

Afghanistan after NATO Withdrawal: Insurgency and Peace Dialogue

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Abstract

NATO and ISAF have practically ended their combat operations in Afghanistan in December 2014. Nevertheless, NATO and ISAF Forces are still present in limited number there. The point of concern here is to analyze the situations of stability in Afghanistan without the help of foreign troops. Here, it is also aimed to study that whether there is an escalation in insurgency, and terrorist attacks, or an improvement is seen in the overall scenario. Furthermore, Afghan National Security Forces and Afghan National Army faced severe crisis of desertion and defection due to no back up support from the government, lack of resources and absence of NATO Forces. The international community started the peace dialogue with the resistant forces to stop violence and be mainstreamed in Afghan politics and ensure stability. The Murree peace talks and Quadrilateral Coordination Group initiatives tried to persuade Taliban for a peaceful settlement with the Afghan government. The issue of insecurity should be solved through continued efforts for peace and stability by dialogue process, which the international community and NATO owe to Afghan nation.

Key Words: NATO, ISAF, Afghanistan, Peace Dialogue

Introduction

NATO and ISAF attacked Afghanistan with the approval of United Nations Security Council in October 2001, under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which deals with the self-defense, with the aim to dismantle Al-Qaeda and overthrow Taliban from power (Khan, 2013). The mission was led by United States of America as she was affected from the twin towers incident and feared more such attacks. These foreign forces were present on Afghan soil for more than thirteen years in combating terrorism and finding the leadership of Al-Qaeda and Taliban. Furthermore, NATO has also worked for the uplifting of ruined infrastructure, mainstreaming drug addicted society, neutralizing extremist viewpoints, strengthening Afghan Security Apparatus, economic uplifting and politically stabilizing of Afghanistan.

As President Barrack Obama assumed the charge in Oval Office, he announced his plan for withdrawal of forces from Iraq and Afghanistan (MacAskill, 2009). At first he withdrew the forces from Iraq and in 2011, sent more forces (about 30,000 troops) to Afghanistan as surge to already stationed troops there, with the aim to ensure complete withdrawal till the end of 2014. During this era of three years, NATO and U.S. troops tried to train the Afghan National Security Forces, and Afghan National Army, so that they could be made able to repel the insurgents' attacks and defend their country from other aggressors (Crunin, 2013). At first it looked like Afghanistan has developed a professional army having the capability to

replace NATO and ISAF and take the charge of country's security apparatus. Nevertheless, as the NATO started to leave Afghanistan, ANSF and ANA, started to defect and desert due to lack of resources accompanied by the increase in attacks from the different insurgent groups (Brown, 2015). It is very difficult to maintain such huge security apparatus through donations without any proper source of revenue and backup strong economy. Taliban were already operating in remote areas against the security forces but rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in Afghanistan posed another credible threat to the security of Afghanistan, region and ANA and ANSF (Ahmad, 2015).

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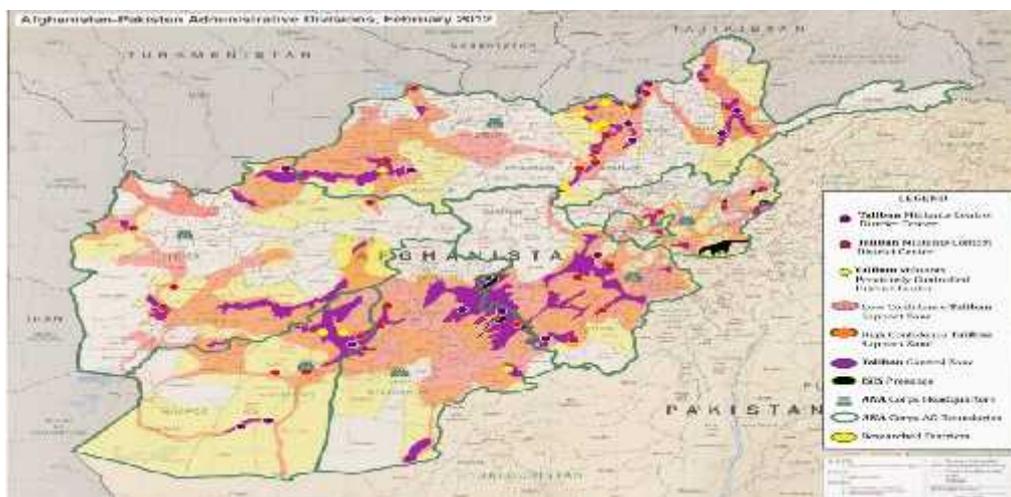
Anarchy and chaos blazoned in different cities of 34 provinces of Afghanistan soon after the NATO withdrawal. The insurgent and resistance forces got opportunity in the absence of NATO to tackle with the Afghan Security forces. Earlier in January, soon after NATO withdrawal, reports claimed the emergence and footholds of ISIS in different parts of Afghanistan (Bahrani, 2015). ISIS started recruitment in different vulnerable areas and also succeeded in getting loyalty of some aggrieved Taliban members. ISIS also claimed the responsibility of attack in Jalalabad killing dozens of people (Khalid & Rod, 2015). It compelled the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to acknowledge the presence of ISIS on Afghan land and termed it "wolves" and more dangerous than Taliban. ISIS also started training its recruits and comrades near Kabul in a camp named as Saad Bin Maaz camp (Adeel, 2015). These types of activities came to media when the NATO forces had left the country in the hands of Afghan National Army (ANA). On the other hand, even the further deteriorating situation compelled the First Vice President and former Army Chief, General Rasheed Dostam to personally lead operations against the insurgents (Khaama Press., 2015). Another report states that Afghanistan witnessed 10,000 insurgents and terrorist attacks in 2015. The month of May was the worst one which witnessed 1026, terrorist activities due to the Taliban's successful spring offensive, while Helmand, Nangarhar and Faryab provinces witnessed most terrorist and violence activities (Daily Outlook, 2016). The report shows increased level of kidnappings, abductions by the insurgent groups and violence in different areas of Afghanistan.

