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TALIBAN IS LEADERLESS ONCE AGAIN

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Reports claiming the death of the Leader of the Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, flooded the news on Sunday, May, 22, 2016. As per the reports in the western media, Akhtar was killed when a drone strike carried out by the Americans attacked a car in which he was allegedly travelling in the Baluchistan Province of Pakistan. The strike was authorised by President Barack Obama who is currently on an official visit to Vietnam, and the President confirmed the news of the death on May 23, 2016. Meanwhile, the Chief Executive of Afghanistan - Dr Abdullah Abdullah, and the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) had already announced the news of Akhtar's death on Sunday itself. Despite the announcements made by the American, Afghan and the Pakistani establishments, the news is yet to be confirmed by the Taliban. Various media agencies, through their independent sources, have presented conflicting reports about Taliban's perception of the subject. Wall Street Journal claims that the Taliban leaders have denied the news as false, whereas Reuters claim that the leadership council of the Taliban

convened a meeting to discuss matters of succession.¹ The Afghan Pajhwok news agency claims that a senior Taliban leader has confirmed the news of Akhtar's death.²

However, the fact that the news has been confirmed from the topmost executives of two different nations compels one to take it seriously. The American and the Afghan Government would not risk making such drastic declarations if they were not true, especially at a time when the Afghan peace talks are at such a delicate stage. Earlier, in March, Hizb-i-Islami, the second largest resistance movement in Afghanistan (after the Taliban) agreed to be a part of the peace talks being arranged by the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG). Taliban leader Akhtar had refused to participate in the talks calling it futile unless the QCG agreed to accede to its demands which are as follows:

- The foreign presence in Afghanistan has to end;
- The Taliban must be removed from the United Nations' black list;



- The assets and the accounts of the Taliban are unfrozen; and
- The prisoners are freed.

Needless to say, the demands were too high for the QCG to consider, and despite various diplomatic attempts by the Afghan government to reach out to the Taliban, Akhtar had denied participating in the peace talks. The Afghan government initiated direct talks with the Taliban in early July 2015. However, the talks, which were brokered by Pakistan, were suspended indefinitely when the news of Omar's death leaked within a few days of the commencement of the talks. Mullah Omar was revealed to have died in Pakistan in April 2013, and the ISI and the Pakistani army were accused of covering up the death. The fact that senior members of the Taliban were aware of Omar's death and had kept the news under wraps since 2013 re-emphasises that Mullah Omar was the key stone to the crumbling arch of the Taliban. His apparent leadership was seen as the moral pillar holding the group aloft, and had kept the cracks in the Taliban from widening, as the group was increasingly being looked at as being defunct, especially in the background of a declining al Qaeda and a rising Islamic State.

Mullah Akhtar, who was Omar's deputy, succeeded Omar, and in his attempt to revive Taliban's position unleashed a blood bath in Afghanistan, taking a hardliner's approach towards the Afghan government and the

reconciliation process. The Taliban has been responsible for over 75 percent of all terrorism related fatalities in Afghanistan, with an average of killing 3.9 people per attack.³ After his accession to the top of the Taliban, the group took control of the Capital of the Kunduz province.⁴ However, the appointment of Akhtar had been met with criticism from within the Taliban, with the group almost breaking into two factions over the appointment.⁵ Now that Akhtar is dead, the Afghan government can take this opportunity to re-approach the Taliban and urge them to participate in the talks. However, the tides may turn worse, depending on who is selected to be the new leader. The two names that are being pitched for the leadership post are of Mullah Mohammad Yakub, the son of Mullah Omar, and Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is the leader of the Haqqani network and was Akhtar's deputy. According to former head of the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) Rahmatullah Nabil, the ISI is more likely to push Haqqani's name for the top post. This, he believes is in sync with how the intelligence agency had pushed for Akhtar's name after Omar's death.⁶

