



Talking to the Enemy

Some thoughts on what that means

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Abstract

Talking to an enemy in wartime is, generally speaking, an essential component of any strategy. That statement is applicable in most conventional wars and insurgencies alike. There are cases of counter-insurgencies in earlier eras that were crushed by extreme military measures, but the strategies that underwrote those campaigns are viewed as extreme today and are most likely politically unsustainable. But, if talking to an enemy is inevitable it is also fraught with dangers, for both parties will seek to advance their objectives through such contact—negotiations being, on occasion, just as effective an instrument of war as armed force. The recent call for negotiations with so-called moderates in the Taliban are, therefore, not unexpected and should not be regarded as the equivalent of a declaration of failure by the countries involved in military operations in Afghanistan. If carefully implemented, and with a clear understanding of the socio-political environment in that country, a more determined effort at talking with the enemy and his supporters could well prove to be the harbinger of a more effective counter-insurgency strategy.

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1 The Call to Talk

In recent months, the seemingly endless conflict in Afghanistan has given rise to suggestions that it is necessary to talk to certain elements, generally characterized as moderates, in the ranks of the Taliban. Afghanistan's leader, Hamid Karzai,¹ and US president Barack Obama have both endorsed negotiations with "less hardened Taliban."² Other senior members of the Obama administration are similarly inclined, including the National Security Advisor, James Jones, and the Special Envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke.³ "[T]he war in Afghanistan cannot be won," the long awaited new US strategy paper for that conflict states, "without convincing non-ideologically committed insurgents to lay down their arms, reject al Qaeda, and accept the Afghan Constitution."⁴

Leaving aside the possibility that there might not be any moderates with which to negotiate, an argument recently voiced by *Toronto Sun* columnist Peter Worthington, the logic behind the call to talk with the enemy appears at first blush to make sense.⁵ Dividing the enemy and isolating more extreme and probably irreconcilable foes from those with whom one might "do business" is sensible. Dividing one's enemy has always been a sound tactic in wartime. It is also viewed by advocates as the means—quite possibly the last best means—of rescuing the international community's faltering effort in Afghanistan. And there is already evidence of considerable public support for negotiations in at least one Western country with troops in the field. In mid-2007, a poll conducted for CTV news and *The Globe and Mail* revealed that a majority of Canadians (63 percent) endorsed negotiations as a means of extracting the country from what many were already regarding as a muddled, costly and possibly unwinnable war.⁶ Similar levels of support are likely in the countries of NATO-Europe where, according to *TransAtlantic Trends 2008*, support for continuing combat operations stands now at only 43 percent.⁷ A March 2009 poll indicates that even in Great Britain, where support for confronting the Taliban has generally been higher than its European partners, nearly two-thirds of respondents endorse talking to the Taliban.⁸

¹ See the interview with Hamid Karzai in which he begins his response to the question "Is it necessary to negotiate with the Taliban?" with "absolument [tr. absolutely]." The interview is found in "Afghanistan, Dernière Tentative de Main Tendue," *Paris Match*, 3 April 2009.

² Mike Blanchfield, "Negotiating with Taliban no change in tactics: Obama," *Calgary Herald*, 9 March 2009.

³ Jodi Kantor, "Back on World Stage, a Larger-than-Life Holbrooke," *The New York Times*, 8 February 2009.

⁴ President of the United States, *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 27 March 2009, accessed at http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Afghanistan_Pakistan_White_Paper.pdf.

⁵ Peter Worthington, "Chatting with the Taliban," *Toronto Sun*, 19 March 2009. German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung also appears to reject the distinction: "When I was just in Afghanistan, we spoke with many tribal chiefs who said 'Taliban is Taliban'." See "German Defence Minister Jung Rejects Negotiations with Taliban," *Bloomberg News*, 30 March 2009, accessed at <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=2061100&sid=aYGh&DCI95RI&refer=germany>.

⁶ "Canadians support talks with Taliban: poll," *CTV.ca*, 20 May 2007.

⁷ By contrast, support in the US for combat operations in Afghanistan is 76 percent. German Marshall Fund, *TransAtlantic Trends 2008: Key Findings*, p. 13, accessed at <http://www.transatlantictrends.org>.

⁸ Christina Lamb, "Taliban chief backs Afghanistan peace talks," *The Sunday Times*, 15 March 2009.

The recent calls for negotiations are not unexpected. Nor are they without political risk. Whenever a war is believed to be going badly, demands that a government talk to the enemy are always voiced. And the suspicion on the home front that the call, even when responding to a careful assessment of national interests, stems from a sense of weakness or strategic uncertainty invites critical comments from those who oppose such demands. One sees this dynamic reflected, for example, in recently published analyses of the debate inside the British Cabinet in the days surrounding the fall of France in 1940.⁹ Confronted with the collapse of France and a war with Germany that many thought Britain could not hope to win, several leading ministers unsuccessfully sought to win over their colleagues to the position that the most effective means of protecting their country's long-term interests was through a negotiated settlement with Hitler. To his credit, Winston Churchill orchestrated the opposition to this perspective. With the benefit of hindsight, today we shudder at the idea of a negotiated peace with the Third Reich, which is perhaps why it took so many years for the debate to be revealed; but there was nonetheless a sober, if unsettling, logic to the arguments in favour of that approach.

The conflict in Afghanistan has generated a similar discussion, with two significant differences. First, the call for negotiations with the Taliban has waxed and waned for several years now; and, second, unlike 1940, the debate has taken place in the public realm, in parliamentary chambers, on televisions, and on internet sites, rather than in secret cabinet sessions. The consequence of the very public nature of the debate has meant that those who have advocated negotiations have been tarred in the media for either moral turpitude or defeatism. In September 2006, the leader of the Canada's federal New Democratic Party, Jack Layton, publicly urged comprehensive negotiations with "all combatants" as a way to speed up the departure of the NATO, and by implication the Canadian, contingents from what he saw as a far too militarized enterprise in Afghanistan. In response, he was seriously upbraided in the national media and parliament for what a national newspaper termed his "unconscionable" proposal, and he quickly earned the moniker "Taliban Jack."¹⁰ Germany witnessed a similar controversy less than a year later. In early-2007, after a much publicised trip to Afghanistan, the leader of Germany's Social Democratic Party, Kurt Beck, suffered much the same treatment when he publicly mused about speaking to elements in the Taliban. He suggested that an effective way to bring the conflict to an end might be to invite all the parties to the conflict to a peace conference in Berlin. Later that year, other members of the SPD indicated agreement with their leader that negotiations were the best approach to ameliorating the situation in Afghanistan. Thomas Steg, a member of the SPD's parliamentary caucus, noted that August that the goal was to get "moderate, reasonable Taliban who are interested in reconstruction and reconciliation" to participate in a new peace process.¹¹ For Beck and Steg, as for other advocates of talks with the Taliban, negotiations might offer a means of fostering a dialogue between Karzai's beleaguered government and its opponents in the countryside, a necessary condition for any cessation of fighting. There is, of course, a more selfish rationale at play here; for Beck and most probably others have not only been motivated by a concern for the plight of Afghanistan. They have also been staking out positions. In Germany,

