Post-2014 Afghanistan: prospects for Taliban's rise to power

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As the drawdown of the international security assistance forces approaches its conclusion, many questions remain unanswered. For instance, whether sheer opportunism will be ground enough to bring the Afghan Taliban to power again? Will the withdrawal of the NATO forces from Afghanistan scheduled for 2014 create a void? Will the foreign forces leave a power vacuum that would constitute a real, credible and sufficient reason for the Taliban to regain their former position? Is the incumbent Afghan government sufficiently prepared to govern the country on its own? What threat will the Taliban pose to the government, and can they stage a comeback by retaking Kabul?

Many experts and researchers foresee bleak prospects for the sustainability of Afghanistan's government. A 2012 report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) highlighted the government's weak organization and management. In the same year, *The New York Times* editorially painted a grim picture of the Afghan security forces. Inductive reasoning on the basis of catchy headlines makes pessimism look like a rational analysis. It is indeed relatively easy to construct doomsday scenarios by pointing at the Karzai government's corruption, ineptitude and nepotism.

Some argue that in the absence of the countervailing force, the Taliban would make a successful comeback to power. They are of the opinion that the coalition partners' unwillingness to invest in the socio-economic development of Afghanistan would help the Taliban. Such factors were present in the past and did support the Taliban insurgency.

This paper will discuss factors that will hinder Taliban's takeover of Kabul. Any explanatory model that sacrifices multi-variant input for prime-time oversimplification will do grievous harm to the fact that Afghanistan is a highly polarized, complex, and heterogeneous society that has multiple ethnicities, races and sects. This makes any analysis infinitely more challenging. It is probably also the reason that no government, including that of the Taliban, has ever been able to consolidate its grip over all parts of the

country, either by attempting to rule it through a centralized government, or by administering it in a decentralized manner.

This paper attempts to show that capturing Kabul will not be smooth sailing for the Taliban. Although things may not be very rosy, they are also not quite as bad as they became in April 1992 when the mujahideen took over Afghanistan. The following reasons explain why it will be unlikely for the Taliban to come to power again.

1. Military strategies: the Taliban's reliance on unconventional warfare

The Taliban rely on hit-and-run tactics to fight conventional forces, or in a more formal language: they excel in asymmetric warfare. It would be unwise for them to take on a well-trained and well-equipped conventional force. Moreover, they are ill-prepared to hold territories for any length of time.

Two phases of the Afghan civil war can be distinguished in the emergence of the Taliban militia. The first phase started in 1989 when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, and ended in 1992 with the toppling of the pro-Soviet Afghan government of President Najibullah. During the Jalalabad offensive (March-April 1989), mujahideen factions were together as a single force with a common goal and they were largely a conventional force instead of the hitherto haphazard gathering of parties that fought a 10-year asymmetric war against the Soviets (Stenersen, 2012: 25). But the mujahideen forces that were trained and equipped to wage asymmetric warfare could not bear the brunt of a pitched battle, and lost (Yousaf & Adkin, 2003: 215-219).

It took the mujahideen forces three more years to enter Kabul triumphantly and they only succeeded because Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, decided to stop supporting the Afghan communist government. The second phase of the Afghan civil war (1992-96) saw the rise of the Taliban and their seizure of Kabul in 1996. The endemic power struggle among mujahideen groups during this period provided a propitious environment for the Taliban to capture Kabul.

The author believes that the post-2014 situation will not resemble the one that existed either in 1989 or in 1992. First, the mujahideen groups—commonly

referred to as the Peshawar Seven (Ruttig, 2006: 10) that operated in the 1980s under the umbrella organization known as the Islamic Unity of Afghanistan—were better armed, trained, and equipped than the present-day ragtag Afghan Taliban groups, scattered around Afghanistan. The mujahideen groups had a base in Peshawar to prepare their operations, and though not unified, they had at least a single umbrella organization. The Taliban insurgents are barely under effective unified command. Their supreme commander Mullah Omar is not in direct contact with decentralized and autonomous Taliban field commanders and the only way of obeying his orders is through a tribal oath-taking system in his name. The Taliban command structure is much weaker than that of the Afghan security forces. The same is the case with the Taliban *shuras* or consultative councils that are believed to be based in the Pakistan-Afghan border region, and are only occasionally in formal contact with each other (Afsar et al., 2008).