The country's capital saw increased level of attacks on different important places, including Kabul city, different embassies and consulates, police training academy and Kabul airport. Kabul Airport in Shah Shaheed area of Kabul was attacked by the insurgents and made the workers of the airport for hours, left at least 16 people dead and more than 400 wounded (Mujib, 2015). Attack on Police training academy in Kabul left 36 people killed including 20 cadets.

The Afghan parliament time and again convened different government officials including National Security Advisor Hanif Athmar to explain the deteriorating security situations in the country (Kathy, 2015). The year 2015 witnessed the fall of Kunduz to the hands of Taliban which is can be termed as the first major offensive of the group after their demise from power in October. In Kunduz, the NATO airstrikes rescued the Afghan Security forces. Reports stated that the Afghan Security forces left their stations to Taliban and fled the battlefield which

gave Taliban free hand to overrun the Governor house, local Jail, freeing hundreds of their friends and controlling Police headquarters. Many districts in the provinces of Faryab, Helmand, Herat, Farah, Ningarhaar and Sar-e-Pul provinces are under the control of armed groups including Taliban and ISIS (McFate, Denaburg, & Forrest, 2015). The United Nations has admitted this fact that Taliban are now more active in many areas of Afghanistan than ever.

The increasing influence of ISIS in remote areas, especially Ningarhaar, Farah province and near the capital Kabul in the last year is adding fuel to the already chaotic situation of Afghanistan. The international experts are terming the situations of Afghanistan one year after the NATO withdrawal as extremely unstable and are of the opinion that the rise of Da'esh (ISIS) after the NATO withdrawal is more dangerous than the presence of Taliban (Andrey, 2015). It has also been noted that more than 1,600 militants have sworn their allegiance to Dae'shin four provinces near and around Jalalabad, Ningarhaar (SPUTNIK, 2015). The following map shows different areas dominated by Taliban and ISIS.



(Congressional Research Service Report, 2015)

Furthermore, Afghanistan was unable to hold parliamentary elections as these were scheduled to be held in 2015, under the bilateral agreement between the rival candidates, Dr. Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. The internal rifts between the two leaders has hampered many decisions regarding elections as well as inclusion of full-fledged defense minister to the cabinet (Chriss, 2015). The parliament completed its tenure in June but interestingly it gave one-year extension to itself unconstitutionally (Mujib, 2015). The government is of the view that ongoing insurgency, instability and lack of funds hamper the holding of parliamentary elections (Keneth, 2015).

The defection and desertion in Afghan National Army increased due to lack of back up support and increasing insurgency in different areas (Faridullah, 2016). According to a NATO official, Afghan National Army has 101 infantry units, out of which only one is termed as capable of fighting, 38 out of them are facing "massive problems", and ten battalions each of them comprising of 600 soldiers are termed as not operational. The casualties in Afghan Army raised by 42% as compared to 2014.