⁹ The best study of the debate inside the cabinet is John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). For an overview of the discussion from Churchill's perspective, see Roy Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography* (New York: Plume Book, 2001), pp. 599-610.

¹⁰ "Jack and the Taliban," *The National Post*, 2 September 2006.

¹¹ Matthias Gebauer and Holger Stark, "Secret Negotiations with the Islamists Proved Fruitless," *Der Spiegel*, 20 August 2007.

as in most other NATO countries, the ISAF mission in Afghanistan is hugely unpopular and thus a political hot potato for governments.

Although the SPD tepidly endorsed Beck's suggestion, thereby putting some distance between it and an unpopular foreign intervention, the reaction from his political opponents and much of the German media was rather severe. While a few commentators were mildly sympathetic to Beck, most were concerned that Germany's international reputation as a reliable ally would be damaged by the approach he was advocating. The SPD's conservative opponents, including leading figures in Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), were far more critical. They laconically questioned whether anyone had ever met a moderate Taliban, and pointedly argued that endorsing talks with the Taliban could "undermine the moral basis for German and international engagement in Afghanistan."¹² Inviting the Taliban "to a round table to give them the possibility of contributing to the solution of a problem that they themselves caused shows an irrationality that borders on voodoo," was how one German journalist reacted.¹³ Beck and his supporters were criticized for defeatism, for bad timing, and for diplomatic naïveté.

All this has happened before, and in public too. On 29 November 1917, a year after he had circulated a similarly argued memorandum to the Cabinet, *The Daily Telegraph* published a letter from the Marquess of Lansdowne, a leading Conservative peer, calling for a negotiated end to the Great War. After observing that the "most dreadful war the world has ever known" had entered its fourth year and that the government was unable to provide any indication as to when it might be concluded or at what further costs in lives and treasure, he noted that revising the official attitude toward a peace settlement would likely be necessary. The cost of continuing the war, that some senior British officials predicted might last another two or three years, would otherwise be catastrophic:

We are not going to lose this war, but its prolongation will spell ruin for the civilized world, and an infinite addition to the load of human suffering which already weighs upon it. Security will be invaluable to a world which has the vitality to profit by it, and what will be the blessings of peace to nations so exhausted that they can scarcely stretch out a hand with which to grasp them.¹⁴

The attitude within the British government to the letter was mixed, although leading members of the Cabinet did not share the pessimism it voiced. At the time when Lansdowne's earlier memorandum was circulating inside the government, the then-Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd-George, gave an interview to an American journalist in which he had argued the war must continue—"the fight must be the final, to a knock-out."¹⁵ A year later, as Prime Minister his views had apparently not changed. Generally, the national media's reception of the letter was also extremely hostile. *The Times*, that had initially refused to publish the letter, denounced it as an example of "the inveterate, unteachable, stupid arrogance of landlords of the Lansdowne class."¹⁶

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Should the West Negotiate with the Taliban," *Der Spiegel*, 4 April 2007.

¹⁴ This passage from the letter is found in Harold Kurtz, "The Lansdowne Letter," *History Today*, Vol. 18, No. 2, February 1968, p.84.

¹⁵ Lloyd-George is quoted in W.B. Fest, "British War Aims and German Peace Feelers During the First World War (December 1916 to November 1918)," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2, June 1972, p. 288.

¹⁶ Lord Newton, *Lord Lansdowne; A Biography* (London: MacMillan, 1929), p. 469.

Despite having been a leading political figure for decades, including service as Viceroy of India, Governor-General of Canada, Secretary of State for War and Foreign Secretary, Lansdowne was broadly condemned, his patriotism challenged, and his mental state questioned. “The newspaper attacks are past all belief,” he wrote a friend in the Foreign Office. Although Lord Lansdowne apparently received many letters of support from private individuals, and even wrote a second letter published in March 1918, his proposal that the government more aggressively pursue the possibility of a negotiated peace settlement never gained any traction in Britain’s political circles and it effectively ended his public career.

It is of course undeniable that the relatively modest burden borne by those countries participating in the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan pales against the enormous sacrifices demanded during the First World War. In no way is the national survival of the NATO Allies engaged in the ongoing war in Afghanistan as it was perceived to be by the combatants nine decades ago. And, while NATO’s continuing utility as an alliance is acknowledged to be tied to the success of the ongoing mission in Afghanistan, it is arguable that greater threats to Western security interests, if not the international order, are to be found elsewhere. (Although it must be admitted that the defeat of NATO would undeniably fortify the resolve of the West’s adversaries everywhere.) Afghanistan is, therefore, a very different context from that which led Lansdowne to draft his controversial letter. Recalling the Lansdowne initiative is nonetheless enlightening for a modern audience for, as Kurt Beck learned in 2007, it underscores the political cost of advocating talking with an enemy in wartime.

Why is there a political cost at all? What is it about these types of proposals that generates such vitriol? Clearly the controversy relates to the context within which the call to negotiate is made. On some occasions, when an adversary is portrayed as irredeemably evil, to advocate talking rather than fighting suggests a weakening of a leader’s moral fibre. Most of us have that sort of reaction when we read that in 1940 some well-known British political figures were urging peace with Hitler. In most other cases, the source of controversy is the charge by opponents that the national interest, often referred to as the war effort, would be undermined by talking to an adversary while military operations are underway.

The argument that the war effort will suffer is, however, far too general. How is the war effort to be impacted by such a proposal being implemented? A more forensic approach to what that actually implies is obviously required. Therefore, while the circumstances surrounding every conflict are unique, it is reasonable to argue that the dangers to the war effort can be grouped under five general headings.

