

WILL SUCCESSFUL BERGDAHL NEGOTIATIONS GET US- TALIBAN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS GOING AGAIN?

This weekend's swap of Bowe Bergdahl for five Afghan Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo has triggered responses on a large number of fronts. For now, I will leave it to others to sort through whether Obama was required to inform Congress, whether the move provides incentive to the Taliban to capture more prisoners and whether Bergdahl was a deserter. Instead, I want to focus on the fact that this prisoner exchange stands as a significant accomplishment in negotiation among parties who have seen previous attempts at negotiation fail.

Recall that back in early 2012, we first learned that the Afghan Taliban was opening an office in Qatar:

The Taliban said in a surprise announcement last week they had reached a preliminary agreement to set up a political address in Qatar and asked for the release of prisoners held by the U.S. military at Guantanamo Bay.

So the release of Afghan Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo was at the top of the list for setting up the office in Qatar and beginning negotiations. It is also important to note that the Haqqani Network, who held Bergdahl in Pakistan, was also to be included in the talks at the same time that the opening for negotiations was first noted and that Pakistan helped to move things along:

The US has taken Pakistan into

confidence over the unprecedented development of allowing the Taliban a political office in Qatar to advance the Afghan reconciliation process, sources revealed.

A senior Pakistani official stated that the Obama administration not only sought Pakistan's consent over the Taliban office but had also given a 'green light' to allow the deadliest Afghan insurgent group, the Haqqani network, to be a part of the reconciliation process.

The move by Washington was a clear deflection from its previous policy of keeping Islamabad at bay over its peace overtures with the Afghan Taliban.

"Yes, we were onboard," said the senior Pakistani official referring to the latest push by Washington to seek a political settlement of the Afghan conflict.

The process suffered a major setback when the office was found to be flying the flag the Taliban used when they ruled Afghanistan and when the sign on the door seemed to suggest that the Taliban felt they were still the legitimate governing body. Hamid Karzai threw a huge fit over that development, and even though his government hadn't been invited to the talks, he managed to stall the process. About a year and a half later, things settled down a bit and the provocative sign and flag were removed.

In today's New York Times, we are warned not to infer that the prisoner swap means that additional talks look likely:

The freeing of five senior Taliban figures in exchange for the American soldier, Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, has offered both a rare insight into the insurgent group's inner workings and a diplomatic first in the long Afghan war: a negotiated agreement between the highest

levels of the American government and the pinnacle of the Taliban command.

Representatives of both sides played down the idea that the exchange, long seen as a crucial prelude to any broader talks, might breathe new life into the effort to engage the Taliban in a peace effort. But the complex swap showed “each side that the other can deliver,” said one senior American official close to the effort. And it gave both the Taliban leadership and the Obama administration important political symbols.

In contrast, ToloNews cites optimism at the Afghan High Peace Council, which was to be a participant in the initial talks in early 2012:

Although the Afghan High Peace Council did not play any role in facilitating the exchange, members expressed optimism about the impact of the prisoners’ release on peace talks with the Taliban, which have failed to make headway despite President Hamid Karzai’s desperate attempts over the past year to get them going.

“The release of the Guantanamo prisoners came from the U.S. and releasing the captive was a decision by Taliban, so this deal was strictly between them two,” said Ismail Qasimyar, Global Affairs Advisor to the High Peace Council. “But it will not end here and it will have its impacts.”

Just as he was upset about not being part of the 2012 process, Karazi is now protesting not being included in the talks that led to the prisoner swap:

The Afghan president is angry at being kept in the dark over a deal to free five Taliban leaders in exchange for a

captured U.S. soldier, and accuses Washington of failing to back a peace plan for the war-torn country, a senior source said on Monday.

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"The president is now even more distrustful of U.S. intentions in the country," said the source at President Hamid Karzai's palace in Kabul, who declined to be identified.

"He is asking: How come the prisoner exchange worked out so well, when the Afghan peace process failed to make any significant progress?"

Just as we had little hint before it was announced that the prisoner swap would take place, I suspect that any new peace talks among the Afghan Taliban, the US, the Afghan High Peace Council, the Haqqani Network and even the Afghan government will take place behind a strong veil of secrecy until the process has ended, whether successful or not.