace.¹² Bonn was not a peace agreement and Britain's former ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, has described it as a 'victors' peace'.¹³ Despite widespread agreement among most commentators and policymakers that to include the Taliban in a peace process would have been mistaken, impracticable and potentially destabilizing, as the ensuing insurgency intensified some would come to regret that decision and suggest that the

most opportune time to engage the Taliban was missed. Two prominent figures in the crafting of the Bonn settlement, Lakhdar Brahimi and Fransesc Vendrell, would both later admit that leaving Taliban out of Bonn was a big mistake.¹⁴

The Taliban put out feelers to the interim Afghan government in 2002 but the US instructed Karzai to ignore them. Antonio Giustozzi notes that some Taliban in early 2002 ‘were waiting for some “offer” from Kabul (presumably for power sharing). Which never came. Hence they were forced to resort to violence.’¹⁵ Giustozzi is sceptical of claims that the Taliban could have been included in the Bonn process given that they were ‘in a state of disarray at the end of 2001 and it would not have been in a position to win significant representation in the new Transitional Administration.’¹⁶

Regardless, such retrospective analysis is of course no use to those making decisions at the time. There is no evidence of serious analysis advocating talks at that stage. Reports produced by organisations such as the International Crisis Group (ICG) did not seriously consider or advocate for Taliban inclusion in the peace process, but rather focused their analysis on priorities for security, democratic transition and post-conflict humanitarian and reconstruction needs. What opportunities existed to engage the Taliban in the immediate post-intervention period – such as described by Lucy Morgan Edwards¹⁷ – were squandered, and not because policymakers were ignoring any expert advice: such advice did not exist.

Even if there had existed experts advocating Taliban inclusion, there are strong reasons to believe that policymakers would not have been receptive. As Ahmed Rashid relates, the Bush administration acted not based on analysis, but on ideology.¹⁸ In the aftermath of 9/11, they had promoted the zero-sum rhetoric of ‘you are either with us or against us’ and branded the Taliban as evil. This rhetorical stance largely closed off any possibility of political outreach. Furthermore, this was an administration dominated by the Department of Defense with respect to the formulation of US foreign policy, thus limiting the opportunities for diplomatic initiatives.¹⁹ So, in 2001 and early 2002 a number of factors militated against any form of settlement involving the Taliban, in particular: the outcome of the military intervention resulting in the triumphant defeat of the unpopular Taliban regime; the political situation in Afghanistan, with virulently anti-Taliban Northern Alliance leaders filling the political vacuum; and the balance of power in US foreign policy

with the Pentagon calling the shots while simultaneously turning its gaze towards Mesopotamia.

Eyes elsewhere

It is now well known that following the apparently successful prosecution of the military campaign in late 2001, the Bush administration quickly shifted their focus to what for many neo-conservatives was the real foreign policy priority: Iraq. Continuing American operations in Afghanistan focused narrowly on hunting down the remnants of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: essentially, those now deemed ‘outside’ the political process.²⁰ The resultant neglect of Afghanistan not only contributed to many of the mistakes that would later bedevil international efforts there, but also meant few appreciated the ominous signs of a growing Taliban resurgence in the south of the country. As Giustozzi explains, the ‘Neo-Taliban insurgency’ was not taken seriously as the US ‘had other places in the world in their sights ... [and] Afghans were relying on what they perceived as the overwhelming power of the United States to rid them of their enemies.’²¹

In Afghanistan, peacebuilding and statebuilding actors were preoccupied with seeing that the various elements of the Bonn process were implemented on schedule, such as building functioning state institutions and establishing security. ‘Reconciliation’ in this period, amongst researchers, was mainly concerned with issues of transitional justice, impunity and ethnic alienation, rather than any serious consideration of political engagement with the Taliban. Research and analysis similarly focused on the details of typical post-war reconstruction activities. The Taliban movement was considered to have been comprehensively defeated and sporadic attacks were dismissed as the last gasps of a spent force: ironically, Rumsfeld announced an end to major combat operations just as the insurgency was making its comeback.²² International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops were mainly confined to Kabul and had little presence in the provinces due to the ‘light footprint’ approach that had been adopted. Some observers warned of a rising threat from the insurgency, but the prevailing opinion was that a little more attention on the security and peacebuilding fronts would lead to stability and undermine any Taliban comeback.²³ Optimistic predictions of improving governance, spreading security and economic development dominated the policy discourse. No prominent Western

policymakers, commentators or experts were proposing political engagement with the Taliban.

As the insurgency mounted after 2003, Karzai sought to bring in moderate Talibs through secret negotiations but these efforts met with little success.²⁴ The ‘Program for Strengthening Peace’ was established in 2005 to attract rank and file Taliban and, by October 2006, 2,600 supposed fighters had been given certification letters under this scheme, but most had not been active since 2001 and were predominantly refugees trying to return to Afghanistan. Karzai made public statements ostensibly encouraging ‘reconciliation’ – such as his much publicized January 2006 plea for Mullah Omar and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to return and live in peace – but these were largely theatrical gestures rather than genuine attempts at deal-making.²⁵ From the international perspective, there was a palpable shirking of responsibility on the issue: the Western position was that any reconciliation efforts should be Afghan-led.

