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Afghanistan's Unending War

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Not so long back Afghanistan was referred to as the ‘France of Central Asia’. It was famous for its beautiful nature, mountains, food, culture and most importantly regional stability. “*The country was once one of the most attractive tourist destination till 1960s*”, said Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American and the former US ambassador to Afghanistan. Visitors - tourists, hippies, Indians, Pakistanis, and even Europeans were stunned by the beauty of its gardens and snow-capped mountains. But the whole picture and fate of the country changed with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The ‘France of Central Asia’ was immediately transformed into a cold war battle ground between US and the Soviet Union. With the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, US-backed *Mujahedeen* went on an offensive seizing power in April 1992. However conflict and lawlessness persisted giving rise to the Taliban by 1994, who eventually captured Kabul in September 1996 and ruled until the US led military forces toppled them in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11. While a democratic government was established but the hostility between the government and Taliban continued. It has got worsen with the entry of ISIS in the region since 2015. Over the past few years, civilian casualties have continued to rise. As per the UN estimates, in the last two years, more than 11,598 casualties have been reported, of which 3,600 lost their lives. Afghanistan is now been considered as one of most unstable nation of the Central Asia.

The most recent manifestation of this violence was the deadly blast that ripped through the heart of Kabul on 31 May 2017. “For God's sake, what is happening to this country?” proclaimed Ghulam Sakhi, a shoemaker in Kabul whose shop is close to the site of the deadly blast that ripped through heart of Kabul on 31st May 2017. And this is not just one shoemaker’s voice but the pain of all 32 million Afghans. The country has been going through one of its bloodiest time in years, leaving the cities bereft and its residents engrossed by fear. It all started after one of the deadliest suicide attacks in Kabul on May 31, 2017, slaying over 150 people, wounding 400 people and damaging the embassies of Turkey, Germany, Japan and India. The attack took place in one of the most busy areas of Kabul, Zandaj Square (also known as Green Zone) at 08:25 a.m. local time (03:55 GMT) when most of the people had just reached or were enroute to work.

As of now, no terrorist organization has taken responsibility for the attack. Although the ISIS has been carrying out many bombings in Afghanistan since 2015 but it seems they are hesitating to take the responsibility for this one. The Afghan-Taliban have condemned the attack and said that *“The Islamic Emirate (as they call themselves) condemn those blasts carried out against civilians and in which civilians suffer casualties without a clear target”*. But the Afghan government has accused the Haqqani network which has had very strong ties with Pakistan. Moreover, Afghanistan broke all the cricketing ties with Pakistan and President Ghani called acts of terrorism as an *“undeclared war on Afghanistan”* and a *“cowardly act”*. Pakistani authorities labelled these accusations as baseless. Both countries accuse each other of allowing militants to shelter in the border regions and launch bloody attacks that threaten regional stability.

Soon after the blasts, numerous anti-government protests started across the country, calling for the resignation of President Ghani. The demonstrators also demanded the execution of the “Daesh prisoners”. It was believed that the protest would be followed on pro-peace principles but soon it turned violent when Police fired on and, killed nine civilians. After that, on June 3, at the funeral of the Senator Ezadyar’s son, three bombs exploded in which 19 people were killed and 112 were injured

Another explosion occurred , outside the main Mosque of Herat city on June 6, 2017, that left 7 dead and 15 people wounded. On the same day, a rocket was lobbed into the Indian ambassadors residence in Kabul. Luckily no casualties resulted. This attack was carried out during the Kabul Process Peace and Security Conference which was being attended by representatives of 27 countries, regional and international organizations. As per the UN estimates, since last two years, more than 11,000 casualties has been reported out of which 3,500 lost their lives.

Speaking at a recently hosted international conference on the peace process in Kabul, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani tersely remarked:

Our challenge is that we can't figure out what it will take to convince Pakistan that a stable Afghanistan helps them. Pakistan believes sponsoring terror is a controllable tool that can be switched on and off to achieve goals." in the presence of the representatives of Pakistan, India, Iran, Egypt, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, US and various European countries. The president Ghani also invited Taliban to peace talk and join the political process of the country. "If Taliban wants to join peace talks, the Afghan government will allow them to open an office, but this is their last chance,

It can be seen that the Ghani administration has failed in its objective of providing security to its people. The failures of his government have even overshadowed Hamid Karzai's shortcomings. This has to be taken into consideration because he made several promises regarding the country's security in 2014 when he got elected as President. The country's security has always been the major concern for the government but now there are many accusations against the government and its security organs for failing to protect civilians.

The US is to decide whether to send more 5,000 troops to Afghanistan when 9,000 are already in the country. Any final decision on troop levels would be made by U.S. President, Donald Trump, who has not made any major policy announcements on Afghanistan till now. The US and NATO have been supporting the Afghanistan government, financially and militarily. With the help of the allies, the Afghan government has been able to hold all the provincial capitals, with the exception of Kunduz that fell briefly to the Taliban. The Afghan military has welcomed the more foreign troops and asked US and NATO countries to train Afghan security forces in February 2017.

It cannot be denied that Taliban has steadily established a strong grip in several parts of the country since 2014. And peace can only be restored if both, Afghan government and Taliban cooperate with each other. If Taliban accepts the Ghani's call and starts making the peace negotiation with the government then it would be one of the most significant shifts in the country's domestic and foreign policy. As Pakistan is unofficially backing the Taliban in Afghanistan, a breakthrough in peace talks would help revive direct dialogue between the Afghan and Pakistani authorities.



After the Taliban attack in Lashkar Gah, the political and regional stability is nothing but the dream for Afghans.

The way to turn that dream into reality is by developing the diplomatic ties with Pakistan and find the immediate solution to the dispute over Durand line. Though it would be nearly impossible for the both governments after border skirmish incident of 5 May 2017 but one has to open the room for negotiation. The Taliban is fractured and becoming weak mainly due to the lack of leadership (after the death of Mullah Omar) and Pakistan is well aware of this situation. There is no denial that the Pakistan has been using the Taliban as an instrument to pressure government to meet its demands.

Now in order to keep Taliban away from Pakistan, the Afghan government should make an effort to reach out to the Pashtuns of Afghanistan who make up an estimated 42% of total population. As Lawrence Alan Levine, a military expert who trained the Afghan National Army, believes “All Taliban are Pashtun but not all Pashtun are Taliban.” It is important to find solution to Taliban with Pakistan

As far as US troops are concerned, though Pentagon hasn't increased the number of troops deployed in the region but General Mattis is in favour of sending more troops to support Afghan National Army. One should keep in mind that the main motive behind sending troops to any nation is to ensure peace and stability in the region not waging war on foreign soil. The Taliban are not be pleased with talks of an increase in the number of US troops. They might reject President Ghani's call for peace talks.

The Pashtun question, Taliban insurgency and Durand line dispute could be resolved in one go if both governments opened diplomatic talks and tried to find the middle ground. Because it cannot be argued that no Afghan strategy, even with more troops, would ever succeed without reducing Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban.