

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



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Time to Face Terrorism Seriously

Terrorism seems to be turning into a complex issue for the world in general and Afghanistan in particular. The aftershocks of terrorism have shaken Afghan society to a large extent and continue to do so even at the present time. The so-called "War against Terrorism" has not been able to reach its conclusion as it has not been successful in eradication of terrorism from the country. The Taliban insurgents, who have been termed as 'terrorists' still enjoy strength in certain parts of the country and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are having a tough time in countering them. When the war against terrorism had started the plan was to punish Taliban for sheltering Al-Qaeda, emancipate Afghanistan from their tyrant rule and strive for a democratic system for the Afghan nation. Somehow, Taliban were pushed out of the country or at least from the main cities. A democratic system was developed and there were great hopes that it would grow stronger with the passage of time and peace would prevail within the country. However, those hopes have not turned into reality - the democratic system is still facing some very serious challenges, and the security situation is deteriorating with each passing day. Taliban seem to have regained their strength and they have threatened the whole Afghan nation recently in some parts of the country. They have shown that they are capable of restoring their position.

The incident in Badakhshan, Takhar and Kunduz clearly show that they are strengthening their positions in the areas that were not their stronghold earlier.

Even in Balkh province, which is a comparatively peaceful province, the insurgents attacked Indian Consulate on Sunday night and carried out their fight for more than 24 hours.

The situation in the capital Kabul also seems to be getting serious in the last couple of days. Since the dawn of the new year, the security incidents seem to be on the rise. There was an attack on a restaurant near Taimani, which killed some civilians. And, yesterday, there were two attacks near Hamid Karzai International Airport, which also injured civilians.

Peace process with Taliban does not seem to be in a good shape. Recently, Afghan government agreed with Islamabad for a Pakistan supported peace talk with Taliban. As a part of the process, Pakistan will host a four nation meeting of representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, US and China within a couple of weeks to pave the way for peace talks with the Taliban. The meeting will also focus on how to take the talks forward by creating the framework for the process.

This meeting will be of immense importance in deciding the future of talks with Taliban as it would be a major step after the talks in Murree, which was not concluded properly and was followed by a halt.

Pakistan, on most of the occasions, has announced its support for a stable Afghanistan, but public perception in Afghanistan disputes Pakistan's commitments to bring the resurgent group to the peace table. The Islamabad meeting will, however, be the first of two. The second meeting will take place later in Kabul. No date has yet however been announced for this meeting.

The important factor in the talks would be the participation of US and China. Their influence and pressure would really be helpful in keeping the efforts of all the stakeholders on track. There are hopes that the meeting would open new doors for the peace process.

The important achievement for the Afghan government would be to make Taliban ready for a peace process and negotiate for a cease-fire. If Taliban get ready for a cease-fire it would mean that they are really ready for negotiations. No peace process can succeed unless the clashes stop and the parties in the war are ready to lay down their arms.

Another important factor for Afghanistan would be to convince Taliban to accept Afghan constitution, which seems a bit difficult as Taliban have always strived for a Shariah-based law in the country. It is really a Herculean task to make them ready to respect Afghan constitution and abandon their demand for a Shariah-based law as they are gaining strength on the battle-ground. They are even insisting on their own terms and conditions for the peace talks. However, for Afghan government, it would be a great loss if it compromises on its constitution which is result of years of struggle for a democratic system and for which the Afghan people and the soldiers have given large number of sacrifices.

Afghanistan, as a top priority, needs to reach to a conclusive position regarding terrorism, if it wants to continue its journey towards a democratic and peaceful state. President Ashraf Ghani has clearly indicated that he is serious about the issue and has always called for a regional and global cooperation to eradicate terrorism. Nonetheless, it is more important that Afghanistan must have its own strategy bold and clear regarding the issue and must follow the same through actions, not words alone.