America especially was not supportive of anything that smacked of political dealings with the Taliban and actively discouraged Karzai, although it tolerated Afghan government amnesties for low-level fighters. Throughout this period, ‘reconciliation’ for the US remained a way to draw off members of the Taliban who were not inclined to fight. Nevertheless, one of the earliest public statements in support of talks came towards the end of 2006, when Republican Senator Bill Frist stated that negotiations with members of the Taliban might be necessary based on his assessment, following a tour to Afghanistan, that a purely military approach was unlikely to succeed. However, this was a rare opinion at that time and the senator’s proposal was not for comprehensive high-level talks, but rather something similar to what Karzai had been attempting for some time: offering routes out of the movement for reconcilable Talibs, while using force against those who refused.²⁶

With the Taliban insurgency not seen as a major threat to the Afghan state, any suggestion of negotiating with the movement would have been seen as risible amongst both politicians and their electorates in the West. Likewise, and probably reflecting this assumption, next to no research or expert opinion suggesting such a course appeared. An ICG report raised the issue of Pashtun marginalization in the new political dispensation, but this was presented as a problem of Panjshiri Tajik domination of post-war politics rather than of any putative failure to engage the Taliban politically.²⁷

The Military Approach Dominates: 2006-08

2006 witnessed a major escalation in the insurgency manifested in suicide bombings and the increased use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Western observers began to comprehend the seriousness of the insurgency, yet at this point ‘it was not yet evident that it was a full scale war.’²⁸ Since 2003 there had been a steady expansion of ISAF beyond Kabul but 2006 saw a major reinvestment by the alliance, demonstrated by the decision to deploy around 6,000 British troops to Helmand in April. However, the international coalition underestimated the strength and tenacity of enemy forces; the initial summer push to defeat the resurgent Taliban did not succeed and thereafter additional troops were deployed to combat the growing threat.

With the large deployments of military forces, a new phase set in – which would hold sway for two or three years – marked by the prevailing belief in the ability of military force to defeat the insurgency.²⁹ Through repeated offensives, the military believed crucial progress was being made. However, troops would clear an area of Taliban only for them to return, which led to accusations that military efforts were akin to ‘mowing the grass’.³⁰ Between 2006 and 2008 the security situation deteriorated – a number of districts were lost to Taliban control, violence escalated and the insurgency spread across Afghanistan. Despite this, there was a tendency to trust in ‘one more push’ or the next new strategy. Given the military’s dominance over Afghanistan policy, diplomatic efforts were somewhat overshadowed. At this time, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown insisted there would be no talks with Taliban. Military triumphalism and optimism prevailed.³¹

Yet there is evidence that some officials were starting to question the existing approach.³² Indeed, reports of secret exploratory talks engineered by British intelligence agents in mid-2007 emerged later that year.³³ In December, two diplomats were expelled for engaging in supposedly unsanctioned discussions with the Taliban in Helmand (apparently focused on the limited objective of engaging Talibs that might be persuaded to talk). In a March 2008 interview, the British Defence Secretary Des Browne discussed the need to think about talking to the Taliban but his comments were general and non-committal.³⁴

This apparent sense of growing unease in (mainly British) official circles, while clearly a reaction to the faltering military situation, may well have been influenced by the steady rise in experts, academics and informed commentators beginning to question the military strategy and raising the issues of talks. Yet, prominent academics remained sceptical of any form of reconciliation strategy. In an October 2007 opinion piece in the *New York Times*, respected Afghan scholar Professor Amin Saikal implored policymakers not to ‘cave into the Taliban.’³⁵ Similarly, Professor Maley believed the solution lay not in talking to the Taliban – something still largely anathema within US policy circles – but in dealing with the sanctuary and support provided to insurgents by Pakistan.³⁶

Toward Talking: 2008-10

International troop numbers had risen from 36,000 in 2006 to 70,000 in 2008. This had done little to push back the Taliban and in fact 2008 would prove to be the most violent to that date, registering the highest death toll for US and NATO troops. There were a series of high profile attacks, including against the Serena Hotel and the Indian Embassy, and difficult battles took place in Kunar Province with serious casualties among US troops. Perhaps reflecting the increasingly desperate security situation, that year saw some attempted exploratory moves among international actors toward political engagement with the Taliban (who were at that point apparently seriously contemplating talks).³⁷ In April 2008, reconciliation principles were drawn up by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Policy Action Group (PAG).³⁸ In late 2008, political contacts, hosted by Saudi Arabia, were made between Karzai and Taliban representatives. This was one of the first attempts at movement toward a general settlement but little real progress was made and the US refused to endorse or participate in the meetings.

The Canadian government was an early proponent of exploring the possibility of negotiations. A June 2008 official report to parliament stated that military means alone were insufficient and that one of the government’s priorities would be to ‘facilitate Afghan-led efforts toward political reconciliation.’³⁹ However, this view was not shared in the UK and US. A 2009 UK Foreign Affairs Committee report claimed that talks were not possible until more ground had been made in operations

against the Taliban, although this certainly suggested negotiation was now being discussed within policy circles.⁴⁰ Crucially, the US remained wholly opposed to the idea, despite begrudgingly recognising the need to improve reintegration efforts for so-called ‘moderate Taliban’.⁴¹

Serious doubts about the military campaign were being raised by figures within the armed forces, such as British Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith’s widely publicised remark that, ‘We’re not going to win this war’. He went on to say that the aim might be to simply put the Taliban in a position where talks might be possible: ‘If the Taliban were prepared to sit on the other side of the table and talk about a political settlement, then that’s precisely the sort of progress that concludes insurgencies like this. That shouldn’t make people uncomfortable.’⁴²

Paralleling these developments, 2008 and 2009 were important years in terms of emerging research on reconciliation. In quite quick succession a number of important and influential studies, articles and opinion pieces emerged, all of which, amongst other things, and some more strongly than others, raised the possibility of talks as a serious option. The context of this was what many identified as a rapidly deteriorating security situation, exacerbated by failed statebuilding efforts, poor governance, patchy and insufficient development gains and insurgent expansion across the country.

