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Issue Brief

Taliban's Spring Offensive and their Interest in Peacemaking: How to Reconcile the Two

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Despite major losses and setbacks to the Afghan Taliban, including defections and reconciliation of certain members of the group, (including former senior commanders and officials) with the government under the amnesty program initiated in 2001. The strength, resolve and capability of the group have not been adversely affected. Initially restricted to their traditional heartland in the south, over the years, the Taliban have taken advantage of the US's mismanaged war in Afghanistan, and the ineffective governance and policies of the Karzai government, to expand their presence and area of influence to other parts of the country.¹ While claims of major differences arising within the group had surfaced, they appear to be based on hearsay and do not hold much weight as the Taliban have remained active and united, with Mullah Omar as the group's leader. Overall, the Taliban have demonstrated political and military resilience on the field and off, amongst themselves and have been able to make up for their military losses easily. Thousands of fighters continue to join the group, making the Taliban's insurgency even stronger than before.

Although it has taken more than 13 years to acknowledge what former US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Robin Raphel, had stated more than a decade ago regarding the Taliban that, "The Taliban are a significant factor in the Afghan equation and one that will not simply disappear any time soon. The group has established significant control throughout the country and have sustained themselves (throughout the 13 years) demonstrating their staying power. The reasons for the group's success so far has little to do with military prowess or outside military assistance. The real source of their success has been the willingness of many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, to tacitly trade unending fighting and chaos for a measure of peace and security, even with severe social restrictions it is not in the interest of Afghanistan or any of us here that the Taliban be isolated."² Raphel's assessment of the Taliban still holds true. Today the Taliban continue to expand their influence and gain support from the masses.

With the coming of the new government in Kabul, headed by President Ashraf Ghani, there were hopes that the Taliban would accept the positive overtures initiated by the national unity government for peace and reconciliation and abandon their spring offensive. However, with the initiation of the Taliban's spring offensive' "AZM" (resolve), on April 24, 2015³ as a "means to liberate Afghanistan and establish an Islamic emirate free of foreign control,"⁴ has not only highlighted reluctance on the part of the group to abandon its military campaign and hold talks but continues to undermine efforts for establishing peace talks. Subsequently, differences and divisions within the Taliban have also impeded

talks. There are numerous groups and factions operating under the garb of the Taliban, with varying political agendas. Those members of the Taliban who are suffering from war fatigue and are willing to talk do not have influence at the operational level over those members and fighters who are opposed to talks. Such is the case of Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, a senior member of the group, who favors talks. He is opposed by Abdul Qayum Zakir, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, a vehement opponent of talks with the government.⁵

While an offensive from the Taliban was expected in the group's traditional areas of influence in the south and the east, the group's expansion into the north (Kunduz) and west of Afghanistan was something unforeseen and has come as a surprise. In fact, if one looks at the Taliban's recently launched spring offensive in Kunduz, 'poor governance, weak institutions, corrupt leaders, lack of state coordination and infighting'⁶ are reasons cited for the group's growing success in the province. Initially limited to 40 percent, at present the Taliban controls 65 percent of the province.⁷ The Taliban's growing influence and control are not specific or limited to the Kunduz province alone; the Taliban continue to actively increase their presence and influence throughout the country.

Since their fall in 2001, the Taliban have managed to recover, retaliate and transform into a highly superior adversary and achieve significant 'strategic and tactical victories'⁸ over international forces as well as the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Since June 2013, when NATO handed over responsibility for the security of the whole of Afghanistan to the ANSF in a transitional process, there has been a sharp rise in the Taliban's activity. In fact, the group, according to the Afghan army chief of staff, General Sher Mohammad Karimi, has had no difficulty in expanding its presence "in almost every province of the country."⁹ Over the years, the overall outlook and conduct of the Taliban has gradually undergone a major transformation. While still heavily relying on warfare, the group has somewhat altered its strategy, and has expressed certain degrees of flexibility on issues and practices that alienated them from the community at large. The group has openly denounced and asked its fighters to avoid the 'killing of innocent people, including women, children and the elderly.'¹⁰ Apart from the launch of the Taliban's mobile Radio station 'Radio Shariat' in August 2007, the group has also been active through its website - Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan¹¹ - and has also been using poetry and songs to reach out to the common man.¹²

Also more recently, the group has declared a more open stance towards women. This has been highlighted in the recently held unofficial talks between the Afghan Taliban and Afghan representatives

in Qatar in May 2015, and twice in Oslo in June, 2015.¹³ Despite the Taliban's discriminatory attitude towards women in the past prompted by ignorance and obscurantism, the group now openly supports women's right to education (up to the university level) and the right to work 'in male-dominated professions' such as law and engineering as well as the right to choose their spouse.¹⁴ This apparent change in stance along with pledges made by the Taliban are seen with a fair amount of suspicion. However, considering the rigid and extreme mindset of the Taliban, it is certainly a positive development that warrants some recognition. Similarly, the group has been actively trying to transform its tarnished image globally, and has kept the option of diplomacy open by holding meetings with delegations from the US, Germany and Japan. In an attempt to cast themselves in a more favourable light and at the same time muster up support for their cause, the Taliban have paid visits to Germany, Japan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and China and recently to Iran¹⁵ and Norway.¹⁶