Pakistan has always had an influence over the Taliban, and this was accepted by Sartaj Aziz (Foreign Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister), when he admitted that Pakistan has sheltered some Taliban leaders, but said that Taliban was beyond Pakistan's control.⁷ Both Mullah Omar and Mullah Akhtar died in Pakistani territory, and this has thrown light on Pakistan's role in the

terrorist attacks that occur in Afghanistan. The drone strike that attacked Akhtar's car could not have been a matter of sheer coincidence. It implies that the American agencies had been monitoring Akhtar for a while. This brings to question the intelligence sharing arrangement between the Americans and the Pakistanis. The Ministry of External Affairs of Pakistan has protested against America's violation of the Pakistani sovereignty, complaining that they were not informed of the attacks. There are two possible analyses of this comment. First, it is possible that the Pakistanis were not made aware of the attack, which could indicate that the Americans do not fully trust them on some matters. Second, if Pakistan was indeed aware of the impending attack, then it raises questions whether the Taliban can trust Pakistan any further. It is also possible that Pakistan considered Mullah Akhtar to be a failing leader as his leadership was only dividing the Taliban, and hence the ISI had its own interest in ensuring that Akhtar is removed, and a stronger leader, such as Haqqani is put in his place.

So what could explain Pakistan's interest in Taliban?

Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan has been rooted in its fear of being sandwiched between two nations with whom it has hostile relations, and it has since used terrorist groups to wage a proxy war with both India and Afghanistan. With India, it has sought to counter

the superior conventional capabilities by wielding non state actors. With Afghanistan, it has either attempted to place a government in Kabul that is favourable to Islamabad (like the Taliban), and if it has been unable to do so, it has tried to keep Kabul preoccupied in dealing with militants in the Afghan territory. Afghanistan's enmity with Pakistan is long entrenched in history, with examples such as Kabul fighting against Pakistan getting a UN membership, and clashes over the Durand Line, which demarcates the border between the two states.

In its attempt to destabilise Afghanistan, Pakistan has tried to exploit the differences that exist between the various Afghan tribes and has attempted to place them against each other, by supporting some, while subduing others. This practice was seen right from the time when Pakistan controlled the flow of resources to the *mujahideen*. Then, it favoured the Pashtun factions led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaludin Haqqani (father of Sirajuddin Haqqani), over other factions such as those headed by Ahmed Shah Masoud (heading the Tajiks) and Rashid Dostum (heading the Uzbeks).⁸The choice of favouring the Pashtuns could be attributed to the fact that the former president of Pakistan, Muhammad Zia ul Haq was wary of a heavy inflow of Pashtuns into Pakistan in case of an ethnocentric conflict in Afghanistan. The idea was to keep the Pashtuns in Afghanistan, containing the ethnic conflicts within the Afghan boundaries so that they do not seep into

Pakistan, and foment uprising with the Pashtuns in Pakistan.

Now, that the Taliban is in a leadership crisis once again, Pakistan finds itself at a very crucial corner, where its role will once again shape the political future of Afghanistan.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

⁸ Samir Puri *Pakistan's War on Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 13

Notes

¹ Jessica Donati and Seed Shah, "Afghan Government Says Taliban Leader Killed in U.S. Airstrike", Wall Street Journal, see <http://www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-taliban-deny-leader-mansour-has-been-killed-1463912879>, and Mirwais Harooni and Phil Stewart, "Afghan Taliban meets on succession after U.S. drone targets leader", see <http://in.reuters.com/article/usa-afghanistan-taliban-idINKCN0YD01C>

² "Kabul Investigation Mullah Mansour's Death Drone Strike", Pajhwok Afghan News, see <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2016/05/22/kabul-investigating-mullah-mansour%E2%80%99s-death-drone-strike>

³ Afghanistan, *Global Terrorism Index 2015*, Institute of Economics and Peace, p. 21

⁴ "Afghan Taliban's Mullah Mansoor 'killed in US strike'", Al Jazeera, see <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/taliban-leader-killed-drone-strike-160521204020111.html>

⁵ Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Resolves Split Over New Leader's Authority", see <http://www.voanews.com/content/taliban-split-over-new-leader-authority-resolved/2964740.html>

⁶ Tariq Majidi, "Islamabad Could Face Fallout Over Mansour's Death: Analysis", Tolo News, see <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/25434-islamabad-could-face-fallout-over-mansours-death-analysts>

⁷ Abubakar Siddique, "Aziz admits Pakistan Housing Afghan Taliban leaders", Dawn, see <http://www.dawn.com/news/1243093>