

THREATS TO AFGHANISTAN'S STABILITY

By

VBN RAM

INTRODUCTION

If we assume that Afghanistan's multi-dimensional turbulence can be overcome, at best within the next two to three years –the policy makers in the US administration, regional powers, the international community, in general, as also the people and the political dispensation in Afghanistan, will heave a sigh of gleeful relief, even if such an assumption may lack any rationale.

The principal challenges, if left unaddressed, which can wreck Afghanistan are its security concerns, its economy and the role played by Pakistan, besides the role played by Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours. The above factors are also interlinked.

The efforts of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) to push the peace process forward were adversely affected due to the US drone attack which killed Mullah Mansour (the successor to Mulla Omar) Mansour was expendable to Pakistan.

His death does not mean loss of Pakistan's control over the Taliban. Pakistan was crafty enough to get Sirajuddin Haqqani installed as Mansour's military chief, a measure which bolsters its robust grip

over the Taliban. Afghanistan desires to enlist the cooperation of any and all parties which can help reduce turbulence and enhance its security, it is because of the above that it has not even hesitated to enter into an accord with the reprehensible Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

DOMESTIC IRRITANTS

Post the drawdown the security arrangements permitted a small NATO troop presence numbering 13,000 including 9800 Americans besides approximately 26,000 military contractors. These were required for providing air support to Afghan forces and facilitating air strikes.

President Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah are the veritable two sides of a weighing scale - the extra tilt of any one of which can wreck the “government of unity “from its very foundations. Sadly, the many issues of divergence between them do not auger well. Hence power sharing between the above functionaries on the basis of equity – remains undelivered in practice. Afghanistan’s economy which was already quite bad, prior to the withdrawal of the coalition forces has slid into tatters post the withdrawal. Half the GDP was constituted by the services sector before the drawdown and the income from services drastically came down since the services given to the coalition troops and contractors was no longer needed-post the drawdown. Corruption and the lack of transparency had always been and continues to be a drain on the system. The Afghan National Defense and Security force is ill -equipped and underpaid, its effectiveness has been severely dented by the lack of suitable combat essentials including night vision devices and adequate air support. Afghan government control or influence has been decreased to 65.6 percent by the end of May 2016 from 70.5 percent in the previous year. This has bolstered the Taliban and elements inimical to the government.¹

**LEADERS WHO DEvised MEANS
TO BROWBEAT THE TALIBAN**

Around the year 2001, just prior to the US invasion, two Pashtun leaders i.e. Abdul Haq and Hamid Karzai (who was later to become the President) were designing a foolproof strategy to raise revolts against the Taliban by enlisting the support of disgruntled tribes—sadly in this effort Haq was killed by the Taliban. Much to the credit of Karzai he steadfastly stayed his course besides refusing to listen to his well wishers—who cautioned him against risking his life. In fact, he narrowly missed several bomb attacks meant to kill him. Karzai did herald a new anti-Taliban beginning in some zones.²

According to the Afghan Ministry of Interior the areas controlled by the Taliban were identified as Now Zad, Musa Qala, Bagran and Dishu in Helmand- in the south. Nawa district in Ghazni and Khak Afghan district in Zabul province in the south-east, Warduj and Yamgan district in Badakhshan in the north-east and Kohistanat district in Sar-i-Pul in the north.15 years later the Taliban is back in power, more radical than ever.³

There are other areas where the government's control is contested by the Taliban fighters. Kunduz in the north has been going back and forth, time and again from the control of Afghan National Army and the Taliban.

Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have taken advantage of the deteriorating security situation to establish training camps, these include a large facility in the Shorabak district of Kandahar—the US forces got a scent of the above only a year after such camps were set up. The US forces did raid one such camp in Patika province in July 2015. Abu Khalil Al Sudani

one of al Qaeda's seniormost figures is thought to have been killed during the raid.⁴

Afghan fighters have made common cause with several warlords and grassroots trouble makers and hundreds of them from different areas have conducted ambushes at checkpoints. Insecure areas are manifestly so because of mismanagement and ineffectiveness.⁵

TALIBAN'S PIVOTAL ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN'S STABILTY

There is no gainsaying that if the Taliban (which quintessentially is formed by fundamentalist hardcore Pashtun ideologues and their henchmen) adopts a flexible attitude for political stability-normalcy can be brought about sooner than can be imagined. It is this reasoning which compelled the Ashraf Ghani government to plead with Pakistan to put pressure on Taliban cadres and their sympathizers to proactively work for the peace process in Afghanistan- in order to enable Afghan High Peace Council to suggest political concessions including reservations for the Taliban in the legislature, without the Taliban actually having to field candidates for elections.

