



Afghanistan in 2009 The First Quarter

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In the first quarter of 2009, three issues have taken center stage: Taliban resurgence and its spread into Pakistan; the Af-Pak strategy of the US unveiled by Obama; and the debate on the forthcoming Afghan Presidential elections. This essay attempts to analyze the above three crucial developments.

THE TALIBAN RESURGENCE

The Taliban is estimated to have a permanent presence in 72 per cent of Afghanistan ; its hold being strong not only in its bastions of the South but also in the east, where it literally runs a parallel government. Successes against the Taliban, whether military or of winning 'hearts and minds', have been limited as the Taliban appear to be striking at will with lethal force and being successful in their propaganda war.

January 2009 witnessed a limited but successful military operation to oust Taliban from areas around Helmand's provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. However the writ of the government over this region remains tenuous, as the administrative machinery is still unable to deliver basic services to people, further alienating them. Members of the UN Security Council after their visit to Afghanistan in December, concluded that almost 40 per cent of Afghanistan was either "permanently or temporarily inaccessible to government and non-government aid."

Major Attacks, Jan-Mar 2009

January 4: British troops captured four key Taliban strongholds after an 18-day offensive in Helmand Province.

February 1: A car suicide bomb attacked an International Military (IM) convoy of Turkish soldiers in Kabul Police District 13.

February 2: A suicide bomb in a police uniform in Tirrin Kot, capital of Urugzan province, killed 21 Afghan police recruits and injured 8 others.

February 11: Taliban attacked Ministry of Justice, Education and Directorate of Prisons in Kabul leaving 20 people dead and 57 injured.

March 19: A roadside bomb killed Afghan legislator, Dad Mohammed Khan, his three bodyguards and a local commander on the Kandahar-Helmand Road in Southeast Afghanistan.

Attacks throughout Afghanistan continued unabated in the first quarter of 2009; the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's), suicide bombings and hit and run tactics being the most favored methods of executing attacks. IED's alone have accounted for an astounding 75 per cent of the total US troop casualties , while the use of hit and run urban guerilla tactics is also on the rise. Most of these attacks were directed against security forces - the Afghan police and international troops, and symbols of the Afghan government. The brazen attack on February 11 in Kabul, carried out by heavily armed gunmen with ease stands out for its symbolism. The attack came on the eve of a visit by US special envoy to the region Richard Holbrooke, engaged in a policy review on Afghanistan. The third such high profile attack in the capital in a matter of a few months, it reflects the strengthened morale of the Taliban.

Numerous factors have contributed to the Taliban renaissance. First, endemic corruption plaguing much of the government machinery, especially the police and judiciary, both of which affect the everyday life of the common man, has undermined credibility of the elected government and helped build up a degree of local support which stems more out of the Taliban's ability to fill in the governance vacuum as opposed to ideological

support for their cause. Second, NATO strikes may have enjoyed short-term military success but in the long run these strikes have not rendered the Taliban a spent force. As civilian casualties resulting from these strikes mount so has the anger against international troops with many swelling the ranks of the Taliban as foot soldiers to avenge personal loss. Further, arbitrary detention of civilians and indiscriminate house raids, which are seen as deeply antithetical to local customs, have further fuelled local anger and violence.

Third, the failure of the international community to deliver on its pledge of a better future for Afghans; an empirical indicator of this lack of commitment to 'nation building' is reflected in the paltry levels of per capita investment that stood at a mere US\$57. This figure appears even more dismal when compared to other major areas of US intervention such as US\$100 in Bosnia or US\$679 in Kosovo. Moreover, even of the aid that did trickle in, some 86 per cent of it was estimated to be 'phantom aid,' that is, it was spent on goods and services from the US as opposed to being spent on developing indigenous capabilities. Thus, not surprisingly this has led to an increasing sense of frustration and with little or no alternative opportunities, turning to the Taliban was for many the only other alternative.

