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## In Afghanistan, it's a simple power struggle between US-led and Pakistan-led players

BY SALMAN RAFI

MARCH 13, 2016

While the Afghan war continues to be overwhelmingly projected as a 'Taliban-led insurgency' against the incumbent government, it has greatly assumed the color of a power struggle among various actors.



*By refusing to join Afghan peace talks, Taliban may be indirectly seeking a bigger share in political power*

Taliban are no more a homogenous group. Nor are the various states involved in the so-called peace process pursuing identical objectives. With various Taliban factions claiming 'leadership' of the movement and holding differing positions vis-à-vis the peace process, the question of who to talk to has become extremely important.

Divided as they are, the Taliban are still fighting the war. However, they realize that the war cannot go on for an indefinite period and that some sort of compromise has to be reached to secure space within political and economic structures of Afghanistan.

Despite some recent positive overtures by the Taliban regarding participation in the quadrilateral peace initiative, internal fragmentation is turning out to be more of a problem than a step towards the ultimate downfall of the group as the leading contender for political power.

That the question of who to talk to or who may be willing to talk has become super-important is evident from the way Pakistan offered its services to identify those willing to engage in dialogue. As it stands, the Taliban's biggest faction officially refused to engage in a dialogue in a statement released last week.

The statement said the Taliban leadership "has not authorized anyone to participate in this meeting". It reaffirmed their erstwhile position vis-à-vis the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. The statement also made it clear that no meaningful peace process could take place unless foreign troops are completely withdrawn.

While this statement seems to have 'killed' the peace process, a close look at the ground situation would explain why it was released at this juncture.

Although the situation is tricky on the ground, some observers associate the Taliban's rapid success to the support they continue to receive from some 'foreign powers', be it military or diplomatic. And no country can extend such support better than Pakistan.

Ironically, among the four members of the quadrilateral group, only Pakistan went to oppose setting any pre-conditions for the Taliban to engage in the peace process. Such a position is in marked harmony to Pakistan's opposition to the continuity of military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban.

Pakistan has itself been fighting the Taliban for many years and this fight has only intensified in the past two years or so. These differing positions vis-à-vis Pakistani and Afghan Taliban indicate Pakistan's unabated 'good relations' with the Afghan Taliban (read: Pakistan Foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz's rare admission in the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations regarding having some 'influence' among the Afghan Taliban) and the way Pakistan and China want to use the Taliban's position to secure complete withdrawal of western forces from Afghanistan. Hence, the Taliban's insistence on securing complete withdrawal as the pre-condition for any dialogue.

The presence of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan goes against critical interests of Pakistan and China, especially the latter's Silk Road projects. On the other hand, it is the very presence of the U.S. military forces in Afghanistan that can ensure the continuity of the incumbent government. The Afghan security forces are falling against the Taliban's extremely organized attacks.

Only three weeks ago, the Afghan government had to pull out forces from the strategically important province of Helmand due to their inability to push out the Taliban.

“Now that the government has withdrawn its forces from this district, we will see Kajaki, Gereshk and Sangin collapsing very soon,” said deputy provincial council member Abdul Majid Akhundzada. The Taliban, on the other hand, said it had captured armored personnel carriers, bulldozers and other equipment abandoned in Roshan Tower and nine other checkpoints.

In this context, the Taliban’s last week refusal to participate in the dialogue process makes full sense. Pakistan and China cannot strategically afford any further U.S. military presence, nor can the Taliban themselves. The Taliban, Pakistan and China are, therefore, on the same page as far as their position vis-à-vis ending the war is concerned.

The U.S., for its own stakes, cannot make complete withdrawal. Recent developments in the Middle East have only made it even more necessary for it to maintain the existing troop level or increase it as and when needed. Military presence in Afghanistan is vital for the U.S. to maintain balance of power in the Middle East and Central Asian regions where an insurgent Russia continues to stamp its own influence.

The ground situation, as it stands, can no more be simply described as the ‘U.S. Afghan war.’ It has become a simple power struggle between the U.S.-led and Pakistan-led state and non-state actors. For China and Pakistan, the war is about securing maximum political power for the Taliban in the Afghan State and use that presence to maximize their geo-economic objectives. The Taliban, on the whole, do support this program and this is what they aim at achieving through repeated attacks on Afghan security forces.

However, given the officially admitted influence Pakistan enjoys over the Taliban, the Taliban’s statements cannot be taken too literally. As one official from Pakistan’s foreign ministry informed, the Taliban’s refusal to participate in the dialogue process is more of an indication of the bigger share in political power they want to have rather than a mere rejection of the possibility of ending the war through dialogue.