- ***Projects weakness:*** This is the most frequently heard criticism of treating with an adversary during wartime. It is rooted in a belief that an enemy and anyone else who is watching will interpret any gesture, other than the forceful continuation of the war itself, as a concession. “I cannot refrain from pointing out to your Majesty,” a Spanish nobleman wrote to Philip III in 1607 with reference to proposals to dampen the ongoing Dutch revolt, “that it will appear good neither to God nor to the World if Your Majesty goes about begging for peace with his rebels.”¹⁷ That four hundred year-old assessment is probably still the case today. In other words, talking to an enemy signals weakness and one would not, this logic holds, talk to an

¹⁷ The Count of Fuentes, quoted in Geoffrey Parker, *Europe in Crisis, 1598-1648* (London: Fontana Press, 1979), p. 153.

enemy when military power and the will to use it are still available, and if one expects to achieve victory without having to compromise one's objectives. Negotiations are, therefore, an implicit acknowledgement by the party that initiates the talks that those objectives are no longer achievable.

- ***Undermines domestic support:*** This is a corollary of the first consideration, except that it is concerned with weakness in the eyes of one's own domestic audience. Talking with an enemy is seen as legitimizing its aims and, consequently, could undermine a public's willingness to bear the burdens of continued conflict. Winston Churchill alluded to this concern in 1940, arguing that while one might have definite limits prior to talking to an enemy, "the forces of resolution which were now at our disposal would have vanished" after the negotiations had begun.¹⁸ The mere act of negotiating changes the political dynamic surrounding a conflict, often in ways that are unpredictable and, quite possibly, uncontrollable. When national survival is not threatened by the outcome of a conflict, there is likely to be a lower level of public tolerance for the inevitable casualties associated with military operations.
- ***Undermines military morale:*** War demands that military forces engage in operations that necessarily lead to the acceptance of heightened dangers and profound sacrifices. An inability to fully grasp the limited nature of the conflict as suggested by talking with an enemy, or the awareness that previous sacrifices might not yield the victory that was originally promised by political leaders or that does not seem to advance national interests in an appreciable manner, could undermine the morale of the armed forces. If that were to happen, the effectiveness of the military instrument in wartime would be reduced. Much, of course, depends on the nature of the conflict. Problems arise when soldiers no longer believe that their sacrifices are worthy of the effort for which they are being demanded. Although US forces have fought well on many occasions, the limited nature of the Vietnam conflict meant that the last years of US intervention when Washington was very obviously seeking ways to detach itself from the conflict "were marked by troop mutinies, widespread drug addiction, high levels of desertion, and even the murders of over-zealous officers intent on sending men out on dangerous missions."¹⁹
- ***Threatens alliance cohesion:*** When the war is being waged by a coalition, conducting or even proposing negotiations with an adversary might indicate that a country's commitment to a common cause is wavering. As the coherence of any coalition is entirely dependent the willingness of its members to bear their share of the war, a statement by one ally that the conflict should be concluded undermines that common front. Whereas the goal of defeating a foe might unite allies, pursuing talks could very well underscore the disparate interests that have otherwise been subsumed in the common military effort. Intra-alliance resentments are also possible as an adversary focuses its efforts (military and political) on those allies who are perceived to be vulnerable to the appeal of a call to negotiate.²⁰

¹⁸ Churchill is quoted in Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography*, p. 607.

¹⁹ Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, January 1975, p. 186.

²⁰ It is perhaps not a coincidence that local Taliban commanders believe that increased casualties will lead to an early withdrawal of the German contingent in Kunduz. See "Interview with a Taliban Commander: 'What's Important is to Kill the Germans,'" *Der Spiegel*, 21 May 2008.

- ***Leads to charges of betrayal:*** A negotiated conclusion to an unpopular war might well bring added support to a political leader. However, if one is viewed as too willing to compromise with an adversary, charges of betrayal—of the nation’s interests, of the military, of the dead—could well ensue. Abraham Lincoln was widely condemned in the press when he agreed to meet representatives of the Confederacy at what came to be known as the Hampton Roads Conference in January 1865. The criticism only died away when the conference failed to obtain Southern agreement to Lincoln’s terms.²¹ In other cases, violence directed at those who conducted the talks has ensued. Despite the fact that the Irish Republican Army had been broken by the success of British operations, one of its leading figures, Michael Collins, was killed by his own men for negotiating a peace agreement with Whitehall.²²

Any or all of these factors can apply in the consideration of an initiative to open a dialogue with an enemy in wartime.

It is important to recognize, however, that all of those five possible facets of the very general charge of damaging the war effort are accentuated when a war is going badly. In such circumstances, negotiations, far from being just a tactic to advance strategic goals, sometimes seem to be symptomatic of defeatism. In such an environment, concessions are viewed as little less than capitulation. Proponents of negotiations are immediately accused—tacitly or otherwise—of doing the enemy’s bidding. The Pakistani government’s recent agreement to impose sharia law in the Taliban-controlled Swat valley, in an effort to dampen violence and regain the confidence of the local population, is an example of this. “The government is buying peace at gun-point,” one Pakistani political leader immediately argued, while a senior UN official has asserted that the new law would do little to appease the Taliban, but would instead “give them a taste of victory.”²³ Negotiations and the compromises that necessarily accompany such a process will reduce the chances of achieving ones strategic objectives. In the case of Pakistan’s recent decision this argument seems rather persuasive given that the government has essentially lost control of Swat. And therein lies the danger for those who, in other circumstances, might well also believe that the most appropriate approach to advancing a country’s interests lies in maintaining a dialogue with its foes. When setbacks on the battlefield yield a new emphasis on diplomacy how best can governments assure their supporters and their adversaries that they are not seeking to avoid defeat rather than advancing toward victory?

The public debate surrounding the call for negotiating with the West’s enemies in Afghanistan has demonstrated a similar uncertainty. What was once derided as unacceptable has now become inevitable. Less than a year after Kurt Beck’s musings about negotiating with the Taliban, the British defence minister, Des Browne, publicly asserted a need for the Taliban to be integrated in any peace process:

²¹ The Hampton Roads Conference (29 January 1865) is described in detail in Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), pp. 690-693.

²² See Ian F.W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 16-17.

