

Conflict in Afghanistan: Implications for Central and South Asia

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On March 14, 1999, after four days of negotiations, in the words of UN Special Mission to Afghanistan, “in a spirit of sincerity, mutual respect and frankness” in the secluded Botanical Gardens complex at Ashkabad, the capital of Turkmenistan, Taliban and the Northern Alliance agreed in principle to a peace deal that would create a coalition government, offering the hope of peace after two decades of fighting. This was the first time ever during the course of the present civil war that Taliban was accommodative of the idea of sharing power with its rivals.

In retrospect, on 30th October 1998, the warring Afghan factions, due to the efforts of Saiyed Jalal, a close confidant of Saudi Crown Prince, Abdullah, agreed for a one-week cease-fire to harness the processes to negotiate a peace agreement. As a goodwill gesture, each side released 50 prisoners. This initiative was mainly the result of the set back of Taliban at the hands of Ahmad Shah Masood whose forces recaptured the northern Takhar provincial capital of Taloqan. Later, the opposition forces also captured the Burka district in northern Baghlan province. Baghlan province is about 120 miles north of the capital Kabul. After capturing Burka, the opposition forces were marching towards Nahrin district. Thus the remaining 20% Afghan territory continues to remain away from the Taliban’s hold and eludes peace prospects in Afghanistan. Be that as it may, the engagement of Sayied Jalal had underlined the Taliban-Saudi nexus, which ultimately extended to the US as well. In this context, one noticed that the tone of US anxiety on Osama bin Laden had slowed down quite a bit and much was not heard about the ‘Satan-America’ in Afghanistan. Thus, one hoped that the Saudi-US axis monitored through Pakistan on Afghanistan would be able to provide a stable alternative and this will have some pacifying effect on the war in Afghanistan.

But after a brief lull in the month of January 1999, which might rather be attributed to the Holy month of Ramadhan, the warring factions had started fighting all over again. This had warranted increasing diplomatic efforts from UN resulting in the recent Ashkabad talks. This had led many to hope that the conflict was coming to an end even though the sceptics had started sounding cautions about the possible lines of differences that would arise from any negotiations delineating the share, each party would have, in the future power structure.

The UN mediated negotiations in which Taliban and its rivals participated on the agenda of sharing power and finalising a permanent cease-fire appeared to be a positive step. Moreover, the statement of Wakil Ahmad Muttavakil, leader of the three-member Taliban delegation that “in order to join both the groups, we have agreed to have a shared executive, a shared legislation and a shared judiciary” gave the indication that Taliban are reconciled to share the power and end the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. It was quite intriguing that the final statement did not mention an immediate cease-fire between the warring factions. The peace talks also did not underline the

scope of power sharing. The head of the four men opposition group, Mohammad Yonus Qanouni, left the issue of a cease-fire to the next meeting.

In the mean while, the developments since Ashkabad have proved the sceptics true. The cease-fire that came into effect after the Ashkabad talks is no more operative now and the warring factions have once again gone back on their words, each accusing the other of violating the spirit of the agreement. In third week of March heavy fighting broke out between Opposition Alliance and Taliban in Bamyán province. All this has once again confirmed the intractability of the problem so far.

Taliban Agenda

The ground realities suggest that Taliban is trying to win over the populace through the Islamicist messages of its own brand and variety and has gone ahead with its Islamicist campaigns. Right from the mode of dress down to the choosing the colours for the cars and other vehicles, Taliban is bringing in everything under its sway. Although it is doubtful whether the Islamic precepts are strictly being followed in the conflict in Afghanistan, in the past, Fatwas have been hurled by the warring factions against each other for justifying the violence. It needs to be recognised that these Fatwas are not passed against any infidel but against the brother 'Muslims', who are engaged in the conflict on the either side. And there are no more 'infidel communists' left now, which could be dealt within accordance with the Islamic Sharia of the Taliban brand. It was interesting to hear poor Iranians being described as infidels, after the tension built up between the Taliban and Iran in the aftermath of the massacre of, as reported by UN, about 5,000 civilians including women and children, during the attack on Mazar-i-Sharief. These civilians, belonging to the Shia school of Islamic faith and, presumably, the sympathisers of Hizb-e-Wahdat, were killed by employing inhuman methods of torture. This development brought out into open, the ideological linkage of Taliban with Saudi Arabia. It may be mentioned that Taliban's relations with Iran would continue to remain strained, if not tense, for a long time to come.

This aspect of Taliban's ideology has special relevance for the societies and polities of Central and South Asia. It needs to be recognised that while analysing Taliban as a phenomenon or an ideology, much of the effort is concentrated on Islam. It should be other way round. The misplaced priority in analysing Taliban is providing the latter with the opportunities to create a great deal of confusion and bringing about some kind of ideological consolidation of gullible and ignorant minds. In this state of confusion, it is able to push ahead its own concepts of 'Jihad' and 'infidels'. Taliban has provided a new dimension to the strategic use of religion and it is this aspect which is posing a new challenge to the plural societies of Central and South Asia.

Central Asian concern

Sharing close borders with Afghanistan, the former Central Asian Republics view the situation in Afghanistan with concern because the events and developments in the latter have direct implications on the region. The republics of Turkmenistan and Kirghyzstan have adopted slightly neutral posture towards Taliban as against the hard line adopted by the remaining three republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan.

The resurgence of religious fervour of Saudi orientation in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and violence in some parts in these republics have heightened the fears that these two republics are prone to Taliban influence. There is an apprehension that gradually the ground may become fertile for Taliban to extend its sway in the region in pursuance of a dream towards a Caliphate. The Chinese anxiety that periodic upsurges in Sinkiang have a Taliban connection has direct implications for Kazakhstan. The missing suitcases with nuclear devices make the situation all the more alarming. The statements of Osama bin Laden that 'there would be fire-works in the region' indicating this potential need not be lost sight of.

Implications for India

It may be recalled that two dozen Kashmiri militants belonging to Hizbul-Mujahideen outfit were killed in the camps during the US missile attacks on the camps being run by Osama bin Laden. These militants, as confirmed by Hizbul-Mujahideen, were undergoing training in these camps. The casualties in the encounters with security forces and identifying the militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan raise the issue of security in India and its concern for the developments in Afghanistan. There are linkages between the Taliban and religious seminaries from Pakistan because the former claims to have been trained in these seminaries. In the three day conclave of Markaz-I-Dawat-ul-Irshad, held in Murrekay in Pakistan, it was claimed by the organisation that its militant wing Lashkar-i-Toiba, was carrying out successful operations in J&K. Recently, Friday Times in Pakistan has released the list of persons belonging to Lashkar-i-Toiba from Pakistan and Afghanistan who were killed in encounters in Kashmir. Thus, Taliban is the main laboratory to prepare future Islamic Mujahideen of Taliban variety. Lashkar-i-Toiba, which has been claiming close cooperation with Taliban in J&K, is one of the branches of this laboratory. The facts support the contention that these institutions work and thrive under government patronage in Pakistan. The media has repeatedly highlighted the visits of the ministers of the present government in Pakistan to Markaz-i-Dawat-ul-i-Irshad. Thus, South Asia in general, and India in particular, has equally larger stakes in Afghanistan developments. The Taliban continues to threaten the stability in the societies of these regions. The recent protest by the Chinese government to Pakistan regarding the extension of Taliban activities making incursions into Xianjang indicates the looming dangers well beyond Central and South Asia.