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Post-Bin Laden prospects for the peace process in Afghanistan

LSE Ideas

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With all the symbolic allusions to 9/11, including President Obama's visit to 'ground zero' on May 5, at the end of the day the annihilation of the world's 'terrorist number one' in a US covert operation in northern Pakistan turned out to be a highly contextual, instrumental and multi-purpose move. The relevant political contexts are multiple, but the interests, dynamics and implications involved are qualitatively different from the ones that shaped the US-led 'war on terrorism' at its onset. A decade since 9/11, the main international implication of bin Laden's execution is not the most obvious and direct one, i.e. the toppling of al-Qaeda as a major blow to transnational terrorism, but a more indirect and fundamental one.

The anti-terrorism meaning of bin Laden's death and its significance for the future of the 'global jihad' movement (a problematic term used here for brevity's sake) is hardly negligible, but relatively limited. The main strength of the al-Qaeda-style, or post-Qaeda, movement has been its specific, truly globalist vein of ideological/religious extremism – and that predates and will outlive bin Laden as its rather vulgar populariser, with a younger, Internet-based generation of ideologues well in place. The movement's another major strength lies in its adaptive and innovative organizational patterns that go beyond network-type structure and involve direct coordination role of ideological/strategic discourse for its multiple and otherwise autonomous and fragmented elements. Their markedly transnational agenda distinguishes them from territorially based armed actors that may display certain ideological proximity, but are inseparably and primarily tied to local political agenda and armed struggle.



The key point of reference for the Abbottabad liquidation starts and ends up with the US domestic politics. Still, a year and a half before the next presidential elections, the link to the US political cycle is not as immediate and primitive as it may seem. The liquidation may be long-overdue, but from the point of the US electoral politics, it may even look premature. The more fundamental political implication of this operation is a combination of (a) how it is instrumentalised, as an important interim step, to meet the most pressing foreign policy challenge for the US today – which is not al-Qaeda terrorism, (b) how this ultimately contributes to calculated domestic political boost to Obama's next presidency prospects and (c) what the latter would mean for the rest of the world, as opposed to potential US domestic alternatives.

The evolving struggle for the future of the broader Middle East in the midst of the mass-based – and generally pro-reformist – Arab uprisings poses both new challenges and new political opportunities for the current administration. The 'Arab Spring' has also overwhelmed and de facto depreciated much of the post-9/11 security discourse centred on Islamist terrorism. However, such foreign policy issues tend to be easily overshadowed in US domestic politics by socio-economic concerns, while domestic impact of major foreign policy failures can be devastating. Even prior to bin Laden's death, the most dramatic challenge on the US foreign policy agenda has not been 'global jihadi' terrorism. The most challenging issue, where the US is closest to failure, remains the US intervention in Afghanistan that, while originally linked to al-Qaeda, has long acquired its own dynamics. To effectively demonstrate – not just declare – to its own people and to the world that the US is on the right track on, i.e. on its way out of, Afghanistan by the time of 2012 presidential elections, the administration needs to decisively act now.

Against this background, the US 'solution' for bin Laden has a two-fold meaning. Most importantly, it is the clearest indication so far – and the first practical sign – that the current administration has put a genuine political stake upon US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. In line with that goal, the liquidation of bin Laden in Pakistan may also be interpreted as an attempt to breathe life into the political negotiation process in Afghanistan.

In recent months, there has been no shortage in peace and 'stabilization' initiatives on Afghanistan. The common starting point for all of them is the recognition of the failure of the present counterinsurgency campaign in – and of a military solution for – Afghanistan. Leaving some of the interesting but less practical [approaches](#) aside, the more earthly proposals range from the more upbeat to the pessimistic ones about the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. The pessimistic scenario is well captured by Robert Blackwill's stabilization '[plan B](#)' that implies a reluctant recognition by the US and NATO of the Taliban rule in the south-east, regardless of the progress in negotiations or a lack of such. It also hints at the need to live up

with the de facto, but not de jure, division of Afghanistan, coupled with the more targeted US and allied support to the central government and the northern provinces.

In contrast, the [Brahimi-Pickering plan](#) is the closest one can presently get to a multilateral, UN-centred peace framework for Afghanistan. The proposed framework that includes all armed veto players on the ground in the negotiations and addresses the key contested issues does qualify for a genuine peace process. It also seriously explores how, through the negotiating process, some of the Taliban's political, legal and security concerns may be accommodated in a power-sharing arrangement, in a political system based on Islamic law. Of a range of possible concessions that the Taliban could offer, the only non-negotiable constant for all foreign and international stakeholders remains the requirement for severing the Taliban ties to bin Laden's al-Qaeda. The killing of bin Laden, by effectively lifting what appeared an insurmountable political hurdle to formal peace negotiations between US/NATO and the Afghan insurgents, serves as a major preparatory and facilitating act on the way to any political solution.

While this clarifies to some extent the direction that the US policy on Afghanistan is taking, it does not resolve the fundamental problem that permeates even the comprehensive Brahimi-Pickering plan. This plan does not go beyond past proposals to offer a convincing explanation of why the Taliban would choose negotiations as a better way to achieve their goals, over continued armed struggle or simply enduring the enemy. The peace plan treats armed parties in Afghanistan as equal rational choice players, stuck in a military stalemate and, for different reasons, pushed towards negotiations. A military stalemate may, indeed, serve as a major driver towards successful peace negotiations, but mostly in case of 'symmetrical' stalemate between comparable state or non-state parties. However, the role of the US/NATO forces as major combatants and counter-insurgents in Afghanistan turns the situation into a fundamentally asymmetrical stalemate which does not imply that every major party is equally, if at all, interested in a peace process, both in substantive and in technical terms, such as the time framework. The present, quite violent stalemate poses a major political challenge for the US and embarrassment for NATO, but not for the Taliban who have proved their capacity to wait for a long time (according to their ideology, 'eternity', if needed). To hope that the 'new ambivalence' in Pakistan will serve as a decisive external lever to push not just select Taliban leaders, but the complex conglomerate of the Taliban-led insurgency toward negotiating peace in Afghanistan is well-intentioned, but wishful thinking.

To sum it up, there is no similar time or political pressure on the Taliban to engage even in a properly managed peace process, designed with significant international input, as there is on the side of a US administration that needs to be on a firm track towards a negotiated solution by 2012 and, preferably, to have the settlement in place by 2014. This basic reality does not change with bin Laden's death, nor does it devalue the very idea of a negotiated solution for Afghanistan, especially in the longer term. However, it makes the way to an eventual settlement (at least over the next 2-3 years) more likely, if not to follow Blackwill's pessimistic 'Plan B', than to constantly oscillate between deadly force on both sides and occasional, rather than systematic talks (falling short of the Brahimi-Pickering comprehensive peace process framework). It also somewhat diminishes the real political benefits of the liquidation of Osama bin Laden for the prospects of a negotiated solution in Afghanistan and of the US relatively face-saving military withdrawal.

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