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Afghan Peace Talks and the Changing Character of Taliban Insurgency

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Abstract

The June 2013 opening of a Taliban office in Doha raised fresh hopes of a negotiated settlement of the Afghan imbroglio among certain quarters. That the process ended in a deadlock underlined the fact that the intent and negotiating positions of the parties in conflict remain the least understood. Why do the Taliban, willing to hold out an olive branch to the United States, continue to carry out such gruesome attacks inside Afghanistan? Is this a serious attempt by the United States to broker peace in Afghanistan or a desperate measure to extricate itself from the conflict theatre? Answers to these questions, to a large extent, define the complexities of the search for peace and stability in the war-torn country. It also bares the element of futility of talks, dialogue, negotiations with the extremists especially when the conditions and the time are not ripe for such peacemaking initiatives.

Introduction

The Doha talks, which were initiated with the 18 June opening of a Taliban office in the Qatar capital, stand more or less abandoned. The development hardly comes as a surprise

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especially when the American President Barack Obama had described it as "an important first step toward reconciliation"² and the other parties in the negotiations – the Afghan government and the Taliban – had differing perceptions on the peace process. While Afghan President Hamid Karzai was infuriated with the attempt of the Taliban to gain legitimacy by placing their name plaque and flying their flag at the office in Doha, the Taliban took credit for a rocket attack that killed four US soldiers near Bagram air base on the same day.³ Even as the Taliban representatives in Doha continued to declare their intent to carry the peace process forward, on 25 June, the insurgents launched an early-morning well-coordinated attack on the Afghan presidential palace in Kabul. Three security guards were killed in the attack including the eight suicide attackers who came in land cruisers and tried to enter the fortified palace. Taliban subsequently claimed responsibility for the violence, citing the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) facility, the nearby presidential palace and the adjoining Ministry of Defence as the intended targets in their spring offensive.

Conventional explanations behind this 'talk and fight'⁴ strategy of the Taliban assume the insurgency to be monolithic, consisting of cadres owing allegiance to the same ideology, and more importantly, the same leadership and organisation. Going by this assumption, these attacks have a demonstrative effect and provide an additional leverage of negotiating from a 'position of strength'.⁵ Further, the attacks signify the strengthening of the Taliban narrative of driving away the foreigners (infidels) and a deep sense of disdain towards the prevailing state of affairs and a 'puppet' regime supported by them. However, such explanations could be misleading.

Af-Pak Strategy and the Changing Character of Insurgency

Since the December 2009 rollout of the Af-Pak strategy⁶ by President Obama, with greater emphasis on 'kill or capture', a large number of Taliban leaders and fighters have been

² "Taliban attack US base in Afghanistan after talks offer", *BBC* (19 June 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22963576>. Accessed on 23 June 2013.

³ "Taliban attack US base in Afghanistan after talks offer", *BBC*, (19 June 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22963576>. Accessed on 20 June 2013.

⁴ While one arm of the insurgency is fighting, the other is involved in talks – use of a dual strategy of demonstration of strength, of being the superior party in the negotiations (targeting and driving away foreigners) and at the same time gaining space and time to regroup and rearm, is an indication of the emerging differences and divisions within the insurgency (moderates and the hardliners). "Taliban's dual strategy: Fight and talk peace", *Today* (26 June 2013), <http://www.todayonline.com/talibans-dual-strategy-fight-and-talk-peace>. Accessed on 27 June 2013.

⁵ The ripeness theory suggests that efforts of the US-led coalition to achieve a position of strength are not conducive to negotiations, as these are usually facilitated by a perceived 'mutually hurting stalemate', in which none of the parties believes it can escalate to victory. Matt Waldman & Thomas Ruttig, "Peace Offerings: Theories of conflict resolution and their applicability to Afghanistan", Afghan Analysts Network, 2011, http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/4360~v~Peace_Offerings_Theories_of_Conflict_Resolution_and_Their_Applicability_to_Afghanistan.pdf. Accessed on 25 June 2013.

⁶ Jesse Lee, "A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan", (27 March 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/27/A-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan>. Accessed on 25 June 2013.

neutralised.⁷ At one level, many of these killed are considered to belong to the insurgency's pro-talks and moderate faction. Their replacements, however, have been more radical leaders and foreign fighters who are perceived to be less amenable to talks. A direct fall-out of this has been an increase in the levels of competition for power and influence within the various *shuras* (council) of the insurgency, especially between the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) and the Peshawar Shura Taliban (PST). The QST consists of clerical and traditional emirate leadership wielding political power. The PST, on the other hand, has evolved into a more centralised command and control structure (*military commission based shadow government framework*), with young and educated recruits, greater financial resources, and close links with the Pakistani security establishment.⁸ Since 2012, with the increase in the infighting and the near-absence of a unified leadership provided by periodic statements by the Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar⁹, there has been a gradual erosion of power within the QST, with the PST wresting greater power and control of the insurgency.

As a result, within Afghanistan, the old Taliban command structure remains active in the southern heartland. However, the east and the north are witnessing the increase in activities and influence of the factions aligned more closely to the PST and the Haqqani network. The encirclement of and grip over Kabul and other population centres and along arterial roads, apart from efforts to infiltrate and occupy peripheral areas and Pashtun-dominated pockets in the north – Balkh, Sar-e Pul and Samangan from the west (Faryab, Herat and Badghis) and east (Badakhshan), have increased.