A major conflict assessment exercise titled ‘Understanding Afghanistan’ – commissioned by the UK government, conducted under the auspices of the Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU) at the University of York, and involving a number of established Afghanistan experts – concluded that ‘little progress with security, economic development or social inclusion is likely to be achieved without the incorporation of the Taliban into the government’ and that a ‘more inclusive post-Bonn political process is of critical importance.’⁴³ At around the same time, an article in *Foreign Affairs* by Barnett Rubin and Rashid pointed toward the necessity of a ‘major diplomatic initiative involving all the regional stakeholders in problem-solving talks’ and advocated ‘exploratory talks and an evolving road map.’⁴⁴ Also, in a USIP report published in September 2008, Mohammad Stanekzai argued that ‘comprehensive and coordinated political reconciliation process must be started.’⁴⁵

This trend was continued through 2009. In an article in *Survival* in February 2009, Adam Roberts noted that ‘negotiation in some form with some of the insurgent

groups and factions is inevitable.’⁴⁶ Similarly, in *Strategic Analysis*, Mariet D’Souza described the move towards reconciliation, including negotiating with insurgents, as a policy option that ‘many international and Afghan analysts are increasingly proposing and that is gaining currency’.⁴⁷ After outlining existing initiatives and potential obstacles to reconciliation, D’Souza proposed reorienting the military effort to support a durable political process encompassing not only dissident groups but other alienated communities.⁴⁸ Thomas Ruttig of the Afghan Analysts Network also argued that ‘the current Afghan insurgency cannot be stopped or overcome by military means’ and, amongst other requirements, advocated talks to ‘achieve a political accommodation with the insurgents to end the war.’⁴⁹ Afghanistan expert Michael Semple published his book, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, which argued that there needed to be a shift from co-option to accommodation and a strategic approach toward a comprehensive peace (although he believed there was no imminent hope of a settlement).⁵⁰

Of course there was a great deal more detail contained in these works than conveyed above, but the key point is that this emerging body of work by acknowledged Afghanistan experts constituted an important intellectual foundation for the subsequent shifts in policy that would soon materialise. The central message was consistent and persuasive. Over the course of the following years such research and informed opinion would have a cumulative impact through the intermittent release of articles, statements, opinion pieces and briefings by respected analysts possessing credibility and experience. One expert described this as a ‘gradual process of attrition’, which interacts with other powerful forces shaping policy, and that slowly creates pressures on diplomats and officials to pay heed to the emerging consensus.⁵¹

The Brits break out

In Britain, these developments would coalesce to bring about a significant shift in policy – prior to that in the US – that hardened over the course of the next two years, moving from outright rejection of talks through growing support for a strategy of cooption (‘reintegration’) and then to one essentially, albeit tentatively, endorsing high-level talks.

A moment which captured the intermediate stage in this transition was a speech by Foreign Secretary David Miliband in mid-2009. Miliband spoke about the need for a political solution alongside the military offensive to draw in moderate Taliban. He argued this required,

a political strategy for dealing with the insurgency through reintegration and reconciliation. That means in the long term an inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan, which draws away conservative Pashtun nationalists - separating those who want Islamic rule locally from those committed to violent jihad globally ...'

He went on to explain that 'we need ... a more coherent effort to fragment the various elements of the insurgency, and turn those who can be reconciled to live within the Afghan Constitution.'⁵² Following Miliband's speech, in August 2009, Prime Minister Brown announced a new reconciliation strategy to persuade Taliban fighters not committed to a radical agenda to switch sides and which was formally embraced at the London Conference in January 2010.⁵³ These initial steps culminated in Miliband's March 2010 speech in America in which he stated that 'now is the time for the Afghans to pursue a political settlement with as much vigour and energy as we are pursuing the military and civilian effort.'⁵⁴ As Jonathan Steele recounts, the then British special representative Cowper-Coles had played an important role in persuading Miliband to propose talks in his speech.⁵⁵ This was the furthest any Western politician had gone in proposing negotiations and the position was not immediately endorsed by the American administration or even Miliband's own boss, Gordon Brown.