On average, ANA loses 22 soldiers on daily basis due to increased level of terrorists and insurgent's attacks. Although, the NATO countries are committed to support Afghan Security forces till the end of 2017, and are trying to extend it to 2020, but it failed to stop the vigorous defection and desertion in Afghan National Army (Ahmad, 2016).

Peace Dialogue

The Afghan Peace Process that was initiated through informal meetings in Oslo, Doha, and Urumqi in Hamid Karzai regime, saw many ups and downs in attaining its goal to restore peace and stability in the country. The Afghan government and USA continuously used their influences and different forums to convince and force Taliban leadership for joining the dialogue process and shun the violence. The process looked successful at first when it led to the first ever formal meeting between Afghan government and Taliban representatives, hosted by Pakistan in Murree on July 07, 2015 (Sajjad, 2015).

Nevertheless, the news of the death of Mullah Umar hindered the process and the two parties failed to meet again officially. Pakistan hosted the Heart of Asia Summit, in December 2015, in which Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed to resume the process and went on for formulation of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), consisting of Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and United States (Khan, 2016).

The QCG has held four meetings so far. The first meeting was held in Islamabad on Jan 11, 2016. The second meeting was held in Kabul on January 18, which called on Taliban to join the peace process with the Afghan Government (Khaama Press, 2016). Again the third meeting was hosted by Pakistan on February 06 and the latest meeting was held in Kabul on February 23, which finally set the agenda for holding direct talks with Taliban and other resistant groups of Afghanistan. High officials from the four countries represented their respective countries. All of these meetings were agenda setting and paving the ways for bringing Taliban interlocutors to the negotiating table.

The latest meeting in Kabul called for the direct talks with different factions of Taliban in the first week of March. It should also be noted that there are two main factions of Taliban raised after the death of Mullah Umar. The main group of Taliban is led by Mullah Akhtar Mansour, Mullah Rasoul heads the faction which opposes Mullah Mansour's leadership and is mainly operating in Zabul and Herat provinces (bbc.com, 2015). Both the groups have been reported to have fought in many areas of Zabul and Herat and inflicted heavy loss on Mullah Rasoul's faction (Khan, 2015). Although, Mullah Rasoul, has no such influence like Mullah Mansour, because Mansour was reported to be elected by majority of Taliban leadership, yet Mullah Rasoul has affected the unity in Taliban by leading the splinter group (Aljazeera.com, 2015). It provided an opportunity to the Afghan Government to identify groupings in Taliban and further enhance the disunity, thus making them more vulnerable to be influenced easily (Khaama Press, 2016). The Afghan Government has invited all those groups who want to denounce violence and are ready to be mainstreamed can participate in the negotiations.

The early meetings of QCG went for setting a pathway to the direct talks with these groups. The Afghan Government insisted for direct talks in early March, while the other three members of the group were not ready for it in March. Keeping in view the devastations of Taliban's Spring Offensive in 2015, now the Afghan government has realized the ground situations in different parts of Afghanistan and has weighed the force of Taliban for upcoming "Spring Offensive". The initiation of "Spring Offensive" by Taliban in late March or early April creates panic for the Afghan Government, and it insists on direct talks before the initiation of the spring offensive (Khan, 2016). The initiation of direct talks can possibly defer or minimize the intensity of the tactical warfare if Taliban saw green signals of fruitful and meaningful negotiations along with acceptance of their preconditions.

The "Spring Offensive" of Taliban in 2016 is expected to be more strong and violent than that of 2015, because Taliban along with its strong foot hold in Eastern and Southern parts of Afghanistan have shifted to the Northern region as well. The fall of these areas to the Taliban can be termed as a huge embarrassment for Afghan Government. In September 2015, the fall of Kunduz province posed a credible threat to the Afghan Security Forces and Ashraf Ghani's administration, which it does not want to be repeated in other areas (Khan, 2016).

Furthermore, the internal rifts between Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah are worrisome, for the restoration of peace. Dr. Abdullah is looking to be unfriendly to the reconciliation process, although he does not say so publicly but some reports suggest that he is not favoring the talks with the Taliban. Recently, Dr. Abdullah has criticized the remarks of the Chairman of High Peace Council, in which he repeatedly called on Taliban "to join the peace process, lay down arms and termed the war against Taliban as not good" (Tamim, 2016). Nevertheless, after the refusal of invitation by Taliban, Dr. Abdullah along with Ashraf Ghani has once again extended their invitation of peace talks to Taliban, which needs an accolade for their unified stance on this critical point.

