

Is it time to talk to the Taliban?

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Is it time to talk to the Taliban? If Steve Coll, the well-connected head of the New America Foundation, is right, the question may already be redundant. Coll wrote in a recent *New Yorker* article that the Obama administration had begun secret talks with senior Taliban leaders.

In the same article, Coll cites a speech by the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to the Asia Society in which she says: "I know that reconciling with an adversary that can be as brutal as the Taliban sounds distasteful, even unimaginable. And diplomacy would be easy if we only had to talk to our friends. But that is not how one makes peace."

Clinton is right in principle, but wrong in Afghanistan. For one thing "talking to the Taliban" is more complicated than it sounds.

Last year, the United States facilitated talks between the Afghan government and a senior Taliban leader. The only problem was the guy was not from the Taliban at all, but a fraud.

Moreover, even if we could find genuine Taliban leaders to whom we could talk, the movement is not monolithic, nor indeed representative of all those with grievances against the Afghan government. It is certainly not representative of all ethnic Pashtuns as is sometimes claimed. So why grant the Taliban a legitimacy it does not deserve?

Indeed, assuming a deal could be had, it would hardly bring an end to the myriad ethnic and sectarian conflicts that afflict Afghanistan, while sacrificing some of the few real gains that have been made on things like women's rights and education to the Taliban's medieval demands.

The Afghan government does need to undertake a genuine process of reconciliation, but with its own increasingly disaffected people first.

Finally I fear that what motivates the administration, or at least parts of it, is not a shrewd willingness to talk to adversaries but an expedient desire to bring America's involvement to an end.

Critics of the war will counter that this is the only prudent option after nine years of fruitless effort. But even if I believed this was true - and I do not - it is the wrong basis for negotiations. It makes it much more likely that the talks will quickly boil down to the only thing on which the two sides can agree, the need for international forces to leave, sacrificing both principle and interests (our own and those of the Afghan people) along the way.

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