The Labour government certainly prompted an important shift in policy but the official line was still limited to coopting elements of the insurgency while defeating hardline fighters militarily. It was not until after the formation of the new coalition government in May 2010, under the premiership of David Cameron, that increased energy was invested in the idea of talks and new opportunities emerged. A window opened up with the creation of the National Security Council (NSC) which allowed for a move away from a military focus toward a more balanced approach which could finesse the nascent political strategy that was gaining traction among senior British politicians.⁵⁶ Cameron also promoted an open-minded approach to

foreign policy issues, holding seminars and workshops to garner the views of outside experts.⁵⁷

So, what role did expert opinion and research play in this process? Interviews with British policymakers working on reconciliation indicated that they were interacting directly with a wide variety of forms of research on the topic. In terms of written works, a diverse mixture of outputs including high-profile books, formal reports and articles were drawn upon and widely read at various levels of seniority, much of it filtered and condensed in internally produced research summaries by influential intermediaries such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's research analysts. Indeed, within government departments, the overall impression was of a healthy and proactive appetite for reading research on the subject. Perhaps surprisingly, those at highest levels, including at ambassadorial level, appear to have been most engaged: this probably reflects the time pressures on more junior staff, tasked with managing discrete projects.⁵⁸

Beyond written research, perhaps as and maybe more important was the direct exchange of expert knowledge through workshops, conferences, seminars, informal discussions and private briefings. For instance, an August 2009 meeting in Kabul to discuss Semple's new book (mentioned above) was apparently well-attended by diplomats.⁵⁹ Cowper-Coles draws attention in his book to the so-called 'Afghan conference industry' and he recounts meeting with scholars such as Sir Michael Howard and Sir Max Hastings and Afghanistan experts such as Barnett Rubin and Giles Dorransoro, whom he claimed 'knew the insurgency better than any British or American intelligence analyst.'⁶⁰

Of particular interest is the relatively small network of analysts and experts that helped to shape the emergent discourse on reconciliation. British policymakers described consulting a somewhat limited, select group of trusted people, especially those capable of talking clearly and straightforwardly to policymakers.⁶¹ These people included important distillers of research and journalistic opinion shapers such as Rashid and James Ferguson who enjoyed privileged access and were capable of producing short, timely, clearly written and informed pieces that resonated well with officials.⁶² Rashid's opinion was especially influential given the huge popularity of his book, *Descent into chaos* – one of the earliest books to detail the faltering Afghan campaign and required reading for anyone working on the region.⁶³ Also, various Afghanistan experts such as Giustozzi, Semple, Anatol Lieven and Alex Strick van

Linschoten were active in influencing the highest levels of British policymaking.⁶⁴ Research and expert opinion was also feeding into policy debate via other channels, such as through the findings of House of Commons select committee inquiries. Prominent experts such as Theo Farrell, Peter Mansfield, Gerard Russell, Matt Waldman and Giles Dorransoro gave testimony at these inquiries and the final reports were apparently taken seriously by British policymakers.⁶⁵

At the higher levels of policymaking, key personalities could have a significant impact on dominant approaches. It was suggested in interviews that Brown's personal character traits placed restrictions on his openness to talks, preferring a cautious approach, while his focus was on troop casualties and winning the next election.⁶⁶ What progress was made was arguably more due to the efforts of more open-minded and proactive ministers such as Miliband. Under Cameron, it was apparent that well-placed acquaintances of his who were working on Afghanistan, such as Ferguson, were granted significant access and invited to brief ministers. Key reconciliation advocates – or 'policy entrepreneurs' – within the British system, such as Cowper-Coles, were able to lobby politicians over time and generally promote the move towards reconciliation. Such figures were avid consumers of research and new ideas, either gained through published studies or personal briefings, and they skillfully deployed such knowledge where necessary to help persuade undecided officials.⁶⁷

A British political officer in Kabul noted how reconciliation was 'an idea that seeped into the bloodstream somewhere' but that it is not possible to point to any specific piece that prompted it.⁶⁸ Once policy began to shift there emerged a real appetite for studies on the subject. Government agencies commissioned new research projects and increasingly engaged with knowledgeable analysts on the subject. As one FCO official based in Kabul put it, 'Once the idea got going then people start talking about all this.'⁶⁹ In this way, research could be seen as moving with prevailing policy concerns. To summarise somewhat crudely: as concerns over the military effort grew within official circles researchers sensed there would be audiences within government on potential talks, resulting in the emergence of the initial body of work after 2008; that research, along with other important situational factors, played an important role in persuading certain well-placed officials and politicians to advocate, both behind closed doors and publicly, for exploring the possibility of negotiations; and subsequently researchers responded to those tentative moves in policy circles and this was manifested in the upsurge in work on reconciliation after 2010.

American Ambiguity to Acceptance: 2009-11

While British policy was undergoing a significant shift between 2008 and 2010, in the US there was little sign of movement on reconciliation. The Bush administration had displayed a distinct lack of focus on Afghanistan and the military dominance over policy presented a crucial obstacle to the articulation of a more political approach. It would take Obama's election to properly recommit America to the issue, but even then change would take time. Also, the UK would play an important role in advocating talks to US policymakers. It was only toward the end of 2010 and the start of 2011 that the US finally began to warm to the idea. By that time a critical mass of expert opinion was arguing for negotiations and beginning to detail potential routes forward.

