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The Afghan Peace Jirga: Is an end in sight?

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Abstract

The recently held peace jirga in Kabul have once again raised hopes among the Afghans and international community of finding peace through 'other means'. The continuing military stalemate and talks of exit have emboldened the Taliban who perceive the tide to be in their favour. In such a scenario, are the peace gestures by the Afghan government a way forward? Will such peace initiatives lead to durable peace in Afghanistan? Will the recently concluded peace jirga provide a consensual framework of negotiations for the Afghans and international community?

Protected by layers of security consisting of 12,000 security force personnel, the much awaited and twice delayed three-day peace *jirga*, a traditional consultative assembly of tribal elders, culminated in Kabul with near unanimous calls for negotiations with the Taliban. Attended by more than 1,600 delegates including 300 women, the *jirga* was intended to build a national consensus around President Hamid Karzai's peace plan for the country. However, the plan ran into rough weather as opposition stayed away. Not only the *jirga* saw no Taliban representation, but on the first day the latter fired at least five rockets, few of them exploded not far from the tent where President Karzai delivered his speech and called on his 'angry brothers'² to come forth and accept the olive branch being extended to them. The security forces also foiled a

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² Afghan peace jirga', *Daily Times* (7 June 2010), www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010%5C06%5C07%5Cstory_7-6-2010_pg3_1. Accessed on 10 June 2010.

Taliban suicide attack apparently targetted at the *jirga*. At the end of the three-day meeting, the Taliban issued a statement saying that the *jirga* did not represent the will of the Afghan people and was aimed at securing the interest of foreigners.³

Role of Talks, Reintegration, Negotiation and Reconciliation

The issue of reintegration and reconciliation is an essential component of counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign, especially in a country whose social fabric has been severely damaged through decades of conflict. As the military stalemate continues and security further deteriorates, especially in the South and East, there is a growing recognition that Afghanistan needs to go through a transformative process in pursuit of national accord and building an inclusive political order, which calls for its own dedicated peace and reconciliation process. One of the main reasons for excluding the Taliban from the original peace agreement of the Bonn Process (2001-2002) was the assumption that after being ‘totally defeated’, they no longer had a credible constituency in Afghanistan. The assumption stayed clear of the issue of sanctuary that the Taliban had found inside neighbouring Pakistan.

Consequently, in a few years, the Taliban have developed serious means to challenge the fragile peace and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Also aiding and abetting the Taliban-led insurgency⁴ are the key Afghan stakeholders excluded from the 2001 to 2002 peace process and their regional proxies who are increasingly playing a destabilising role. The Bonn Process, however, did not envision a greater regional role in ‘peace building’ of Afghanistan.⁵ In light of the deteriorating security and escalating violence combined by the urgency of the United States (US) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to leave Afghanistan, the Afghan government has put forward a peace plan as witnessed by the recently concluded *jirga*. While there has been an emerging consensus on the need and feasibility of reintegration of low and mid-level Taliban among Afghans and internationals alike, reconciliation efforts have generated intense debate and opposition among ethnic minorities, women and human rights groups.

Karzai’s Peace Initiatives – Extending the Olive Branch

The Afghan Government under President Karzai has made numerous gestures towards political reconciliation with the Taliban since 2003. While steering clear of the NATO classification of

³ Afghan peace jirga backs Karzai Taliban talks proposal, *BBC* (4 June 2010), news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/south_asia/10234823.stm. Accessed on 5 June 2010

⁴ The Taliban-led insurgency includes a symbiotic relationship of Taliban guerrillas, followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s radical group Hezb-e-Islami, the Haqqani network, Al Qaeda and its affiliates, religious clerics, narcotic traffickers, anti-government armed groups, tribal fighters, and self-interested spoilers in the Pakistani tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan.

⁵ This inference was derived from interviews, discussions with Government officials, academia, media persons, and aid workers in various Afghan provinces in May–June 2007.

‘tier based Taliban’, the Afghan Government’s approach of inclusion is based on the ‘tribal milieu’ in Afghan society. The objective has been to exploit the differences between the tribes and communities supporting the Taliban in an effort to drive a wedge between Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.⁶ Of late, there has been at least two significant peace *jirgas* – the Joint (Afghanistan-Pakistan) Peace *Jirga* in Kabul in August 2007 and the provincial peace *jirga* in Uruzgan province, Afghanistan in 2008. There have also been similar peace *jirgas* in some of the other provinces. It is difficult to ascertain the actual achievements of such initiatives, which are considered to be important consultative institutions in the traditional Pushtun society. Nonetheless, these *jirgas* have been attempts in providing avenues to the marginalised and alienated Pushtun tribal communities to voice their grievances, given that the modern state institutions to deliver justice, security and governance are non-existent in these areas.