Fourth, the deepening nexus between Narco trafficking and the Taliban has provided a sound financial pillar for the insurgency to build on. Drug trafficking has helped finance not just arms purchases but also sustain swelling ranks of the Taliban militia who are paid a monthly salary ranging from US\$200 to \$300, a princely amount when compared to the paltry US\$75 paid to an Afghan National Army (ANA) recruit. Moreover, with an estimated 14 million Afghans who are dependant on poppy cultivation and no other viable alternatives in the offing, the current international policy of zero tolerance towards poppy cultivation has only further fuelled resentment. While the involvement of 'ablest protectors' of drug trade in Afghanistan ranging from Hamid Karzai's brother Ahmad Wali Karzai to

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officials in the ministry of Interior which is responsible for checking trafficking have made the task at hand all the more difficult. Finally, the presence of safe havens in Pakistan's lawless frontier regions have played a seminal role in sustaining the insurgency in Afghanistan and fuelling instability in Pakistan, thus making it impossible to visualize a solution to the Afghan quagmire in isolation.

II THE AF-PAK STRATEGY

The statement from the Whitehouse - "ability of extremists in Pakistan to undermine Afghanistan is proven...without more effective action against these groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan will face continuing instability," as it unveiled its Af-Pak strategy received a cautious welcome in Kabul; it vindicated its official stance regarding the presence of safe havens in Pakistan's tribal belt, which has helped sustain the insurgency in Afghanistan. The problem is further exacerbated by the formal retreat of the Pakistani state not just from the tribal areas but also from settled regions like Swat. Second, US supply lines in Pakistan coming under constant attack and the US's eviction from its sole base in Central Asia have severely dented its capability to effectively support its mission in Afghanistan. Against this rather complex background that this new strategy assumes significance.

Important Political Developments, Jan-Mar 2009

January 2: The main supply route for international forces in Afghanistan, via Pakistan's Khyber Pass, was re-opened after three days.

January 6: Asif Ali Zardari's first official visit to Afghanistan. Karzai and Zardari oversaw the signing by their foreign ministers of a joint declaration in which the two sides agreed to "develop a joint comprehensive strategy for combating terrorism."

January 22: Richard Holbrooke named special envoy to the Afghanistan and Pakistan region.

February 16: The NWFP government formally announced the implementation of the Nizam-e-Adl regulations in the Malakand division.

February 19: Kyrgyzstan's parliament has approved a government order closing the Manas air base, used by the United States to transport supplies and troops to Afghanistan.

March 27: The Af-Pak Strategy announced by the Obama administration.

In a significant departure from the Bush administration's policies, the 'Af-Pak' strategy recognizes the need for the US to work with key regional stakeholders to stabilize Afghanistan. Thus, apart from Pakistan, if the US succeeds in getting Russia (defacto the Central Asian Republics) on board along with Iran, India and China, it will greatly aid efforts aimed at pacifying Afghanistan and making US military efforts of sustaining its Afghan mission relatively less prone to being held hostage by developments in an increasingly unstable Pakistan.

The new strategy also envisages a troop surge to enhance enforcement of government writ, by sending 21,000 additional troops, of which 4000 would be dedicated to training the Afghan security forces, enabling Afghans to take the lead in upholding their own security. However the key challenge here will be the ability to take the Taliban's fight into country's heartland, which seems unlikely as the troop-population ratio will still remain abysmally low, at best allowing assertion of control over some urban pockets. The Soviets failed to pacify the country inspite of having over half a million troops in Afghanistan for nine years. Also, a lack of credible human intelligence network in Afghanistan could hamper the effective operationalization of this new strategy. Moreover, Obama's talk of an 'exit strategy' could end up further bolstering the already robust insurgency.

