United States, Taliban and Fundamentalism in Afghanistan: The Growing Instability in Afghanistan

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Abstract: This paper aims to elucidate the causes of perpetual instability in Afghanistan since September 11, 2001. It argues that the foreign powers are responsible for “rolling back the stability” and making it a “zone of instability”. United States and Soviet Union, ‘the dancing evils of Cold war’, propel the Afghan descent towards extremism. United States produced so called Mujahedeen and freedom fighter and equipment them with weapons for their strategic interest (to roll back Soviet Union). After winning its Strategic Interest, United States estranged from these Freedom Fighters and remained a silent spectator. When these freedom fighters launched their full-fledged extremism and even not spared United States, United States act as a “wounded bear” and fought the longest war of its history without any conclusion and finally withdraw its NATO forces ‘by force not by choice’. This paper conclude that it is now the responsibility of neighbouring states like Pakistan, Russia, China and India to take comprehensive steps to stabilize Afghanistan and to made security alliances to make Afghanistan a zone of peace.

Key Words: Political Instability, Zone of peace, Zone of Instability, Extremism, Rolling Back.

I. Introduction

South Asia is one of the most volatile regions of the world. The negative effects of ongoing ethnic conflicts, civil wars, nuclear race, ethnic cleansing, communal and political violence, terrorism, counter terrorism, religious extremism, militarization, violation of human rights, unresolved inter-state and intra-state conflicts, and diverse economic interests, etc., are visible today more than ever before in the region. The proverb of ‘21st Century is Asian Century’ is not in soft way but in hard way. In every nation, conflicts has become a regular feature, extremists are perpetually becoming a tool of exploitation, citizens are victimised and plunged into poverty, development is minimal, infrastructure is damaged. If analysed, in the hierarchy of conflicts and poverty, Afghanistan and Pakistan stands first and second respectively. These are the breeding grounds of terrorism. The Taliban, Al Qaeda and other extremist groups are the products of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Taliban were created by United States during 1980s through ‘Operation Cyclone’ and called them as freedom fighter, but after Soviet demise, these non-state actors gained power and emerged as Global Terrorist. United States and Soviet Union exploited the situation of Afghanistan during Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989). Afghan people were injected the seeds of religious fetishism and got training from Pakistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia funded the mujahedeen but after Soviet demise everything changed and only ethnic conflict emerged and the foreign sponsored weapons were used by the militia groups in Afghanistan for power. When finally Taliban emerged in 1994 and captured more than 90 percent of Afghanistan in 1996, other group made Northern Alliance to topple Taliban Afghanistan under Taliban faced adverse conditions from law and order to development. Women forced to wear veil and forbade getting education, men were required to have beard. United States was reluctant to declare Taliban as regime however it was Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates that declared Taliban as legitimate government in Afghanistan. After September 11, 2001 attacks in United States, Saudi Arabia and UAE derecognize Taliban. It was Pakistan that stands with Afghan Taliban. With the emergence of Tehkreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in 2007, Pakistan faced new challenge.

The Afghan government along with United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies have been fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2001 and even after the withdrawal of US led NATO forces, it is uncertain about the future of Afghanistan. In September 2015, Taliban captured Kunduz and after two weeks fight Afghan Army overtook Kunduz from Taliban. Moreover, the causalities of Afghan security forces rise to 28 percent as compare to 2014, which reveals that Afghan forces are still not competent to defend. Since 2009, United Nations records the causalities of civilians and it has recorded that since 2009 till date 5900 deaths and injuries in Afghanistan. Its blame was put on Taliban but Taliban rejected it and described it as, ‘propaganda compiled at the behest of occupying forces’, and made United States and Afghan government responsible for
casualties. Both United States coalition forces and Afghan security forces destroyed the infrastructure of Taliban, killed them, captured then. The biggest achievements for United States and Afghan Forces include the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Osmani in 2006, Mullah Dadullah in 2007, the arrest of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in 2010 killing of Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad in 2011 and Mullah Akhtar Mansur in 2015, but, despite the killing of thousands of other militants, the insurgent group has retaken big chunks of the country.

