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May 12, 2010

Dear President Obama:

President Hamid Karzai's visit to Washington this week will mark a critical juncture for U.S. policy in the war in Afghanistan.

After conducting "talks about talks" with Taliban leaders and intermediaries for more than a year, President Karzai will seek U.S. support to launch Afghan national reconciliation talks that include the Afghan Taliban. We strongly urge you to agree. Hindering Afghan efforts to resolve their differences can only prolong the war and increase its human suffering and material costs.

Recognition is growing that talks with Afghan insurgent leaders, including the Taliban, are essential to ending the war. President Karzai and other senior Afghan politicians support talks with the Taliban. More and more ordinary Afghans, including Afghan women professionals, believe that peace in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without including Taliban leaders in a national reconciliation process.

Britain and other NATO allies also want to start talks with the Taliban now. British Foreign Minister David Miliband made clear several months ago that, while an eventual agreement should require all parties to sever ties with al-Qaeda, end armed struggle, and accept an Afghan constitutional framework, these requirements should not be preconditions for a dialogue. An agreement should also protect gains in women's rights made since the fall of the former Taliban regime but this, too, should not be a precondition for talks.

The former head of the UN mission in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, has also argued that a negotiated agreement that includes the Taliban is the only way to end the war. He has held talks with high ranking Taliban leaders and believes, with many others, that some, if not all, of these leaders are ready to discuss a negotiated end to the war. Another sign that insurgents are ready to talk is the peace plan Gulbuddin Hekmatyar proposed to the Afghan government in February; indications are that this plan has support among the Quetta Shura of Afghan Taliban leaders.

We understand that your administration is not opposed to eventual talks with Taliban leaders, but U.S. officials have argued that talks should not begin until U.S. military operations have weakened the insurgents. This policy increasingly isolates the United States and diminishes the confidence of U.S. allies.

Negotiations will take time. They should begin now with all those willing to negotiate. No one, including the Taliban, believes that U.S. and NATO forces will remain in Afghanistan indefinitely. This expectation ensures that U.S. influence in Afghanistan will diminish, not increase, over time. Many analysts believe that Taliban leaders want to talk with the U.S., not only with the Karzai government. The U.S. should agree to engage. Delaying talks will only diminish U.S. leverage.

The U.S. decision in Iraq to negotiate agreements with the main indigenous insurgent forces fighting the Iraqi government and U.S. troops is now widely seen as the greatest tactical success of the Iraq war, one that opened the way to rapid de-escalation and the negotiated withdrawal of U.S. troops that is now underway. A U.S. decision now to follow the lead of the Afghan government and U.S. allies and to open talks with Afghan insurgents has a similar potential to put Afghanistan on a course of de-escalation and an end to the war.

We strongly urge you to say “yes” when President Karzai asks you this week to support Afghan national reconciliation, including talks with the Afghan Taliban.

Sincerely,

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