

Assessing the feasibility of negotiating with religious insurgencies: historical precedents and strategic lessons

Evaluando la viabilidad de negociar con insurgencias religiosas: precedentes históricos y lecciones estratégicas

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

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

Abstract

This document examines how negotiation strategies impact conflict resolution with insurgent groups, focusing on the U.S. approach to the Taliban during the Afghan conflict. It compares the U.S. strategy with historical cases of successful negotiations, such as with the Free Aceh Movement and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. It argues that military approaches alone do not address the root causes of insurgencies and that successful peace agreements require negotiations under the right conditions. Key lessons include the importance of timing, trust, and addressing political grievances. The document suggests that the U.S. reluctance to negotiate with the Taliban, due to fears of legitimizing the insurgency, overlooked the potential benefits of dialogue. Insights from these cases could have informed a more effective strategy for the Afghan conflict, highlighting the value of negotiation for achieving lasting peace.

Resumen

Este documento analiza cómo las estrategias de negociación impactan la resolución de conflictos con grupos insurgentes, centrándose en la postura de Estados Unidos hacia los talibanes durante el conflicto afgano. Compara la estrategia de EE.UU. con casos históricos exitosos, como el Movimiento Aceh Libre y el Frente Islámico de Liberación Moro. Se argumenta que los enfoques militares por sí solos no resuelven las causas subyacentes de las insurgencias, y que los acuerdos de paz exitosos requieren negociaciones en condiciones apropiadas. El estudio subraya la importancia del momento oportuno, la confianza y la resolución de agravios políticos. Sugiere que la reticencia de EE.UU. a negociar con los talibanes, por miedo a legitimar la insurgencia, pasó por alto los beneficios potenciales del diálogo. Las lecciones de estos casos podrían haber llevado a una estrategia más efectiva para el conflicto afgano, destacando el valor de la negociación para alcanzar una paz duradera

Assessing the Feasibility of Negotiating with Religious Insurgencies: Historical Precedents and Strategic Lessons		
Objectives	Methodology	Contributions
 Evaluate the feasibility of engaging in negotiations with religious insurgent groups.	 Examine the negotiation processes and peace agreements between Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).	 Demonstrate the feasibility of engaging in negotiations with religious insurgent groups
 Examine the potential for achieving favorable outcomes through such negotiations.	 Analyze the negotiation strategies and peace settlements between the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).	 Highlight the essential conditions and requirements for successful negotiations
 Identify the essential conditions required to conduct effective negotiations.	 Apply insights from these case studies to the context of Afghanistan.	

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Objetivos	Metodología	Contribuciones
 Evaluar la factibilidad de iniciar negociaciones con grupos insurgentes de carácter religioso.	 Examinar los procesos y acuerdos de paz entre Indonesia y el Movimiento Aceh Libre (GAM).	 Demostrar la viabilidad de entablar negociaciones con grupos insurgentes religiosos.
 Analizar las posibilidades de alcanzar resultados favorables y acuerdos de paz sostenibles.	 Analizar las tácticas de negociación y los acuerdos de paz entre Filipinas y el Frente Moro de Liberación Islámica (MILF).	 Resaltar las condiciones y requisitos esenciales para negociaciones exitosas.
 Determinar las condiciones clave necesarias para realizar negociaciones efectivas.	 Aplicar las lecciones de estos estudios al contexto afgano.	

Negotiations with insurgencies, Free Aceh Movement, Moro front for national liberation

Negociaciones con insurgencias, Movimiento Aceh libre, Frente moro de liberación nacional

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Introduction

The images of hundreds of people running towards the last American planes leaving from Kabul during the final days of the US' withdrawal from Afghanistan are difficult to forget.

Today, the shadow of those tumultuous days lingers, as many continue to grapple with the factors that contributed to the tragic conclusion of the two-decade-long conflict (Brownlee 2024). Amidst those factors, significant scholarly attention has been directed toward the United States' hesitancy to engage in substantive negotiations with the Taliban (Brooking, 2022). At the core of this scrutiny many wonder: What could have happened if negotiations were approached differently?

