

THE AFGHAN MISSION: 'OUT-OF-THE-BOX THINKING AT THE TACTICAL LEVEL'

Canada reaches out to Taliban

After years of refusing to negotiate with insurgents, soldiers in Kandahar put word out they want to talk

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KHENJAKAK, AFGHANISTAN -- Canadian troops are reaching out to the Taliban for the first time, military and diplomatic officials say, as Canada softens its ban on speaking with the insurgents.

After years of rejecting any contact with the insurgents, Canadian officials say those involved with the mission are now rethinking the policy in hopes of helping peace efforts led by the Afghan government.

The Canadian work on political solutions follows two separate tracks: tactical discussions at a local level in Kandahar, and strategic talks through the Kabul government and its allies. Neither type of negotiation appears to have made progress so far, though efforts are still in the early stages.

In Kabul, the topic is under discussion within the Afghan government and among members of the Policy Action Group, a high-level committee that includes Canada, as major international players try to find agreement among themselves about so-called "red lines," or parameters for talks with top Taliban commanders.

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President Hamid Karzai has called for peace talks with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, but there is heated debate about how such dialogue might affect Afghanistan's constitution, laws and state structure. The Taliban have called for strict Islamic laws, for instance, and insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has suggested a rewriting of the constitution. Some participants in the discussions are even suggesting Taliban leaders should be given political posts, or control over districts or provinces, though this is fiercely contested.

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The United States is said to want to maintain an ability to continue military operations in Afghanistan, which it views as crucial to the fight against al-Qaeda and other extremists.

In Kandahar, the Canadian military seems to be moving cautiously toward smaller, more localized talks with insurgents.

Stakeholders' positions

There's little agreement among those with a stake in Afghanistan about whether to negotiate with the Taliban, and if so how to go about it. These are some of the positions.

Afghanistan

The government, which has had a series of secret talks with the "moderate Taliban" since 2003, insists that the Taliban must first surrender completely, disavow armed insurrection and accept the foreign presence before entering formal negotiations.

Taliban

Last year, a spokesman for the Taliban said leader Mullah Mohammed Omar has approved demands for negotiations, including control of 10 southern provinces, a timetable for withdrawal of all foreign troops, and the release of all Taliban prisoners in six months. Not all the fighters are on board, however, with some saying they'll never negotiate.

Pakistan

The newly elected government quickly began negotiations with Taliban groups in that country, and could act as a trusted host for any negotiations among the Kabul government, NATO and the Afghan Taliban.

United States

Officially, the United States is strongly against any negotiations with the Taliban. But Kurt Volker the deputy head of the European and Eurasian Affairs office at the U.S. State Department, said Washington welcomed Afghan President Hamid Karzai's bid to sit down with radical Afghan groups, as long as they rejected violence.

Britain

Although Prime Minister Gordon Brown told Parliament, "We will not enter into negotiations with these people," his Defence Secretary, Des Browne, said in March that Britain and other democratic states should negotiate with elements of the Taliban, among other extremist groups, to prevent the long-term spread of terrorism. It's been reported that MI-6, Britain's external security service, has already held secret talks with the Taliban. At the local level, the British cut a deal, appointing a former Taliban leader as district chief of Musa Qala in Helmand province in exchange for security guarantees.

Netherlands

Although the Dutch are reluctant to go into details, negotiating with the Taliban is an explicit part of Dutch military policy in Afghanistan. Talks are usually held through the provincial governor.

Germany

The government is officially against negotiations, but some members of the governing coalition have suggested Berlin host talks with the Taliban.

Staff