Quite Simply, the Afghan government is insisting that the Taliban should abide by two conditions:

- a) Cut of all links to al-Qaeda, the Haqqani network and other anti-Afghanistan elements
- b) Commit themselves to abide by the Afghan Constitution

Even if the Taliban were made to agree to the first condition, it will be virtually inconceivable for them to agree to the second.

"In a Dec 2012 Track 2 meeting representatives of the Taliban characterized the 2004 Afghan Constitution as *illegitimate* because it was written under the shadows of US B 52 aircrafts. The need for a Constitution written by Afghan scholars in a free atmosphere and presented to the nation for approval was the first priority in the Taliban

Threats to Afghanistan's Stability

statement-along with demands for access to power in Kabul. The Taliban would likely put changes to the Constitution at the forefront of their agenda in any peace talks.”⁶

Sadly, the likely changes the Taliban would make to the Constitution would gravely imperil the rights of women, children and minorities by promoting Salafi-Wahabi strains of Islam and a more rigorous implementation of the *Sharia*. Since there is not much the Ashraf Ghani government can do as regards the fundamentalist stance which the Taliban takes, the best it can do, is to negotiate with the Taliban-which is exactly what it is doing. Taking the above notion forward the Afghan government had recently had two secret dialogues in Qatar. An important Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Manan Akhund and the Chief of the National Directorate of Security Masoom Stanekzai attended. The Afghan government and the US authorities neither acknowledged nor denied such meetings having taken place. Interestingly, Pakistan did not participate in these talks.

But though Pakistan did not participate in the Doha talks, three Taliban leaders i.e. Maulvi Shahbuddin, Mullah Jan Mohammad and Abdul Salam visited Islamabad and briefed Pakistani officials regarding its agenda and scope. The visit to Islamabad by the above named Taliban leaders has unruffled many feathers in Afghanistan, since it portrays Pakistan's increasing decision making powers, vis a vis the Taliban and the manner it functions in Afghanistan. ⁷

So much for the Pakistani pretense regarding non interference in Afghanistan's domestic affairs. Chances of peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government have, without doubt, got hamstrung because Pakistan presents the biggest roadblock. According to Dawlat Waziri the Spokesman for the Afghan Defense Ministry-the Afghan government is working on “Shafaq Operation” to clear areas under the control of insurgents during the upcoming winter. Though this operation has barely

touched areas like Ghor province, where 33 civilians recently got killed and scores grievously injured during retaliatory attacks against the killing of two Taliban commanders by the latter's sympathizers, it is also believed that this atrocity was committed with help from the Islamic State. The representatives of Ghor in the *Mishrano Jigra* (the Upper House) came hard on the government for neglecting security.

The US is proactively engaged to remove the likely stumbling blocks to the peace process. Under its pressure Pakistan had arrested three Taliban leaders namely Mullah Nanai, Suleman Agha (the erstwhile Taliban governor of Daykond province) and Mullah Sani.

One important reason the Taliban's stubborn stance against the present Afghan government, has slightly softened, is because some of its own fighters are getting killed at the hands of the Afghanistan's security forces. Recently, the Afghan security forces have killed 80 Taliban fighters in Tarinkot the Capital of Uruzgan province.

As an interesting aside, ever since President Ghani took Office he spared no effort to seek Pakistan's help to make Taliban to come to the negotiating table for a durable peace in the land locked country. The Afghan President visited Pakistan several times and had exhaustive talks with Army Chief Gen Kayani and other senior ISI and military functionaries. He was, nevertheless utterly dismayed some time later, when he discovered that instead of helping Afghanistan, Islamabad, was in fact, encouraging terrorism within Afghanistan through the Haqqani network and its co-operators. After a bomb attack on the American University in Kabul- which killed 13 persons, President Ghani, without mincing words told Pakistan's Army Chief Raheel Sharif that the Kabul bomb blast was sourced from Pakistan. Ghani has reiterated the same after every such terror attack.

