Shanghai Cooperation Organization: The only way to tame a belligerent Taliban - analysis

By Ayjaz Wani

A resurgent Taliban is in haste to recapture power in Afghanistan and is making advances across the war-torn country following the winding down of US military operations and the steady withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. The Taliban has made headways within their traditional strongholds of the south and also in the northern districts of Mazar-e-Sharif. The Taliban have encircled the provincial capitals, seized vital border crossings, and restored rules like no smoking and no shaving. They have barred women from going out unless accompanied by a male. The Taliban has also ordered all imams to provide a "list of girls above 15 and widows under 45 in captured areas to be married to Taliban fighters."

The Taliban's resurgence, replete with its hardline interpretation of the Holy Quran, is not only an outcome of appeasement by the US administration under Trump and Joe Biden but the divergence of the regional powers dealing with Taliban. Though all regional powers can work together under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the parochial interests of some countries are making things murkier for long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan and beyond its borders.

Regional powers and Taliban

The regional countries with geo-strategic, geo-economic and security stakes have been facing a dilemma ever since President Biden announced a complete military exit from Afghanistan. Except for India, most of the regional powers have confidentially met the Taliban, and some have used them for their own geo-strategic and security interests in the region. For example, Tehran and Moscow helped the Taliban, after 2019, on the pretext of Islamic State affiliates in Afghanistan. They used the terror outfit to settle scores with the US. The Taliban has visited Tehran and Moscow, held talks with the respective governments, and even facilitated the intra-Afghan negotiations in their respective countries.

Pakistan used a dual strategy by backing the US-led military operations and giving sanctuary to the Taliban. From 2002 onwards, the security establishment of Pakistan helped the Taliban through recruitment and donations via different religious groups. On 16 July, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said that Pakistan had not severed its ties with terror groups and more than 10,000 fighters entered Afghanistan within one month. Before starting the intra-Afghan peace process, a Taliban delegation from its political office in Qatar, headed by Mullah Baradar and the deputy emir responsible for political affairs, visited Pakistan. They held meetings with Pakistani officials, including Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi. The relations between the Taliban and Pakistan's military establishment were further exposed when a Taliban dignitary in the outfit's political office in Qatar admitted that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was deeply involved every decision made by their office.

The reasons were evident as Pakistan felt strategic encirclement given New Delhi's diplomatic and commercial presence in Afghanistan as the most significant contributor for the reconstruction of the war-torn country. India has consistently remained committed as a facilitator of peace and economic development of the Afghan people and remained aloof from the Taliban, given the proxy war it faces in Jammu and Kashmir. However, there are reports that New Delhi has recently tried to reach out to some factions of the Taliban in the backdrop of the changing security situation in Afghanistan.

China, on the other hand, used a "narrow approach" and "self-driven diplomacy." Beijing's engagement with the Taliban dates back to the 1990s, when the north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang became volatile. Given the contested histories, separatism, violent extremism and centrifugal tendencies, Xinjiang's Uyghur Muslims started anti-China agitations in 1980, 1981, 1985, and 1987, culminating in the Baren incident of 1990. China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, met Taliban leader Mullah Omar in 2000 and courted the Taliban and other terror groups to contain any "spillover" of terrorism to Xinjiang. Mullah Omar promised that the Taliban would not allow Uyghurs to launch attacks on China in Xinjiang, but they will continue to remain in the Taliban ranks. Subsequently, when President Trump cancelled the talks with the outfit in 2019, Beijing hosted a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

Can the Taliban keep their promises?

The Taliban has offered lip service to the US and its allies to prevent "international terrorist groups or individuals," including al-Qaeda and ISIS-K, from using Afghan soil. The Taliban has also offered similar assurances to Russia, Central Asian nations north of Afghanistan, China, and Iran on toleration of the Shia sect. Subsequently, however, the regional powers are sceptical of the Taliban given its behavioural change from the last two months.

On 7 July, China once again blamed the US for its hasty withdrawal and warned that Afghanistan could once again become "the region's powder keg and a haven for terrorism." Similarly, the Central Asian republics with porous borders with Afghanistan faced a peculiar situation when 1,037 Afghan servicemen from Badakhshan province crossed the borders. This infiltration forced the President of Tajikistan to mobilize 20,000 reserve troops at the border. He also requested the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CETO) for assistance. In May 2021, blasts hit Shiite dominated areas of Western Kabul in which at least 50 people were killed and more than a hundred wounded. No group took responsibility for the attack, but the Afghan government blamed the Taliban.

The violence in the streets of Afghanistan perpetuated by the Taliban and capture of power by them shows the first signs of their lip service towards the talks on intra-Afghan negotiations for the political settlement.