When it comes to sitting at the table with insurgent groups, it is often argued that holding talks with these factions will not be a viable way to resolve the conflict. Opening up to such possibilities, it is said, would only serve to legitimize the efforts of the insurgency and potentially encourage further violence (Byman 2009). These assumptions are argued to have been at the heart of the White House's reluctance to openly negotiate with the Taliban and pursue a peace agreement through such means (Rubin 2020). However, historical evidence has demonstrated that despite these arguments, negotiations with such groups are common, and they have in multiple instances led to long-lasting peace settlements (Clarke & Paul 2014).

With this in mind, the following paper will explore the historical precedents for negotiating with insurgent groups like the Taliban, seeking to extract lessons that could have been considered and applied to the conflict. It will begin by briefly defining what constitutes as an insurgency before examining arguments for and against opening negotiations with such groups. The paper will then delve into two distinct examples where negotiations were successfully conducted with armed groups, focusing on the negotiation process and the resulting settlements to extract lessons from these processes. Finally, the paper will discuss the potential applicability of these lessons to the Afghanistan conflict before concluding.

Insurgencies and negotiations

When addressing insurgencies, it is crucial to clearly define what we understand as one, particularly considering the proximity that these groups hold to terrorist organizations due to the nature of their actions and their frequent collusions with them (Chenoweth et al. 2019).

Given this situation, the following essay understands insurgencies as “*protracted political-military activities directed toward [...] the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations [...] to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control [of a particular area] and [their] legitimacy*” (CIA 2011, p. 4–5).

The primary argument against engaging in negotiations with insurgencies is that such a move would not only reward their behavior, but also provide them with the legitimacy they crave (Best & Bapat 2018). Simply put, if these groups believe they can accomplish their goals through force, they will continue to employ it to achieve their objectives (Byman-2009). Conversely, insurgencies would have no incentives to use violence if governments offer no concessions, as their actions would then be proven to be futile (Best & Bapat 2018). It is similarly argued that engaging in negotiations with these groups, despite the inherent risks, might ultimately be fruitless, as insurgencies often lack the capability to uphold reliable commitments. A reality that becomes even more challenging when negotiating with religious factions like the Taliban, as their beliefs are perceived to make them unable to compromise (Klocek, 2015). However, various studies have shown that the “*no concessions*” strategy has consistently failed to dissuade insurgent groups from resorting to violent means to achieve their objectives (Best & Bapat 2018). Furthermore, in most cases, states ultimately opt to engage in negotiations with these groups, as their economies cannot endure the no-concessions approach for extended periods of time (Clarke & Paul 2014). On a similar note, while the use of armed forces is recommendable to create a mutually hurting stalemate (MHS) that would facilitate negotiations, their indiscriminate use has been proven to intensify insurgencies by inadvertently escalating the conflict and providing armed groups with further justification for their actions (Zartman 2001; Weinstein 2006).

Ultimately, those that advocate in favor of negotiating with insurgent groups do so on the belief that resolving these conflicts necessitates a political resolution that addresses the fundamental political grievances underlying the insurgency (Petrova 2015).

Historical Precedents

After examining the arguments in favor and against negotiations, when it comes to reality, governments do tend to open successful negotiations with these groups: the IRA and the UK, RENAMO and Mozambique, the FARC with Colombia, etc. (Clarke & Paul 2014). The examples are plentiful, but for the purposes of this essay, and given the religious background of the Taliban, the focus of the following section will be aimed at analyzing the successful negotiations that were conducted with religiously motivated insurgencies, due to their higher resemblance with the aforementioned group. This study will now delve into the history and peace process of two precedents: the Free Aceh Movement and Indonesia, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Philippines, to then extract the lessons to be learned from them.

