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Taliban Sweep after the US Withdrawal

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Since May 1, when United States' troops finally started to depart, Afghanistan has been witnessing a salvo of Taliban offensives wherein districts after districts are falling into the hands of Taliban fighters. More than 100 districts have fallen into their hands' post-May 1, bringing the total number of districts to 212 under Taliban control, including the latest districts in Takhar, Badakhshan and Parwan province. As of July 12, the Taliban has captured Afghanistan-Iran most significant trade border crossing of Islam Qala shifting the sweep to the West from the North.¹ This control of border points comes after the United States left Bagram Airbase, a symbol of American strength in Afghanistan for the last 20 years. More surprising is how they sneakily emptied the base. There has been a new development in Afghanistan whereby Talibs are focusing on capturing cities and districts, forcing the Government forces to surrender without a necessary fight to be seen as legitimate rulers. The role of tribal leaders and village elders have got more important as they influence Government officials to leave the area. The videos that are being circulated shows Taliban Mujahids welcoming Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) fighters who are defecting and being given a dignitary reception. Their strategy started in 2011 when Taliban leadership set up 'Dawat-o-Irshad' Commission to encourage defections from Afghan Security Forces. In recent offensives, it is being seen that it is the militiamen of independent warlords who face brutal repression by the Taliban as compared to Government forces. The current Taliban sweep employs 'attritional warfare augmented by military chokepoint strategy', in which critical strategic districts and provinces are captured and leaving major cities, highways and infrastructure vulnerable to Taliban takeover.² The official spokesperson of Taliban has timely stated that they do not intend to attack provincial capitals (in accordance with some unpublished annexes of the Peace Agreement) but their attacks in Kunduz, Badghis, Taloqan presents a different picture. However, the capital of Badghis, Qala-e-Naw, has been taken back by the Afghan military.

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Venture into the North

Badakhshan had always been a powerful anti-Taliban bastion as it was previously home of the Northern Alliance. Taliban now have captured 26 districts out of 28 in the province, including the Wakhan Corridor, which was immune from Taliban presence. This has put Taliban right at the doorstep of China. The Afghan-Tajikistan border, also known as Sher Khan Bandar Crossing, was told to be in the hands of Taliban according to news sources, to cut off revenue to the Afghan Government. This instance of Taliban endeavour into the North will have implications for all stake holding

countries like Russia, US, Pakistan, Iran, India and China along with Central Asian countries. Turkey and Russia have already shut down their consulates, and India has restricted its activities in Mazar-e-Sharif and called back diplomats from Kandahar. India would have many reasons to worry about as Taliban in the North could disrupt the entire security environment that had been established by many countries as a strong fort against Taliban. Indian consulates in Herat and Jalalabad had been attacked previously by the Haqqani group. Recently Salma dam, also known as the India-Afghan friendship dam, was attacked, resulting in the killing of 16 personnel. The North is significant since it is the gateway to Central Asia, and countries like China, India, and Russia are looking towards this extended neighbourhood for its energy security needs. Hence any kind of trouble in the North will make the Afghan equation more convoluted.

Reasons for their success

Taliban has been focussing on their tactical adaptation since 2014. It now uses refined guerrilla tactics which change from region to region. In the East, Improvised Explosive Device (IEDs) get more useful since terrain does not support conventional combat fight. They have improved their fire control using a disciplined volley of

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Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) against particular targets. Along with better fire coordination, combined arms with manoeuvring units vegetate the target to be attacked effectively.³ However, the Taliban's strategy relies on surrounding provincial capitals outside while waiting for an opportune time to advance to get hold of the territory without fighting a battle. They would want to use their stockpile and shed blood against ISIS-K and other militias. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the deputy emir and an UN-designated terrorist, released an advisory where he told fellow Talibs to not get violent in the face of recent victories and focus on the principles of good governance as enshrined in the Sharia. He also warns the mujahideen not to confiscate the belonging of anyone who 'voluntarily' joins the Emirate.⁴ All these statements have a purpose to win the propaganda war and to position Taliban as a responsible player. Taliban has the advantage of cohesion which moderates like Mullah Baradar has enabled after the group was on the verge of extinction owing to internal rivalries amongst themselves. The lowering of the morale of ANDSF is another major factor contributing to the fall of the government regime. The rapid withdrawal of US forces, poor leadership, overdependence on foreign support, expensive logistics, structural deficiencies and corruption has exacerbated their already dire situation.

Possible Outcomes

The theory of 'quick collapse' of the regime might not happen as Ghani Government has more resources at its disposal and better fighters and ammunition to fight Taliban than the then President Najibullah when Taliban took over for the first time. Still, Najibullah could hold on for much time after American Withdrawal and only fell apart when the Soviet Union collapsed. Taliban now is simultaneously gaining and losing territories, but this crest and trough of Taliban's trajectory might lead them to a position where they can gradually gain control of the entire country as long as they can coax ANDSF to surrender in contested districts. Another outcome would be where foreign supports stays, providing stiff defence for the Afghan military. However, this scenario is least likely as 'Over the Horizon' Counter-terrorism measures by the United States and others does not seem to happen as neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Tajikistan refuse to host American bases. Another scenario of 'consolidation and fight'⁵ seems to have the most traction where Afghan forces abandon the difficult areas, concentrate on Kabul, and clear the North. In the meantime, Taliban would gain control of the West, East and South. Economic concerns in Afghanistan have occupied China for long, but with the Taliban in the Wakhan, the spectre of militancy in Xinjiang will haunt China. The latest UNSC report on resolution 1988 also mentions IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) militants joining the ranks of Taliban in the North⁶. Russia too worries about spillage of extremism in the Caucasian region and Central Asia, which it considers its sphere of influence if Taliban can firmly establish its presence. Iran, on the other hand, has been very cryptic in this Afghan maze. It has offered to provide services of Fatemiyoun brigade, a Shia military army controlled by IRGC, in Afghanistan, but it remains unclear as to whom it intends to target precisely. Both Taliban and Afghan military would want to be helped against their adversaries.

Indian involvement in Afghanistan needs to be modelled on the latest developments and ground realities. India has told that it is open to talks with all players considering the disadvantage if India stays out of it without compromising its historical hard stand on terror groups operating in the Af-Pak region. India would not want Pakistan to have their sway over the new setting in Afghanistan and hence counter their strategic depth from the beginning. India would have to balance out all the risks associated with the engagement as Taliban still maintains nexus with Al-Qaeda and harbours India-focussed militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad who migrate from across the border.⁷

Notes

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