The Changing World Perception over Taliban

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

The emergence of the Islamic State group in the Middle East, and its affiliate group in Afghanistan, change many things, among them, speeded a change of the world's perception to the Taliban insurgent group in Afghanistan. Last month, a senior Russian official said that the country was sharing information with the Taliban as the group is fighting the Islamic State militants. The statement angered many in Afghanistan, causing concerns over Moscow's relations with the Taliban, an insurgent group that the US-led international coalition and Afghan government has been fighting about a decade and half. Reacting to the statement, the MPs in the Afghan parliament expressed concerns over Russia's relations with the Taliban and called such contacts as interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. The MPs called on the government to ask clarifications from Moscow over the country's cooperation with the Taliban.

The statement from Russian special envoy for Afghanistan indicated a significant shift in Russian view of the Taliban and Moscow's consideration of the group as a terrorist group. Russia has had friendly relations with the Afghan government over the last fourteen years since the fall of the Taliban regime. And Moscow has been backing the US-led international coalition in the efforts to fight the Taliban and bring peace and stability in the country. The country is officially supporting the Afghan government in its efforts to overcome the insurgency in the country. The United States has said that the country is not worried over the statement, and is trying to work together with the Russians over Afghanistan. The Russian statement over the country's cooperation with the Taliban came at a time while the Afghan government was fighting a bitter campaign against the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

Russia is not believed to be alone in establishing back-channel relations with the main insurgent group in Afghanistan. The Afghan and US has long been accusing neighboring countries of backing the Taliban, and there have been media reports on such support for the Taliban. Last year, the Afghan government protested an alleged visit of a senior Taliban delegation to Tehran, during which the Taliban delegation and Iranian security officials reportedly talked about many issues including affairs in the Muslim world, security and the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. In addition, it was reported that the Taliban members had visits to China and Norway as part of the efforts for resumption of peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. However, it should also be noted that the Taliban had increased its diplomatic contacts with the world after the peace efforts last year took momentum. Russia has long been wary of the militants threatening the Central Asian states which are viewed as the backyard of the Russia. In order to counter influence of the militant groups attempting to penetrate into the Central Asia, Russia has been backing the Afghan government - and the international efforts for salvaging the country from

the grip of the insurgency. Despite Russia's concerns for security of Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan, Moscow was less concerned with the Taliban as the group is not promoting a global cross-border agenda. Emergence and expansion of the Islamic State group in the region and in Afghanistan was coming as a fresh threat for security and stability of the Central Asian states, as the group is seeking a global caliphate. Moscow has seemingly recalculated its strategic assessment of the conflict in Afghanistan, making the threat of Islamic State a top priority.

The relations between the Taliban and the outside world have undergone considerable changes. The group that once was demonized by both the Western alliance and the traditional regional powers such as Russia and Iran is now being accepted as an active movement in Afghanistan with expanding ties with the outside world. Many countries in the region now see the Taliban as a militant group capable of playing a crucial role in containing the influence of the Islamic State group. Given the nature of the relations between the West and Russia and taking into account the potential threats of the militant groups to stability of the Central Asia, an unexpected and unconventional response from Russia has been expected. Currently, the unconventional response from Russia is believed to be limited to, as the Zamir Kabulov has confirmed it, maintaining intelligence sharing cooperation with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The ongoing rivalry between world major powers and the conflict in the Middle East further compounds the puzzle of the militant players in Afghanistan and the region. The world major powers are increasingly failing to resolve the existing crises in the world, rather tend to take a divergent course over most of the crises in the world. Depending to the development of the events related to activities of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and the region, Russia, Iran and probably more countries in the region may increasingly turn to Taliban to help promote the group into a bulwark against the Islamic State group. If the current trend continues, there is a potential risk of a fracture in the common perception of the World and regional countries to the Taliban being a banned, illegitimate, insurgent group fighting the Afghan legitimate government. This would be a nightmarish scenario for the Afghan government. The Afghan government needs to promote a regional consensus on the world's stance over the insurgency in Afghanistan through increased diplomatic efforts. The government also needs to do more to persuade the regional countries that it would be the only viable partner for long-term stability in Afghanistan and the region. The government must prove itself a trustworthy security partner of the regional countries in the face of increasing and multifaceted crises. The military efforts are not sufficient for winning the war. The government also needs to promote diplomatic efforts for seeking a shared regional approach over the conflict in Afghanistan.