Obama reviews policy

Obama's 2009 reviews of US policy toward Afghanistan (and Pakistan) involved very little discussion of the possibility of a political approach – Bob Woodward's account in *Obama's wars* reveals the odd, throw-away reference but the issue, it appears, was never seriously considered.⁷⁰ There was some discussion about low-level reintegration of Taliban fighters but nothing much beyond. A civilian/military divide on the issue was apparent, with military figures decidedly sceptical about talks while tentatively supportive civilians were sidelined. This reflected not only the dominance of the military in decision-making but also political sensitivities associated with the assumed ongoing and strong links between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which prevented US decision-makers from looking at the prospect of engagement seriously.⁷¹

The sheer magnitude of the resources commanded by the US military in Afghanistan meant it was dominant on Afghan policy and senior commanders held to the line that talks would only be possible after the Taliban had been decimated. Rashid describes how the military and CIA were decidedly less enthusiastic than the diplomatic service about talks; he notes that the military's preferred option was to stay on the offensive for as long as possible.⁷² Semple explains how from a military

perspective, reconciliation was generally seen as a way of splitting the insurgency and notes how the three references to reconciliation in the influential Counterinsurgency Manual ‘stress the need to “eliminate,” “kill,” or “neutralize irreconcilables and extremists.”’⁷³ He claimed a ‘security-dominated version of reconciliation’ was destined to fail as military pressure only works if it is backed up by a credible and complementary reconciliation strategy, which was not in place for the surge.⁷⁴

The military’s dominance over Afghan policy helps explain why the growing body of research and expert opinion that was evident at this time (outlined above) failed to take hold in the US system. Interviews revealed that the military is far from research shy and does consume large amounts of information through various parts of the organisation, both in theatre and centrally.⁷⁵ Moreover, Sarah Chayes argues it would be mistaken to paint the military as monolithic, plus its reluctance to pursue negotiations was not simply due to a belief in the efficacy of force but also due to serious concerns over both the feasibility of talks as well as being seen to reward Pakistan’s ‘policy of using extremist violence [through Taliban proxies] to advance its objectives’.⁷⁶

Yet, this has to be balanced against the military’s ultimately rejectionist position, which was linked to prevailing cultural and organisational factors constituting serious barriers to the effective digestion of research. In detailing such shortcomings, Matt Waldman has highlighted serious deficiencies in institutional memory, key advisers appointed because of their biases in favouring military-led counter-insurgency approaches, a reluctance to convey bad news to superiors, and the practice of retrofitting information to preconceived agendas.⁷⁷ Regarding the latter point, Waldman notes how ‘General Petraeus evidently ignored findings about the strength of the Taliban, the futility of counter-insurgency efforts and the need for reconciliation that were reached by the analytical team he himself had established at US Central Command.’⁷⁸ Chayes similarly claims the military ‘predictably defaulted to the traditional “can-do” attitude.’⁷⁹

America comes on board

Nonetheless, a change in the US position on reconciliation occurred throughout the course of 2010. If 2009 had been dominated by debate over the surge then 2010 was the year of talking about talks behind closed doors. The ultimate outcome of this

would become apparent in early 2011 as the administration began to unveil its new approach to political reconciliation.

In early 2010, the US was maintaining that there would be no reconciliation with the Taliban. All eyes were on the large February Marjah campaign in Helmand and the Kandahar campaign later that year – both were expected to break the back of the insurgency. Indeed, James Dobbins notes how, ‘in early 2010 ... the very concept of talking to the enemy was controversial in official circles and little discussed beyond them.’⁸⁰ Richard Holbrooke, US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP), was still insisting there would be no reconciliation, but that reintegration should move forward: the position adopted at the London Conference in January. The military argued that it needed more time while emphasising the political cost if negotiations were to fail. A *Guardian* article noted that ‘whatever the latest thinking in the White House might be, David Petraeus, the new US commander of Nato forces in Afghanistan seems interested in making the fight against the Taliban last as long as possible.’⁸¹ Moreover, amongst expert opinion there were still sceptical voices, which provided a measure of intellectual support for the military’s position. For instance, Audrey Cronin of the US National War College believed talks were pointless because there would be no negotiable terms⁸² and conservative commentators at organisations such as the American Enterprise Institute continued to champion the military approach.⁸³

Yet by the middle of the year, the administration appeared to be beginning to come around to the idea of talks – even if not officially – although there was still no agreed US position. By that time it had more or less become ‘conventional wisdom in Kabul that the West will have to make compromises with insurgents that once would have been unthinkable.’⁸⁴ Indeed, Dorronsoro suggested that the ‘U.S. command’s optimistic assessments of the situation in Afghanistan are out of step with the vast majority of independent experts’ reports and witness accounts collected in Afghanistan.’⁸⁵

A number of initiatives were conducted that year, all of which underscored how seriously the issue was now being taken. Perhaps most influentially, Thomas Pickering and Lakhdar Brahimi co-chaired a task force hosted by the Century Fund which included consultations with a wide range of Afghanistan experts and scholars.⁸⁶ The Afghanistan Study Group released a widely publicised report in August 2010 which argued that ‘the U.S. should fast-track a peace process designed to decentralize

power within Afghanistan and encourage a power-sharing balance among the principal parties.⁸⁷ The findings were supported by a wide range of scholars who were listed at the end of the report. Simultaneously, a series of workshops in mid-2010 entitled ‘Anticipating a Political Process in Afghanistan’ organised by independent analyst, Minna Jarvenpaa, were attended by UN, US and UK officials and involved presentations by established experts working on Afghanistan: the consensus at the meetings for moving forward with negotiations was clear.⁸⁸

