

Looking At Afghanistan Beyond 2014

Militant violence has increased in Afghanistan since the start of the Taliban's annual spring offensive in early May 2012. For the record, the month of June alone witnessed the highest number of attacks in nearly two years' time, with over a 100 assaults a day across the country.

On 7 August, 2012, seven Afghan civilians died and eight others sustained injuries when a roadside bomb attack targeted a bus in Balasan-e Khaldari in Paghman, near Kabul. Targeting passenger vehicles is a rather rare event in and around Kabul, although it is a more common occurrence in other parts of Afghanistan.

On 6 August, a mine planted on a donkey detonated in Charsada, a district in the central province of Ghor, killing its police chief and three others. Ghor hardly witnesses militant violence. These two events send a grim reminder - that no part of Afghanistan is immune to militant violence, manifesting itself through suicide attacks, roadside bombings, surprise raids, and improvised explosive devices and the like.



The training of Afghan National Police personnel is vital in ensuring future stability in Afghanistan. © ISAF Media

Resilient Militant Force and Their Interim Strategy

The intensification of militant violence comes at a time when the Third Phase of the Security Transition is underway in a number of Afghan provinces. When this transition phase is completed – a task that should take the next couple of months - Afghan forces will have taken control of security duties from the NATO troops, thereby taking responsibility for territory containing 75 percent of Afghanistan's population in the process. The transition of security responsibilities from NATO forces to the Afghan Army and Police forces began in July 2011 and is due to end in 2014. The development also comes at a time when the Western forces in Afghanistan are facing a crisis of confidence, globally and also in their home countries.

There have been certain key recent developments that have eroded the credibility of the Western forces in Afghanistan. Glaring cases include US soldiers burning copies of the Koran, footage apparently showing US marines urinating on bodies of dead Taliban fighters, accidental killings of civilians during US attacks on the Taliban, and several green-on-blue attacks, in which Afghan security force members attack the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) personnel.

As per the UN report, there has been a steady increase in civilian casualties in the past five years due to the ongoing war against terror. In 2011, the figure was a

record 3,021, with the majority of the deaths blamed on militants, especially the Taliban. It is widely believed that the Taliban is likely to intensify its operations against prominent targets in the interim period (at least until 2014) in an attempt to demonstrate the weakness of the Afghan Government, to erode extant public support for Karzai and to combat the security objectives of ISAF.

However, the group is not expected to wage major military confrontations with ISAF as these involve huge costs, besides loss of manpower. Militant offensive activities also come at a time when an apparently corrupt and incompetent Afghan political apparatus is facing a dilemma over the strategy needed to bring about peace, stability and growth. Political leaders probably need to understand that seeking long-term US support whilst engaging in peace overtures with the Taliban could be problematic.

Taliban Support Base and Containment Strategy

Any attempt towards the restoration of a peaceful order in the region post-2014 firstly depends upon the clever management of Taliban activities in the region. Currently a dominant section of the Pashtun population in Afghanistan, a substantial majority in Pakistan's tribal areas and neighbours like Iran support the activities of the Taliban, either directly or indirectly. This is primarily because of their anti-American stance, as opposed to being motivated by a radical ideological inclination. Besides, there are also opportunist supporters like Al-Qaeda, sectarian organizations and warlords, in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as alleged sections within the military establishment in Pakistan and political

establishment in Afghanistan who have been trying to use the Taliban to further their own interests.

These groups not only strengthen the Taliban but also strive towards their legitimization within the international community by engaging in dialogue with global scholars, who do not consider all Taliban as dangerous. Their other *modus operandi* includes indulging in media manoeuvring by participating in dialogue and contributing articles. However, there is a small majority that is comprised of Uzbeks, Mohajirs, certain sections among Pashtuns, especially the elders, and sections of the political elite in the region from the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, and the ruling Pakistan Peoples' Party in Pakistan. This majority publicly oppose the Taliban. There are also large segments that oppose Taliban activities but it appears that they lack the courage to come out in the open.

The international community needs to push for a UN Security Council resolution that will formally authorise the Afghan Government to negotiate with the Taliban. It is sensible to seek a resolution that would allow the NATO and Afghan forces to provide adequate security to the fighters and their families who would like to surrender, to enlist them through international agencies like the UN High Commission for Refugees or the International Committee of the Red Cross for developmental and capability enhancement initiatives with the support of the Afghan Government and to remove the names of Taliban leaders from the list of designated terrorists, as well as to release the remaining prisoners held at Guantánamo and the like. Diplomatic efforts must be intensified in order to

encourage Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to help the Taliban set up a legal political party pursuing legitimate aims through legitimate means, as other Afghan militants, such as former members of Hizb-i-Islami party, have done. The Taliban leadership should be provided with a neutral venue, where it can hold talks with the Afghan Government and NATO.

Developmental Alternatives

It is essential that certain economic initiatives are undertaken in order to gradually push the country towards prosperity. The Silk Road Initiatives, a plan named after the ancient trade route and designed to bolster connections across South and Central Asia and subsequently to Europe, can be encouraged. Other initiatives like the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation – Asian Development Bank project of transport corridors connecting the five Central Asian states, as well as Afghanistan, Mongolia and Azerbaijan needs to be encouraged.

As a part of the SILK-Afghanistan project, NATO has provided satellite-channel based affordable, high-speed access to the Internet and IT infrastructure to Afghan universities and other governmental institutions since 2006.

