Major powers pull the strings at Bonn talks on Afghanistan

Peter Symonds
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The UN-sponsored talks on the political future of Afghanistan opened on Tuesday in the Petersberg Castle, a luxury hotel just outside the German city of Bonn. The meeting was opened with due pomp and gravity by German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and UN special envoy to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, who read out a message from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

The gathering was billed as a conference of Afghan representatives; an opportunity for Afghanis to decide their own fate. UN officials have repeatedly stressed that a solution would not be imposed on Afghanistan from outside. In his opening address, Fischer piously urged delegates "to forge a truly historic compromise" for the sake of war-torn Afghanistan and its people. "The responsibility is yours. No one can relieve you of it and no one wants to," he said.

The whole affair is reminiscent of the gatherings of political stooges staged from time to time by the European powers in the 19th century to give their colonial rule an air of legitimacy. The Bonn conference is not to meet the democratic aspirations of the Afghani people but to satisfy the requirements of the major powers, above all the US. Everyone is well aware who holds the whip hand both financially and militarily. Who could attend, the size and composition of the delegations, the agenda, timing and even location were all dictated by Washington and its allies.

None of the four Afghani factions taking part have any popular mandate. They are loose alliances of tribal leaders, militia commanders, warlords and exiles, who are based on ethnic and religious loyalties and completely reliant on different foreign backers. The real decisions have either been taken already in the flurry of preconference diplomatic activity, or will be made by the various "foreign observers", who are watching over their Afghan proxies. At least 18 countries have accreditation, including the US, Russia, Britain and all of Afghanistan's neighbours.

Nominally at least, the Northern Alliance leaders, who have provided the foot soldiers for the US in its war in Afghanistan, are in the strongest position. Following the collapse of the Taliban regime, their troops have seized a large swathe of territory in the north and west of the country, including Kabul. Headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, who is paradoxically still recognised by the UN as the Afghan head of state, the Northern Alliance has sought to consolidate its grip on power, setting up a police force in the capital, taking over ministries and doling out official positions.

But having exploited the Northern Alliance as a convenient military force, Washington is determined to prevent the grouping and thus its principal backers—Russia, Iran and India—from monopolising power. The Northern Alliance, also known as the United Front, is based largely among northern ethnic groups—the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. The US has been actively cultivating groupings among the country's Pashtun majority both inside and outside Afghanistan. Without a reliable proxy of its own inside Afghanistan, Washington is pushing for a "broad-based" administration in order to dilute the influence of particular factions and enable the US to establish its predominance.

As a result, the US and UN overrode plans by Rabbani to convene a conference of his own in Kabul where the Northern Alliance would be in a stronger position to dictate terms. Strong pressure was also brought to bear on Rabbani to stop him from forming his own administration and proclaiming himself head of state. While finally agreeing to send a delegation, the Northern Alliance has played down the significance of the Bonn meeting, describing it as only "symbolic".

Rabbani insisted last weekend that the conference was not a summit council and that the main meetings had to take place inside Afghanistan and involve senior officials. None of the four factions are represented at the Bonn meeting by their top political leaders. Neither Rabbani, Northern Alliance foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah nor allied warlords Ismail Khan and Abdul Rashid Dostum are present.

The delegations present include the so-called Rome Group—the representatives of the 87-year-old former king, Zahir Shah, who has been in exile in Italy since 1973. The US and the UN are both pushing for the king to return to Afghanistan as a figurehead to replace Rabbani as head of state and to bring together a political vehicle based on the Pashtun tribes that traditionally ruled the country. Washington had been cultivating relations with the king well before September 11, with the US Congress allocating funds for him to convene a *loya jirga* or assembly of tribal leaders. The importance that the US attaches to the king is indicated by the size of the royalist delegation in Germany—11, the same number as the Northern Alliance whose militia control over half the country.

The two other delegations in Bonn are the Pakistani-backed Peshawar group and the Cyprus group, which is reportedly supported by Iran. Each of these disparate collections of exiles has five representatives.

The Peshawar group was formed only a month ago at a meeting of around 700 Pashtuns—mullahs, former Mujaheddin fighters and tribal leaders—in the Pakistani city. The gathering, pompously

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titled “a Conference for Peace and National Unity,” was nominally convened by Pir Sayed Ahmed Gailani, a religious and tribal leader, businessman and supporter of the king, who like Rabbani and others was armed and funded by the CIA in the 1980s to fight the Soviet-backed regime. The meeting was so obviously staged by the powerful Pakistani military intelligence agency, the ISI, that the king declined to send any representative to this gathering of pro-monarchists, lest he be tarred with the same brush.

