

## Afghanistan, on a slow fuse

The attack by the Taliban gunmen at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul last weekend was a grim reminder of the deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan. The siege at the hotel lasted more than 12 hours and claimed 22 victims, including 14 foreigners, before the gunmen were neutralised.

Days earlier, in an interview with CBS, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had said that Afghanistan is “under siege”, with “21 international terrorist groups operating in this country” and “factories producing suicide bombers”. He acknowledged that without U.S. support, the Afghan national army would not “last more than six months” and the government would collapse. This is a bleak assessment indeed coming from an insider who has seen the situation unravelling.

Over the last 16 years, civilian casualties have mounted to 31,000, increasing progressively to over 4,000 a year. The Afghan security forces are losing nearly 7,000 men a year, an attrition rate difficult to sustain and twice the number of casualties that the international coalition forces suffered from 2001 till 2014 when they ceased combat operations and embarked on Operation Resolute Support to “advise, train and assist” the Afghan forces.

The U.S. has contributed significant blood and treasure, spending over a trillion dollars (considerably more if long-term veterans’ care is included) and losing more than 2,400 lives in pursuing the longest war in its history. Of this amount, about \$120 billion has been spent on reconstruction and development, more than the inflation-adjusted expenditure under the Marshall Plan for rebuilding Western Europe after World War II. The rest of the international community has also contributed. India is a significant partner, having spent over \$2 billion on humanitarian assistance, infrastructure building and human resource development, with an additional billion dollars committed.

U.S. President Donald Trump is determined to bring about a change in American policy and while authorising a limited increase in U.S. troop presence by 4,000 soldiers, has also been critical of Pakistan. On January 1 he tweeted: “The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!” The tweet has been followed by a suspension of all military assistance to Pakistan. This has resulted in resentment in Pakistan but whether this will bring about a change in its army’s behaviour remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, the legitimacy of the National Unity Government (NUG) consisting of Mr. Ghani as President and Abdullah Abdullah as Chief Executive (a newly created position) is increasingly under question. Cobbled together after the disputed 2014 election with political backing from the Obama-Kerry team, the Chief Executive’s position was to be legitimised through a constitutional amendment creating the post of Prime Minister, which has not happened. Without a clear division of power and responsibility, relations between the President and his Chief Executive have remained strained. With presidential elections due next year, it is clear that the NUG experiment will not be repeated. It is hardly surprising that since end-2016, there are growing questions about the legitimacy of the present arrangement.

Meanwhile parliamentary elections, which were originally due in 2015, are yet to be held. Electoral reforms to ensure greater transparency have not been implemented. The decision to issue new election cards based on biometric voter registration has remained stillborn. The seven-member

Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the five-member Electoral Complaints Commission were finally constituted in November 2016 after prolonged political wrangling between the President and the Chief Executive but the chairman of the IEC was sacked recently. While July 7 has been announced as the date for Wolesi Jirga (lower house) elections, most Afghans are certain that elections this year are highly unlikely.

Given that elections are funded by the international community and one election is likely to cost \$250 million, it is highly probable that the presidential and parliamentary elections will be clubbed together in the middle of 2019, for reasons of economy. However, whether these elections can be held at all will depend upon security. Currently, Taliban controls over 50 districts while another 120 districts are contested, leaving more than 200 districts where the Afghan government exercises control. In other words, the current security situation will not permit elections to be held in nearly 45% of the territory of Afghanistan. This is enough to raise doubts about the legitimacy of any electoral outcome. It is true that the Taliban cannot secure a military victory as long as the U.S. is present, but it is equally true that their ability to disrupt peace, prevent reconstruction and hamper elections continues to grow.

In December, Mr. Ghani announced that he had accepted the resignation of Balkh Governor Atta Mohammad Noor. Mr. Atta issued a denial, refused to step down and declared that he would arrest the new appointee Engineer Dawood if he entered the province. Mr. Atta is an influential leader of the Jamiat-i-Islami and had been in his current position for 13 years, emerging as the regional strong man. In earlier times, he had backed Dr. Abdullah but now he calls him 'a snake'. When Kabul announced that his signatures were invalid and no provincial payments including salaries to officials would be forthcoming, Mr. Atta coolly declared that he would take control of the customs revenues from the Hairatan land port on the Uzbek border. He has been addressing public rallies questioning the authority of the government in Kabul.

The message has not been lost on other regional strong men. Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek leader, in Turkey since last May, has supported Mr. Atta. Mr. Dostum was forced into voluntary exile amid investigations into allegations that he had arranged for the kidnapping of a political opponent who had then been raped and tortured by him and his guards. Further west, Ismail Khan, a former minister in the Karzai cabinet and governor of Herat, can take charge of the lucrative trade route with Iran. In Kandahar, police chief Abdul Razik, who has been in his position since 2011, has resisted attempts to shift him. To his credit, he has delivered a measure of security in Kandahar, in sharp contrast to neighbouring Helmand. He also controls the Spin Boldak crossing into Balochistan. In doing so, he relies as much on his loyal Achakzai militia as on the official police.

The last two years have witnessed a significant shift in Russia's position. While it has denied U.S. reports of having supplied weapons to the Taliban, Russia acknowledges that it has opened up communication channels and is prepared to both provide a venue and facilitate peace talks. At the recently concluded Raisina Dialogue in Delhi, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Igor Morgulov described the Islamic State as the principal threat to Afghanistan and the region. He questioned as to how its fighters had been brought into northern Afghanistan in unmarked helicopters when the airspace is under U.S. control. The U.S. flatly rejects such insinuations and questioned Russian and Iranian motives in weakening the Kabul government by giving recognition to the Taliban.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, there was an international consensus on rebuilding Afghanistan and ensuring that it should not become a source of regional and global instability. That consensus has eroded over the last 16 years. Further, the Afghans who had returned in large numbers determined to reclaim their country and rebuild it are frustrated at the steady decline in both security and governance. The newly created Afghan institutions are unable to address the challenges without significant international support, both financial and material. However, with a

breakdown in the international consensus, it may not be long before the slow fuse reaches ignition point. And 2019 may well become the critical year.

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