



The Taliban's Threat to Peace in Afghanistan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Washington's increased support notwithstanding, the Afghan government has thus far failed to contain the Taliban's sustained terror campaign, while efforts to revive the moribund peace process have similarly run into a dead alley. It remains to be seen whether last week's bold peace initiative by President Ashraf Ghani will strike a responsive chord with the Taliban.

The recent spate of terror attacks in Afghanistan, especially the Taliban's January 27 suicide bombing in Kabul that claimed more than 100 lives, has underscored the fragility of the National Unity Government and kindled fears of the Taliban's imminent "spring offensive." President Trump urged the international community to "take decisive action against the Taliban and the terrorist infrastructure that supports them," while Secretary of State Tillerson insisted that "all countries who support peace in Afghanistan... have an obligation to take decisive action to stop the Taliban's campaign of violence."

These tough words are not difficult to understand. Ever since President Trump's August 2017 announcement of a new Afghan strategy, which ascribed India a key role in the stabilization efforts, the administration has put greater military pressure on the Taliban in order to bring it to the negotiating table with the Kabul government, to little effect. Within this framework, Washington has recently announced the suspension of some \$2 billion in aid to Pakistan until Islamabad took decisive action against the Taliban and the Haqqani network, widely believed to be sheltered in Pakistan.

But how effective will this new strategy be? Can the reinforcement of US military presence in Afghanistan by 3,000 troops bring an end to the ongoing insurgency, something that ten times as large a force failed to achieve? Not least since after nearly two decades of extensive US military aid and training, the Afghan security forces are still plagued by serious operational problems that have enabled the Taliban, despite reported infighting within its ranks, to gain control and/or contest nearly half of Afghanistan's districts. Hence, for all its tough talk, Washington seems keenly aware of the urgent need for a political solution that is acceptable to both the Afghan government and the Taliban. As Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan told a recent high-level meeting of the UN Security Council: "Victory cannot be won on the battlefield - a solution is and must be political."

Unfortunately, the last time both sides held official talks was in 2015 in Pakistan's Murree town, only to be indefinitely suspended after the uncovering of the death of the Taliban's founder leader Mullah Omar. Progress in subsequent intermittent back-channel contacts between Kabul and the Taliban has been similarly thwarted by deep mutual distrust, as well as the duplicity of the Pakistani government and security forces. Islamabad's insistence on the presentation of a "credible" US-Afghan plan as a prerequisite for resuming the peace process has been seen in Kabul, Washington, and New Delhi as a ploy to evade the persistent demand that the Pakistani security services end their support for the Taliban and the Haqqani network.

On the domestic front, matters have been further complicated by Afghanistan's deepening political malaise. The national unity government agreement, concluded in 2014 with Washington's backing, was not just a clever ploy to resolve the electoral stalemate between the two presidential candidates Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, but a de facto power-sharing deal between the Pashtuns and the other Afghan communities (Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, etc.). But the arrangement has done little to ameliorate the political crisis as the Ghani-led government has come to be seen as thoroughly corrupt, incompetent, and incapable of bringing peace to the war torn nation, so much so that many Afghans seem to view it as a no better governing alternative than the Taliban.

This can perhaps explain Ghani's bold peace proposal of February 28, made at the conference of countries and organizations involved in the Kabul peace process. In an abrupt about-turn, the president offered to recognize the Taliban as a legitimate political actor, to enter into a ceasefire with the organization that will include a general prisoner release, and to remove all sanctions "without any preconditions in order to pave the way for a peace agreement." It remains to be seen whether this

latest initiative will strike a more responsive chord with the Taliban than its many failed precursors.

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