²³ Declan Walsh, “Pakistan accepts Taliban demand for sharia law,” *The Guardian Weekly*, 17-23 April 2009.

In Afghanistan, at some point, the Taliban will need to be involved in the peace process because they are not going away any more than I suspect Hamas is going away from Palestine.²⁴

The upward spiral in violence in Afghanistan, the very significant setbacks suffered by the counter-narcotics programme, and the re-emergence of Taliban elements throughout that country, required a re-think. This new approach was underscored by the public's disenchantment with the war. A July 2008 Angus Reid poll revealed that public opinion in several NATO countries perceives the Afghan war to be a failure: 69 percent of Germans, 66 percent of Italians, 63 percent of British and French respondents, and 40 percent of Canadians held that view.²⁵ There is a residual worry, therefore, among those who still see value in the ISAF mission that talking with the enemy might turn out to be little more than covering fire for a strategic retreat. More to the point, concerns have been expressed as to how any overture to so-called moderates among the Taliban will be received by them given that many in the West believe that the chance for victory is slipping away, and also how will it be interpreted by other Powers and anti-Western elements elsewhere in the world.

²⁴ Rich Bowden, "Taliban must be included in negotiations: Des Browne," *Monsters and Critics*, 25 September 2007, accessed at http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/uk/news/articles_1359500.php/Taliban_must_be_included_in_negotiations_Des_Browne.

²⁵ "Sondages sur l'Otan: deux tiers des européens contre la mission en Afghanistan," *LePost.com*, 7 avril 2009, accessed at http://www.lepost.fr/article/2009/04/07/1486922_aondages_sur_l'Otan_deux_tiers_des_europeens_contre_la_mission_en_Afghanistan.html.

2 The Discourse of War

If it is true that such dangers are endemic in any effort to talk with the enemy, it should nonetheless be acknowledged that they are largely inescapable. Such dangers are rooted in the nature of war itself. This might come as a surprise for those who view armed conflict through the lens of the world wars of the twentieth century, as a period of intense violence followed by the adversary's capitulation. This perspective holds that negotiations to recreate some sort of international order should then follow, with the victorious Powers, who have claimed just reasons for the conflict, imposing a settlement. That is, of course, what appears to have happened in both world wars and again after such conflicts as the first Iraq War (1990) and the NATO-led campaign against Serbia (1999). In this understanding, conflict is viewed as the collapse of international relations where politics surrenders to force of arms, and diplomatic traffic with an adversary no longer serves any positive purpose other than to communicate or receive a capitulation. "No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted," Ulysses S. Grant told his Confederate opponent at Fort Donelson in February 1862, "I propose to move immediately upon your works."²⁶

But is that sequence of politics (i.e., diplomacy), then war (i.e., violence), then politics (i.e., diplomacy) again an accurate representation of the relationship between diplomacy or dialogue and armed force? "Unconditional Surrender" Grant's uncompromising stance appealed to many at the time and still does, but circumstances have required that most political leaders—then and now—be less categorical. A continuing role for dialogue stems from the fact that war, far from being unrestrained violence, should always be understood as purposeful. "Politics, then, will permeate military operations," Clausewitz wrote, "and in so far as their violent nature will admit it, it will have a continuous influence on them."²⁷ In other words, war is, at root, a political activity, an idea that is captured by the Prussian philosopher's most famous (and sometimes misunderstood) aphorism that it is "a continuation of politics by other means."²⁸ Politics, that is diplomacy, ought not to cease when the cannons are firing at one another. Countries speak to each other in wartime by many means, including the type of war they conduct, the resources they commit and the strategies they employ. For example, the Chinese invasion of Vietnam's northern provinces in 1979 was a carefully calculated exercise in punitive diplomacy, inflicting enormous losses on Hanoi for disregarding Beijing's policies. More recently, Russia used its summer 2008 invasion of Georgia to ensure that both Tbilisi and its Western backers understood that Moscow will no longer acquiesce to that country's drift toward NATO accession.

In this image of war as a form of dialogue between adversaries, politics and violence are not wholly separate entities. Instead, the two are inextricably connected. Countries talk to each other during peacetime by means of diplomacy and the conversation endures during war through the application of force. Obviously, the violence of a wartime exchange generates its own dynamic sometimes leading the conversation in directions that might not have been predicted, but communications are generally never absent. Only in those cases where the goal is the physical

²⁶ Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, A Narrative: From Sumter to Perryville* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 212.

²⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

annihilation of an enemy is dialogue not immediately present or even obvious. One thinks here of Genghis Khan's campaigns when adversaries were ruthlessly annihilated;²⁹ or Adolf Hitler's conception of his war with Soviet Russia (i.e., Operation Barbarossa), a conflict that was to be accompanied by the "total eradication of any active or passive resistance."³⁰ It is no surprise, therefore, that Hitler consistently refused to consider talking with Stalin.³¹ But a survey of history reveals that that such an approach is an anomaly for, at most other times, talking to an enemy has been an integral part of war. And, indeed, even Hitler made very public overtures to Britain after the fall of France. While talking to an enemy might seem to be a distraction from a country's overall war strategy, war itself might be understood as little more than selecting what proportion of each means of communication—diplomacy or force—one intends to emphasize with an adversary.

Engaging in a dialogue with an enemy is, therefore, almost always unavoidable and is generally welcomed as a means to advance national interests. "Even during war," Hugo Grotius, the father of international law, wrote, "the supreme authorities are wont to grant certain kinds of intercourse among the hostile parties; as Truce, Safe Passage, Ransom."³² In fact, history is replete with examples of negotiations that have been conducted while armies have continued to engage in military operations. The Congress of the Peace of Westphalia that would end the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) convened in December 1644, but the war continued until the treaties of Münster and Osnabruck were concluded four years later. All of the combatants anxiously awaited the prospect of a negotiated settlement, but the fighting continued as each sought to improve its bargaining position by force of arms.³³ In other cases, talking to an enemy amounted to little more than a sounding out of an adversary as to its intentions, particularly the parameters of a possible settlement for a cessation of hostilities. In 1916, the newly enthroned Austrian emperor, Karl, launched a secret peace initiative (i.e., "the Sixtus Affair") through family contacts in Belgium that, despite considerable optimism among those involved, ultimately failed.³⁴ There is some evidence (not conclusive) that in the Second World War, a far more extreme conflict than the first, Stalin twice tried to initiate talks with Germany.³⁵ Hitler, as was already mentioned, was never interested. On other occasions, countries have more explicitly used military power to force the pace of stalled negotiations. During the negotiations that would eventually yield the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (February 1918), Germany and Austria launched a military offensive to coerce the

²⁹ These campaigns are described in James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen; The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (New York: Atheneum, 1979).