A. Free Aceh Movement and Indonesia

Context

The Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM), was emerged in 1976 seeking the independence of Indonesia's Aceh region (Schulze 2004). Guided and fueled by Islamic values, throughout its history, GAM underwent three distinct phases. The first phase, from 1976 to 1979, was characterized by the group's small size and eventual dispersion, with its leaders forced into exile due to the counterinsurgency (COIN) operations of Jakarta (Ross 2005; Kingsbury 2007). GAM would reemerge in 1989 with increased troops and support, triggering larger and harsher COIN operations that resulted in the second dispersion of GAM forces (Schulze 2004; Ross 2005). However, this later victory was short-lived, as the exit of Indonesian President Haji Mohammad Soeharto in 1998, coupled with his successor's decision to remove troops from Aceh, enabled GAM to regroup with greater strength than before due the escalated grievances towards Jakarta caused by the intensified military actions of the second phase. (Amnesty International 1993; Ross 2005).

Negotiations and the “Memorandum of Understanding”

Negotiations between GAM and the Indonesian government commenced during this third reemergence, with both sides initially coming together to pact a ceasefire. However, the distrust between both parties was prominent throughout these initial talks and it eventually prompted the Indonesian government to arrest the GAM negotiators, abruptly ending this first attempt (Schulze 2004). This same issue arose during the second round of negotiations, commencing in 2002. Despite both factions signing the "Cessation of Hostilities Agreement" (COHA), which facilitated another ceasefire, this time under the supervision of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD), the absence of sufficient monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, coupled with persistent distrust and commitment issues from both sides, ultimately resulted in the premature termination of the agreement (Huber, 2004). Nonetheless, after intense military offensives in the region, the 2004 Sumatra-Andaman tsunami, and the efforts of Acehnese NGOs to foster a better atmosphere for negotiations; talks resumed once more with both parties exhibiting more pragmatic and realistic expectations for the peace settlement (Large & Large 2008).

A notable aspect of this third round of negotiations was the mediation led by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, who organized the negotiations around the principle that "*nothing is agreed until everything is agreed*", meaning that unlike previous attempts, the final agreement would be postponed until both security and substantive issues could be resolved together (Large & Large 2008). That strategy ultimately culminated in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) of 2005, in which GAM agreed to disband and relinquish its demand for independence in return for amnesty to its combatants, allowing for the group's transition into a political entity, and a broader autonomy for the Aceh region (Aspinall 2005). The agreement also withheld the government's commitment to reducing the presence of military and police forces in the region, as well as the implementation of a monitoring mission, ultimately led by the European Union and ASEAN, to ensure the compliance of both sides (Aspinall 2005)

B. MILF and Philippines

Context

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was originally part of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), an insurgent group which sought to establish an independent state based in the Mindanao region of the Philippines. However, the MILF's more pronounced focus on Islamic law and ideals led to the group's eventual break away from the MNLF in 1977, after the later reached an agreement for semi-autonomy with the Philippine government ([Mapping Militant Organizations 2019](#)).

Negotiations and the “*Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro*”

While talks between the MILF and the Philippine government commenced in the late 1980s, significant efforts didn't materialize until 1997, following the signing of the Tripoli agreement between the MNLF and the Philippines, which ended their 25-year-long conflict ([Herbolzheimer 2015](#)). In that year, negotiations between MILF and Manila lead to the signing of the “General Cessation of Hostilities”, which introduced a series of confidence-building measures as well as a cease-fire. However, the peace process faltered in 2000 when Joseph Estrada's administration, arguing that they were indulging the armed group, withdrew from negotiations and initiated attacks on the insurgency ([Abuza 2005](#)).

Numerous attempts to forge a peace agreement followed in subsequent years under Malaysian facilitation. Unfortunately, these efforts would repeatedly fail, mainly due to the absence of trust between the armed forces and the MILF ([Abuza 2005](#)). Nonetheless, while initially fruitless, these peace-seeking efforts served to showcase the commitment of both sides to reach a peaceful resolution for the conflict, thus gradually building trust between both parties and eventually paving the way for a preliminary peace-framework in 2012, which culminated in the “Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro” (CAB) putting an end to 17 years of negotiations. Under this agreement and its annexes, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao was replaced with the self-governing *Bangsamoro*: a new regional entity based in Islamic law and ideals.