Threats to Afghanistan's Stability

Why is Pakistan foisting terror attacks in Afghanistan:

Pakistan has been using its so perceived facilities extended to the US in its fight against terror, to arm-twist the latter –to take a pro-Pakistan stand on Kashmir, failing which : a) it will continue foisting mischief in Afghanistan and to make regional insecurity even worse, distance itself from the US and get into a closer embrace of a teamed-up China and Russia.

In the above context the following statement Pakistan made through one of its legislators Senator Mushahid Hussain Syed is extremely significant “ Road to peace in Kabul lies in Kashmir, in the sense that when you talk of peace, you cannot corporatize peace, you can't segregate a section.....OK you can have peace in Kabul and let Kashmir burn. That is not going to happen.”⁹

The above is as much an arm-twist of America as it is of India and in the context of the latest warning Islamabad has received from the US- by which the latter threatens Pakistan that should it fail to destroy terrorist networks –which Washington assertively claims are supported by Pakistan's intelligence agencies-US will not hesitate to do so by itself, if necessary. This radical departure from previous statements from US (which invariably qualify such assertions by statements such as “Pakistan itself is a victim of terrorism and has put up a stiff resistance against terror groups) is a welcome change-in as much as the magnitude of Islamabad's diabolic role in cross-border terror, remains undiluted, despite, foreign diplomats portraying Pakistan as a victim of terror. Interestingly, the US warning to Islamabad was made by Adam Szubin the Acting Under-Secretary of Countering the Financing of Terrorism. It remains to be seen whether the obdurate Pakistan's ISI is jolted into some positive action.

Of course, such an assertion by the US will not prove credible or reliable, unless it backtracks in matters such as its entertaining members of

Pakistan's military and the ISI –many of whom attend funerals of terrorists they describe as martyrs. It will also not be credible, if the US continues to pour humongous sums as aid both military and civil- the civil aid also channels itself into financing terror outfits.

Afghanistan is perceived to be offering strategic depth to the deep state of Pakistan, the latter's misplaced judgment makes it believe that any government in Afghanistan –which adheres to an “independent” domestic and foreign policy i.e. without the covert and overt interference from Pakistan –will not merely run counter to the latter's strategic interests, but will pose an existential threat, more so when numerous areas within Pakistan have become vulnerable to balkanization. For example the Baloch nationalists-who have now been embraced by India (remember Prime-minister Modi's Independence Day declaration). Pakistan also suspects –as is commonly understood by its utterances, time and again, that India is actively promoting anti-Pakistan interests through its diplomatic missions and through other sources, in areas such as Jalalabad in southern Afghanistan.

Even as regards the perpetrators of the recent attack on the Police Academy in Quetta, Pakistan has already identified them as the Indian and Afghan Intelligence agencies, whereas, there is ample evidence that the Sunni terror group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and elements of the Islamic State were behind the attack. It is well known that Daesh sleeper cells are deeply entrenched in Pakistan.

John Nicholson the US and NATO commander in Afghanistan has taken a more erudite stance by appreciating India's military assistance to Afghanistan manifested through gestures, such as the gifting of the four Mi -25 helicopters. The Commander has forthrightly admitted –during his second visit to India in Aug 2016 that the LeT (Lashkar e Taiyyaba), JeM (Jaish e Mohammad) and the Haqqani network are not only a threat to Afghanistan, but to the region as a whole.¹⁰

Threats to Afghanistan's Stability

The internal dynamics in Pakistan, which is a veritable breeding ground for hard core fundamentalists—many of whom erroneously believe that Pakistan's very existence depends upon an Afghanistan—which unless it crafts its every policy on the dictates of the GHQ in Rawalpindi, will pose it a strategic threat.

It is the above insecurity which ostensibly worries Pakistan- and made it promote the Taliban government in Afghanistan during 1996 to 2001- in the aftermath of the unceremonial and inglorious withdrawal of the Soviet forces and events in its aftermath.

