Abdullah: Taliban takeover 'impossible' in Afghanistan

As US President Joe Biden prepares for the formal withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, the man responsible for peace talks between the rampant Taliban and the official Afghan government is not entirely optimistic about the country's future.

Abdullah Abdullah, an Afghan official who leads the High Council for National Reconciliation, told CNN in an exclusive interview that talks between the two parties had made "very little progress" and were happening at a "very slow pace".

Speaking from his residence in Kabul, the Afghan capital, Abdullah acknowledged that the Taliban has "gained momentum" following weeks of the militants releasing propaganda videos from military bases, claiming that Afghan forces had fled.

The Taliban has accused the Afghan government of not engaging with the intra-Afghan peace negotiations in Doha. "Our intention was to make some progress, but the opposite side was not interested in the peace talks," Taliban political office spokesman Mohammad Naeem said in a video statement on the intra-Afghan negotiations, which was released yesterday and obtained by CNN.

Naeem accused the Afghan government's negotiating team of being incomplete during May's peace talks in Doha, due to some of its members being "physically present in the battlefield" and "busy in war."

Last week, Deborah Lyons, the UN's special envoy on Afghanistan, said that 50 of Afghanistan's 370 districts had fallen to Taliban militants since May.

While Abdullah didn't directly blame the Taliban's gains on the upcoming US withdrawal, he told CNN that "had it been our choice ... we would have thought differently."

When asked about the Taliban's future prospects of overthrowing the Afghan government, he said "it will not happen," though there was no "guarantee" that at some point in the future, the country wouldn't become a haven for terrorists, as it had been before the US war on terror began. "The Taliban have failed. They promised that they will delink with al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. We don't have many signs of that. So that's the danger for us, as well as for the region." When asked about a US intelligence report which said the Afghan government could fall within six months, Abdullah said that it "doesn't look like that for me," but that "it should be a warning that has to be taken seriously." Abdullah hailed Biden's commitment of $3.3 billion dollars to support Afghanistan's security, but admitted that "it will not address all of the challenges in the country."

Beyond the risk posed by the Taliban, Abdullah said that "unity amongst the political leaders" of Afghanistan was needed if a peaceful solution is to be found and a collapse in government avoided.

Despite the relatively downbeat tone, Abdullah did tell CNN that he didn't believe the country could go back to how it was in 2001, before the US started what would become its longest military campaign.

"Too much has been gained. There might be temporary setbacks here and there, which is what we are witnessing but part of those gains are irreversible."

The US could complete its formal troop withdrawal from Afghanistan within days, according to multiple US officials, leaving only up to 1,000 troops in the country to help secure the US embassy in Kabul and the city's airport. Abdullah joined Afghan President Ashraf Ghani for talks last week at the White House with Biden. According to a White House readout, US and Afghan leaders agreed that despite the US withdrawal, a "strong bilateral partnership" would continue, with "enduring" US support for the Afghan people and for the country's security forces.

However, alarm bells are ringing over what may befall the country's people in the coming months as the Taliban offensive gathers pace and Afghan security forces are left without the support of US and NATO air power.

Following Biden's announcement in April that most US forces would be gone by September 11, NATO said it would start its own withdrawal of troops by May 1, to be completed "within a few months." Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Tuesday that the US withdrawal would not necessarily mean the end of NATO's Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, though some NATO allies have already begun pulling out their troops.

Once complete, the US withdrawal will mark the end of its "forever war" in Afghanistan -- a conflict that began in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks on US soil and has inflicted a heavy cost in the two decades since. Biden's decision in April followed on from an earlier undertaking by former US President Donald Trump that his country's forces would leave this year, despite concerns from senior advisers over the security of American diplomats there.

The Kabul Times

Re-connect with China to revive Afghanistan's economy

By: Shokrullah Amiri

Perhaps one of the misfortunes of Afghanistan is that it does not have a passage to China. If it had one, the political and military situations in Afghanistan would have been so much different today. And the left-wing Afghan movement, leaning to China, would not have disappeared in the 1980s.

China and Afghanistan share a 46-mile border with a Wakhjir Pass (in China referred to South Wakhjir Pass) as the only possibly navigable Pass. At an altitude of 5,000 meters and with a 3.5 hours' time difference, this is the sharpest official change of clocks of any international border (Insider). However, the Wakhjir Pass is not an official crossing point. There is no road access reaching the Pass on the Afghan side, although the Pass was part of the Silk Road.