II. Taliban, its Resurgence, Strategy and Role After 2014

As mentioned above, Taliban is the product of United States in the form of freedom fighter or mujahedeen during 1980’s. It was only after Soviet demise that Taliban emerged as a powerful force and captured most of Afghanistan by 1996 and ruled till October 2001. Since its launch in 1994, the Taliban have taken pride in their cohesiveness. The group's unity and a devotional obedience to its founding leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, played a key role in its resilience and successes on the battlefield. After 2001, Taliban dispersed and took shelter in Pakistan’s Quetta sector and in 2002 made Quetta Shura (Queta Council)⁹. The Shura (consultative council) directs a multi-pronged insurgency from sanctuaries in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan Province, of which Quetta is the capital. Since 2006, the Shura has issued and regularly updated a Pashto-language document called the “Rulebook for the Mujahedeen of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”.⁷ It contains directions through which the Shura asserts central command over military field operations and other issues. Since 2004 Taliban tries to recapture and maintain its status quo in Afghanistan. There are three main reasons for this resurgence.⁸

1. First, the end, in 2014, of the US and NATO combat mission and the withdrawal of most foreign forces from Afghanistan reduced the risk the Taliban faced of being bombed and raided.

2. Secondly, the Pakistani military's launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb in the North Waziristan tribal area in June 2014, dislodged thousands of mainly Uzbek, Arab and Pakistani militants, who flooded into Afghanistan and swelled the Taliban's ranks.

3. And finally, although the Afghan security forces have fought well against the insurgents over the past year, they lack certain capabilities and equipment especially air power and reconnaissance.

The presence of several thousand foreign fighters has further complicated the situation in Afghanistan. Afghan government officials said in June 2015 there were more than 7,000 foreign militants in Afghanistan. The Taliban have been bolstered by militants from the Middle East, Central Asian countries and Pakistan. About a dozen militant groups, having different goals and agendas, are fighting in Afghanistan. The emergence of so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also brought the Taliban and al-Qaeda closer, as never before, by challenging the legitimacy of both groups. Although the priorities and strategies of the Taliban and al-Qaeda are different, the two groups have been helping each other in Afghanistan, while ISIS has tried to undermine both groups. The al-Qaeda leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, renewed his pledge of allegiance to the Taliban's new leadership and accepted the authority of the Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour, attack in August 2015. Mansur later killed in US drone attack in September. Al Zawahiri called on all jihadists (Islamist militant groups) to accept the authority of Taliban leader. In Afghanistan apart from Taliban, the active militant groups include:

- Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: Afghan Taliban led by Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour
- High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate: Taliban splinter group led Mullah Muhammad Rasool
- Hizb-e Islami (HIG) or Islamic Party: a comparatively minor Afghan insurgent group led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar
- Tehrik-e Talib Pakistan (TTP): Pakistani Taliban
- Islamic State (IS): challenges the Taliban’s legitimacy and supremacy
- Al-Qaeda: supports the Afghan Taliban and has renewed its allegiance to the Taliban leader, Mullah Mansour
- Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT): Pakistani militant group traditionally focused on India
- Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ): Pakistani sectarian militant group targeting Shias
- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU): linked to IS since August 2015
- Islamic Jihad Union (IJU): a splinter faction of IMU now loyal to Afghan Taliban
- East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM): China-focused Uighur separatist group.

In July 2015, there emerged a turning point in Taliban leadership when split take place when Mullah Akhtar Mansour was appointed new leader in a hasty transition after Mullah Omar's death was made public. Some of the Taliban's political leaders and military commanders challenged Mullah Mansour's right to succeed and accused him of "hijacking the movement because of personal greed". He remained as a prominent leader during Mullah Omar led1996-2001 Taliban rule in Afghanistan In early November 2015, a breakaway Afghan Taliban faction appointed its own leader, Mullah Mohammad Rasool, (the governor of Nimroz during the Taliban regime), at a meeting of fighters in Afghanistan's western Farah province.