Secondly, the Taliban can be regarded as second generation mujahideen (Heineman, 2012). Only a few Taliban leaders are children of the First Afghan War (1979-89) during which the current top figures such as Mullah Omar and his associates had been lower level mujahideen commanders who fought the Soviets. The mujahideen had received their combat skills training from Pakistan's Special Services Group who had been trained at the US Special Forces academy at Fort Bragg, North Carolina (Coll, 2004). They had learned to wage asymmetric warfare against the Soviet troops but with little overall success, and failed to damage the formidable Soviet war machine, even with Stinger missiles although it provided them with some strategic edge.

Thirdly, the Taliban have not come up with an alternative governance model, but merely taken advantage of corrupt practices and weaknesses of the incumbent Afghan regime. Their strength stemmed from dissatisfaction rather than an alternative for the population. Fourthly, the Taliban are not equipped to govern a territory. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that with the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 there are no longer Al Qaeda-run camps in Afghanistan. Some training facilities are available in the semi-autonomous tribal areas of Pakistan, being run by the Haqqani network, but the quality of the training cannot be compared to that of mujahideen in the 1980s.

2.   The number of Taliban militants and command structure

The strength of the Afghan Taliban insurgents is around 40,000, including 10,000 hardcore fighters, whereas the rest can be described as part-time or reconcilable (Papa & Feldman, 2010). The number of mujahideen fighting in the Soviet-Afghan war was estimated at 45,000 by 1983 and inflated to 180,000 by 1986 (Oliker, 2011: 76).

The number of militants has to be seen as an insurgent/population ratio in a given area. During the 11-year-long Vietnam conflict (1964-75) for instance, the allies faced a formidable foe in the Viet Cong, which comprised roughly 500,000 insurgents (GlobalSecurity.org). This means about 1 out of 350 Vietnamese was involved in the armed struggle with sanctuaries in Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam. Moreover, they benefitted from a perennial supply of arms and logistics from China. The Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan do not enjoy such support. They are not a monolithic entity. Unlike the Viet Cong or Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), they lack a formal command structure. Apart from a loose command structure, commanders are locals, and the groups can be more appropriately described as Taliban-inspired rather than as part of the movement per se. By and large, local people join the insurgency with only one idea in mind: to drive out the foreign forces from Afghanistan as this has always been the norm in the Afghan culture.

As for the "Taliban councils", they have rudimentary organizational structures, and lack the discipline to contain violence within their ranks. The uncoordinated outbursts of sporadic violence claim many victims, because of which more Afghan civilians have been killed by local Taliban insurgents than by foreign and Afghan security forces combined.

3.   Absence of the element of surprise

The Taliban militia emerged in 1994 as an indigenous phenomenon (Heineman, 2012). Only later the movement accepted logistical support and manpower from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Within no time the movement gained momentum because it could provide relative stability and order amid the chaotic upheaval created by the warlords of mujahideen factions (Rashid, 2000:1).The Taliban garnered the support of the Afghan people who were

tired of the ceaseless factional fighting. Helped by popular support and logistic supplies, the Taliban began their conquest of Pashtun-dominated areas in southern and south-eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban's march to victory over the mujahideen was swift, mainly because of their popularity and unexpected logistic support. No mujahideen leader had anticipated the emergence of a new militia that would challenge them, and certainly not with the support of neighboring Pakistan. The post-2014 scenario does not offer a stage for such surprises. Popular clamor will not call out for a stabilizing factor because the security apparatus that the NATO will leave behind, albeit imperfect, will prevent the chaos that existed when Taliban rose to power. The Taliban march to Kabul in 1996 did not face any opposition worth the name. In the past, no militia, either former mujahideen groups or paramilitaries led by former Afghan Army generals, gave any importance to the lightly armed Taliban. Today, however, the situation is being pretty much analyzed by both the incumbent Afghan government and the coalition forces.

