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Issue Brief

Afghanistan: The Growing influence of the Taliban

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Despite 15 years of international presence in Afghanistan and the US claims of achieving progress and development, 'Afghanistan is worse off today than it was before 2001.'¹ Since 2001, an estimated \$685.6 billion have been spent on Afghanistan² yet it has not made any significant change for the better. Afghanistan continues to be confronted by violence and insecurity; weak and ineffective governance, corruption, a flourishing drug trade that accounts for more than 90 per cent of the world's opium and a growing Taliban insurgency that continues to escalate.

While President Karzai's protracted tenure was marred by corruption and inefficiency, there were hopes that with the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) along with the takeover of security by Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the state of affairs in Afghanistan would improve. However, Afghanistan continues to be challenged by a myriad of problems, and is far from being stable. Not only has President Ghani struggled to establish a stable cabinet, like his predecessor, he too has failed to bring stability to the country or make headway with the Afghan Taliban. Afghanistan continues to stand highly divided on the issue of the Taliban and has yet to develop national consensus, as well as a national narrative. While President Ghani has achieved success with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami, he has struggled to revive peace talks with the Taliban. However, the peace agreement with the Hizb-e-Islami appears to be more of a symbolic victory for the government as the group has been largely inactive in recent years, and has not really been a part of the current insurgency. Therefore although it is a breakthrough for the Ghani government, the move has not reduced violence in the country nor has it had a meaningful impact on convincing the Taliban, who have dismissed the deal as a 'political marriage'.

Despite US's claims of rescuing the Afghan people from the Taliban's turmoil and suppression, the Taliban are stronger than before. Since their brief ouster in 2001, the group has made a strong and steady comeback, proving to be 'stern adversaries'. They have reorganised themselves and have re-emerged as a growing political and military threat, gaining support from the masses. Despite losses on the field including the loss of the group's leader, Mullah Omar followed by Mullah Mansoor, the Taliban are stronger than before and appear to have no difficulty in finding recruits to make up for their losses. Although a few former Taliban members have reconciled with the government, thousands of fighters continue to join the insurgency. While there were claims that differences had risen among the group, but they seem to be mere speculations as the Taliban have in fact proven that they are active and continue to exert influence. Initially restricted to their traditional heartland in the south, the Taliban

have extending their area of influence to the northern and eastern parts of the country³ and currently control one-third of Afghanistan's districts.⁴

The Taliban have attained more territory in 2016 than at any time in their 15-year fight.⁵ Currently, 33 of Afghanistan's 400 districts are under the Taliban.⁶ Apart from gaining ground, the Taliban have achieved significant military successes against the Afghan National Security Forces in Kunduz, LashkarGah and Tarinkot. The recent surge in attacks by the Taliban witnessed at the US military base at Bagram and attack on the German consulate indicate that the Taliban are trying to make the most of the insurgency before the winter sets in/have no intention of abandoning their offensive. The ANSF continue to struggle against the Taliban who have proved to be a far superior adversary. The Afghan military have suffered declining numbers and high attrition rates as military casualty rates in the year 2016 have been historically high. According to the SIGAR Report of October 2016, Afghan military declined by 2,199, thus leaving the army at 87 per cent of its certified military strength of 170,000⁷. Similarly, 'attrition caused by rising casualties, declining re-enlistments and desertions' increased to 33 percent in 2016 from 28 percent in 2015.⁸ Hence a spike in attacks as well as the Taliban's growing presence is a clear indication of the growing influence of the Taliban.

Despite continued fighting, reports surfaced of an alleged meeting held between representatives of the Taliban and Afghan government in Qatar⁹ in October 2016. In what is being referred to as the first round of talks held after the collapse of the Murree peace process of 2015, it is believed that both sides exchanged views, where the Afghan government insisted that the Taliban lay down their arms, declare ceasefire, and enter into talks. The Taliban, on the other hand stuck to their previous demands which include the complete withdrawal of foreign forces, official recognition of the group as a political movement, release of its prisoners and that names of its leaders should be removed from a UN blacklist¹⁰. Prior to this, an alleged meeting had taken place in September 2016, in Qatar between Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, Afghan intelligence chief and Mullah Omar's brother, Mullah Abdull Manan Akhund.¹¹

While optimism was created out of the interaction, it appears that the meeting in Qatar has met the same fate as previous efforts, namely the Murree peace process and Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), with the Taliban denying that the meeting had taken place. In a statement, the Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid.¹² However, it appears that the Taliban's denial of talks comes after no headway was made during the meeting. While the interaction is an indication of both sides

willingness to enter into a dialogue, unless the Afghan government and Taliban move beyond the rhetoric and blame game - find the middle ground and compromise, any interaction will be futile. In short, both principal stake holders must seize the opportunity and continue the dialogue process. At this critical juncture, it is imperative that the Afghan government should make efforts to revive the stalled peace process with the Taliban. Instead of asking the United Nations to put sanctions on the Taliban chief, Maulvi Haibatullah, President Ghani must focus on a national reintegration program and wooing those elements within his government opposed to talks. Similarly, the Taliban too must demonstrate a visible reduction in attacks against the state and unite under a collective negotiating stance. With changing regional dynamics and the Afghan war in its fifteen year, neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban can afford to shun the opportunity of a dialogue process, as force is not the solution. However there appears to be a deadlock where neither side is willing to reconcile. Until then, Afghanistan will continue to be an issue of concern and present challenges to the international community, the region and more importantly neighbouring states, Pakistan, in particular.

Notes and References:

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