The Afghan government claims that they had invited all the factions of Taliban to the negotiations. On the other hand, Dr. Muhammad Naeem Wardag, the spokesman of political office of Taliban in Qatar has denied the claims, by saying that they have heard these steps through Media and have not been contacted by any official from Afghanistan. Although, Taliban have now received the invitation but refused to participate in the process, until their demands are fulfilled (Khan, 2016). Their demands include, recognition of their political office in Qatar, promulgation of Islamic Sharia, removal of names from United Nations' black list, freedom of international travel of Taliban leaders, installment of interim setup during negotiations and expulsion of foreign troops from Afghanistan. The convincing of fighters on battlefield for peace process is also a major issue for Taliban leaders, because they are not ready to talk to the government until the expulsion of foreign troops. On the other hand these preconditions are termed as unacceptable by the group members (Khan, 2016).

Hizb-e-Islami (HeI) Afghanistan claims that they have received the invitation from the government of Afghanistan. Afghan Foreign Minister, Salah Uddin Rabbani telephoned Hizb-e-Islami leader, and the son-in-law of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar; Dr.

GhairatBaheer and invited them to the negotiations (Tahir Khan, 2016). Nevertheless, HeI has also put forward their demands and said that they will participate in only intra-Afghan dialogue, and will not participate in any process influenced by foreigners (Express Tribune, 2016).HeI accepts the QCG members as facilitators but do not want their agenda to be imposed on the Afghans (Khan, 2016).

Furthermore, the QCG members have given Pakistan, the task of inviting ten influential leaders of Taliban and Haqqani Network, although their names are not made public by the authorities, but Taliban have termed this move as creating division and rifts among the Taliban circles (Khan, 2016).

All the fore-mentioned situations and movements highlight that restoration of peace is not as easier as QCG visualizes it. QCG want to preserve Afghanistan's unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty through Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process (mofa.gov.af, 2016). QCG also want Taliban to be streamlined through adjusting them in the current political system, while Taliban do not recognize the current institutions and are demanding an interim setup to be installed during the negotiations (Khan, 2016).These conditions are contradictory and there seems no flexibility from the either parties on their stances. The recent refusal of Taliban of joining the process and the call of Mullah Akhtar Mansour to the Taliban fighters to move to the mountains puts further impediments in smoothening the ways for peace. Nevertheless, Ashraf Ghani's another call to the Taliban shows desire of the Afghan government for restoration of peace. On the other hand, Pakistan and China are hopeful for restoration of peace process in the near future (Daily Outlook, 2016). Pakistan terms Taliban's demands as practicable to some extent but it has urged Taliban to put their demands on the negotiating table, rather than using it as a tool to deter the process (Hamid, 2016). Moreover, the American government and Afghan government have also shown their intentions to use force against those who opt for creating disturbance and violence (Daily Outlook, 2016).This puts a shadow of misfortune on the fate and destiny of the Afghan Reconciliation Process and can possibly promote more violence and instability in Afghanistan, if both the parties firmly stick to their demands and preconditions. There needs an enormous amount of flexibility and devotion from both the sides to make these endures and process fruitful and successful. The members of QCG, especially Pakistan has to play crucial role in bringing back Taliban to the negotiating table. There is also another option with Pakistan to use the sympathizers of Taliban to persuade them for talks. Since the day one Pakistan has used and should use its influence on the Taliban leadership to sit aside their preconditions and first sit for talks then put forward their conditions in front of the Afghan government. The QCG should also consider some of the preconditions of Taliban as an incentive to move forward. At the end, the solution to Afghanistan's instability lies in restoration of internal peace, which is possible only through negotiations and mediations of the influential actors like Pakistan, China and other religious and political parties, with in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The destiny of Afghan Peace Process can be achieved only through continued and consistent contacts through vigorous endures of all the stakeholders with the Taliban leadership.

The ambiguous situation of Afghan Peace Process has further added to the unclear situation of future political and security situation of Afghanistan. Although, National Unity Government has tried its level best through its High Peace Council,

regional states and lawmakers to persuade militants for negotiations, and they succeeded up to a certain level by holding several unofficial meetings and the first ever official huddle in Murree, Pakistan (Express Tribune, 2015). Although in 2015, Afghan Taliban faced the tragedy of the death of its emir Mullah Umar followed by the casual fights on succession between Mullah Akhtar Mansour, Mullah Yaqub: the son of late Mullah Umar and Mullah Rasoul. Yet the attacks of Taliban on different places considerably escalated (Daily Dawn, 2015). The fight with in Taliban and between Taliban and Da'esh have been reported in many provinces, by killing each other for dominating the scene in Afghanistan and legitimizing it through their announcement of Jihad (Holy War) against each other in the last year (Khaama Press, 2016).