This activity was supported by a number of studies and influential opinion pieces which emerged throughout the course of 2010, building on those discussed above. The majority of prominent Afghan experts by that time believed that a military solution was no longer realistic and there was a concomitant need to explore negotiations. For instance, Dorronsoro argued the surge would not succeed in defeating the Taliban and that the US should not waste any more time in pursuing talks.⁸⁹ Similarly, Matt Waldman published a piece, funded by the Canadian government, which concluded that ‘given the constraints of counterinsurgency and transition strategies as well as the deteriorating security situation, the Afghan-international coalition should seek to engage in direct or indirect exploratory talks with the Taliban.’⁹⁰ Often the authors of such studies were invited to brief US officials or present their findings at workshops and conferences attended by policymakers: such opportunities were crucial as a means of influencing policy as officials rarely have the time to read entire written reports and themselves attest to the advantages of face-to-face interaction in building trust and enabling mutually beneficial dialogue.⁹¹

A notable feature of the most influential analysis on potential negotiations was its provenance from amongst experts working specifically in or on Afghanistan. While this might be expected, there is little evidence of the more general and voluminous academic literature on political settlements, peace processes or conflict resolution feeding into the debate, nor efforts to draw lessons from other contexts and historical cases. Interviews confirmed this general impression: officials claimed there was little engagement with the academic literature and believed it was often too dense, complex or impenetrable to seriously resonate with policymakers.⁹² Of course, in some cases, Afghanistan experts drew upon their own deeper knowledge of the literature and made reference to this in their work. One of the rare attempts to bridge the divide was a paper written by Waldman and Ruttig in January 2011, which sought

to assess the applicability of theories of conflict resolution to the situation in Afghanistan.⁹³

The influence of the media was also influential in pushing forward the debate on reconciliation. The prospect of negotiations was an issue that was widely reported and numerous articles and opinion pieces were published on the subject, many of which cited new research or the views of respected analysts.⁹⁴ As such, articles in news media as well as numerous television and radio expert interviews represented an important conduit for research on reconciliation to shape public opinion and increase the political pressure on policymakers. More directly, politicians and officials often keep abreast with the latest opinion and regularly read newspapers: in this way they would come across relevant op eds, articles or studies.⁹⁵ The cumulative effect of the emerging discourse on negotiations and persuasive swell of expert opinion, especially from 2010, served an important function in gradually shaping policymakers positions.

At this time there were certain sections of the US administration increasingly pushing against the military view, most notably within Holbrooke's office. As Rashid recounts,

In Washington, the idea of talking to the Taliban became more acceptable, largely due to the efforts of Richard Holbrooke, his deputy Frank Ruggerio, his adviser on Afghanistan Barnett Rubin, and Douglas Lute at the National Security Council, who all battled to win over other parts of the U.S. government.⁹⁶

Although Holbrooke was initially sceptical of talks, by around June 2010 he had essentially come around to the idea and his efforts in pushing for talks would begin to take effect over the next year or so – his views apparently had a considerable role to play in persuading Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton.⁹⁷ A possibly crucial factor in this process may have been the influence of a number of experts brought in by Holbrooke to work as advisers. Foremost among these was Rubin who, as mentioned, had been an early vocal advocate of a political solution and his appointment was indicative of an emerging openness to the idea.⁹⁸ His influence was arguably significant: Vali Nasr describes Rubin producing a 3-inch-thick folder of memos for Clinton on negotiations.⁹⁹ Yet, Chayes suggests that perhaps as important as any informed analysis generated by the SRAP's office was Holbrooke's tendency to

directly extrapolate lessons from the Balkans, which arguably paralleled the military's tendency to draw tendentious analogies with Iraq.¹⁰⁰

Also important was the role of British officials in promoting the shift within Holbrooke's office and subsequently the wider American administration. Once British policymakers had come to accept the idea of negotiations, a chief concern to ensure real progress was bringing America on board. Expert analysis thus became a key weapon in the armoury of British diplomats in making the case.¹⁰¹ This was a central theme in a report by the UK Foreign Affairs Committee which commended the UK government for its support of political reconciliation, and recommended 'that it re-double its diplomatic efforts to bring whatever influence it can to bear on the US to highlight the need for US leadership on the issue' and that 'its most strategically important task is to convince the US of the merits of moving swiftly towards an endorsement of, and involvement in, talks with the Taliban leadership.' The Committee also noted how 'reconciliation with the Taliban is gradually becoming orthodox doctrine among commentators in America'.¹⁰² British official advocacy had to be well targeted and influential research could be tactically deployed to support such efforts. The US may well have reached the conclusion that talks were necessary without British encouragement, but as Cowper-Coles concludes, 'the net results of all our efforts to encourage a more political approach may only have been to get the United States to accept reconciliation ... a bit sooner than it might otherwise have done.'¹⁰³

All these various factors coalesced to prompt noticeable movement within US policy circles throughout the second half of 2010 and on 28 November the first direct meeting between US officials and the Taliban occurred in Germany. These exploratory moves were early signs of increasing interest in reconciliation within parts of the administration but scepticism remained and these developments did not yet imply full buy-in. Obama's promised December 2010 review repeated the familiar line that the US will 'fully support an Afghan political process that includes reconciliation with those Taliban who break ties with al-Qaeda, renounce violence and accept the Afghan constitution'.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the announcement at the NATO Lisbon summit in November setting a time limit to the presence of US forces arguably made achieving progress on reconciliation all the more urgent. Also, public pressure on the President was mounting: in December, an open letter calling on the President to open unconditional

talks was signed by sixty journalists, analysts and scholars, including the majority of analysts mentioned throughout this article.¹⁰⁵ An important event signaling a change in policy was Clinton's February 2011 Holbrooke address which stressed that the only solution to the Afghan conflict would be political.¹⁰⁶ As Steele suggests, 'Holbrooke's sudden death [in December 2010] ... seemed, paradoxically, to lead Clinton to take his views more seriously.'¹⁰⁷ Reporting in early 2011, Pickering and Brahimi concluded that 'we are still some distance from full-scale negotiations, let alone a peace settlement, but the exploratory process has clearly passed from former officials and academic observers, such as ourselves, into more-authoritative hands.'¹⁰⁸

