



THE
HUFFINGTON
POST

Naive Game of ‘Whack-a-Mole’ with Taliban Leaders Will Not Bring Peace to Afghanistan

06/09/2016 01:23 pm ET |

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JonGorr via Getty Images

The confirmed death of Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour following a US drone strike in Pakistan’s south-western province Balochistan last month, has been widely interpreted as beneficial for peace in Afghanistan. However, this reading of the killing of the Taliban’s leader is completely at odds with the only clear lesson learned of fifteen years of military engagement in Afghanistan: there never was and will never be a military solution to this conflict.

When confirming the death of Mullah Mansour, Afghanistan’s Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah portrayed him as a [structural impediment](#) to the peace process. Similarly, US Secretary of State John Kerry, explained the rationale for the attack in rather [simple terms](#): “Peace is what we want [and] Mansour was a threat to that effort.”

Mythical milestones

President Obama, responsible for the authorization of the drone strike, called it an “[important milestone](#)” for peace building efforts in Afghanistan. Coming from Obama, this is both sad

and ironic, as it means that all of Obama's self-proclaimed 'milestones' for Afghanistan, especially the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, have been achieved in neighboring Pakistan *and* by military force.

The road to peace in Afghanistan does not run through the US drone program. Killing insurgent leaders cannot be expected to produce a fertile breeding ground for peace talks. The assumption behind the US drone program is that you can somehow 'whack' all Taliban leaders until you find one that you can talk peace with. Such an assumption is naive on at least three accounts, detailed below.

Why 'whacking' with drones will not help

First, it is highly unpredictable what the next leader will do. In this particular case, it is unlikely that the Taliban's new leader, [Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada](#) will change course, especially as the Taliban insurgent groups are currently waging a fairly successful war in several parts of Afghanistan, controlling towns and rural districts, and being able to strike with coordinated attacks in the heart of Kabul. Also, in the past few years, new Taliban commanders have generally been more radical than some of the older ones, providing no evidence to substantiate the wishful thinking that there will suddenly be a more 'dovish' leader, arising, as it were, from the smouldering remains of the car wreck or house hit by a drone strike.

Second, a peace deal may be reached with the Taliban *leaders*, but to be sustainable, they depend on effectively addressing some of the grass-roots demands and legitimate grievances of the Taliban's constituencies. That is exactly why a political process is so important, as it is the only way to effectively incorporate some of the legitimate parts of the Taliban's agenda into the regular political system of Afghanistan.

Third, and perhaps even most important, the road to peace in Afghanistan *does* go through Islamabad. Killing Taliban leaders on their soil, especially if it is done against the will of Pakistan, will not help the, already highly challenging, efforts to get a peace process back on track in Afghanistan. Pakistan's Minister of Interior, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan has warned that the drone strike on Mullah Mansour would have "[serious implications](#)" for the country's bilateral relation with the US. This relationship had already suffered greatly in recent years, most importantly with the [Raymond Davis incident](#) and the American raid that killed Osama bin Laden. He [reacted strongly](#) to the killing of Mansour, claiming it was "illegal, unjustified, unacceptable, against Pakistan's independence and sovereignty, and completely against the UN Charter and international law."

Conclusion

Drones may kill some symbols and symptoms of the current conflict in Afghanistan, but to create a real breeding ground for peace in Afghanistan, we need to bring all the Taliban 'influentials' and regional players on board, instead of antagonizing them. Achieving this titanic task - which is only one of the essential elements needed to put the peace process back on track - would be a real milestone for peace and security in Afghanistan.

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