However the failure of the policy to even mention issues of judicial incompetence, rising civilian casualties, a fleeting reference to corruption and no new strategy on breaking the linkages between Narco trafficking and the insurgency are some major policy blind spots that confront Washington and its allies as they brace themselves for turning the tide in Afghanistan in 2009

Significantly with the possibility of an outright military victory being bleak, the new strategy talks of political adjustments with 'reconcilable' elements within the Taliban. With an outright military victory being elusive the idea appears to be pragmatic, however it needs to address crucial questions such as who will be granted amnesty and on what grounds and who will be allowed to retain arms? These questions will be of importance for those ethnic groups who have been at the receiving end of Taliban violence. Second, while promoting political dialogue with the Taliban more needs to be done to strengthen the capacity of the Afghan state so it can win over and absorb insurgents as opposed to being taken over by them. Further, politically, any major concessions to the Taliban could potentially

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unsettle the existing political equations as the Tajik dominated Northern Alliance leaders, already feeling marginalized by the Karzai government, are unlikely to accommodate any major concessions to the Taliban leaders. These developments have the potential of triggering political alignments and re-alignments in Kabul's political circles on the eve of the Presidential elections, while inviting skepticism and perhaps a degree of displeasure if not outright opposition from certain regional quarters such as India.

III

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Afghanistan braces itself for its second Presidential elections; its successful conduct will help in re-legitimizing the fast diminishing credibility of the Afghan government and will also set the tone for the 2010 parliamentary elections. However there are formidable challenges that need to be urgently addressed for realizing the goal.

First, given the deteriorating security environment, failure of the Afghan government and international community to deliver on governance and the most basic everyday necessities has led to voter disillusionment. Many Afghans, particularly in the insurgency-ridden Southern and Southeastern provinces, cast doubts about the utility of voting with no tangible change visible in the ground situation over the last eight years. Staring at an uncertain future, not surprisingly they question the wisdom of risking their lives to vote knowing the ever present threat of the Taliban. If the prevailing grim mood in the populace translates into low voter turnout it would eventually pose a serious credibility crisis for the new incumbent in office. Thus, it is imperative for the government to raise voter awareness about elections and its significance for the future of Afghanistan.

Second, with a majority of the Southern and Eastern provinces - pre-dominantly Pushtun in terms of ethnic composition - being in the grip of the insurgency, there exist strong doubts whether or not elections will be held at all, and if they are held, voter turnout is expected to be abysmally

low. The problem is compounded by the fact that unlike in the previous elections, refugees in Pakistan and Iran - who are largely Pushtuns who fled unstable conditions in the south of the country - will not be registered for voting. Thus, a failure to hold a free and fair election with reasonable levels of voter participation may lead to the Pushtuns feeling disenfranchised vis a vis other ethnic groups in Afghanistan and could create social and political friction.

Third, with Karzai seemingly losing favor with some of the key players in the international community, on account of endemic corruption and nepotism in his government, outside players will have to resist the temptation of attempting to influence the election process either overtly or covertly.

Fourth, the Karzai government faces the assiduous task of creating a political consensus cutting across political lines on how will Afghanistan straddle the period between May, when Karzai's term ends, and August, when a new government takes office. Thus far not only has the issue charged up the political environment but has created the potential for a constitutional crisis of sorts with the opponents proposing and Karzai promptly disposing the idea of non-partisan interim leader taking charge once his term expires on 21 May. The opposition, however, insists on not recognizing Karzai as president upon the expiration of his term.

Fifth, the elections will be a mammoth logistical, financial and security exercise, which will challenge the nascent and fragile institutions of the Afghan state to the hilt. The potential of the election process being marred by instances of violence orchestrated by the Taliban remain high and will reinforce the popular view that the Taliban are increasingly holding sway over the country. The voter registration exercise has already come under attack from the Taliban, particularly in the southern provinces. These challenges will be magnified if none of the candidates in the fray manage to poll more than 50 per cent of the votes, which would necessitate a run off vote.

IV CONCLUSIONS

With snow melting in the mountains and passes in the summer months, violence is likely to escalate. Much will depend on how the 'Af-Pak' strategy plays out over the next few months. Finally, the run up to the Afghan elections will create a charged

atmosphere with increased political rhetoric against the US and its allies as Karzai attempts to ward off criticism castigating him as a stooge of the west. With an estimated 10 of the 364 districts in Afghanistan being under Taliban control and another 156 being classified as high-risk districts, coupled with intense public disillusionment, the conduct of free and fair polls with respectable levels of public participation appears to be a difficult proposition. Turning the tide in Afghanistan will by no means be an easy task and would require political will, not just from the international community at large but from Kabul itself.

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