In exchange, the MILF committed to disbanding its rebel forces and relinquishing its weaponry to a mutually selected third party. Additionally, a regional police force was to be established, and the Philippine military agreed to reduce its presence in the region, transitioning law enforcement duties to the newly introduced regional police while assisting in dismantling local militias. The agreement also mandated an international monitoring team, along with various normalization and peace committees, a transitional justice program, and provisions for amnesty for the combatants ([Herbolzheimer 2015](#)).

C. Lessons learned

After closely examining each process and the resulting agreements, a plethora of lessons can be drawn from both conflicts. These range from the importance of facilitating the reintegration of insurgent groups into society, to the significance that labels carry, as neither GAM or MILF were ever officially designated as terrorist organizations, potentially easing the negotiation process ([Daniels, 2021](#); [Haspelslagh & Zartman, 2022](#)). Nevertheless, this paper emphasizes the following key lessons derived from the subsequent analyses:

Military means cannot solve the underlying causes of an insurgency

While the military was repeatedly successful in repelling the insurgency in both cases studied, the political issues that prompted the emergence of the insurgencies were still there. Moreover, and as seen in the GAM case, the measures taken to repel the insurgency were counterproductive in the long run, as the actions taken by the military during the second phase of the conflict eventually generated more support for the insurgency's cause during its second reemergence ([Schulze 2004](#)).

Military means may be necessary to ensure that the other side does not have a Better Alternative to the Negotiated Agreement (BATNA) and to create a MHS, both instrumental for facilitating negotiations ([Zartman, 2001](#); [Sebenius 2017](#)); but without utilizing political mechanisms it will not be possible to address the underlying causes that prompt the apparition of an insurgency.

The importance of time and *timing*

For negotiations to yield positive outcomes, timing is crucial, requiring a “*ripe moment*” (Zartman 2001). In the cases under analysis, both the government and insurgent groups realized that negotiation was their only viable option to resolve the conflict and break free from the cycle of protracted violence (Schulze 2004; Herbolzheimer, 2015). However, even when both sides sought out a negotiated solution, ripeness took a long time to occur, with both peace processes going through numerous unsuccessful attempts before both sides were willing to compromise their positions and reach a definite settlement. Hence, it is imperative to acknowledge that while negotiations present the most enduring solution for addressing the underlying causes of insurgency, they will require sustained perseverance and patience throughout the process until ripeness is reached.

Trust and commitment by both sides is essential

This analysis has also shown that in both analyzed cases, the first attempts to reach a peace settlement mainly failed due to the lack of trust and commitment between both sides. Interestingly, this research showcased how the governments and their respective armed forces were the ones negatively influencing the well-being of the peace talks by being the first to act on their distrust to the other side. This was particularly displayed in the military actions taken by Manila in the 2000, disrupting the three year long cease-fire, and by the arrest of GAM negotiations conducted by Jakarta in 2001 (Schulze 2004; Abuza 2005). Building trust is a complex endeavor, yet essential for any successful negotiation (Lewicki & Polin 2013). Governments and armed forces must demonstrate their willingness to trust insurgent forces and display their commitment to achieving peace, as without such efforts, insurgent groups are unlikely to reciprocate (Kelman 2005). Nevertheless, the cases under examination also illustrate how trust-building can be facilitated through mediation and international monitoring teams. While both sides must trust these entities and believe in their impartiality, mediation and monitoring, as seen in the MoU and the CAM, can serve as invaluable tools in overcoming distrust between conflicting parties, and effectively reach a settlement (Kelman 2005).