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NUG 16 Months On: Weaker Defense Capacities, Stronger Enemies

By Bismillah Alizada

Afghans were elated at National Unity Government (NUG)'s assumption of office after a prolonged controversy a year ago, hoping the new administration deliver on the many promises it had made to them. All that proved short-lived, however.

Through the subsequent months, as Afghans were waiting for things to become better, the NUG encumbered itself with power sharing arrangements to an extent that it barely could take care of, inter alia, the security situation which was exacerbating.

Soon, to everyone's dismay, the many promises the two run-off runners had made proved hollow. According to Impassion Afghanistan's SadRoz report (100 Days reports), the NUG could achieve only four of the 110 promises that were to be achieved in the first 100 days of the administration in office.

After the death of Mullah Omar's death in late April, the NUG embarked on a publicity war against the Taliban claiming that the group's weak leadership in the aftermath of Omar's death will enfeeble them. Assuming the group's leadership after bitter internal disputes, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansur sought to prove the group is still strong enough to challenge Afghan government and security forces. Sporadic onslaughts ensued, with a new tactic of hit-and-run. The group's maneuvering was more strategic, however. In late September, the group raided Kunduz, the first province that fell to the Taliban since 2001. It took almost two weeks for the government to reassume control of the city. Nevertheless, Taliban's skirmishes never stopped. Many districts in North, particularly in Faryab province, swung between the Taliban and Afghan security forces.

More recently, Sangin, Helmand's key district fell to the Taliban on December 21, a day after the deputy governor had warned the central government of losing the district. Taliban, of course, cannot stay for long in the district—at least for now. But such attacks, certainly, claims lives of many citizens and Afghan security forces along with undermining government's legitimacy. Is such a setting, NUG's tough categorical stance against the Taliban seem less plausible to Afghans. Therefore, NUG dramatically loses public support

and approval.

Asia Foundation's report, published on November 17, shows that Afghan's optimism about whether the country is going in the right direction has dramatically fallen, with 57.5 percent saying it is not. Taliban's attacks and the NUG's failure in preventing them, is a major factor in this loss of confidence of people in NUG's performance.

Yet that is not the only challenge in regard to security. Daesh, also known as ISIL or IS, is another, and even more challenging threat. Afghan government confirmed Daesh's presence in the country in mid-March. Since then, the group has secured footholds in the country, posing serious security threat to both the government forces and to the citizens. The group beheaded 7 bus passengers taken hostage on November 8 callously.

The brutality shocked Afghans citizens who went out on the street in Kabul three days after the beheading, calling on the government to resign and marked a strong protest unprecedented in the country's history.

Now, Daesh has a radio station named Radio Voice of Daesh operating in Nangarhar, the group's headquarter in Afghanistan. In nine months since their presence was confirmed, the group has grown strong enough to lead onslaughts on districts close to its headquarter in Nangarhar.

That being said, NUG's measures to meet these threats are disappointing. Since its formation NUG has played the negotiation card in a very awkward manner, giving the Taliban the opportunity to sway between 'peace talks' at some times and fighting at others.

Furthermore, Taliban are not under a united command, so 'peace talks' will not meet the government's expectation of peace and security. Yet, Taliban are not the only ones who fight the government.

With NUG losing in three fronts—the Taliban, the Daesh and the public confidence—it would be so wrong for the government to lay all its eggs in the basket of 'peace talks' and so unrealistic to expect such talks will provide desired goal. NUG should take serious measures to remedy its loss in each of the three aforementioned fronts. As so, It should rethink its playing of 'peace talks' card, and think of drastic measures in fighting Daesh, and try to regain people support.

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