Ahmed Rashid, the journalist and author of Taliban: Militant Islam, said that "conflict can suck in the neighboring countries." Countries like Iran, Central Asian Republics, Pakistan, and China in Xinjiang will bear the immediate impact, while India and Russia will face security and terrorism challenges. Furthermore, as regional groups resist the Taliban and its violence, Afghanistan will become a magnet for terror groups from all over the globe who will use the ensuing civil war for their ends. Given this situation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can help the region craft a coherent approach to deal with the Taliban.

SCO can tame a belligerent Taliban

Formed in 2001, the SCO is a regional organization currently comprising eight member states of China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. With Afghanistan, Iran, Belarus, and Mongolia as observer states, the SCO has mainly focused on regional security issues. The SCO and Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) have been at the forefront to fight terrorism, separatism, and regional extremism. As Afghanistan faced a peculiar situation after 2001, the SCO created the Afghanistan Contact Group in 2005, which became defunct with the escalation of violence in West Asia. However, after the US-led NATO started withdrawing troops, the Afghan government viewed the organization as an alternative venue for regional peace and prosperity.

After 2017, the Afghanistan Contact Group was revived and started playing a role in reconciliation and peace through diplomatic channels with both the Taliban and civilian government in Kabul. All SCO members, including New Delhi, after 2017, tried for the much-needed peace, stability, and prosperity of Afghanistan. However, all the regional powers except the Central Asian countries and India used Afghanistan and the Taliban for their parochial geo-strategic and geo-economic interests against the West and each other.

This double game has only worked in favour of the Taliban.

In a recent meeting of the SCO Contact Group on Afghanistan in Dushanbe, all members reaffirmed to settle the conflict in Afghanistan through dialogue and pitched for an inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar also highlighted this consensus through New Delhi's three-point road map on Afghanistan. The SCO member states, including the observer state Iran, need to revisit their divergent policy towards the Taliban in the interest of regional peace and prosperity. If the SCO countries do not converge on the Taliban, the prevalence of peace in Afghanistan as well as in the neighboring countries will be hard to find.

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UN warns of increasing presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan

The United Nations Security Council's Monitoring Committee in its recent report has once again warned of increasing presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, saying that al-Qaeda fighters are active and present in 15 provinces of Afghanistan's eastern, southern and south-eastern parts. The UN report has said that al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is alive and living in Afghanistan. Based on the report, the al-Qaeda leader is sick and under treatment.

The report says that the group has strengthened its positions in and around Kabul, where it conducts most of its attacks, targeting minorities, activists, government employees and personnel of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. Currently, Daesh is active in Nuristan, Badghis, Sar-e-Pul, Baghlan, Badakhshan and Kunduz provinces.

"Despite territorial, leadership, manpower and financial losses during 2020 in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces, Daesh's Khorasan branch, or ISIL-K, has moved into other provinces, including Nuristan, Badghis, Sar-e-Pul, Baghlan, Badakhshan, Kunduz and Kabul, where fighters have formed sleeper cells," the report said.

According to the report, in its efforts to resurge, ISIL-K has prioritized the recruitment and training of new supporters; its leaders also hope to attract intransigent Taliban and other militants rejecting the US – Taliban peace deal and to recruit fighters from the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq and other conflict zones.

The Indian Outlook magazine has also published an article on UNSC's recent report on Afghanistan. The magazine has written that a number of ISIL-K leaders are trying to be cooperative with Taliban and other extremist groups, which is in contradiction to the US – Taliban peace deal signed on 29 Feb 2020.

According to the Indian magazine, the ISIL-K leaders hope they will recruit those fighters and other extremist groups that are rejecting the US – Taliban peace deal.

What worries the current governments in the region today is the increasing capacity of ISIL based on their ideology. Currently, the geography of Central Asia and East Asia is one of the key places for which different scenarios have been designed by ISIL.

Daesh is further focusing on natural financial resources as narcotics; therefore, the terrorist group's fighters most of whom were from the Chechen were operating in the Middle East.

Currently, Daesh is planning to organize and coordinate increasing uprisings in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and in Central Asian countries in general as the group has recruited the Afghan nationals in Afghanistan. We even see that a number of elements of the al-Qaeda terrorist organization are members of the terrorist group in which Tajiks, Uighurs and Uzbeks, all of whom, of course, formed the outer body of ISIL-K in Afghanistan.

In the past two year, ISIL-K has targeted the Shiite population in Afghanistan.

The group has made effort to increase its presence in the country by conducting guerrilla tactics such as suicide attacks, targeted killings, and the use of other new and brutal tactics.

The UNSC's report has come amid of increasing insecurities and surge in Taliban attacks across the country. It seems that the increasing threat of Daesh is serious not only in Afghanistan but also in the entire region. Therefore, all the world should give hands to root out all the terrorist groups including Daesh considered as a big challenge to the entire world.