Since the government of national unity took over in September 2014, a number of interactions aimed at establishing peace and reconciliation have been initiated between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban. While the first round of talks were held in China in November 2014, the most recent 'intra Afghan dialogue' took place in Oslo from June 16-17, 2015 between representatives of the government headed by Deputy Afghan foreign minister, Hekmat Khalil Karzai and Taliban members headed by Sayed Tayeb Agha.¹⁷ Prior to this, a 'historic' interaction took place between the first Afghan all-female delegation headed by Shukria Barakzai, a female Afghan member of parliament and a Taliban delegation led by Sohail Shaheen on June 6, 2015.¹⁸

Despite an apparent change in the Taliban's overall conduct, however, the group's growing power presents a grave challenge to the national unity government and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Although the ANSF have achieved certain successes against the Taliban, these have been transitory and limited, as they 'lack requisite capacities as a counterinsurgent force'.¹⁹ The Afghan security forces continue to be confronted with challenges such as capability, fighting capacity, logistics, equipment, desertions and hence struggle to put on their best defence against the Taliban, but with little success. The ANSF have suffered high 'attrition and casualties',²⁰ and are only able to maintain a limited level of security against the Taliban²¹ who are well versed in guerrilla warfare. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), civilian casualties in Afghanistan have risen 8 percent higher in 2015 compared to 2014, making 2015 the bloodiest year on record for Afghan soldiers and civilians since 2001.²²

Pakistan, for its part actively supports an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' peace and reconciliation process and has extended all efforts in this regard, by reassuring the Ghani government of its sincerity and commitment towards a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Publicly the political leadership in Pakistan has also reached out to the Afghan Taliban and, in private, is believed to have exerted pressure on the group to halt their spring offensive and engage in the reconciliation process with the government.²³ However, the Taliban have ignored all appeals for a ceasefire and in fact have continued to step up attacks against the ANSF. This surge in violence and bloodshed, considered to be the worst in years, has not only prompted Pakistan to distance itself from the group but has also resulted in strong criticism against the group's attacks from the political and military quarters. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has termed the Taliban's activities "an act of terrorism, and any effort by any militant or group to destabilise Afghanistan will be dealt with severely and such elements will be outlawed and hunted down."²⁴ Similarly, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif has said that "enemies of Afghanistan will be considered enemies of Pakistan."²⁵ An important development that highlights improved relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan was the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence Agency and Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security on May 18, 2015, which entails 'intelligence sharing, complementary and coordinated intel operations on respective sides.'²⁶ While this unprecedented agreement clearly indicates growing cooperation between the two states, mistrust continues to undermine relations. Despite Pakistan's commitment and visible change in approach towards the Afghan Taliban, authorities in Afghanistan continue to doubt Pakistan's sincerity as was made evident from the strongly worded message that President Ghani sent to Prime Minister Sharif in May 2015. Although domestic pressure has been building up on President Ghani due to his overtures to Pakistan and rise in violence and casualties due to the Taliban's spring offensive, as frustrating as it may be, the Afghan leadership must understand that Pakistan's role is only limited to supporting the peace process, establishing talks and reconciling with the Taliban is a matter of national consensus and prerogative. Although the Taliban's continuing offensive and no progress on talks is straining Pakistan-Afghan ties, President Ghani by putting conditions on Pakistan will certainly not deliver the Taliban let alone the peace process. It will only jeopardise the gains made so far between Pakistan and Afghanistan in their fragile relationship.

Considering the level of casualties as a result of the Taliban's ongoing insurgency, the recent interactions and meetings between the Taliban and Afghan representatives might seem insignificant, but in the larger scheme of things, progress is being made as is evident from the recently held meeting in Oslo.

While the talks are certainly not a substitute for peace and reconciliation, a process has been initiated. How successful that process will be is anybody's guess. In this regard, the key factor is to continue the process of constantly engaging with the Taliban and sustaining all efforts made in this regard. Only through dialogue and engagement will both sides be able to remove their doubts and misunderstandings. The fact of the matter is that dialogue is the only way to end the turmoil in Afghanistan, and while the process is complex, long and frustrating, all the principal actors involved, such as the Afghan government, the Taliban and other Afghan political factions will have to demonstrate patience and maturity if they really want to put an end to the conflict...

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