Afghanistan needs to be given pre-eminence in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). SAARC regional centres could also be set up in Afghanistan as they have been in other member countries. In order to attract tourists, the Government of Afghanistan must speed up infrastructural development

and promotional activities at the historical site of the Bamiyan devastated by the Taliban in 2001 and promote sustainable eco-tourism in other spots like the remote and peaceful northeastern Wakhan Corridor.



Projects such as this road construction effort are crucial for Afghan economic development. © United Nations Photo

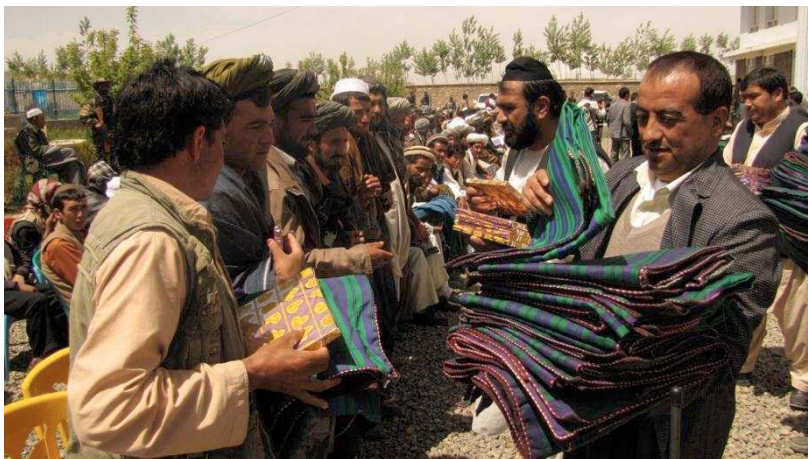
New Zealand recently granted USD 1.2 million for the Bamiyan province to launch an eco-tourism development. With the improvements in infrastructure, the Afghan Government needs to think of opening avenues for starting direct flights to these areas from foreign countries in order to attract more tourists. All these developments will ensure the active involvement of the regional and international communities as stakeholders in the process of development and not as powerbrokers.

Looking Forward

The Government of Afghanistan needs to sincerely focus on the reintegration and rehabilitation of fighters belonging to various armed groups including the Taliban. The US must put its weight behind the strategy to bring the Taliban into some sort of a power-sharing agreement with the Afghan Government. This approach currently appears to be prudent and

unavoidable. The political engagement strategy may prompt factional differences within the Taliban organization over time. Due their strategic importance, priority must be given to forces that have been vocal against the Taliban, with regard to issues of power-sharing, policy formulation and dialogue with anti-government forces.

Reconciliation can truly be achieved if negotiated from a position of strength; otherwise, militants will buy time to improve their capability using the pretext of negotiations. Additionally, militants will feel the necessity to negotiate only when they realize that the cost involved in waging a war is greater than that of a negotiated agreement. A phased international troop withdrawal and subsequent transition to training and advisory roles for a long-period, together with continuous developmental support will create such environment.



Projects such as the reintegration of Taliban members in the province of Ghor could help to stabilise Afghanistan following the end of ISAF operations. © ISAF Media

It needs to be remembered that foreign aid constitutes up to 97 per cent of the country's gross domestic product and if donors withdraw funding quickly, Afghanistan, which is one of the world's 10 poorest countries, would certainly be on the brink of economic

breakdown. It has received nearly USD 60 billion in civilian aid since 2002.

Some sort of a pragmatic regional solution needs to be evolved. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal who are among the five largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations and being Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, should take genuine interest in contributing to peace and development. The region also has an equally big stake in Afghanistan's stability. Following the American withdrawal, a South Asian peacekeeping force could also be formed with due approval from the UN by taking into confidence some of its persistent opponents.

In order to usher in a mature political system, the need of the hour is to revamp the rule of law in consonance with the Afghan culture and tradition, reform the anti-corruption legislation to

conform to the UN Convention Against Corruption, and efficiently counter narcotics trade. Besides, attempts must be made to encourage civic societies championing the cause of ethnic or sectarian unification, massive investment in its human capital for long-term return and a national dialogue on a revised Constitution for a decentralized political

system replacing a personality-centred Presidential system.

Economic development can be accelerated in a secure environment under politically sound leadership. None of the political parties today have

a pan-Afghan character and the country is yet to have a national leader in the true sense. Thus, the country is far from attaining the stage of political legitimacy currently needed. Dreaming of a sudden transformation to capitalism through foreign investments is mere wishful thinking. Attempts must be made to strengthen the institutional capacity to handle future foreign investments. Both public and private sector investments can be encouraged in areas such as agriculture, mining, energy, capacity building and infrastructure.

At this stage, any foreign investment in lucrative sectors like mining and hydrocarbons will be considered by locals as an invasion and would be a fodder for militants to stimulate anti-government sentiments. Significantly, most of these mineral deposits are concentrated in remote areas dominated by ethnic communities who are mostly anti-Western. Now, private players may not be keen to invest in traditional sectors as seemingly this would bring fewer returns.

As far as investors are concerned, some of them, especially Western governments may not be keen to continue supplying the amount of aid that they have previously been providing, to successive corrupt governments of Afghanistan post-2014, given their own domestic economic climate. Investments can be brought into the country at an appropriate time when the security environment and political conditions are somewhat under control.

It is an obligation of regional and global powers to work collectively for the betterment of Afghanistan as the country's current situation is to a considerable extent the result of

regional and global power rivalries. Nonetheless, the proactive engagement of the regional and international communities must continue to empower the Afghanistan Government in order to check the vilification of its past achievements.

By: Maitreya Buddha Samantaray