Negotiations with religious insurgent groups are possible and can lead to peace

However, the most notable lesson that can be drawn from both instances, is the possibility of achieving peace settlements with insurgent groups and particularly those with religious backgrounds and aspirations. Additionally, this study has illustrated how these armed groups, despite their religious affiliations, demonstrated a willingness to adjust their objectives and engage in compromise, clearly exemplified by the GAM's decision to abandon its more extreme objectives (Aspinall 2005). Although to this day there are still underlying issues, as well as challenges regarding the implementation of both agreements, conflict between the studied countries and their respective insurgencies has not returned since the signing of the MoU and the CAB, and it seems improbable that conflict will reemerge in these regions (Hamid 2018; Lacson 2024).

Applying the lessons to Afghanistan and the Taliban

Leveraging history and drawing lessons from past experiences to inform decision-making and analyses is a prevalent and valuable tool in the realms of politics and foreign policy (Vertzberger, 1986). Nevertheless, when taking a look at the past and drawing lessons from it, one must be careful, as it is easy to abuse it and commit contextual or subconscious errors that lead to biases and fallacies, thus hampering the usefulness of applying history and its lessons (Vertzberger, 1986).

While this paper is aware that the context, history and unique circumstances in which both peace agreements were reached will never be exactly replicated for future instances, this paper nonetheless believes that the lessons learned from the two cases can be valuable for addressing and analyzing future insurgencies and negotiations. Furthermore, and in spite of the differences, this paper contends that the aforementioned insights could have been advantageous for both the United States and the Government of Afghanistan in managing their interactions with the Taliban. On this matter, one of the most readily applicable takeaways to the conflict with the Taliban is the second lesson of this essay: timing and time are crucial aspects of talks.

As was mentioned, this takeaway not only implies that for negotiations to be effective both sides must genuinely commit to achieving peace, but also that for negotiations to effectively work, they must be conducted when the time is ripe (Zartman 2001; Kelman 2005). However, the possibility of attaining ripeness was undermined in Afghanistan when the military's engagement was announced to scale down in 2011, thus hampering the possibility of a MHS, and when the eventual withdrawal of troops was set on a timetable instead of being contingent on specific conditions, providing the Taliban with a BATNA: waiting (Sebenius 2017). In other words, the time-based conditions of both events enabled the Taliban to secure favorable conditions for their cause simply by biding their time, which inevitably ended up eroding the possibility of arriving at a peace settlement through negotiations.

Ultimately, the most pivotal insights that could have positively impacted the Taliban conflict pertain to the initial and concluding lessons. As previously elucidated in this essay, the White House predominantly approached the insurgency through a military lens, consequently pursuing COIN and militaristic strategies in pursuit of outright military victory over the Taliban (Rubin, 2020). However, had American administrations heeded the lessons learned from the analyzed cases, they might have recognized not only the inadequacy of achieving decisive military triumph in eradicating the Taliban threat, as the underlying root causes would have persisted unresolved, but also see that there exists a real possibility of reaching a negotiated settlement with religiously motivated insurgent groups.

Conclusion

This study aimed to critically scrutinize the prevailing assumptions surrounding the efficacy of engaging in negotiations with insurgent entities such as the Taliban as a viable pathway to achieve peace. The exposition commenced by delineating a comprehensive definition of insurgency, followed by an examination of the primary arguments both against and in favor of negotiating with such groups. Subsequently, the analysis delved into two analogous cases, which bore semblance to the Taliban insurgency, to illustrate instances where negotiations have been effectively conducted with insurgent factions, particularly those grounded in religious ideologies.

By examining the contextual factors and mechanisms that led to the MoU and CAB, this paper extrapolated a series of instructive lessons. Among these, the paper posits that certain takeaways could have been effectively applied to the conflict involving the Taliban. Despite the differing contexts and circumstances, the essay contends that had both the United States and the Afghan government seen the limitations that military-centric strategies have in addressing the underlying causes of the Taliban insurgency, and acknowledge the potential for negotiating a peace settlement with religiously motivated insurgent groups, albeit a complex and patience-testing endeavor, the trajectory of the conflict could have potentially veered towards a different more positive outcome.

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