4.   Rifts among the Taliban ranks and loss of leaders

According to Thomas Ruttig, co-director and senior analyst of the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), the current insurgency in Afghanistan can be divided into six segments: the Islamic Movement of the Taliban; the networks of the Haqqani and Mansur families in the southeast; the Tora Bora Jihad Front led by Anwar-ul-Haq Mujahed in eastern region; HIG (Hizb-e-Islami, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar faction); Salafi groups in Kunar and Nuristan provinces (eastern region); and inter-related local former mujahideen, and criminal groups, adopting Taliban-like language and behavior (Ruttig, 2009: 10).

Considering the Taliban as a movement, it is composed of fragmented units, scattered across the Pashtun belt, i.e. the eastern and south-eastern Afghan provinces, without any formal command structure. Moreover, the units are very diverse and divided, which leads occasional fierce gun-battles between different Taliban groups and Hizb-e-Islami (Hekmatyar) in different parts of Afghanistan (Rogio, 2010).

Seth Jones, associate director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the Rand Corporation, concluded in his study of 36 former Taliban fighters under the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR)

program that three factors contributed to its success: a perception among the Taliban fighters that the government forces are winning at national and local levels; coercion in the implementation of the program; and recognition of local grievances (Jones, 2011: 1-3). One report mentioned that some 5,000 Taliban fighters joined and were rehabilitated under the DDR program (Peter, 2012). Before his assassination in 2011, Burhanuddin Rabbani, president of the Afghan High Peace Council, was able to develop contacts with reconcilable Taliban groups and forge ties with the former Afghan Taliban leadership. Among those who became part of the peace process were Arsala Rehmani, Habibullah Fawzi, Sayeedur Rehman Haqqani and Faqir Mohammad (Jones, 2011). Some of those leaders became members of both upper and lowers houses of the Afghan parliament.[1]

Apart from defections, political engagement, laying down of weapons, and joining the High Peace Council, many high-profile and experienced Taliban leaders were either killed or captured during the fighting (Jones, 2011). The lack of capable leadership will have a serious impact on post-2014 perspectives.

5.   The US post-withdrawal strategy

Soviets' counter-insurgency strategies were ruthless. Thousands of Afghan civilians lost their lives as a result of indiscriminate Soviet bombings. In fact, the Soviets had caused their own defeat by making the Afghans rise against them and the Afghan communist regime. During the 10-year Soviet occupation, the strategy was to drive out a population that was deemed to harbor anti-government sentiment. The Soviet strategy was doomed from day one and so was the communist regime that did not by any means try to win the hearts and minds of the population (Oliker, 2011: 74).The CIA-ISI-GID alliance took full advantage of that situation that was entirely of the Soviets' making and recruited thousands of insurgents from the refugee camps.

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[1]   Some high level defections include leaders such as Mullah Turabi, Taliban Minister of Justice), Mullah Qalamuddin,Taliban chief of religious police and now a member of parlement, Abdul Wakil Mutawakil, Taliban forgien minister, Mullah Abdul Salam 'Rocketi', commander of eastern Afghanistan), Mullah Khaksar Akhund, Taliban chief of intelligence, and Abdul Salam Zaeef, Taliban ambassador to Pakistan.

During the last 11 years, however, no such deliberate killing spree has been reported. There have certainly been incidents where hundreds of Afghan civilians lost their lives in bombings but there was no mass exodus of refugees to neighboring countries.