Doha Office and the Challenges of Talking to Taliban

The opening of the office has given the Taliban an address to communicate with the outside world. Probing into the intent and influence of the group that has come out in support of the peace talks, however, portrays a different picture.

The Taliban-led insurgency is no longer a monolithic organisation. Since 2001, the insurgency functions as an amorphous organisation comprising of loosely aligned motley of anti-government elements, followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's radical Hizb-i-Islami (HIG), the Haqqani network, Al Qaeda and its affiliates, religious clerics, narcotic traffickers, smugglers, armed groups, unemployed youths and alienated men in Afghanistan; and tribal fighters in Pakistan's tribal areas. The transformed character of the insurgency, combined

⁷ Bill Roggio, "ISAF captures Taliban facilitator behind insider attack in Paktia", *Long War Journal* (1 November 2012), http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2012/11/isaf_captures_taliban_facilita.php Accessed on 25 June 2013.

⁸ The military commission model is also actually better suited to running a traditional, low-intensity campaign based on guerrilla operations, which does not necessarily seek territorial control. Claudio Franco, "The evolving Taleban: Changes in the insurgency's DNA", *Afghan Analyst Network*, Kabul (19 May 2013), <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-evolving-taleban-changes-in-the-insurgencys-dna>. Accessed on 21 June 2013.

⁹ Mullah Omar has not been seen in public in years. On rare occasions, a message is issued in his name but he never appears in front of his followers. For all the world knows, the self-styled Commander of the Faithful may be dead, mad or incapacitated. Bruce Riedel, "The Doha portent", *Indian Express* (3 July 2013), <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-doha-portent/1136806/0>. Accessed on 25 July 2013.

with its tactics of alliance-building and network-centric mode of operations, in the last decade, is instructive. The decentralised nature of the insurgency has helped to quickly replace neutralised leaders and foot soldiers and withstand the enemy (US and Afghan governments) attempts at fracturing, splintering, co-opting the insurgents. The rapidly changing character of the insurgency, on the other hand, has introduced an overwhelming amount of ambiguity into the peace processes. For example, the HIG has adopted a dual strategy of being a part of the government and at the same time maintaining its fighting potential, thus retaining a tremendous 'spoiler effect'.

The unsettled question therefore is regarding the intent and type of the Taliban in the Qatar office. Who do they represent and what influence do these 'agents of peace' have with the leaders of the factions who continue to indulge in violence? The Taliban peaceniks in Doha are said to represent the pro-talks section of the insurgency.¹⁰ In the past, the Pakistani military establishment had restrained them from initiating direct talks with the Afghan government. Mullah Baradar remains in captivity since 2010.¹¹ In 2011, the hard-line section of the Taliban carried out an attack on Agha Jan Motasim, a member of the QST, in the city of Karachi. Motasim had advocated the need for the group's negotiations and eventual participation in Afghanistan's mainstream political process.

The Road Ahead

What has brought about this turnaround? Has the conflict level reached a 'hurting stalemate' or is the time for talks used to build on the other arms of the insurgency?? The bringing in of one section of the insurgency to the negotiating table would provide some temporary respite to the establishment from intense pressure from the US (increased drone attacks and unilateral operations) and may well result in some additional pecuniary benefits and bargaining space including getting concessions on the Haqqani network. At the same time, it would help in splitting the linkages between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. It would, however, do little to address the continuation of the conflict by a more centrally controlled, trained and well-funded lethal insurgency of the PST. The recent attempts at peace talks could thus be an exercise in futility, when the sphere of influence and the control of insurgency are shifting to the PST.

¹⁰ For biographical details on the representation of the Taliban, see Kate Clark, *The Taleban in Qatar (2): Biographies – core and constellation*, *Afghan Analysts Network*, Kabul, 24 June 2013, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-taleban-in-qatar-2-biographies-core-and-constellation-amended-with-more-details>. Accessed on 20 July 2013.

¹¹ Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar is a co-founder of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. The deputy of Mullah Mohammed Omar and leader of the militant Quetta Shura in Pakistan, Baradar was largely seen as the de facto leader of the Taliban till 2009 and was reported to be in charge of all long-term strategic military planning for the Taliban in southern Afghanistan. He was captured in Pakistan by a team of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in February 2010 and has been held at an unknown location inside Pakistan. "Taliban commander Mullah Baradar 'seized in Pakistan'", *BBC* (16 February 2010), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8517375.stm. Accessed on 23 July 2013.

Providing legitimacy by talking or even weaning one section of a rather-irrelevant faction of the insurgency will not provide the space or conditions to co-opt or neutralise the lethal component of the insurgency. The process of peace talks and negotiations, labelled as a crucial step for a peace settlement, would not end the perpetual cycle of violence in the Af-Pak region. With no declaration of a ceasefire and with the pre-conditions for talks becoming the end-points of a process-based outcome, there is no clear vision of the end-goal of such peace initiatives.

Critics for long have alleged that the negotiation process with the Taliban is yet another attempt to find a quick fix-solution to the enduring problem and, for the Western nations, a desperate measure to extricate them from the present imbroglio. History has important lessons. Peace talks and negotiations with insurgent groups, when initiated in unilateral and uncoordinated manner, carry the danger of refuelling conflicts and throwing countries into greater chaos and instability.

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