Indeed, a few months later, in June 2011, Obama made a speech stating that 'peace cannot come to a land that has known so much war without a political settlement' and that 'America will join initiatives that reconcile the Afghan people, including the Taliban.'¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, in July, underlining his pragmatic approach to the issue, Cameron held out the case of the IRA and Sinn Fein's involvement in the Ulster peace process in imploring the Taliban to join a political process, while explicitly endorsing an offer of power-sharing.¹¹⁰ But more important than such public statements were the real signs of progress manifested in diplomatic activity on the ground, such as the series of meetings between US and Taliban representatives throughout 2011 exploring confidence building measures and what the initial steps of a political process might comprise.¹¹¹ While not evidence of unconditional embrace of negotiations, these moves signaled at least a serious willingness to explore the possibilities for political reconciliation – something almost completely absent just months earlier.

Conclusion

The assumption might be that research has played a marginal role in shaping policy on such a politically sensitive subject as reconciliation in Afghanistan. In one sense, this is accurate. The move toward reconciliation was principally a consequence of events: namely, a deteriorating security situation on the ground and international concern not to leave Afghanistan without an outcome that could be presented as 'victory'. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to underestimate the role that research and expert knowledge played. Events on the ground were important but it often took

experts to make sense of those events (where the failure of the military approach was not recognised, understood or palatable to those in official circles). Research not only contributed to a sharper and more realistic understanding of the increasingly desperate security situation but when, after 2007/08, a growing number of analysts began, initially tentatively, but increasingly stridently to make the case for talks, this provided ‘fertile ground’ on which policy could evolve. This analysis would also suggest that no single piece of research can be clearly attributed to the change in policy. Rather, the influence of a multitude of studies, opinion pieces, statements and briefings occurred in a cumulative, ‘drip-drip’ fashion over a number of years.

This article has also shown the diverse ways policymakers have interacted with different forms of research, which has generated emergent debate, helped shape policy positions and served as advocacy ammunition. Meanwhile, researchers have taken advantage of policy windows, whereby changing circumstances, created either by new personalities or changing facts on the ground, provided openings for new approaches. Also, so-called ‘policy entrepreneurs’ – mostly within government – played a crucial role in moving the debate forward, often supporting their position with the latest analysis. Particularly important in the US was the influence of prominent analysts and academics – some strongly supportive of talks – brought into government in advisory roles. Also, different forms of intermediaries, from research analysts to journalists served a ‘translation’ role in the process. Such figures were either behind the scenes subtly pushing the agenda by making sense of expert opinion for policymakers or more publicly making the case for talks through various forms of public media.

Research can be seen to develop in parallel with policy concerns as they come on to the agenda, and then evolves with them over time. This reflects the familiar story of research following the latest policy direction and, of course, the money. As the idea of reconciliation became gradually more palatable amongst policymakers, further research emerged. Gradually a more cooperative, interactive and reciprocal relationship emerged – a more lively exchange of ideas and arguments bubbled up within policy networks. For instance, in more recent years there has been a shift from studies addressing the question ‘should we talk’ to those relating more to ‘how’ exactly that might happen – and just as policymakers began to grapple with those same issues.

So, while rarely independently decisive in influencing policy, research and expert opinion interacts with changing events, policy windows, the emergence of new personalities, and the actions of various intermediaries to shape emerging positions. Research is but one factor among many which serves to push policy in new directions, and those interviewed agreed that this is only right: research cannot be the only factor in making important political decisions. On issues as sensitive, complex and politically uncertain as reconciliation, sometimes judgement, intuition and political acumen can be as important. Nevertheless, this article suggests fruitful avenues for enhancing the influence of research in conflict-affected contexts, even if chance and contingency remain powerful determinants. For instance, researchers should trust in persistence and resolve, while making every effort to present their findings in an concise, clear and accessible manner, preferably in person; governments should support roles that serve to translate and condense research for busy officials, provide opportunities for experts to take up positions closely advising policymakers and encourage healthy and proactive dialogue with the analytical community.

This article has not attempted to judge whether research advocating talks was necessarily right or wrong. Events themselves may provide answers to that. Many key observers, while supporting reconciliation as the only realistic option, are also profoundly pessimistic about the prospect that talks will ultimately succeed or even take place. Anatol Lieven's comment perhaps best sums up the general mood surrounding the issue: 'How should we view this case – an example of success, of research ultimately winning out and changing policy, or of too little too late, as most acute observers would probably claim; the opportunity has passed.'¹¹²

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¹ This article emerges from a larger research project entitled, 'The Influence of DfID-Sponsored State Building-Oriented Research on British Policy in Fragile, Post-Conflict Environments'. The project is funded by the ESRC and DfID and is based at the Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU) at the University of York; the Principal Investigator is Professor Sultan Barakat, Director of the PRDU.