The objective of the US counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy has not been to exasperate the Afghan population. First, the Americans' reason to invade Afghanistan was different from that of the Soviets. The Soviets were motivated by geopolitical considerations. The US sought to destroy Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime. Al Qaeda had claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks in the US and the Taliban regime was harboring it. Secondly, the raison d`être of the prolonged presence of NATO forces in Afghanistan was to keep it out of Al Qaeda's tentacles (White House, 2011). From the beginning, the US and the coalition partners kept a light footprint for many years. The US troop level started from 10,000 in 2002 and gradually rose to 68,000 by 2009 (*The New York Times*, 2009). It was only after the resurgence of the Taliban that the surge initiative raised the troop levels close to 100,000 in 2012 (Nordland, 2012). Coalition partners also contributed another 50,000 troops. The US COIN strategy was based on 'shape, clear, hold, build, and transfer' (Cordesman, 2009: 40-44). By August 2012, the US and coalition partners had transferred 75% of the Afghan territory to the newly developed Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The withdrawal timetable demands foreign forces to stop being operational by the end of 2013 and withdraw all forces by the end of 2014 (Lisbon Summit Declaration, 2010). During the Chicago Summit, pledges were made by the US and its allies to aid the Afghan government with $4.1 billion every year for the next 10 years (2014-24) in order to keep it operational (Chicago Summit Declaration, 2012). The decision was crucial and it clearly showed that the policymakers were well aware of the mistakes that the Soviets had made (Ahmad, 2012).

Furthermore, the Soviets and their allied Afghan military losses were huge in comparison with those of the US and its allies. During the nine-year conflict, the Soviets lost 13,310 troops whereas the US and allies lost 3,000 troops in 11years (Taubman, 1988).

The situation that the US will leave behind is therefore much less susceptible to be exploited by Taliban propaganda against the Afghan government, and is unlikely to find a population that is itching for revenge.

6.   The Pashtun factor

The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan got most of its support from the Pashtun belt. As Ruttig (2009) has put it: "Most of the Taliban are indeed Pashtun. This reflects patterns of ethnicization that emerged during the civil wars between the late 1970s and 2001. As a result, it is justified to call the Taliban a (predominantly) Pashtun movement. But they are not 'the movement of the Pashtuns' representing as they do only a minority of Afghanistan's largest ethnic group."

The Taliban rule benefited the Pashtuns, but it created a huge trust-deficit among other ethnic groups. During the current insurgency the Taliban have once again been able to get reasonable support from the Pashtun community. Other ethnicities are aware of this relationship and are quite concerned about the possible repercussions for them after 2014. They have already started to seek support from Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to ensure their future and survival.[2]

Another question is related to the reliability of the Taliban support base emanating from the Pashtun community, and whether the Islamist insurgency serves the Pashtun cause.

Even though the supportive Pashtun community represents a large portion of the Afghan population, many among the Pashtuns support stability in Afghanistan and reject the Taliban version of Islam. The number of Pashtuns on the payroll of the Afghan security forces and of other civilian institutions is considered to be in proportion with Pashtun demographic strength. Simply put, the Taliban seem to ignite Pashtun nationalist feelings, and a significant proportion appears to sympathize with their cause, but when the Taliban try to impose their harsh version of Islam, the support base is not substantial.

Michael Semple, a research fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard Kennedy School, describes Pashtun-dominated areas as the

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[2]   Iran is sympathetic to ethnic Hazara community (9%) because Hazaras are adherents of Shia Islam, Uzbekistan naturally supports Uzbek ethnic group (9%) in Afghanistan and Tajiks (27%) could bank on Tajikistan, though it is too poor to render any support.

primary recruitment centers for Taliban insurgents. Bushra Gohar, a staunch opponent of Taliban and leader of Pashtun-dominated Pakistani political party Awami National Party, says, "Not all Pashtuns are Taliban...We are Pashtuns too. Taliban is a mindset. You have Punjabi Taliban too" (Chishti, 2012).

The fact of the matter is that Taliban capitalized on serious Pashtun grievances for which the US was held responsible in the garb of ethno-nationalism. Examples of such instances are the harsh treatment of Pashtun Taliban prisoners at the hands of Tajik/Uzbek-dominated Northern Alliance during Operation Enduring Freedom, the under-representation of Pashtuns in government institutions under the Karzai administration, illegal seizures of Pashtun lands in northern Afghan provinces by other ethnic groups, removal of Taliban era Pashtun officials from posts in the new set-up, and a lack of fair trial for Taliban combatants by the incumbent government (ICG, 2013: ii-iii). Addressing the Pashtun grievances is essential to reverse the Taliban momentum.