Having been instrumental in creating and backing the Taliban since its formation in 1994, Pakistan now finds itself without any substantial means of influence in Afghanistan. The Peshawar meeting was an attempt to establish a new political instrument. Islamabad has been desperate to prevent the Northern Alliance, backed by its arch-rival India, from gaining a dominant position. It has therefore backed US moves for a “broad-based” administration and an international “peace-keeping” force in Kabul.

The CIA has been actively attempting to recruit allies among the Pashtun tribes. In the midst of the opening sessions of Bonn conference, the organisers broadcast a live call via satellite phone from Hamid Karzai who declared that the conference was “the path to salvation”. Karzai was unable to attend in person because he is currently collaborating with the US military and CIA in orchestrating the fall of Kandahar, the Taliban’s last remaining stronghold. At the beginning of November, the US military had to dispatch a helicopter to “extract” Karzai from Afghanistan after he was surrounded by the Taliban and appeared to be about to meet the same fate as another US political asset, Abdul Haq, who was captured and executed.

The contempt with which the major powers view these “Afghani representatives” is highlighted by the agenda at the Bonn conference. The political future of Afghanistan has already been mapped out in detail in the UN Security Council and by UN envoy Brahimi. An interim administration of between 15 and 20 is to be established whose task will be over the next six months to convene, under the title of a *loya jirga*, a hand-picked assembly of several hundred. This meeting will choose a quasi-legislative body of about 120 to 150 to establish another interim regime and draw up a constitution for elections—possibly in two years time.

All that is left for the meeting in Bonn to do is to rubber-stamp the process and haggle over who will fill the positions. In one sense, the duration of the conference says everything—three to five days to decide the political fate of Afghanistan and to form an interim administration. It is hardly enough time in any vaguely democratic body to decide on the agenda and to begin to discuss the complex issues of a country which has been ravaged by more than two decades of war. But it should be long enough for the major powers to bully their Afghani surrogates into burying their differences, temporarily at least, and agreeing to the outlines of the plan.

The main sticking point reported so far is the opposition of the Northern Alliance to allowing a so-called international peacekeeping force into Afghanistan. Clearly, the Northern Alliance would prefer to maintain a position where its militia are the only sizeably-armed force within the country. A multi-national army, even if not directly controlled by the US, would undercut the Northern Alliance. Turkey, a close US ally, has been nominated as the likely country to lead such a force.

But the Northern Alliance is under considerable pressure to fall into line. The US and its allies have warned that reconstruction aid estimated at $6-10 billion, spread out over a number of years, is contingent on agreement to the UN plan. The message was spelled out by both Kofi Annan and German Foreign Minister Fischer in their opening addresses and reinforced outside the meeting in comments to the press by US special envoy on Afghanistan James Dobbins. To underline the point, donor countries are due to hold a meeting next week in Berlin to consider the outcome of the Bonn conference.

If economic blackmail is not enough, then other methods will be used. The *Washington Post* bluntly spelt out a warning to the Northern Alliance in an editorial last week. It began by outlining the options open to the Western powers to get agreement at Bonn. “The prospect of international reconstruction aid can be used as leverage; so can eventual Western and UN recognition for an Afghan government, which is something the Taliban never achieved.”

The *Post* went on to insist, however, that the Northern Alliance had to “accept the political primacy of the southern Pashtuns, while retaining a significant role in the national government... For now, with crucial battles still to be fought against al Qaeda, it’s worth giving our Afghan allies that chance to be reasonable. Yet, over time, if reason fails, stronger steps should not be ruled out.”

Just what the “stronger steps” might be, the newspaper diplomatically left out. It does not take much imagination to work out what was being referred to. The ruthlessness with which the Bush administration has ousted the Taliban is meant to serve as a warning that the same methods will be used against anyone who stands in the way of US interests in Afghanistan or internationally.

Just as the Bonn conference was about to get underway, the US military landed more than 1,000 marines and seized control of Kandahar airport, effectively establishing the first US bridgehead inside the country. The timing was no coincidence. It delivered a clear message to the delegates: we will do what we like in Afghanistan, whether you agree or not.

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