³⁰ The "Guidelines for the Conduct of Troops in Russia", issued on 12 June 1941, ten days before the invasion of the USSR. Quoted in Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), pp. 142-143.

³¹ See Nicolaus von Below, *At Hitler's Side: The Memoirs of Hitler's Luftwaffe Adjutant 1937-1945* (London: Greenhill Books, 2001), pp. 120, 179-180.

³² Hugo Grotius, *On the Rights of War and Peace: An Abridged Translation* (London: John Parker, 1853), p. 432.

³³ See C. V. Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (London: Penguin Books, 1957), pp. 404-440, and Derek Croxton, "L'ombre de Mars sur la Westphalie; Les opérations militaires ont-elles duré les négociations?" in *L'Europe des traités de Westphalie*, edited by Lucien Bely (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), pp. 267-288.

³⁴ It was termed the "Sixtus Affair" because the initial contacts were facilitated by Prince Sixtus of Bourbon-Parma, the brother of Zita, Karl's consort. See Gordon Brooke-Shepherd, *The Last Habsburg* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), pp. 62-80.

³⁵ H.W. Koch, "The Spectre of a Separate Peace in the East: Russo-German 'Peace Feelers', 1942-44," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 10, No. 3, July 1975, pp. 531-549.

new Soviet regime into accepting their harsh terms.³⁶ And both the Johnson and Nixon administrations waged war, including unprecedented bombing campaigns, to attempt to obtain concessions from North Vietnam during the various rounds of negotiations with Hanoi they held.³⁷

2.1 Insurgency Warfare and Dialogue

Is this record any different when dealing with insurgencies? The answer is sometimes yes. Insurgency warfare does not easily admit the sort of dialogue between combatants that can exist in conventional conflicts. Sertorius' rebellion in the Roman provinces of Hispania (83 to 72 BC) is an ancient, but nonetheless relevant example of this difficulty.³⁸ Sertorius sought to challenge the excesses of Roman authority under the dictator Sulla, and was for some years successful in conducting military operations in the Republic's Spanish provinces while maintaining a high level of local support. From what we know, talking with Sertorius was never even contemplated as Rome would never have wanted to legitimize his actions and thereby set a precedent for other would-be rebels in its Empire.³⁹ Rome was never interested in anything but an absolute military triumph. Despite several victories over armies sent to crush the rebellion, it collapsed only after a jealous colleague assassinated Sertorius.

And, indeed, in more recent times, some counter-insurgency operations have either made only limited efforts, or eschewed any attempt, at conversation with an adversary. This attitude has been reflected in military campaigns that by today's standards would be regarded as both extremely ferocious and politically unsustainable. The British employed a variety of non-traditional methods in their fight with the Boers of South Africa (1899-1902). The most notorious of these measures included the internment of much of the Boer civilian population in concentration camps (to separate them from the fighters) and the destruction of their homes, crops and livestock.⁴⁰ These measures were only abandoned very late in the war (November 1901) when leaving civilians in their homes severely handicapped the Boer guerrillas due to the very limited resources available for both groups.⁴¹ The German campaign against the Herrero of Southwest Africa (1904-1906) was even more brutal, explicitly using genocide and starvation to break local resistance.⁴² In

³⁶ See John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Brest-Litovsk; The Forgotten Peace, March 1918* (London, MacMillan, 1966), pp. 205-240.

³⁷ See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam; A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983).

³⁸ The sources on Sertorius are meagre, and so a detailed narrative of the rebellion he led is not possible. Much of what we know comes from the Roman writer, Plutarch. See his sympathetic treatment of Sertorius in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (New York: The Modern Library, 1940), pp. 678-696. Adrian Goldsworthy draws heavily on Plutarch for his insightful chapter on Sertorius in his survey of Roman military commanders, *In the Name of Rome* (London: Phoenix Press, 2003), pp. 154-170.

³⁹ Arthur Keaveney, "Review of Philip O. Spann. Quintus Sertorius and the Legacy of Sulla," *The Classical Review*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 1988, p. 322.

⁴⁰ By May 1902, British troops had destroyed 30,000 Boer homes. See Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies*, p. 39.

⁴¹ Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 581.

⁴² See George Steinmetz, "From Native Policy to 'Exterminationism': German Southwest Africa, 1904, in Historical Perspective," *Theory and Research in Comparative Social Analysis*, Paper #30 (University of California—Los Angeles: Department of Sociology, 2005), accessed <http://www.repositories.edlib.org/uclasoc/trcsa30>.

neither of these cases, was a sustained dialogue attempted, and unquestioned strategic victory over the adversary was objective. In the case of the Boer War, negotiations began in April 1902 at Vereeniging with the Boer surrender following at the end of May. For the Germans, the physical extermination of their enemy was the goal and so negotiations were pointless. It is not at all coincidental that the German anti-partisan campaign in Eastern Europe during the Second World War followed a similar pattern to the Herrero war forty years earlier.⁴³

But even in cases of rebellion where dialogue has been attempted, the outcome is not always favourable. General Louis-Gabriel Suchet was reasonably successful in his role as commander of the French occupation army in the Spanish province of Aragon from 1809-1813. He was able to neutralise much of the local population by lessening the burden of the occupation, but guerrilla activities that flowed into Aragon from other provinces often undermined the effectiveness of his policies and left the initiative to his foes. Taxes levied to fund counter guerrilla activities and a draw down of troops (for Napoleon's ill-fated Russian campaign) ultimately undermined Suchet's efforts.⁴⁴ As one might have expected, the Spanish insurgents were unremitting in their hostility, the neutrality of the locals was extremely shallow, and Suchet's achievements could only ever be fleeting. The more recent example of the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka is also instructive here. Under pressure from India, the Sri Lankan government agreed to implement a series of constitutional and political reforms to enhance Tamil participation in the country's political life. However, while it is true that the India-Sri Lankan Agreement (1987) never garnered a majority of support among the island country's Sinhalese population, the crucial element in its failure to quench the insurrection was due to it not being acceptable to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The core of the Tamil Tigers' political demands was an independent Tamil state, something that Colombo was not prepared to concede.⁴⁵ Ultimately, India's effort at counter-insurgency failed and the Indian peacekeeping force was withdrawn; and although the Indian effort substantially weakened the LTTE, the rebellion has continued up to the present time.⁴⁶ In both these cases, the political leadership of the insurgency in question found itself either unwilling or unable to seek a negotiated settlement. That is a significant constraint, since engaging in a dialogue with an adversary always presupposes the presence of a party that wishes to listen.