THE IMPACT OF ZARB E AZB

In attacks targeted at terrorists vide the *Zarb e Azb* operation thousands of Pashtuns have been slain. This pogrom on the one hand, has outraged Pashtuns on either side of the Durand Line and on the other incensed Pakistan due to a mass exodus of victims into in area, which Pashtuns still treat as their post-British legacy—but continues to be in Pakistan. A Pashtun leader Mahood Khan Achakzai has brazenly proclaimed he would not allow anyone to harass refugees in their “own land “ He added Khyber Pakhtunwa province belongs to Afghans and they can live there without fear. If Afghans are harassed in other parts of Pakistan they should come to Pakhtunwa province-where no one can ask them for refugee cards because the area belongs to Pashtuns. Achakzai heads the Millie Awami Party. In the meanwhile, Pakistan has sealed the Torkham Crossng-through which multitudes of refugees used to enter Pakistan.¹¹

EFFORTS IN THE DIRECTION OF WOOING THE TALIBAN ACCORD SIGNED WITH GULBUDDIN HEKMATYAR

The Afghan government has recently concluded a peace agreement with one of its most notorious warlords –also called the “Butcher of Kabul” whom the United States diligently nurtured as a fierce bulwark against

the Soviet Union-during the eighties. The principle aim of the deal is to checkmate the level of violence and to encourage the Taliban and other groups undermining Afghanistan's stability –through violence-to eschew violence , come to the negotiating table and enter into similar accords. Hekmatyar, designated by the US- a global terrorist in 2003, was not present on the occasion of the signing of the ceremony, his negotiator signed for him and the *Hezb i Islami* (HiZ)- the group he heads.

As a part of the above deal, President Ghani has pledged to lobby the US and the UN for lifting of international sanctions against him because of his suspected ties to the al Qaeda and the Taliban. Once sanctions are lifted Hekmatyar will return from Pakistan-where he has been in exile for 20 years. Under the terms of this accord Hekmatyar will receive immunity for his past crimes and will be entitled to all political privileges and rights. Many analysts have cast doubts about the accord, their argument is-the much hated Hekmatyar will prove to be a major stumbling block to peace efforts, because his political adversaries will put a spanner in the sound functioning of the government, when it is already handicapped due to the discords in the Unity government.

ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN

A major irritant for Afghanistan's stability-or, shall we say, the lack of peace and tranquility within Afghanistan, has been the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) from within which, a radical faction which operates in conjunction with the Islamic State, has emerged. This faction has affirmed its unflinching loyalty to the al Qaeda and the Taliban. The numerous jihadi and fidayeen attacks within Afghanistan, many parts of Central Asia and some areas within Pakistan are caused by this faction.

Recently, the Afghan Vice-President Gen Abdul Rashid Dostum was leading a counterterrorism operation against terrorists in the northern

Threats to Afghanistan's Stability

Faryab province when his convoy was ambushed. Dostum was injured, but he has substantially recovered. The terrorists consisted of fighters from the Islamic State, besides the Taliban. Dostum said the Islamic State is planning to deploy 7000 fighters from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Syria, Lebanon and Chechnya.

AFGHANISTAN'S REVENUE FROM OPIUM, FINANCES TERROR

Afghanistan accounts for more than 90 percent of the world's illicit opium production and 15 percent of the opiates produced in Afghanistan are smuggled through Central Asia mainly Tajikistan enroute to Russia, eastern Europe and China. Tajikistan is not merely a transit zone for Afghanistan's opium, but is a major consumer.

END NOTES

1. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SIGAR REPORT July 29, 2016
2. Afghanistan –A Cultural and Political History: Thomas Barfield
(page 288)
Princeton University Press
3. Afghanistan Times Oct 7, 2016
4. 300 al Qaeda Operatives supposed to exist in Afghanistan
Bill Roggio-Senior Fellow at The Foundation for The Defense of
Democracies and Editor of the Long War Journal
5. Dr. Asef Baktash: Head of the Afghan Rescue & National Movement
6. Special Report of the United States Institute of Peace
7. Afghanistan Times: Editorial Oct 22, 2016
8. Afghanistan Times: Oct 23, 2016
& The Times of India: Oct 27, 2016
9. Afghanistan Times: Oct 8, 2016

VBN Ram

10. The Indian Express: Aug 10, 2016
11. Afghanistan Times: June 28, 2016
12. Afghanistan Sun: Oct 18, 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

V. B. N. Ram, a postgraduate in business management from XLRI Jamshedpur, is widely travelled and immensely interested in and concerned about contemporary geostrategic developments. He has been a China watcher and has researched extensively on Asia-Pacific affairs. He has also written on developments in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Maldives. His articles have been widely published. He has more than three decades of experience in the private and public sectors, including some in responsible positions.