For the critics of the Afghan President, the recent *jirga* is a face saving exercise, especially at a time when his popularity is seen as plummeting both at the domestic and international level. The *jirga* served as a tailor-made platform to revive support and build legitimacy after the 2009 presidential elections which was allegedly rigged and fraudulent.

The opposition having boycotted; it was alleged that the Afghan President handpicked the delegates for the *jirga*. The *jirga* was, thus, largely unrepresentative and non-consultative. While it included members of both Houses of the Parliament, provincial councils, religious scholars, tribal leaders, civil society organisations, Afghan refugees residing in Iran and Pakistan, it was left unattended by several main drivers of insurgency, key opposition figures and most importantly, the Taliban. Abdullah Abdullah of the National Front, Karzai’s main rival candidate in the 2009 presidential election, declined to attend calling it ‘a little more than a rubber stamp’.⁷ The *jirga* critics alleged, lived up to the expectations of benefitting only the president and ended up in making calls similar to the ones reiterated by Karzai in recent times. It called for the removal of Taliban leaders from the UN blacklist so that the hurdles were cleared for face-to-face talks between the Afghan government and insurgents who renounce ties to Al Qaeda.⁸ The *jirga* recommended that the Afghan government form a commission to lead efforts to negotiate with the Taliban.

⁶ For further details of Karzai’s government efforts at talks and negotiation with the Taliban, see Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, ‘Talking to the Taliban: Will it Ensure ‘Peace’ in Afghanistan?’, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.33, no.2, March 2009.

⁷ ‘Afghan president Karzai to open assembly on peace’, *Post Bulletin* (2 June 2010), www.postbulletin.com/newsmanager/templates/localnews_story.asp?z=50&a=455295. Accessed on 10 June 2010.

⁸ The United Nations Security Council on 27 January 2010, on the eve of London Conference, had lifted travel and economics restrictions from five Taliban leaders – Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil, who was a minister of foreign affairs in the Taliban government, Abdul Hakim Monib, another former Taliban official who has since served as Karzai’s governor in Uruzgan province, Fazl Mohammad Faizan, Shams-us-Safa Aminzai and Mohammad Musa Hotak.

Karzai appears determined to build reconciliation with the Taliban by way of removal of all internal hurdles outside and within his own government. His decision to dismiss two very influential members of his administration – Interior Minister Hanif Atmar and National Security Chief Amrullah Saleh on the grounds of security lapse leading to attack on the Peace *Jirga* is being interpreted as a move towards reducing the influence of Northern Alliance in his administration. Northern Alliance groups remain opposed to any forms of peace with the Taliban. Incidentally, both these officials were very close to the US administration and NATO officials in Afghanistan. Reacting to the development, Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said both officials were ‘people we admire and whose service we appreciate’.⁹ Atmar was opposed to reintegration of the Taliban into the police and army. Saleh, Afghan intelligence chief since 2004, was in disagreement with Karzai over release from detained Taliban sympathisers who could not be prosecuted for want of evidence.¹⁰ Moreover, the presence of members of Northern Alliance in key ministerial positions overlooking the reconciliation process was viewed as an impediment to the negotiations with the Taliban given prevailing inter-ethnic ‘trust deficit’.

Series of Parallel Efforts – Lack of ‘Unity of Effort’

A plethora of efforts have taken place on the peace parleys, both in the region as well as outside. In the absence of a unified strategy and red lines, the peace processes have largely resulted in dissipated efforts. Most importantly, these initiatives have fallen short of being able to bring in the Pakistan-based Taliban leadership. In January 2010, a small delegation including four Afghan lawmakers, one of whom was a relative of the slain anti-Taliban warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud, met some Taliban representatives led by the son of former Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Maldives. This informal meet was arranged few days before the London Conference in January 2010, as signalling the international community of the indigenous Afghan effort independent of the Afghan government effort.

A month later in February, Afghan government sources indicated that it has established contacts with Taliban’s second ranking leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. However, Baradar’s arrest in Karachi by Pakistan appeared to have sabotaged the effort. Pakistan rejected the Afghan Government’s appeal to hand over Mullah Baradar to them. Karzai believes that Pakistani assistance would be crucial to get the Taliban hardcore leaders to agree to peace talks. In January 2010, Karzai had met his Pakistani counterpart Asif Ali Zardari for two days in Istanbul to

⁹ ‘Two Karzai aides resign after jirga attack’, *MSN* (6 June 2010), www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37536188/ns/world_news-south_and_central_asia/. Accessed on 10 June 2010.