Why are insurgencies so much more resistant to effective dialogue? First, the conflict often quickly devolves into a guerrilla war, thereby making a sustained dialogue between combatants impossible. It is a common practice of insurgencies that rebellions try not to confront the enemy on his own terms. One thinks here of the LTTE, who first conducted conventional operations but quickly shifted to asymmetric attacks (including suicide bombings) when confronted by superior Sri Lankan military capabilities. When that happened, the LTTE fighters began to purposely mix with the general Tamil population in northern Sri Lanka, changing the nature of the rebellion. Trying to talk to an enemy becomes more difficult when the adversary does not appear unified or cannot be easily distinguished from the local population. It is also very probably complicated by

⁴³ Ben Shepherd and Juliette Pattinson, "Partisan and Anti-Partisan Warfare in German-Occupied Europe, 1939-1945: Views from Above and Lessons for the Present," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 5, October 2008, pp. 675-693.

⁴⁴ Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies*, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁵ Rajesh Rajagopalan, *Fighting Like a Guerrilla: The Indian Army and Counterinsurgency* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 87-89, and 125-127.

⁴⁶ By early-2009, it appeared that the LTTE was a spent force as a result of a successful campaign by the Sri Lankan army. See Padma Rao, "Sri Lanka Looks to Uncertain Future," *Der Spiegel*, 9 February 2009.

an enemy's ideology that permits his reliance on suicide attacks as a means of advancing his goals. A second explanation is that the nature of a rebellion all but eliminates the likelihood of any such conversation in the first instance. An insurgency is a challenge to the legitimacy of a government in a given territory. Suchet led, formally speaking, an army of occupation, whose presence was always resented and stiffly resisted: it did not matter what he did, for his force was always regarded as alien to the local population. The LTTE, with its call for independence, undoubtedly viewed Columbo's authority in Tamil populated areas in similar terms. It was also for this reason that the Karzai government expelled two EU diplomats in late-2007 for conducting unauthorised talks with Taliban representatives, and this probably also explains why both the British and German governments did not publicise secret (and ultimately futile) negotiations with the Taliban that were only later revealed in their national media.⁴⁷ Within such constraints, war as dialogue seems rather pointless for both sides demand the wholesale acceptance by the other of their position: in most cases, compromise will be assumed to de-legitimise those positions and, therefore, cannot be welcomed.

On one level, therefore, insurgencies do not appear fundamentally different from other conflicts, for the combatants are seeking to advance their interests through a reliance on armed coercion. For example, in the later stages of the war, North Vietnam's strategy was aimed directly at talking to an increasingly sceptical US domestic audience. The Tet Offensive in 1968 was an example of such thinking. Whereas in a conventional conflict, the adversary is the target of strategy, during a rebellion, the audience is of necessity much broader. The combatants are endeavouring to defeat (or, at least not be defeated by) the adversary, but each must also address the needs of the general population that the insurgency is seeking to mobilize in its favour. Success or failure would seem to be rooted in the degree to which this outreach is accomplished. In 1878, Austria-Hungary occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina after putting down an insurgency that required the commitment of 270,000 troops and several months of heavy fighting; but after four years armed resistance flared again.⁴⁸ John Shindler has argued that a combination of defeating the enemy and talking to the population explains how the 1882 insurrection—the last Vienna had to confront in those provinces—was extinguished:

The enemy was pursued without rest or remorse, yet the absence of retributive policies against Muslim and Orthodox civilians, even in areas where the rebels had significant support, was undoubtedly key in bringing long-term peace to eastern Herzegovina, as was the emperor's amnesty for rebels.⁴⁹

Forty years later, Bosnian regiments were among the most loyal and hard-fighting of the Austro-Hungarian Army, testifying to the success of the counter-insurgency campaign. The purpose of military operations in a modern counter-insurgency operation is no longer just to compel an adversary to do another's will, but rather to convince the population from which that foe draws his sustenance that it should no longer provide that support. Talking to an enemy during an insurgency is, therefore, really all about persuading its supporters to switch sides.

⁴⁷ See Thomas Harding and Tom Crogan, "Britain in Secret Talks with the Taliban," *Daily Telegraph*, 29 December 2007. See also Gebauer and Stark, "Secret Negotiations with the Islamists Proved Fruitless".

⁴⁸ Laszlo Bencze, *The Occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878* (New York: East European Monographs, 2005), p. 276.

⁴⁹ John Shindler, "Defeating Balkan Insurgency: The Austro-Hungarian Army in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1878-1882," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, September 2007, p. 548.

We see evidence of this in the outreach efforts made by the British commanders in ISAF. In many cases, the efforts have, like the negotiations mentioned above, failed. In 2007, *The Sunday Times* reported that £1.5 million in bribes were disbursed in an attempt to convince Taliban fighters to lay down their arms.⁵⁰ The initiative failed to achieve satisfactory results as the money was simply pocketed with no strategic gain for NATO. In a more noted failure, at Musa Qala in late-2006, British commanders had negotiated a deal with tribal elders whereby a local militia would take over security functions from NATO forces and a safe conduct for British troops withdrawing would be provided. But even as the deal was being arranged, British officials acknowledged that they did not know what type of relationship the local elders had with the Taliban. It was only a half-surprise, therefore when by year's end, the Taliban had returned and a NATO offensive was required to retake the area.⁵¹ In this latter instance, both parties were seeking to neutralise the other's advantage through negotiations, and while the Taliban were aiming to offset a tactical disadvantage, the British were attempting to encourage defection from the ranks of putative supporters of the adversary.