The head of the splinter group does not call himself the Amir ul-Mumineen (leader of the faithful) - the official title of the Taliban leader that makes him the political and military head and demands following his orders is a religious duty. Soon after the splinter group was established, clashes erupted between the two sides,
mainly in Zabul, Farah and Herat provinces, where the splinter group had established bases. Fighters were killed and injured, mainly from the splinter group. The casualties included Mansour Dadullah, the most powerful commander in the splinter group. This is an edge for the Afghan security forces if the splinter group clashes each other, it becomes easy for the govt. to wipe out.

He controls vast financial and military resources and, through recent victories on the battlefield, including the temporary capture of Kunduz in late September 2015 and the seizure of other areas in the south and north of the country, has further strengthened his position as the overall leader of insurgency.

Security forces of Afghanistan and United States forces also targeted and killed ardent chieftains of Taliban. Mullah Akhtar Mansur was killed in US drone attack in Pakistan’s tribal area by the United States. Mansour assumed the leadership in July 2015, replacing Taliban founder and spiritual head Mullah Mohammad Omar. He was the person who was not willing to negotiate with the government. His death is considered as a great achievement for Afghanistan and United States because it was Mansur who was according to Pentagon was obstacle to peace and reconciliation between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. According to US Defence Ministry, “Mansur has been an obstacle to peace and reconciliation between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, prohibiting Taliban leaders from participating in peace talks with the Afghan government that could lead to an end to the conflict.”

After his death, the insurgent group said its new leader is Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, one of two of Mansour's deputies. In his very first message, the new Talibal chieffain told United States to end its intervention in Afghanistan. "Admit the realities instead of useless use of force and muscle … and put an end to the occupation”. Akhundzada said in a speech on the eve of Eid-al-Fitr, “Our message to the American invaders and her allies is this: the Afghan Muslim people neither fear … your force nor your stratagems”. He also called on neighbouring countries to fight against the US, saying the presence of Americans would harm our mutual interest and destabilise the whole region. The new Taliban leader urged the neighbouring states to help Taliban to free Afghanistan from American and said “You are expected to join your voice with that of the Afghans to end the occupation or at least do not take steps which contribute to prolongation of presence of the Americans.”

The Taliban launched their annual spring offensive in 2015, with a clear strategy to seize more territory, establish permanent bases in “secure” areas, where the leadership can live and operate in safety, and thus strengthen their bargaining position and gain maximum advantage at the negotiation table. The Taliban now hold more territory than in any year since 2001. But they could not manage to capture and hold towns and provincial capitals - an objective they had planned to achieve before this winter. And anyway the expansion of the Taliban's territorial gains doesn't automatically mean the collapse of the government in Kabul. The militant seizure of Kunduz has made the north-eastern city the site of one of the Afghan government's worst setbacks since Taliban forces were ousted in 2001. One of Afghanistan's largest cities, it has long been a strategically important transport hub for the north of the country. The border with Tajikistan is porous, and it is used for the smuggling of Afghan opium and heroin to Central Asia, which finally finds its way to Europe.

Afghanistan need stability and it can come through peace process. Although peace process is already initiated but Taliban under Mansur were not willing to cooperate. After his death, the incumbent Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada may cooperate. There are four main parties in the Afghan peace process - the Afghan government, the Taliban, the US and Pakistan. Many Afghan officials have long accused Pakistan of sponsoring the Afghan Taliban insurgency. It is true that, Taliban has also not spared Pakistan. Unless they are all on the same page, it is mere a dream about reaching a political settlement and achieving a meaningful progress is unlikely. The resolution of the problem and the ending of the conflict needs an internal consensus in Afghanistan and a multifaceted and multinational approach involving mainly regional players.