Lailuma Noori

Will not support military imposed system in Afghanistan: Intl community

KABUL: Representatives from the United States, the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, NATO, Norway and Britain have jointly stressed that they will not support a government imposed military on Afghanistan.

At a meeting on the situation of Afghanistan the representatives said that there was no military solution to the Afghan problem and that they won't support a government imposed by force.

The high-level talks between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban on July 17-18 should focus on key issues in the future, the meeting urged.

The representatives acknowledged that reaching a final political agreement, including an agreement on the constitution, was time-consuming, and that the government and the Taliban needed to reach an understanding on a lasting and comprehensive ceasefire until basic principles for the next government and details of agreement on a transitional government.

They stressed that the formation of a transitional government should include respect for the rights of all Afghans in accordance with Afghanistan's international and anti-terrorist commitments.

The Taliban have also been urged to immediately stop violence and that all parties to the conflict must reduce violence, protect civilians, and respect their obligations under the international humanitarian law.

The special envoys have specifically called on the Taliban to stop military attacks and called on both the government and the Taliban to significantly contribute to the peace process and stressed the urgent need for a ceasefire, besides praising the sacrifices of the Afghan security forces.

"Afghan people have suffered much during the last long conflict and are now concerned by high levels of violence, Taliban attacks and a number of serious human rights abuses," they said in a statement. The meeting has also reaffirmed support for a comprehensive peace process that is Afghan-owned and that represents the full and meaningful participation of women.

"Both sides must negotiate in good faith to reach a justice based and lasting political agreement, and welcomed any mediator to advance the process," said the statement.

In the statement, they announced five conditions to help Afghanistan's next government; inclusive governance, the right to elect political leaders, the protection of human rights, the rights of women, youth and minorities, commitments in the fight against terrorism and the fact that Afghanistan does not become a base for terrorists.

Abiding by the international law, including international humanitarian law, is one of the elements that the countries emphasized in the final peace agreement.

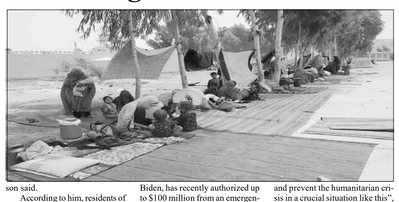
The representatives of the said countries have also stated in their most recent statements that international support for any future government will depend, at least in part, on adherence to five agreements; good governance, commitment to the rule of law and human rights, including the preservation of the achievements of women and girls, the government's firm action to fight corruption, and the fulfillment of the Geneva commitments as conditions for the continuation of the international assistance to Afghanistan. **Suraya Raiszada**

IDPs increasing as war intensified across Afghanistan

The Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have recently increased as the war between Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and the Taliban insurgents intensified Across the country. The IDPs asking Afghan government to provide them humanitarian aids.

"War forces us to leave our homes and shelters with our families for other secure districts, without having anything to eat or wear. We are in a bad situation. We want the government to help us. Otherwise, our situation will get worse every day if the war continued," Akhtar Mohammad, one of the displaced persons told to The Kabul Times.

According to him, Kabul is the only secure place where people could find shelter, hoping that the fighting sides sympathize with people rather than displacing them from their localities. "We're in Kabul to demand the government to take back control of our districts in Takhar province so people can go to their homes back. We expect the Afghan government and international community to listen to us and not let the Taliban keep fighting and push people away from their homes", Mohammad Alim, another displaced person said.



According to him, residents of districts of the northern provinces of Afghanistan are facing humanitarian crisis, hoping the Afghan forces take the control of those areas back from the Taliban.

amid U.S aid announcement to Afghanistan, The Afghan Ministry of Repatriation and Refugees has said that the new aid from the United States will be prioritized to solve the basic needs of the displaced persons and refugees, adding that the new aids will be spent on the internally displaced persons that are increasing day by day. The U.S president, Joe Biden, has recently authorized up to $100 million from an emergency fund to help Afghan refugees and displaced persons.

In a conference on Saturday, the ministry's spokesperson, Reza Baher, announced the aid has not yet been given to the Afghan government, adding that U.S aid will either be spent through the Afghan government or international organizations. He also emphasized that the internally displaced persons will be aided and helped in any case.

"We will use the aids in order to solve the basic and humanitarian needs of the displaced people and prevent the humanitarian crisis in a crucial situation like this", Baher added. According to the statistics of the Afghan Ministry of Repatriation and Refugees, in 2021, 42 thousand families (approximately 300.000 people) have been displaced due to the ongoing wars between the Afghan security forces and the Taliban in different districts of Afghanistan.

Over the course of the past few weeks, the number of internally displaced persons is increasing due to violence. The situation is expected to be under control of the Afghan government within coming weeks. **Kohistani**