¹⁰ Shahid R. Siddiqi, *The Peace Jirga and After: Will this Jirga prove a turning point in President Karzai’s efforts to woo the Taliban?* Axis of Logic, (21 June 2010), axisoflogic.com/artman/publish/Article_60412.shtml. Accessed on 22 June 2010.

discuss how to involve Taliban in the peace process. In spite of Pakistani promises, little progress has been achieved in this front.

In March, a delegation of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami group went to Kabul to present a 15-point peace plan to Karzai. Talks, however, ended with Hekmatyar reiterating the demand that foreign troops must leave Afghanistan by mid-2010, elections in six months and a review of the Afghan constitution. Though Hezb-e-Islami's demands are not set in stone, these do run into the realm of non-negotiable. By all means, Hekmatyar remains an isolated leader and a weak link in the Taliban-led insurgency. The recent armed factional strife between his forces and local Taliban groups in Northern Afghanistan has raised doubts about his ability to influence Taliban leadership; and thus acts as a serious mediator between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

In the last week of May 2010, several delegates drawn from the Afghan Parliament, former Taliban members and the Hezb-e-Islami met for several days in Maldives to explore an end to the war in Afghanistan. While the Maldivian government had helped organise the talks in the hope of bringing peace to the region gathering, it was reportedly orchestrated by Homayoun Jarir, a son-in-law of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Jarir has acted as a mediator for the Afghan government and Hekmatyar. Among the parliamentarians present was Arsala Rahmani, a former minister of higher education in the Taliban government who has worked on bringing Taliban members to the government's side. However, the talks never rose beyond its unofficial nomenclature as both the Afghan government as well as the Taliban stayed aloof. While the Afghan government said that it was not participating in the talks, the Taliban issued a statement dismissing as 'baseless' a report that its representatives had participated in the talks. It labelled those who participated representing the 'Taliban' as people who had already surrendered to the Afghan government and are acting on its behalf.¹¹

Splitting the Opposition – Separating the 'Fish' from the Pond

President Karzai's detractors are being challenged by a number of optimists and the believers in the capacity and vision of the Afghan President. For them the *jirga* is a gradual preparation for the scenario of a US withdrawal from the country. President Karzai who doubts the staying power of the Americans in Afghanistan realises the limitations of dealing with the Taliban in the eventuality of US withdrawal. Thus, his plan works towards the probability of inclusion of the Afghan Taliban to deny Pakistan a stake in post US withdrawal negotiated settlement. Towards that objective, Karzai's two-tiered plan of reconciliation and reintegration include an offer of amnesty, cash and job incentives to Taliban foot soldiers, while arranging asylum for top figures

¹¹ Author's discussions with the Maldivian government officials highlighted the efforts of the Maldivian government in bringing peace in the region, Male', 24-27 May 2010. Maldives is also presently witnessing the radicalisation, which is of concern to the local authorities. Also see Carlotta Gall, Afghan Government and Taliban Deny Formal Talks, *New York Times* (22 May 2010).

in a second country and getting their names struck off the UN as well as US blacklists, are practical efforts. On 21 June 2010, 12 Taliban prisoners were freed from US detention in Bagram while two would-be suicide bombers were released from Afghan custody.¹²

The strategy appears to be clear and simple. What cannot be gained through overt peace offers is to be secured through splitting the opposition. One important achievement of the numerous such efforts including the recent peace *jirga* is a split, in some manner, in the older generation of factional leaders. Whereas leaders like Sayyaf, Burhanuddin Rabbani and Sebghatullah Mujaddedi can be said to have been brought to the Karzai side of the dividing line, leaders like Dostum, Mohaqiq and Abdullah are some distance away from being won over.

President Karzai is expected to sign a decree launching a reintegration programme featuring the weapons initiative. The decree would also establish a High Council for Peace to begin a nationwide outreach effort to lure insurgents away from the battlefield. The Council will set up local reintegration committees at the provincial level led by provincial governors. The Afghan government expects between 36,000 and 40,000 insurgents to join the reintegration programme within the next five years.

Disinclination of the Taliban leadership to the offers of peace continues to remain the greatest hurdles in pursuing peace in Afghanistan. Negotiations occur from a position of strength and at the moment, the Taliban perceive itself as winning the war. According to a count, 249 foreign troops have been killed in Afghanistan in the first half of 2010 (as at the first week of June).¹³ The casualty among the US forces since the beginning of the Afghan war has crossed 1,000.¹⁴ The talk of exit by various NATO countries has further strengthened this conviction. Faced with no prospects of defeat, the Taliban spokesperson continues to reiterate the demand of the withdrawal of foreign 'occupation' forces from the country as the primary condition before initiation of any talks. Any change in this stated position is difficult to perceive in near future.