The renewed process of reconciliation by forming Quadrilateral Coordination Group comprising of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and United States could possibly help in reviving the peace process with Taliban and other insurgent groups (Afghanistan Times, 2016). The positive response from stakeholders and keenness of regional actors for restoring peace can prove helpful in decreasing the current level of insurgency. Another dilemma which peace process faced is the death of Mullah Mansour in a drone attack in Baluchistan province of Pakistan on May 21, 2016. Although, it was a serious issue and a sudden blow for the Taliban, yet they managed to pick the successor of Mullah Mansour immediately from among the members of Central Executive Council (Qazi, 2016). Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada; the new Amir of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan go more confidence and loyalties than his predecessor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour. Haibatullah is a learned religious scholar and not a field soldier, due to which the international community hoped that he will favor the peace process and will shun the violence. His new strategy of challenging the writ the government is to abduct the passengers on the main roads and highways of different provinces of Afghanistan. It created more panic for the government because of its lose control over remote areas and imperfectly trained personal of Afghan law enforcement agencies (Gul, 2016). The operation "Umari" launched by Taliban as their Spring Offensive 2016, is more severe than its 2015 version .In 2015, they captured Kunduz province only but in 2016, they have been successful in controlling of many districts in more than eleven provinces of Afghanistan (Gul, 2016). These districts are said to be on the verge of collapse at any point in this year. The Afghan Parliament time and again called the interior minister, heads of Law Enforcement Agencies and intelligence officials to brief the house on increasing insurgency (Afghanistan Times, 2016). The attack on police academy in Kabul is another proof of strengthening control of Taliban not only in remote areas but also in the capital of the country. The attack on Hazara community and the resultant carnage in Kabul, although not acknowledged by Taliban, but shows the efficacy of militants in targeting the soft targets due to the failure of the government to ensure peaceful protests and processions.

Flight and Repatriation of Afghan Refugees

Complete repatriation and rehabilitation of Afghan refugees mainly from Pakistan and Iran is still a nightmare for the Afghan Government. In 2015, out of 1.6 million Afghans registered with UNHCR inside Pakistan, Only 58,212 Afghan refugees are repatriated from Pakistan (Afghanistan Times, 2016). Afghan migrants

are currently second largest in the world after Syrian refugees (Daily Outlook, 2015). According to official statistics of Afghanistan the first half of the last year saw 6,0000 migrants repatriated to the home country, but contrary to this, in the second half, about 1,50000 Afghans sought asylum in other countries, which shows that the plight of the people rose in the second half due to increasing instability.

Conclusion

Insurgency, insecurity, bad governance, corruption, flight of Afghans, internal rifts between Ghani and Abdullah, abduction, violence, stumbling economy and lack of resources are the hot topics in today's Afghan politics and discussions. It is clearly seen from the above-mentioned statistics, reports and incidents that if the current situation prevailed, then it is easy to predict the situations in the ongoing year, 2016. Currently, there seems no positive sign of decreasing the insurgency and instability throughout Afghanistan; rather it may escalate if not taken seriously by the Afghan Government and major global and regional actors. The current situations compelled the ex-Commander of NATO's Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, General John F. Campbell, to confess that United States can rethink by using the option of bringing forces back to Afghanistan if the situations remained the same. The sustainable solution does not lie in support from foreign financial and security aid and assistance. Peace can be restored through persistent struggles for reinitiating the peace dialogue, economic revival, generation of revenue from internal resources, mainstreaming the militants through different incentives and continuous practice of democracy. ISIS is a credible threat to the country if not handled timely and tactically. QCG needs to continue its struggle and other regional and global actors should also encourage the Taliban to set for direct talks with the government and find a solution to the ongoing insurgency and shunning of violence. Peace can be restored by opting a holistic approach. If the government opts for talking to one group and deny others, then it will be difficult to achieve the desired goal of long-lasting peace. No doubt, NATO has left Afghanistan but the theatre for ongoing War on Terror, Afghanistan can be turned into a peace haven only when as a whole all the fighting and combating forces are streamlined and their concerns not dealt with. All those actors who are directly or indirectly involved in Afghanistan should use their influences to end violence, because the fourteen-year presence of NATO could not solve the issue with iron hand and with its withdrawal the insurgency blazoned immediately and the situations may deteriorate further due to negligence.

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