7.   Geopolitical environment

Afghanistan's geopolitical environment is not conducive to the rise of the Taliban to power.

Afghanistan lies in a neighborhood that puts a high existential pressure on the government of each state. External actors have been on their guard over the future political set-up of Afghanistan.

Central Asian states are concerned about the growing Islamist militancy within their borders. Iran is watchful because it cannot tolerate an anti-Shiite regime back in Afghanistan.

The Russians have their own fears about the post-2014 scenario because the reinstatement of an Islamist government would likely encourage power aspirations of Muslim insurgents in the Muslim-majority Russian states of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. For Russian defense analysts, a Taliban takeover would be similar to reopening a barely closed Chechen chapter (Rotman, 2011). Thousands of Chechen Islamists received training in Al Qaeda-run training camps in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. But

India may be the most concerned. Competing with Pakistan's $300 million (PILDAT, 2012:15), Indian investment in Afghan development projects had reached $1.2 billion by 2009 (Bajoria, 2009). India thinks that the reemergence of the Taliban would turn Afghanistan into a safe haven for anti-India militants.

A cash-starved and militancy-hit Pakistan is also in no position to pursue any future policy objectives in Afghanistan, which brought the Taliban to power. The Taliban's military victory will have serious implications for Pakistan's own security and militant landscape.

The Chinese have invested heavily in the Aynak copper mines south of Kabul and in the exploration of oilfields located in northern oil-rich provinces Sar-e-Pul and Faryab, which are estimated to hold around 87 million barrels (Simpson, 2011). In other sectors of the Afghan economy the level of Chinese investment would increase after 2014.A stable and peaceful Afghanistan is absolutely essential for the completion of such economic projects. In a nutshell, Afghanistan's neighbors would not be willing to let Taliban come to power again.

8.   The emerging Afghan security apparatus

One notable achievement of the rebuilding process in Afghanistan has been the raising of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF): the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). Both institutions have been suffering from setbacks such as desertions, absence without authorized leave, low-quality training, high illiteracy rate, corruption, highhandedness, green-on-blue attacks, and occasional defections (*The Telegraph*, 2012). Despite all this, the ANSF appear capable of withstanding the conventional Taliban assaults.

The bigger picture seems to give cause for optimism. With a 200,000-strong ANA and 150,000 ANP the Afghan forces took control of 75% of the Afghan areas and are able to conduct independent operations against Taliban insurgents (Blenkin, 2012).

The impact of this buildup is felt in Taliban ranks. It is developing infiltration strategies to launch the so-called green-on-blue attacks that escalated in 2012.

The ANP's highhandedness and corruption are important issues that Taliban successfully capitalized on (Brady, 2012). The ANA has fared much better in this regard (Lyle, 2012).

Another key achievement is the National Directorate of Security (NDS), the Afghan premier intelligence agency that has been quite successful in preventing some Taliban attacks. Established in 2002, the NDS has developed into a full-fledged organization with 15,000-30,000 active duty personnel. Many of the military operations and night raids are conducted on the basis of intelligence provided by the NDS. The NDS network has widened during the last 10 years. It has thwarted some insurgent attacks, proving its effectiveness (Zaheer, 2012).

Conclusion

Although the Afghan Taliban remain a formidable guerilla force, Kabul is unlikely to fall to them after the withdrawal of foreign forces.

Any scenario that comes to a contrary conclusion includes a concomitant renewed Al Qaeda threat. Al Qaeda relied heavily on the Taliban and this would not be different now, if Afghanistan enters a renewed civil war.

During the past 11 years Al Qaeda has been able to launch international terrorist attacks through its affiliates. However, it could not pull off any spectacular attacks in Afghanistan. The destruction of its bases and a lack of safe havens for planning and training terrorists were the main cause of its diminished power. The biggest challenge for the US and its allies will be to maintain their vigilance. Afghanistan must remain on the West's radar screen for the foreseeable future. This is the only way to prevent terrorism from rearing its ugly head in that hapless country.

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