

BONN CONFERENCE UNLIKELY TO PRODUCE RESULTS FOR AFGHANISTAN

On Monday, over 1,000 delegates from over 90 nations and organizations will meet in Bonn, Germany to discuss the future of Afghanistan. The Afghan-led conference will address three specific areas: the transfer of security responsibility from coalition forces to the Afghan government by 2014, the sustainment of international aid, and the possibility of reconciliation with insurgent groups.¹ The conference—to be held ten years after the 2001 event that established the current system of government—offers an opportunity for Afghan and international partners to identify existing problems and map out actionable steps leading to 2014 and beyond. However, its effectiveness will likely be undermined by international hesitation to offer concrete commitments, Pakistan’s decision to boycott the event, and the lack of a truly representative delegation led by President Hamid Karzai.

- The Bonn conference of 2001 created a roadmap by which the international community could work with the Afghans to “reestablish permanent institutions of government” in Afghanistan and draft a new constitution.² Although the conference worked to integrate the various factions warring within the country, defeated Taliban officials were not invited to participate in the talks.
- U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker announced that the Taliban were not invited to participate in the conference, and the idea of peace talks with insurgents has remained controversial since the assassination of the government’s chief negotiator, Burhanuddin Rabbani, in September.³ If future peace talks are to be considered, they must be conducted in a transparent manner and at least consider requests from relevant groups.
 - The Taliban has previously denounced peace negotiations, decrying any prolonged Western presence as an attempt to occupy Afghanistan. Quetta Shura Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar said in August that “every legitimate option can be considered” but that the Taliban would not participate in the “symbolic” conference.⁴
 - Past peace talks were criticized for being highly secretive and opaque, and non-Pashtun minorities remain highly suspicious of deals that could be negotiated with Pashtun insurgents.⁵
- Pakistan’s boycott of the conference will make any progress on reconciliation even more unlikely, as it remains the only country in the region with the ability to influence the insurgent groups operating within its borders.
 - Islamabad’s outrage stems from late November cross-border coalition airstrikes that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers.⁶
 - Neither Prime Minister Yousuf Gilani nor Foreign Minister Hina Khar will attend, and a parliamentary committee will decide in coming days whether the Pakistani ambassador to Germany will participate.⁷
- In November Karzai hosted a large gathering of politicians and local leaders to build a national consensus on major issues leading to the Bonn conference, but opposition figures criticized the jirga for being a select group of Karzai-aligned powerbrokers and appointees rather than a body genuinely representative of the population.⁸

The 2001 Bonn conference did not resolve any major political issues but rather set up a general process for moving forward.⁹ The 2011 conference will likely produce a similar roadmap that will require international participants and regional players to make sustained, complementing efforts. However, addressing complex political and economic issues is as necessary as security planning, and if participants are not willing to take hard, critical steps towards meaningful reform of the government and constitution, the international community will have lost a real opportunity to work towards bringing more stability to the region.

Paraag Shukla is a Senior Research Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Bonn to Host Conference on Afghanistan in Early December,” Embassy of Germany, March 10, 2011.
- ² Rubin, Barnett R., “Crafting a Constitution for Afghanistan,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, No. 3, July 2004.
- ³ “No Space for Taliban in Bonn Conference: Crocker,” Tolo News, August 4, 2011.
- ⁴ Trofimov, Yaroslav, Maria Abi-Habib, “Taliban Need ‘Pain’ to Talk, Envoy Says,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2011.; Sultan, Hodei, “Istanbul and Bonn Conferences: Building Blocks of the Afghan Transition Process,” United States Institute of Peace, September 20, 2011.
- ⁵ Rubin, Alissa J., “A Leader’s Death Exposes Disarray in the Afghan Peace Process,” *The New York Times*, October 3, 2011.
- ⁶ Zirulnick, Ariel, “Pakistan scoffs at US apologies after NATO strike,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 28, 2011.
- ⁷ Mansoor, Hasan, “Pakistan sets conditions for Bonn peace conference,” AFP News, November 30, 2011.
- ⁸ Shukla, Paraag, “Karzai Seeks Legitimacy at Jirga,” The Institute for the Study of War, November 21, 2011.
Peter, Tom A. “Afghans question Karzai’s motives in calling the meeting,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 15, 2011.
- ⁹ Rubin, Barnett R., “Crafting a Constitution for Afghanistan,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, No. 3, July 2004.