Primacy of Military Operations

The recent troop surge and increase in military operations, notwithstanding, the violence levels have peaked. A UN report¹⁵ indicates that security situation in Afghanistan has changed for the

¹² 'Taliban suspects released after Afghan jirga deal', *Reuters* (21 June 2010), www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE65K11Y20100621. Accessed on 22 June 2010.

¹³ 'Pentagon admits "tough week" as casualty mounts in Afghanistan', *Xinhua* (10 June 2010), http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-06/10/c_13342231.htm Accessed on 12 June 2010.

¹⁴ Chris Lawrence, 'More than 1,000 US troops killed in Afghanistan', *CNN* (8 June 2010), <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/06/08/afghanistan.deaths/>. Accessed on 10 June 2010.

¹⁵ 'UN report on Afghanistan notes surge in attacks, killings', *Washington Post* (19 June 2010), www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/19/AR2010061902715.html. Accessed on 22 June 2010.

worse in recent months. The roadside bomb attacks during the first four months of 2010 have increased by an alarming 94 per cent, compared with the same period in 2009. A 45 per cent increase has occurred in assassinations, with most assassinations occurring in the southern and eastern provinces, where several government officials have been killed in recent months. The report indicated that 'the shift to more complex suicide attacks demonstrates a growing capability of the local terrorist networks'¹⁶ linked to Al Qaeda. The surge in violence has prompted the US lawmakers to question the Obama administration's Af-Pak strategy.

The US strategy clearly hinges on pouring forces into southern Afghanistan before starting a gradual withdrawal in July 2011, subject to 'favourable conditions'.¹⁷ On 20 June 2010, the US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen had stated 'the pace with which we draw down and how many we draw down is going to be conditions-based'.¹⁸ In spite the 'favourable conditions' clause being attached to the July 2011 deadline, pressures for troop pull-out has increased in the US, Canada and Britain, making the probability of troop reduction starting on its due date is much higher.

The foreign troop number in Afghanistan is projected to reach 150,000 by August 2010, almost eleven months before the planned withdrawal is initiated. It is apparent that military approach would remain the primary focus of the international forces in that country to create such favourable condition which allows a gradual reduction in the troop levels. However, the entire exit strategy for foreign forces rests on the assumption that in time, Afghan national security forces would be able to take over from their western counterparts, allowing the NATO to have a face saving pullout. But the fighting capability of the local recruits is still far short of what is expected of them, raising serious concerns of a Taliban return after the foreign troops go home. With these limitations, the effort to weaken the Taliban, howsoever futile it may appear for the moment, by co-opting moderate or reconcilable elements into the folds of the government or society appears to be complimentary and is now being welcomed. In an apparent move to supplement Karzai's initiatives, the US military has said that the Afghan President's order for a review of cases of roughly 15,000 Taliban detainees in Afghan jails would also apply to the US military prisons.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ In a testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee US Commander General David Petraeus said that the July 2011 deadline for beginning a troop withdrawal depends on the assumption that 'conditions' are favorable. Eugene Robinson, 'Obama must keep to his Afghanistan deadline', *Washington Post* (18 June 2010), www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/17/AR2010061704568.html. Accessed on 22 June 2010.

¹⁸ 'US troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan is on track for next Jul', *Times of India* (22 June 2010).

¹⁹ 'Taliban suspects released after Afghan jirga deal', *Reuters* (21 June 2010), <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE65K11Y20100621>. Accessed on 22 June 2010.

Both the US and Karzai administration, however, differ on the Afghan reconciliation approach. Whereas the Americans want to talk to mainstream Taliban only from a position of strength, which they intend attaining by vanquishing the enemy through use of force, Karzai on the other hand, is unsure of the success of the American military victory and hence insists on opening a dialogue with even the unrepentant Taliban to promote reconciliation and end the war. The Peace Jirga scheduled for early May 2010 was deferred to latter date as President Karzai travelled to Washington to gain endorsement for his peace efforts.

