

The Taliban Think They Have Already Won, Peace Deal or Not

“We have defeated the enemy.” The international community is scrambling to secure peace in Afghanistan, but the Taliban believe they have the upper hand — and are saying as much.



By Adam Nossiter

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban’s swagger is unmistakable. From the recent bellicose speech of their deputy leader, boasting of “conquests,” to sneering references to the “foreign masters” of the “illegitimate” Kabul government, to the Taliban’s own website tally of “puppets” killed — Afghan soldiers — they are promoting a bold message:

We have already won the war.

And that belief, grounded in military and political reality, is shaping Afghanistan’s volatile present. On the eve of talks in Turkey next month over the country’s future, it is the elephant in the room: the half-acknowledged truth that the Taliban have the upper hand and are thus showing little outward interest in compromise, or of going along with the dominant American idea, power-sharing.

While the Taliban’s current rhetoric is also propaganda, the grim sense of Taliban supremacy is dictating the response of a desperate Afghan government and influencing Afghanistan’s anxious foreign interlocutors. It contributes to the abandonment of dozens of checkpoints and falling morale among the Afghan security forces, already hammered by a “not sustainable” casualty rate of perhaps 3,000 a month, a senior Western diplomat in Kabul said.

The group doesn’t hide its pride at having compelled its principal adversary for 20 years, the United States, to negotiate with the Taliban and, last year, to sign an agreement to completely withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021. In exchange, the Taliban agreed to stop attacking foreign forces and to sever ties with international terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda.

The Biden administration has yet to definitively say whether it will meet that deadline, just weeks away.

“No mujahid ever thought that one day we would face such an improved state, or that we will crush the arrogance of the rebellious emperors, and force them to admit their defeat at our hands,” the Taliban’s deputy leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, said in a recent speech. “Fortunately, today, we and you are experiencing better circumstances.”

Nearly every day, the Taliban’s website features reports of purported defections to its side, though the details are likely exaggerated, just as both the Taliban and the Afghan government exaggerate each other’s casualties. “59 enemy personnel switch sides to Islamic Emirate,” read one recent headline.

Having outlasted the all-powerful Americans, the rest is child’s play, in the Taliban’s view. The game is essentially over.

“They think they have beaten the Americans, so they can beat the other Afghan forces as well, and get control over the country,” said Jawed Kohistani, an Afghan analyst and former security official in Kabul.



An international peace conference on Afghanistan, held in Moscow this month. Russian Foreign Ministry, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The Taliban, who governed most of the country from 1996 to 2001, are not interested in true power sharing, Mr. Kohistani said. “They are planning to restore their Islamic emirate,” he added, “and they will punish all those involved in corruption and land grabbing.”

Antonio Giustozzi, a leading Taliban expert, disputed the idea that the Taliban are necessarily bent on reimposing a similarly hard-line Islamic regime. “As long as they can get to power through a political agreement, between establishing the emirate and democracy, there are options,” he said. “The aim would be to become the dominant power.”

The Taliban know that Afghanistan, an aid-dependent state, 80 percent of whose expenditures are funded from international donors, cannot afford the isolation of that era, analysts say.

Just as the Taliban have become increasingly sophisticated in their use of social media, online propaganda and a pugnacious English-language website — though they still often ban smartphones in areas they control — so has their language evolved to reflect the current moment.

With the decisive shift in their military fortunes, their words have become assertive and victorious, a posture that would have been impossible a mere three years ago, analysts say.

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The corollary to such posturing is the Afghan government’s insistence that it expects a deadly endgame with the insurgency. Government officials rarely claim that *they* and not the Taliban are the victors, because they can’t. Evidence of Taliban ascendancy, in the insurgents’ steady offensive in the countryside, their systematic encroachment on cities and their overrunning of military bases, is too prevalent.

American negotiators are pushing ideas of compromise and power-sharing, but government officials are largely resistant to them — in part because any interim government would most likely require Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, to step down. He has steadfastly refused to even consider it.

Instead, the government employs back-to-the-wall language indicating that the bloody struggle will only intensify. Earlier this month, a senior official told reporters inside the intensively guarded presidential palace complex that a compromise, coalition government — recently proposed to both sides by Zalmay Khalilzad, the American peace envoy — would merely be used by the Taliban as a “Trojan horse” for the seizure of power.



Zalmay Khalilzad, the American peace envoy to Afghanistan, and U.S. Army Gen. Austin S. Miller, the commander of the U.S.-led mission in the country, at President Ashraf Ghani's presidential inauguration in Kabul, last year. Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

It was “totally unrealistic” to think the insurgents would agree to it, “knowing their psychology,” the official said. “I am not promising a better situation in the future. But we will continue fighting.”

Mr. Ghani sounded a largely pessimistic note in remarks to the Aspen Institute in January. “In their eschatology, Afghanistan is the place where the final battle takes place,” he said of the Taliban.

We “hope for the best, but prepare for the worst,” he said.

The Ghani administration’s bleak outlook also reflects the insurgent group’s territorial gains. In December, nearly 200 checkpoints in Kandahar, the Taliban’s historical stronghold, were abandoned by Afghan security forces, according to the U.S. government’s Afghanistan watchdog.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

"I think they are 90 percent right," said Mr. Giustozzi, of the insurgent group's claims of victory. "Clearly the war has been lost. Clearly things have gone in the wrong direction. Things have worsened under Ghani. The trend is in their favor."

Some analysts caution that while the Taliban may think they have won, other armed actors in the Afghan equation will make a forced takeover difficult. That was the experience 25 years ago, when the Taliban were forced to battle warlords principally in the north and east, and failed to gain total control over the entire country.

A militia in central Afghanistan led by Abdul Ghani Alipur, a local warlord, has already inflamed hostility with the government in recent months. And longtime power brokers in the country's west and north have rallied fighters to defend against the Taliban, if necessary.



Taliban prisoners were released near Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan in May after a peace deal between the Taliban and the United States. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Meanwhile, the Taliban rely on fear to keep local populations in rural areas quiescent. An effective tool is the insurgents' hidden network of ad hoc underground prisons where torture and punishment are meted out to those suspected of working for, or with, the government.

But the Taliban are also viewed by some as being less corrupt than Afghan officials. The group's judges adjudicate civil and property disputes, perhaps more efficiently than the government's faltering institutions.

In some areas under Taliban control, they have permitted schools for girls to continue operating, Thomas Ruttig, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, pointed out in a recent paper — though, he notes, this may be driven more by political imperative than a softening of ideology.

Elsewhere, the Taliban's increasingly confident messaging has penetrated deep into its rank-and-file, in large part because events have borne it out.

"People said that it is not possible to fire on U.S. forces," said Muslim Mohabat, a former Taliban fighter from Watapor District in Kunar Province. "They would say the barrel of the rifle would bend if you open fire on them, but we attacked them, and nothing happened."

"Then we kept attacking them and forced them to leave the valley," said Mr. Mohabat, who fought in some of the most violent battles of the war with the United States.

In the insurgents' view, their advances will inexorably lead to the end of the Kabul government.

"On the battlefield there is a sense that, 'We're stronger than ever,'" said Ashley Jackson, a Taliban expert at the Overseas Development Institute. "Power-sharing and democracy, these are anathema to their political culture."



A member of the Afghan police at an outpost near the front line with the Taliban in Kandahar this month as a cease-fire took effect. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

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