² The Taliban is far from a homogenous group and is comprised of at least seven main armed structures. Thomas Ruttig, 'The other side: dimensions of the Afghan insurgency: causes, actors and approaches to "talks"', Afghan Analysts Network, July 2009, pp. 1-2.

³ William Maley, 'Talking to the Taliban', *The World Today*, Vol. 63, No. 11, November 2007, p. 6.

⁴ Research is defined broadly here as 'any disciplined enquiry intended to increase the stock of knowledge on a specific subject.' This encompasses written outputs but also the accumulated knowledge of analysts and scholars. ESRC, 'Research ethics framework', Economic and Research Council, Swindon, 2005.

⁵ Office of the Presiding Bishop, 'On waging reconciliation: statement from Bishops of the Episcopal Church', 26 September 2001, http://www.msgr.ca/msgr-3/on_waging_reconciliation.htm

⁶ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into chaos: the world's most unstable region and the threat to global security* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 26.

⁷ Rashid, *Descent*, pp. 72-73.

⁸ 'President George W. Bush's address to Congress and the nation on terrorism', 20 September 2001, <http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/terrorism/bush911c.html>, accessed 5 October 2013.

⁹ Also, the CIA opened up its own secret channel demanding Mullah Omar give up bin Laden or face military force – there was no response. Rashid, *Descent*, p. 77.

¹⁰ Thomas Ruttig, 'Negotiations with the Taliban: history and prospects for the future', New America Foundation, Washington, May 2011, pp. 6-7.

¹¹ Bob Woodward, *Bush at war* (London: Pocket Books, 2003), pp. 124-27. Woodward quotes Powell: 'We want Afghanistan to be terrorist free. If the Taliban can do that, fine. If not, we will work with someone else', p. 130.

¹² Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2011), p. 1.

¹³ Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: the inside story of the West's Afghanistan campaign* (London: Harper Press, 2011), p. 59. Nevertheless, latitude was built in to allow figures associated with the Taliban to join the political process – some availed of this opportunity.

¹⁴ Brahimi would designate the failure to include the Taliban as 'our original sin'. Rashid, *Descent*, p. 104.

¹⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and laptop: the neo-Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007), p. 11.

¹⁶ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p. 229. Maley has similarly asserted that there is much fantasy in suggesting the Taliban should have been engaged in 2001 as, 'There would have been no Bonn meeting if Taliban had been invited, such was the fury of the United Front at the recent slaying of Massoud.' *The Afghanistan wars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 264.

¹⁷ Lucy Morgan Edwards, *The Afghan solution: the inside story of Abdul Haq, the CIA and how Western hubris lost Afghanistan* (London: Bactria Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Rashid, *Descent*, p. xlvi.

¹⁹ The Pentagon's budget grew 40% in the five years after 9/11, to \$427 billion. Rashid, *Descent*, p. 1.

²⁰ ICG, 'The Loya Jirga: one small step forward', *Afghanistan Briefing*, 16 May 2002, p. 4.

²¹ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p. 161.

²² Eric Schmitt, 'U.S. declares major combat operations in Afghanistan over', *New York Times*, 2 May 2003.

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- ²⁵ Semple, *Reconciliation*, p. 53.
- ²⁶ Jackie Dent, 'Is it time to negotiate with the Taliban?', CNN, 5 October 2006.
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- ³⁰ Anthony King, 'Understanding the Helmand campaign: British military operations in Afghanistan', *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 2, 2010, p. 317.
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- ³⁴ Rachel Sylvester, 'We must talk to the Taliban, says Des Browne', *The Telegraph*, 29 March 2008.
- ³⁵ Amin Saikal, 'Don't cave into the Taliban', *New York Times*, 18 October 2007.
- ³⁶ Maley, 'Talking to the Taliban', p. 6.
- ³⁷ Ruttig, 'Negotiations', p. 7.
- ³⁸ The PAG, created in 2006, is a committee composed of Afghan government ministers, international agencies and ambassadors from donor nations. The principles emphasised co-option into the political system and a strong Afghan lead. Semple, *Reconciliation*, p. 65.
- ³⁹ Government of Canada, 'Report to Parliament: Canada's engagement in Afghanistan – Setting a Course to 2011', June 2008, pp. 15–16, <http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/canadaafghanistan/documents/q108/index.aspx>, accessed 20 September 2013.
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- ⁴¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the brink: the future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), pp. 126-27.
- ⁴² Mark Oliver, 'War on Taliban can't be won, says army chief', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2008.
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- ⁴⁸ D'Souza, 'Talking to the Taliban', p. 264.
- ⁴⁹ Ruttig, 'The other side'.
- ⁵⁰ Semple, *Reconciliation*, p. 66 and p. 90. Also, a 2010 paper by Talatbek Masadykov, Antonio Giustozzi and James Michael Page reiterated the observation that the situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating and detailed requirements for reconciliation, particularly regarding the role of the UN. 'Negotiations with the Taliban: Toward a solution for the Afghan conflict', Crisis States Working Paper No. 66, January 2010.
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- ⁹³ Matt Waldman and Thomas Ruttig, 'Peace offerings: theories of conflict resolution and their applicability to Afghanistan', Afghan Analysts Network Discussion Paper, January 2011.
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- ¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Steele, *Ghosts*, p. 343.
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