Few signs are floating up as Beijing seems interested in discussing China's direct connection to Afghanistan through Wakhan and Pamir, at least in theory and discourse for now. According to 8AM-Daily, the Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan, Wang Yu, said at a conference on May 9, 2021, that the country was consulting with the Afghan government on the "Belt and Road Initiative" to revive part of the Silk Road in Afghanistan through Wakhan Corridor.

Citing this positive news, the Afghan government immediately set in concrete to build a 50 km high way in rough terrain to access China by road for the first time in history. The project will cost $5 million and will take a year and a half to complete. The initial phase will include graveling and adding asphalt before connecting it with a road already in use in China. This highway starts from the Badakhshan Province extends to the end of the Wakhan district, which almost reaches the Chinese border. It is clear that the project looks far-sighted, but the nature of the plan to re-connect Afghanistan to China is paramount and exciting to all Afghans.

Afghanistan was not initially part of the Belt and Road Initiative due to security concerns. Nonetheless, that policy soon changed as Beijing decided to connect Afghanistan into its broader plans for the region through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

According to former minister M.H. Qayoumi, the movement of goods, energy, and data are three areas in which Afghanistan has a unique advantage under the BRI reflected in the 2016 memorandum of understanding both countries signed. Thus far, Afghanistan and China have undertaken a few projects, such as the Digital Silk Road, the Sino-Afghanistan Special Railway Transportation Project, the Five Nations Railway Project, and a Kabul–Urumqi air corridor. Afghanistan's direct access to China, in addition to facilitating trade and connecting Chinese manufacturers directly to the Afghan market, increases the importance of Kabul's relationship with Beijing, and security in Afghanistan becomes a priority.

According to WITS, China is the second-largest trading partner for Afghanistan ($1.19 billion). The assumption is that the trade volume will possibly increase threefold ($3.5 billion) annually– if there is direct access to China.

Afghanistan's natural resources such as Lithium, Iron, Copper, and Cobalt are estimated to have a value of $3 trillion. These natural resources can turn into a great source of FDI and significantly contribute as a great source of raw material for all BRI members and immediately to Chinese factories if there is direct access.

Afghanistan is geopolitically located between South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the Middle East and can link all these regions. It is particularly true for the transit of energy-rich Central Asia to energy-poor South Asia. In addition, Afghanistan itself has the potential of producing up to 23,000 megawatts of hydropower for exports. There is an Afghan Pine-nuts exports success story and others that could come in from this sector.

If China leads the world in infrastructure development, accessing the Wakhjir Pass shall not remain difficult for both states as long as distance matters in trade and transit.

The growing security concerns triggered by the U.S.-NATO troop's withdrawal from Afghanistan are understandable. In this context playing a more active role in Afghanistan's development seems challenging, but opening a two-way crossing for goods shall always remain as inception.

The author is an experienced consultant and a former head of private sector development in the office of the president of Afghanistan. The article first appeared in CGTN and reflects the author's opinion.

Girls' education has taken root in Afghanistan

By: Shabana Basij-Rasikh

On May 8, in Kabul, the city I call home, murderers bombed a girls' high school and killed more than 80 people, the majority of them female students who were members of Afghanistan's ethnic Hazara minority. This is a sentence that, even now, I have difficulty writing.

But having written it, let me write this:

In the hours after the attack, teenage boys from across Kabul lined the halls of our hospitals, sitting quietly and patiently on floors as they waited to donate blood. In the days and weeks after the attack, wounded girls spoke words of defiance from their hospital beds, vowing that they would not be deterred from their studies as their classmates, girls who had escaped physical injury, announced their intentions to continue their schooling.

And on a hillside outside of Kabul, in a cemetery overlooking our city, Hazara parents came to bury their daughters. They laid their girls inside the earth, and on the ground these grieving mothers and fathers wrote a single word in white chalk.

The word was "education."

I tell you this because I want you to understand when I say that education, particularly girls' education, is the lever that will raise Afghanistan above extremism and into a peaceful and prosperous future, I'm not speaking of a belief I hold alone.

In 2019, a nationwide survey of the Afghan people found 87 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "women should have equal opportunities like men in education." COVID stood in the way of follow-up surveys this year and last, but I've no doubt that this 87 percent figure has grown; indeed, of the roughly 9 million children in school in Afghanistan today, as many as 3.5 million – roughly 40 percent – are girls. The profundity of these statistics comes into full view when you realize that 20 years ago today, the number of Afghan girls formally attending school was precisely zero.