The form that persuasion can take varies according to the circumstances. For the insurgent, the goal is to maintain high levels of local support, by the provision of acceptable governance not otherwise available, or through bloody-minded intimidation. Both have been very evident in Iraq and Afghanistan. For those engaged in counter-insurgency, the objective is to break that stranglehold. In Bosnia, in the late-19th century, it meant reassuring the local Muslim elite that the existing system of land tenure would not be challenged by their new Austrian overlords. In 1878, the Habsburg commanders had failed to understand why their enemy continued to fight despite the overwhelming force ranged against him. In 1882, after four years of political outreach, the Austrians were better informed about the enemy—"whose strategic calculus bore scant resemblance to Western norms"⁵²—and better able to separate hard-line elements from those more amenable to their rule.

One hundred and thirty years later, US forces in Iraq appear to have undergone a similar learning experience, and their counter-insurgency operations have at last benefited from an enhanced understanding of the environment within which they were operating. Thomas Ricks's recently published analysis of the surge strategy⁵³, which involved increasing US troop levels and deploying them into Iraqi neighbourhoods, suggests that the reasons for its success are similar to that of the Austrians. While effective use of military power neutralised the enemy, outreach to the local population built a base of support for US efforts. Similar to what happened in Bosnia in 1882, former adversaries were transformed into partners that the US can work with, at least for the time being. In an online exchange with Ricks, strategic analyst Stephen Biddle argued that increased troop levels alone cannot account for what has happened these last months in Iraq:

Sunnis had tried turning on AQI [i.e., al Qaeda Iraq] before, and AQI's signature brutality had always driven them back into the fold via violent comeback. Enter

⁵⁰ Christina Lamb, "Britain's £1.5 million bribes fail to buy Taliban peace deal," *The Sunday Times*, 22 July 2007.

⁵¹ See Alastair Leithead, "Can change in Afghan tactics bring peace," *BBC News*, 17 October 2006 and Bill Roggio, "The Taliban Return to Musa Qala," *The Long War Journal*, 2 November 2006, accessed at http://www.thelongwarjournal.org/archives/2006/11/the_taliban_return_to_musa_qala_t.php.

⁵² Shindler, "Defeating Balkan Insurgency," p. 549.

⁵³ See Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

the surge. What the surge did was to protect Sunnis who wished to realign against AQI to survive the attempt. The surge wasn't big enough to suffocate the insurgency by putting an American on every street corner—there weren't enough Americans. But what it did do was to put Americans into a position to team up with realigning Sunnis to combine their knowledge of who and where the AQI cells were and with our firepower. The combination rapidly rolled up the AQI infrastructure in western and central Iraq, and in the process resulted in a series of negotiated deals in which the Sunni insurgency stood down.⁵⁴

The Sunni awakening, backed by large amounts of cash liberally disbursed, and the success of the US commanders in convincing local Sunnis that they shared a common interest in defeating AQI, led to the suffocation of that aspect of the insurgency in Iraq.

2.2 Washington and the Taliban

During his long campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama criticised the Bush administration for diverting resources away from operations in Afghanistan to support what he viewed as an unnecessary war in Iraq. America's true enemy was to be found, he claimed, not in Iraq, but in Afghanistan. "We did not finish the job against al Qaeda in Afghanistan," he stated during an August 2007 speech:

The first step [of his foreign policy] must be getting off the wrong battlefield in Iraq, and taking the fight to the terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. [...] Our troops have fought valiantly there, but Iraq has deprived them of the support they need and deserve. As a result, parts of Afghanistan are falling into the hands of the Taliban, and a mix of terrorism, drugs and corruption threatens to overwhelm the country.⁵⁵

A year later, in a television interview on the CBS news show *60 Minutes*, he asserted after discussing his planned withdrawal from Iraq that "we have to refocus our attention on Afghanistan."⁵⁶ Five days later, during the first presidential debate (26 September), he argued this position very forcefully: "We have seen Afghanistan worsen, deteriorate. We need more troops there. We need more resources there."⁵⁷ In his first television interview after winning the election, he returned again to the subject. In reiterating a pledge to draw down the US forces in Iraq – by that time, a pledge made easier to honour because of the success of the surge strategy and the Iraqi government's request that Washington withdraw by 2011⁵⁸—he noted that additional troops

⁵⁴ Thomas E. Ricks and Stephen Biddle, "'The Gamble': Did the Surge Work?," *The Washington Post*, 9 February 2009.

⁵⁵ Senator Barack Obama, "The War We Need to Win," speech given at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Washington, D.C., 1 August 2007, accessed <http://www.barackobama.com>.

⁵⁶ "Transcript: Barack Obama on '60 Minutes'—September 21, 2008," accessed at <http://www.clipsandcomments.com/2008/09/22/transcript-barack-obama-on-60-minutes-september-21-2008/>.

⁵⁷ "The First Presidential Debate," *The New York Times*, 26 September 2008.

⁵⁸ Juan Cole, "Obama is saying the wrong things about Afghanistan," *Salon.com*, 23 July 2008.

would then be available for deployment, “particularly in light of the problems we’re having in Afghanistan, which has continued to worsen. We’ve got to shore up those efforts.”⁵⁹

Shortly after his inauguration, Washington began to focus on the problems in Afghanistan. Obama announced the appointment of veteran diplomat Richard Holbrooke, the author of the Dayton Peace Settlement (1995), as his Special Envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan. He further stated that his administration would prepare a new strategy for tackling the war in Afghanistan. In late-March that policy was finally unveiled. It revealed a re-tooling of US efforts, including a policy of reaching out to elements within the Taliban. The purpose of this outreach is to bring elements of that group into the nascent Afghan political process, “by exploiting differences among the insurgents to divide the Taliban’s true believers from less committed fighters.”⁶⁰ An article in *The Observer* published prior to the White Paper, and that was based on a lengthy interview with the outgoing US ambassador in Kabul, William Wood, provided some insight into the thinking that went into the new strategy. According to the article, this includes a willingness “to discuss the establishment of a political party, or even election candidates representing the Taliban, as part of a political strategy that would sit alongside reinforced military efforts to end the increasingly intractable conflict.” Other ideas being discussed include taking senior Taliban officials off UN blacklists in an effort to foster a dialogue. The article further claims that there have been “at least four attempts at exploratory negotiations between insurgents, their representatives and the Afghan government.”⁶¹

Such thinking is hardly new. A similar approach was advocated for Afghanistan by the well-known Australian writer on insurgency, David Kilcullen. In his opinion, the war in that country has gone terribly wrong and the West is in danger of being defeated. In a November 2008 interview in *The New Yorker*, Kilcullen assessed the situation in the country in very stark terms: “It’s bad: violence is way up, Taliban influence has spread at the local level, and popular confidence in the government and the international community is waning fast. It’s still winnable, but only just [...]” The course of action that he recommended is to speak to the locals and undercut the Taliban:

Rather than negotiate directly with the Taliban, a program to reconcile with local communities who are tacitly supporting the Taliban by default (because of lack of an alternative) would bear more fruit. The Taliban movement itself is disunited and fissured with mutual suspicion—local tribal leaders have told me that ninety percent of the people we call Taliban could be reconcilable under some circumstances, but that many are terrified of what the Quetta shura and other extremists associated with the old Taliban regime might do to them if they tried to reconcile.

