

Afghanistan: Losses, setbacks and impending challenges (Part 2)

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*Ahead of the critical NATO Summit in Belgium on 25 May, 2017, **Dr Sajjan Gohel** discusses the security conditions and challenges in Afghanistan. In this post, he discussed how the Haqqani Network and the ISIS-affiliated Wilayat Khorasan are making their sizeable presence felt, and the geo-strategic agendas of Afghanistan's neighbours which are further complicating the situation. In this context, he stresses the political and military decisions made by NATO leaders in 2017 could well decide Afghanistan's future direction in what remains one of the longest lasting protracted conflicts in the world.*

This is the second part of of Dr Gohel's two-part analysis. Read Part 1 on the Taliban's recent expansion and proposals by the U.S. commander of the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, General John W. Nicholson Jr. to stem the deterioration [here](#).

Enter Pakistan

In addition to the Taliban, Washington is deeply concerned about the Haqqani Network led by Sirajuddin Haqqani, which benefits from being allowed to operate freely and openly within safe havens in Pakistan. In many ways the separation between the Taliban and the Haqqanis Network are hard to distinguish. Despite the Taliban's relentless surge across Afghanistan, its leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, has paradoxically failed to consolidate his position following Mullah Mansour's death. The potential operational takeover by the Haqqani Network therefore seems inevitable.

Stabilising Afghanistan with reduced U.S. assistance would require an end to Pakistan harbouring the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. However, geographic and geopolitical factors will test how much Washington can pressure Pakistan.

In August, 2016, the [U.S. withheld \\$300 million of Coalition Support Funds](#) (CSF) to Pakistan after Washington couldn't certify that sufficient action had been taken against the Haqqani Network. The CSF reimburses Pakistan for costs it has supposedly incurred and compensation for facilities made available to coalition forces.

In his [testimony to the U.S. Congress](#) in February 2017, General John Nicholson said "The Taliban and Haqqani network are the greatest threats to security in Afghanistan. Their senior leaders remain insulated from pressure and enjoy freedom of action within Pakistan safe havens. As long as they enjoy external enablement, they have no incentive to reconcile." Meanwhile, the Taliban's leadership council, the Quetta Shura, has been moving from Quetta in Baluchistan province to Peshawar in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.



Image: Members of a combined Afghan and coalition security force maintain security during an operation in search of a Haqqani network facilitator in Sarobi district, Paktiya province. Credit: [Department of Defense photo by U.S. Army](#) CC BY 2.0

It remains to be seen if the CSF is reinstated under the President Donald Trump administration. On the contrary, further military aid to Pakistan is currently under review and Islamabad could expect a reduction. President Trump's fiscal 2018 budget proposal, entitled 'America First', calls for a 28.5% funding reduction for international programmes and foreign assistance. Pakistan is the sixth largest recipient of American aid.

In 2016, the U.S. Congress's decision to reject financing F-16s jets for Pakistan under the Foreign Military Funding programme, led the Pakistani military to cease the acquisition and assess other potential options including Russian military aircrafts. The role of Russia in AfPak provides a new, or to be more accurate, a retro dynamic in the region. Russia in its former guise as the Soviet Union which occupied Afghanistan in the 1980s, experienced a torrid time fighting the Afghan-Arab Mujahideen which were being sponsored by the West, principally the U.S. with the assistance of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Moscow and Islamabad were on opposing sides during that period but now it does appear that a pragmatic entente is in the pipeline.

The Russia-Iran dynamic

Aside from its faltering relationship with Pakistan, the U.S. has expressed concerns over Russia's actions in Afghanistan including accusations that the Kremlin is sending weapons, supplies and even advisors to support the Taliban. Of concern to Washington was [meetings held in Moscow](#) in December, 2016, concerning Afghanistan's future, which included Pakistan with Taliban representatives present too but no one from the Afghan government. The Taliban has even been sending intermediaries to Russia and there is even talk of a Taliban office being set-up there.

Iran has also undertaken a more conciliatory approach towards engaging the Taliban. They were once sworn enemies especially after the Taliban stormed the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif and murdered ten diplomats. Now, the Taliban has a political office in Iran which is unofficially called 'Mashad Shura' which was the town then Taliban leader Mullah Mansour was driving back from into Pakistan when he was killed in the drone strike. Tehran used to hide visits by Taliban leaders but now openly invites them to conferences.

Support for the Taliban is a geo-strategic hedging strategy that the Iranians and the Russians have adopted to ensure that they have some Afghan faction obliged to their interests. Russia's plan for 'de-escalation' zones in Syria was backed by Iran during recent talks in Kazakhstan. Both countries also support Syrian President Bashar al-

Assad. It therefore shouldn't be a total surprise that they have converged favourably towards the Taliban.

In cultivating the Taliban, Moscow also sees a realistic opportunity to nurture Islamabad and bring it into its fold, especially as Islamabad-Washington relations wane. In September 2016, Russia and Pakistan conducted their [first-ever joint military exercise](#) in the north of Pakistan. Traditional alliances and long-standing rivalries amongst all the actors in what has become the new 'Great Game' in Afghanistan have now become jumbled up which only weakens the central government in Kabul.

Wilayat Khorasan

Aside from the Taliban and Haqqani Network, there is the presence of the ISIS affiliate [Wilayat Khorasan](#) based in Nangarhar province. Largely composed of fighters from Orakzai and Momand agency in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, the group has arguably surpassed the Taliban in terms of brutality. They have beheaded Afghan civilians including children and posted their videos on social networks, in order to visualise the fear factor. In March, 2017, the Wilayat Khorasan entered ANA's main hospital in Kabul, and killed more than 50 people in a siege that lasted nearly seven hours.

On 13 April 2017, the U.S. conducted an airstrike in Nangarhar by using the largest non-nuclear bomb in its arsenal, the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB). The goal was to destroy tunnel complexes used by Wilayat Khorasan, which had ironically once been used by al-Qaeda. Estimates vary as to how many fighters with the terrorist group died but the consensus is that it was significant.

Despite the speculation behind the Trump Administration's motives to authorise the use of the MOAB, it was a decision largely shaped by the [U.S. military in Afghanistan](#) led by General Nicholson who was once in charge of Regional Command East, which oversaw Nangarhar province, and supported by the Afghan government to aid the efforts of the ASSF. This collaborative operation between Washington and Kabul attempted to take precautions to avoid civilian fatalities or casualties. To date, none have been reported. The civilian-military integrated approach is how Nicholson envisages the security strategy in Afghanistan unfolding in the coming months. Another example is that on 7 May, 2017, when Abdul Hasib, one of the Wilayat Khorasan leaders, was killed in Nangarhar province following a joint U.S. Afghan operation.

Conclusion

How much further this cooperation continues depends on the NATO meeting on 25 May in Belgium which will outline, arguably, the last time, that the West makes a commitment to halt the tide of extremism and violence gripping Afghanistan.

The unresolved security challenges in Afghanistan are now in its sixteenth year and have become one of the world's most consequential conflicts. Yet tragically, violence in Afghanistan is nothing new and to some degree the international community has almost become numb to hearing heartrending stories that emanate from the country. Nonetheless, the stakes are high for the international community. By ignoring the problem creates the potential of Afghanistan being used once again as a hub to recruit, train and plot terrorism globally. History has a disturbing way of repeating itself.

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About the Author

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