III. The Pakistan Abortive Travails

Pakistan has never tried to end extremism in Afghanistan. It rather accelerated the tempo of extremism in Afghanistan and uses it as strategic leverage against India. So, it is clear that, extremism in Afghanistan is multifaceted. India wants stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan does not want this. India wants peace process in Afghanistan and Pakistan does not. India wants to expose terrorist and Pakistan wants to secure them. Much of devastation of Pakistan is the result of sheltering extremist. Pakistan in particular is ensnared in Afghanistan’s troubles. Ten years after 9/11 Pakistan continues to be preoccupied with India’s ascendance and its perceived ambitions in Afghanistan and deeply distrustful of U.S. objectives there. This distrust has preceded the United States to raid into Pakistan to kill bin Laden in 2011 and Mullah Akhtar Mansur in 2015. Pakistan still sees its national security objectives as at odds with those of the United States, while its polity is more anti-American than ever. It is suspect of United States ultimate goals in Afghanistan and fearful of a United States plot to snatch its nuclear weapons, which it sees as the crux of its security with respect to the conventionally-superior India. Moreover, Pakistan also doubts the ability of the United States to establish a secure government in
Afghanistan, especially one that will not be hostile to Pakistan. So it pursues cultivating allies in Afghanistan, mainly among the Taliban factions, as a protection policy.

IV. Peace Process: Only Solution of Afghanistan Stability

Afghanistan is a rentier state, much of its resources and infrastructure has been damaged. Afghan community must understand that what they achieve in wars since 1979 till date and what they lost. It is still among the poorest countries with low Gross Domestic Product, poverty, malnutrition, low Human Development Index (HDI), low technology etc. The only way to come out from this conundrum is negotiation, peace process, mutual wellbeing etc. Afghanistan needs negotiations with Taliban and invites them in peace talks. Can such negotiations provide a mechanism to avoid the collapse of the existing order in Afghanistan post-2014 and can the United States redline of no-support for al Qaeda is assured? It is unlikely that the Taliban would be willing to settle for anything less than a de facto, if not de jure power in Kabul while retaining the power it already has in much of the south. Elements of especially the Kandahar, Taliban may well have learned that its association with al Qaeda ultimately cost them their power, but the group also owes many debts to the global jihadist movement.

The death of Bin Laden may have weakened some of the networks, but reneging on these debts to their global jihadi brothers will be costly for the Taliban, no matter how locally oriented its southern and northern elements are. The Taliban’s decision making on severing its links with other jihadists will be deeply influenced by the relative power between the southern Taliban and the eastern Taliban groupings. Afghan government must secure its borders and needs to be vigilant about Taliban activities. Meanwhile, of course, any negotiations with the Taliban are extremely worrisome to the northerners in Afghanistan. Memories of the Taliban’s brutal rule of the 1990s and the Northern Alliance’s fight against the Taliban loom large in their minds, and they also fear the loss of military and economic power they accumulated during the 2000s. Key northern leaders may prefer a war to a deal that they would see as compromising their security and power.

V. United States Policy after September 11

United States policy in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001 was multifaceted. Its core policy pertains to Afghanistan deals with following points:

a. To disrupt, uproot, dismantle and overthrow Taliban as a regime in Afghanistan.

b. To support anti-Taliban forces (Northern Alliance) and use it as a strategic leverage against Taliban.

c. To adopt a policy of engagement with Afghanistan.

d. To install democratic institution in Afghanistan and establish a democratic government.

e. To support international community in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

In most of its policies, United States tick the riddle but it failed to completely eliminate Taliban. The reason is that, Afghanistan is a mountainous state, the terrain is not favourable and United States mostly rely upon drones attacks. It is impossible for coalition forces to fight in mountainous areas where Taliban fighters were hiding and they dominated the cities and cleared the cities from Taliban. Obama when come to power promised to eliminate Taliban and initiated Af-Pak strategy. He also increased the strength the forces. His major achievement includes the Killing of Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad in 2011 and Mullah Akhtar Mansur in 2015. Since 1 January 2015, NATO has been conducting its Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, involving training, advisory, assistance, and counter-terror missions. According to the report, this mission has resulted in 21 US military deaths up until 1 July, 2016 and 16 contractor, US civilian or Department of Defence deaths.