Kilcullen’s understanding does not assume the existence of (nor does he ever refer to) “moderate Taliban,” a term that seems more designed to mislead than to explain a major change in strategy. What it does assume, however, is that the best mechanism to undermine the Taliban insurgency is to reduce the strength of that group’s local support. The fissiparous nature of the Taliban might

⁵⁹ Adam Shake, “Barack Obama CBS 60 Minutes Interview Transcript and Video from Nov. 16th, 2008,” accessed at <http://www.twilightearth.com/2008/11/barack-obama-cbs-60-minutes-interview-transcript.html>.

⁶⁰ See *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan*.

⁶¹ Jason Burke, “America floats plan to tempt Taliban into peace process,” *The Observer*, 22 March 2009.

even make that objective easier to achieve, given that loyalties are, as a consequence, likely to be more frayed. Perhaps they will be up for purchase to the highest bidder. “Co-opt the reconcilables, make peace with anyone willing to give up the armed struggle, but simultaneously kill or capture those who prove themselves to be irreconcilable” is what Kilcullen advocates.⁶²

In both the US White Paper and Kilcullen’s ideas the desire to co-opt elements in the Taliban is accompanied by a scaling back of Western objectives in Afghanistan. In neither is there much attention paid to the advocacy of liberal democratic standards, a cause that is widely viewed now as both unrealistic and incompatible with the traditional culture of the tribes in that region. While Kilcullen does not establish any criteria as the basis for an outreach programme, according to Ambassador Wood the assessment of who might be co-opted is likely to be determined by what members of the Taliban are willing to accept the constraints imposed by the current Afghan constitution: “there is room for discussion on the formation of political parties [or] running [...] for elections. That is very different from shooting your way into power.”⁶³ Whether the rumoured US approach will prove an adequate means of reducing local support is not at all certain and, of course, it is completely uncertain whether such declarations will be sincere or enduring.

At one time or another, Karzai, Obama and others, have advocated talking to the enemy in Afghanistan. All have pointed to what they have termed “moderates” within the Islamist movement as likely interlocutors. It is not at all always certain that some who advocate reaching out to the enemy recognise that doing so is not an alternative to military operations. And it is important to realize that those with whom a dialogue is commenced will also be seeking to advance their interests, including the defeat of those (i.e., NATO) with whom they have been fighting. In many cases, talking to an enemy has not meant that the conflict has ended, far from it, as the dialogue is simply another facet of a strategy to win the war: or, at the very least, to advance one’s objectives. As previous counter-insurgency operations have shown, an effective strategy has been a combination of using military force to harass and kill the enemy, and a dialogue that aims to remove control of the civilian population from which that foe derives support. Talking to the enemy in Afghanistan, as has happened elsewhere, might require engaging in a dialogue with those who are fighting but might be dissuaded from continuing but, most especially, it must also address those who are their supporters.

⁶² George Packer, “Kilcullen on Afghanistan: ‘It’s Still Winnable, But Only Just,’” *The New Yorker*, 14 November 2008.

⁶³ Burke, “America floats plan to tempt Taliban into peace process”.

3 Conclusion

Talking to an enemy in wartime is, generally speaking, an essential component of any strategy. That statement is applicable in most conventional wars and insurgencies alike, even if doing so is much easier when the conflict is the former. There are cases of counter-insurgencies in earlier eras that were crushed by extreme military measures, but the strategies that underwrote those campaigns are viewed as extreme today and are most likely politically unsustainable. And, so, there is perhaps a greater political imperative to overcome the difficulties inherent in a conversation between adversaries engaged by an insurgency. But, if talking to an enemy is inevitable it is also always fraught with dangers, for in many cases the incentive for doing so appears to stem from difficulties on the battlefield. This often leads to charges of defeatism. This is particularly problematic as adversaries, even while engaging in negotiations, will almost always seek to advance their objectives through such contact—negotiations being, on occasion, just as effective an instrument of war as armed force.

If war, as Clausewitz noted, is politics by other means: negotiations in wartime are war by other means. That simple dictum is not always remembered. Given the difficulties that the NATO-led campaign in Afghanistan is encountering, and the low-level of public support in most countries with troops engaged in the campaign, the recent call for negotiations with so-called moderates in the Taliban is, therefore, not unexpected. Nor should it be regarded as the equivalent of a declaration of failure by the countries involved in military operations in Afghanistan. If carefully implemented, and with a clear understanding of the socio-political environment in that country, including the war objectives of the adversary and how he might intend to achieve them, a more determined effort at talking with the enemy and most especially his supporters could well prove to be the harbinger of a more effective counter-insurgency strategy.

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Talking to an enemy in wartime is, generally speaking, an essential component of any strategy. That statement is applicable in most conventional wars and insurgencies alike. There are cases of counter-insurgencies in earlier eras that were crushed by extreme military measures, but the strategies that underwrote those campaigns are viewed as extreme today and are most likely politically unsustainable. But, if talking to an enemy is inevitable it is also fraught with dangers, for both parties will seek to advance their objectives through such contact – negotiations being, on occasion, just as effective an instrument of war as armed force. The recent call for negotiations with so-called moderates in the Taliban are, therefore, not unexpected and should not be regarded as the equivalent of a declaration of failure by the countries involved in military operations in Afghanistan. If carefully implemented, and with a clear understanding of the socio-political environment in that country, a more determined effort at talking with the enemy and his supporters could well prove to be the harbinger of a more effective counter-insurgency strategy.

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