

THE TALIBAN PROBLEM: ON THE AFGHAN CRISIS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

When the U.S.-Taliban talks collapsed last week, the insurgent group threatened to step up attacks in Afghanistan. It made good on its pledge on Tuesday using two suicide bombers who killed at least 48 people by targeting a rally being addressed by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani north of Kabul, and also the capital. These attacks are yet another warning of the security challenges Afghanistan faces, especially when it is gearing up to the September 28 presidential poll. Both the 2014 presidential election and last year's parliamentary poll were violently disturbed by the Taliban. This time, the group has asked civilians to stay away from political gatherings, making all those who participate in the political process potential targets. Rising attacks against Afghan civilians make the Taliban's claim that it is fighting on behalf of them against the foreign invaders hollow. The Taliban did not suspend its terror campaign even while holding talks with the U.S. in Qatar. In July, when the talks were under way, Amrullah Saleh, Mr. Ghani's running mate and the former intelligence chief, escaped a serious assassination attempt. Now that the talks have collapsed, a vengeful Taliban is unleashing itself on the Afghans.

The Afghan government seems determined to go ahead with the election. It has deployed some 70,000 troops to protect over 5,000 polling stations. But the threat from the Taliban is so grave that the President is largely addressing campaign rallies through Skype. Even if the elections are over without further attacks, the Taliban problem will remain. Afghanistan needs a solution to this crisis and regional and international players should help the new government. The fundamental problem with the U.S.-Taliban peace process was that it excluded the Kabul government at the insistence of the insurgents, which itself was a major compromise by the U.S. On the other side, the Taliban was not even ready to cease hostilities. A peace agreement dictated by the Taliban won't sustain. The Taliban can't be allowed to have a free terror run either. A permanently unstable Afghanistan and an insurgent group growing further in strength is not good news for any nation, including Afghanistan's neighbours. Afghanistan needs a comprehensive peace push in which all stakeholders, including the government, the U.S., the Taliban and regional players will have a say. The U.S. should continue to back the Kabul government, put pressure on Pakistan to crack down on the Afghan Taliban, double down its counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and invite regional players such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India and China to take part in the diplomatic efforts. In other words, the Taliban should be forced to return to talks. The U.S.-Taliban peace talks may have collapsed. But it need not be the end of the road for finding a settlement for the Afghan crisis.

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