Even while it has not given up on its own approach, the protracted and unending war efforts and the waning American public opinion against an overstretched war, the US is seen to swing in support of Karzai's initiative. It was, thus, not surprising that President Obama termed the *jirga* 'an important milestone that America supports'.²⁰ However, at the same time, the US is making final preparations to launch a massive military offensive against the Taliban in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar, the Taliban's spiritual capital. To be launched by combined NATO, the US and Afghan forces, preparations have started since months to target about 1,000 Taliban, who remain embedded within the one million strong civilian population.²¹ Gaining control over the Taliban stronghold in southern Afghanistan remains crucial to the US efforts and hence, there is little option available for the forces other than securing an outright and overwhelming victory. In a battle that is projected to 'take months and will not resemble a typical battle'²², the military victory will have to be accompanied by winning hearts and minds of the civilian population, prodding them to sever their ties with the Taliban and support the Central Government in Kabul. In this, in addition to the international forces, the Afghan forces and administrators will have a crucial role to play.

However, if past operations are any indicators, the performance of the Afghans has fallen short of the American expectations. The objective of filling in the vacuum and initiate political and administrative activism has not been achieved following the overthrow of the Taliban from the Marjah in a battle that started in February 2010. The Afghan government and police were slow to fill in the security and governance vacuum as the Taliban continued to remain in hide-outs surrounding Marjah or in sanctuaries within the city. They not only continued to ambush the international forces but also executed those working with the Americans. The idea of 'government in a box' of former NATO commander General Stanley McChrystal envisioning to 'quickly getting a government running and to win public support away from the Taliban by

²⁰ Stephen Kaufman, 'Obama Offers Support for Afghan Peace Jirga', (12 May 2010), www.america.gov/st/peacesec-english/2010/May/20100512143106esnamfuak0.9200861.html. Accessed on 15 June 2010.

²¹ Chris Lawrence, 'More than 1,000 US troops killed in Afghanistan', *CNN* (8 June 2010), <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/06/08/afghanistan.deaths/>. Accessed on 10 June 2010.

²² Ibid.

providing security, delivering services and offering people jobs on public works projects'²³ never took off. Marjah incidentally had been described as a 'dress rehearsal'²⁴ for the Kandahar battle. Analysts have indicated that the military push needs to be backed by a strong political campaign. The Afghans who currently are in charge of establishing local government have been slow to do so. The lessons from Marjah have important pointers for the forthcoming plans to take on the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar province.

In the prevailing scenario, working with Afghans remains as crucial for the international forces as the proposed sweeping victories against the Taliban. The strategy has to evolve from rueing the contentious fact that the Afghans been unable to act, enabling them to act by securing and holding on to the area for long enough. Success of the military campaign will ultimately depend on well buttresses political efforts. After all, all counter-insurgency campaigns are fought in the political domain, with the military being one important component in the overarching strategy. An irresolute declaration of victory will not motivate the wavering and weak political administration to stay put and take over the charge.

Conclusion

Such is the complexity of Afghanistan that it would be a miracle for peace *jirga* alone to provide solution to the problem. What this peace *jirga* aimed to achieve was an attempt at evolving a negotiating framework for the Afghans and the international community alike.

Even as the US endorses Karzai's peace initiative, it is not difficult to see that an overwhelming element of urgency in dictating such a policy. The real road block to peace building efforts – the absence of consensus both among the international community and Afghans remains. As witnessed in the military efforts, the non-military efforts too are plagued by the absence of 'unity of effort'. No attempt worth its name has been made to correct the basic flaws in counter-insurgency.

To address Afghan's woes obviously lies in a long, arduous and committed effort to build indigenous Afghan institutions, empower the local Afghans to develop a stake in the country's peace, stability and progress. This endeavour, for obvious reasons, needs the support of the international community and the presence of the international forces. However, with the announcement for gradual²⁵ withdrawal of forces starting summer of 2011 and the apparent dip

²³ Paul Wuseman, 'Despite US gains, Afghan city still feels intimidation', *USA Today* (9 June 2010), www.usatoday.com/news/world/afghanistan/2010-06-09-marjah_N.htm?csp=34news. Accessed on 15 June 2010.

²⁴ Patrick J. Buchanan, 'What Price Afghanistan?', 17 June 2010, http://vdare.com/buchanan/100617_afghanistan.htm. Accessed on 18 June 2010.

²⁵ 'No immediate withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan: Obama', *Times of India* (25 June 2010), 'Barack Obama on Afghanistan withdrawal timetable' *BBC*, (24 June 2010),

in international commitment to the long term stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan, prospects for peace in Afghanistan appears miles away.

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http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/us_and_canada/10409698.stm. Accessed on 24 June 2010. Speaking on 24 June 2010 on the proposed pull out of forces from Afghanistan, US President Barack Obama said, 'We didn't say we'd be switching off the lights and closing the door behind us. We said we'd begin a transition phase that would allow the Afghan government to take more and more responsibility'.