

Four-way talks on Afghanistan start, with much to overcome

By **Tim Craig** and **Michael E. Miller** January 11 at 1:22 PM

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Afghanistan is seeking unprecedented cooperation from Pakistan's military to jump-start peace talks with the Taliban, but officials cautioned Monday that face-to-face discussions between the warring parties may still be months away.

After a six-month delay, representatives from the United States, China, Afghanistan and Pakistan met in Islamabad on Monday to discuss whether negotiations between the Taliban and [Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's](#) government are even possible.

The day-long meeting, led by Pakistani and Afghan Foreign Ministry officials and U.S. and Chinese special envoys, broke up with a pledge to convene next Monday in Kabul.

“All four countries underscored the importance of bringing an end to the conflict in Afghanistan that continues to inflict senseless violence on the Afghan people and also breeds insecurity throughout the region,” the delegation — which included Richard G. Olson, President Obama's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan — said in a statement. “The participants emphasized the immediate need for direct talks.”

Afghan officials expect Pakistan to hand over a list of Taliban leaders willing to participate in the talks. Once they are known, Afghan leaders want Pakistan's help in retaliating against those who refuse to negotiate, officials said.

“The groups that are willing to talk will be part of peace negotiations,” said Javid Faisal, a spokesman for Afghanistan's chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah. “The groups that continue to fight against Afghans, we will be dealing with them through counterterrorism mechanisms.”

Several attempts to broker negotiations have been made over the past 2¹/₂ years, but the efforts have been hindered by mistrust, diplomatic showmanship and differences within both the Taliban and Afghan government about whether to participate.

Still, Monday's meeting marked the most consequential gathering on this issue since an [effort broke down in late](#)

[July](#) when news leaked that [Mohammad Omar](#), the Taliban's supreme leader, had died two years earlier.

In a statement Monday, Pakistan's government said the latest discussions are aimed at "creating a conducive environment for holding direct talks."

"It is important to undertake a realistic assessment of the opportunities as well as anticipated obstacles in the process and then develop clarity on how to proceed further," Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's foreign policy chief, said in the statement.

Those obstacles are formidable, including the apparent absence so far of any Taliban representatives.

The Taliban's new leader, Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, has shown little interest in negotiating with Ghani's government. Since Mansour was officially selected in late July as Omar's replacement, the Taliban has been making gains on the battlefield and has intensified [deadly attacks in Kabul](#).

Many Afghans also remain skeptical about Pakistan's role as facilitator of the talks. Pakistan's intelligence agency has historical ties to the Taliban leadership, and many top Taliban figures have found refuge across the border after they were driven from power in Kabul in 2001.

"All of the surrounding circumstances of the next round of negotiations don't seem to be particularly favorable, as far as I can see," said Hans-Jakob Schindler, a Taliban expert on the United Nations team monitoring sanctions against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

After its surprise push into the [northern Afghan city of Kunduz](#) last fall, Schindler said, the Taliban has "some feeling of success on the battlefield" for the first time in years. [Those gains](#) could embolden hard-line Taliban leaders to steer clear of negotiations, he said.

But Afghan leaders are hopeful that Pakistan's military will more aggressively pursue Taliban leaders and militants who refuse to sit down with Ghani's government.

Faisal said Pakistan's powerful army chief, Gen. Raheel Sharif, has been delivering "key messages" that his country "is honest and loyal and will honestly fight against terrorism."

"We hope their words are translated into action," Faisal said.

Imtiaz Gul, a security expert at the Center for Research and Security Studies in Islamabad, said the historical "nexis between Pakistan" and the Taliban leadership "has run its course." Gul said Pakistani leaders are under

[tremendous pressure from China](#), which has pledged to invest \$46 billion here, to play a constructive role in ending the Afghanistan war.

Still, Gul said that any “expectation for quick delivery of action is naive.” He noted that elements of Pakistan’s military and Inter-Services Intelligence agency have to work through three decades of history before they can get tough with Taliban leaders unwilling to negotiate with Kabul in good faith.

“We are talking about friendships, social relationships, political alliances and institutional linkages,” Gul said. “It’s extremely intricate — like a minefield, basically. They are trying to find a path through a very explosive minefield.”

Miller reported from Kabul. Shaiq Hussain in Islamabad contributed to this report.

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