I was one of those girls who, officially, didn't exist. I grew up in Kabul in the 1990s and the early 2000s, at a time when girls' education had been declared illegal and girls' schools had been closed down. So, I, along with many other girls, attended secret schools across our city. A network of women – extraordinarily brave women – opened their homes to us, and we packed tight into their living rooms as these women became our teachers, giving us the education we'd been denied, giving us hope.

Education transforms lives and societies. It's transformed my life and it's transformed my Afghan society these past 20 years. Today, I operate the School of Leadership, Afghanistan (SOLA). It is my country's first and only private boarding school for girls, and we enroll nearly 100 students. The story I'm about to tell you is one that I hope you'll remember as we move into what will unquestionably be a long and difficult summer.

During SOLA's most recent admissions season, a man came to visit our Kabul campus. This man, who must remain nameless, is a prominent member of his village – a village where one of our students lives. She's been with us for several years, and not only is she the only SOLA girl who lives in the village; she's the only formally educated girl who lives there. When she's home from school, she offers tutoring to her sisters and to other girls who want to learn. She's become well-known in the village for doing this.

She's the reason this man came to see us

He told us that he has several daughters. One of them is married. Another, who's not quite 18, is already engaged. None of his daughters have received formal education. But he asked if there was a way for at least one of his younger daughters to apply to SOLA – because if she applied, and if she was accepted, he knew that she'd come home and teach her sisters. He knew she'd come home and teach other girls.

He told us that it would take just one of his daughters to make this difference in her community. Just one daughter.

Just one girl

One girl who will step into an already-spinning virtuous circle, a circle of educated women teaching girls who grow to become educated women who teach even more girls. It's a circle that Afghan women have spent the past 20 years setting into motion, standing unafraid on the shoulders of those giants who opened their living rooms for us when we were children.

Memory is a powerful thing. The word written in white chalk on a hillside overlooking my city just a few weeks ago has washed away – and yet its promise endures. We Afghans are and always have been the authors of our own future, one in which women can get married later in life, have smaller and healthier families, earn higher salaries, and invest the majority of their income back into their families.

Education makes this future possible. Education is the intervention that helps eradicate poverty, overcome extremism, and plant the seeds of new beginnings deep into soil where they can never be uprooted. Summer is here, and autumn is coming. September 11 brings with it a change of seasons. For all of us in Afghanistan, it will be a time of challenge. But I will never lose sight of those seeds. I am only one of the many Afghan women and men, young and old, who have worked and sacrificed to place those seeds all across our country. And in the changing of the seasons, we will watch them grow.

Importance of people mobilization against Taliban and government responsibility

KABUL: The issue of people mobilization against the Taliban is still going viral on social media, after anti-government militants intensified offensives, taking a number of military bases and districts in some provinces of the country.

Following the massive attacks from insurgents, the security institutions said they had to withdraw troops from some volatile regions and outposts to prevent civilians' casualties. But, thousands of people, including women and elders, across the country have recently taken arms and joined the frontline of war to support the country's security and defense forces.

The security ministries have also assured that the massive people uprising to support the government forces and defend their territories would go ahead within the security entities and they are now launching anti-militants operations, in coordination with the army and police troops. Scores of fallen districts have been retaken from the Taliban during the past few weeks, through joint coordination from local armed people with full support from the national security and defense forces.

Hasht-e-Subh Daily (8am.af) in one of its articles touched on the importance of the people mobilization against the Taliban group asking the government for full armament and equipment of the people in war on growing insurgency. Safeguarding territorial integrity and survival of the country, under the current conditions, requires national mobilization and the heroism of the people of Afghanistan, a movement, the paper suggests a fundamental way to get rid of the horror of the group.

"People resistance against insurgency without discrimination of gender, tribe, religion and zone can provide undeniable victory on the heinous and atrocious group," the paper noted.

The private paper has pointed to the government responsibility that would help defeat the outfit, as the people mobilization against the group, indicates their abhorrence against the idea of Talibanization all over the country.

The paper counted some government's responsibilities at this point to help the uprising get success, saying the local uprising should be managed within the regional army and recognized within the official framework of the country's national army.

"The government is expected to understand well the people uprising, as the continuation and survival of the government of Afghanistan depends on the wide people support," the paper concluded. **The Kabul Times**