During an official visit to Washington by President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah in March 2015, the US agreed not to reduce its military presence any further through 2015. In October, Obama announced that the current number of US troops would remain through 2016, and be cut back to about 5,500 by the end of 2016 or early 2017. Germany, Turkey, and Italy agreed to keep their deployments in Afghanistan at current levels of 850, 760, and 500 troops, respectively, through 2016. Even in an absence of an outright civil war, the U.S. minimal counterterrorism objectives will be compromised if a stable national government is not capable of effectively ruling from Kabul. Air strikes to decapitate terrorist groups and decimate its fighters depend to some degree on human intelligence. Once the US presence shrinks, local proxies in Afghanistan are likely to provide only self-servicing intelligence, such as that which hurts their political rivals, no matter how large payoffs the United States will offer them. A very unstable Afghanistan or one in an outright civil war will allow the global salafi movement to once again claim victory there over a powerhouse and provide an important psychological fillip to it at a time when its appeal in the Muslim world is waning.

Moreover, an unstable Afghanistan will be like an ulcer bleeding into Pakistan, further destabilizing that country might challenge the national security of India.
VI. Way Forward

Afghanistan is a rich state, only exploited due to political situation. It lies among the states which are injected with extremism of one or the other form. Iran, Iraq, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan are its close neighbours and Pakistan and Iraq are two states from where, non-state actors destabilize Afghanistan. For example, when United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001, Taliban leaders got shelter in Pakistan in general and Quetta in particular from where they made strategies, formed councils to carry on their mission against the regime and foreign troops. It is the duty of neighbouring states to be vigil when crisis occurs. Pakistan needs to play a greater role in stabilizing its internal situation as well as in Afghanistan in soft manner. The role of India in Afghanistan since 2001 is praise worthy, India raised as a soft power in Afghanistan. India is a long run partner of Afghanistan and is expected to play a greater role.

Afghanistan is now facing serious economic, political, and security challenges. It need the support of international community for its development and security. As NATO steps back, states in the region such as China, India, and Pakistan are becoming more actively involved in Afghanistan’s recovery through multilateral venues such as the Istanbul Process and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In particular, China’s growing capabilities, its desire for regional stability, and its geographic proximity to Afghanistan make it well-placed to play a positive role in Afghanistan’s reconstruction.

Pakistan and China though had tried to put Taliban on the negotiating table but it is not easy to reconcile Taliban. As Taliban insisted that till the foreign presence remained in Afghanistan, their Jihad will continue. Taliban takeover of Kunduz in 2015, destroying government offices buildings and other infrastructure reveals that, Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army are still not in a position to defend and United States and international community must focus on this. With the shrinking U.S. influence and determination to significantly scale down its involvement in Afghanistan, what can be done to avert this disastrous outcome, beyond more intense training of and partnering with the Afghan National Army?. Working on removing Taliban commanders and groups from the battlefield – whether through fighting, reintegration, or strategic-level negotiations – has some potential of reducing the overall level of instability come after 2014. It is important to try to encourage the widening of political patronage networks to give a greater number of Afghans a stake in the preservation of the current political order. President Ashraf Ghani and his team need to adopt transparent strategies to free Afghanistan from corruption, insecurity, poverty and malnutrition and need to strengthen ties with the regional players. Focusing on the most destabilizing corruption, such as in the Afghan security forces and that which is very ethnically and tribally discriminatory, should be a key priority as well as mitigating at least the most outrageous abuses of Afghan powerbrokers, including those through which ISAF prosecutes its military objectives.

To improve governance and reduce rent incentives for perpetuating instability, the United States should significantly curtail aid flows to unstable areas and instead allocate resources to projects where existing security and governance arrangements permit vigilant monitoring and which are sustainable in the long term. Efforts to reduce political tensions also must include an early focus on providing for an acceptable power transition in Afghanistan in 2014 that can enjoy at least some elite consensus and some popular support. Reasonably clean elections would be an optimal mechanism, but that may be elusive at this point, given the shrinking leverage the international community has. Afghan government and international community needs to play active role and strengthen the security situation, bring Taliban on negotiating table, and make Afghanistan a zone of peace. However, in the absence of a renewed determination to stay longer in Afghanistan with a robust military deployment, the U.S. influence and options for policy intervention might shrink.

Notes and References

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