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Preface

The Afghan forces suffered heavy casualties after the Taliban carried out a tactical attack on an army base in Mazar-e-Sharif. The assault was highly reflected in national and international media, and the Afghan President announced one day of mourning.

Although it is not the first attack which results in a high number of casualties for the Afghan forces but yet how did it occur? And what will be the impacts of the Afghan government's peace and war policy in this situation? In this regard, you would read in the first part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS).

In the second part of the analysis, you would read about the relations between the NUG and the new US administration and the future US policy towards Afghanistan. Since the past several days, two senior US officials have traveled to Afghanistan which is said to be part of the Trump administration's revision of US policy towards Afghanistan. What is the current situation of relations between the NUG and the Trump administration? What message did the US Secretary of Defense's visit to Kabul carry? And what do the Afghan government and the US want in the future? These and other similar questions are analyzed in the second part of the analysis.

The bloody incident of Balkh and the government's policy of peace and war



The Taliban carried out a deadly attack on 209th Shaheen Corps last week. Based on the recent investigations of the Afghan Ministry of Defense, in this assault 140 soldiers are dead, and more than 60 are wounded. Shaheen Corps is one of the major army bases in the Northern Afghanistan. 30 thousand US troops were also present in the base while the attack occurred.

The attack happens at a time that the US's policy towards Afghanistan is not announced yet, but it seems as if the US will, once again, stress on its military role in this country. That is why, before the Balkh incident, the US dropped the "mother of all bombs" in Achin district of Nangarhar province and then the US National Security Advisor General McMaster, on an unexpected trip, visited Afghanistan and later the US Secretary of Defense General Jim Mattis visited Afghanistan in an unannounced voyage to Kabul. During the US Secretary of Defense's visit to Kabul, the Commander of foreign forces in Afghanistan General John Nicolson said in a press conference that Russia supports the Taliban, particularly by providing weaponry to them.

Why did the attack on Shaheen Corps occur? What were the impacts of this assault? What were the responses to this attack? And how was the Afghan government's policy of peace and war in the past four years? These are questions that analyzed here.

The assault on 209th Shaheen Corps and some questions that it raised

On 21 April 2017, around one o'clock the Taliban, dressed in military uniforms and riding dusty police vehicles, attacked on Shaheen Corps in Dehdadi district of Balkh province. The attackers had injected serums to some of the Taliban members in the car and had manipulated the security forces that they had come from a war zone of Faryab for treatment.

In the first two security gates only their identity cards were checked, and when in the third gate they were asked to submit their weapons, the fight began. It was the bloodiest fight for the Afghan security forces ever in the past 16 years.

The spokesperson of the Taliban Zabiullah Mujahid, on his Twitter page, claimed responsibility for the attack and published the names and photographs of the attackers. The spokesman of the Taliban called the assault vengeance for the killing of Taliban governors in Kunduz and Baghlan provinces and said that it was the beginning of their spring operations.

But there exist three questions here:

First; why the number of insider attacks has increased since the past several years? If one evaluates the attacks carried out against the Afghan forces only in the past several months, one will find out that in these attacks there existed inside help for the attackers for instance in installing bombs inside the furniture in the guesthouse in Kandahar, the attack on a hospital in Kabul, and the assault on 209th Shaheen Corps in Mazar-e-Sharif. According to the Taliban, four people from inside had coordinated with them in Balkh's attack.

Second; the attack on Shaheen Corps shows irresponsibility of the security staff and also indicates the poor functionality of the system. For instance, the cars were not checked in the first two security gates, the unidentified vehicles were allowed inside (without transferring the patients to any ambulance of the corps), etc. Furthermore, according to some reports by the media, there were some intelligence reports that the base would come under attack at around noon time. Despite all these intelligence reports why have they failed to prevent this attack?

Third; after the “mother of all bombs” was dropped in Achin District, some former officials of the government had anticipated a bloody assault, and then the attack on Shaheen Corps occurred. But after the Taliban claimed responsibility for the assault, there remains only one question whether was the way paved for the attack by national or foreign forces?

Assault on Shaheen Corps; reactions and impacts

This attack affected the political and security sectors in the country. On the one hand the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who had a soft stance against the Taliban and would call them “brothers”, decided that he would no longer call them brothers. On the other hand, the heads of corps in the army were replaced, and Minister of Defense and Chief of Army Staff resigned.

In addition, the attack influenced the morale of the Afghan forces and strengthened their incentive to fight against the armed groups, which is something that, in no ways, would help for the long term peace.

The NUG’s policy of peace and war

Since the formation of the NUG, the Afghan government has made efforts to bring peace through foreign policy. The Afghan government wanted to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table by China and Pakistan. In this regard, the Afghanistan-Pakistan-China-Taliban talks, Murree talks, and Quadrilateral Talks were held. In the first process, the Taliban denied their participation, in the second they could not deny, and in the third they refused to participate.

Hence, after two and a half years, this approach of the NUG to bring peace is assumed a failure. During the quadrilateral talks, when Taliban’s participation seemed unlikely, the NUG started negotiations with Hezb-e-Islami. The peace talks with Hezb-e-Islami succeeded, and the outcome was a peace deal with this party.

After the peace deal with Hezb-e-Islami, the media released reports about secret meetings between the Taliban and the Afghan government in Qatar. However,

after that, it became several months, and the Afghan government has not undertaken any step regarding the peace process nor has it changed its policy. In this regard the Afghan government is confused.

On the other hand, since the past several months, instead of peace policy, the Afghan government has undertaken the policy of war against its armed oppositions. For instance, the government conducted large-scale operations against the Taliban (which also killed the Taliban's shadow governors of Kunduz and Baghlan) and used hostile rhetoric against them. In this regard, last month the Afghan National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar said in Jalalabad that, "We will fight against the Taliban as much as we can and we will force them to peace."

Despite the aggressive morale of the NUG, the Afghan government does not have any achievements in the battlefield and quite on the contrary attacks on the Afghan forces have increased, the assault on 209th Shaheen Corps is a major reason for the failure of the war policy.

Besides that, after the assassination of Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the Taliban do not have a clear policy about peace either. It seems that, in this regard, the Taliban are fragmented among themselves, and they do not have a certain strategy regarding peace.

Given the peace and war strategy of the Afghan government, one can say that the Afghan government has also lost its way and is pursuing a policy that would bring neither peace nor security to the country. If both the Afghan government and the Taliban wants to enter the peace talks by force or from a strong position, this process of peace would never start, as was the case in the past several years.

The new US administration and the future of Kabul-Washington relations



The US Secretary of Defense General Jim Mattis in an unexpected trip visited Kabul on 24 April 2017. He said that in this voyage he aimed to assess the security situation in Afghanistan. In a joint press conference with the top NATO commander in Afghanistan General John Nicolson, Mattis said that 2017 would be a challenging year for the Afghan forces but pledged that the US would stand on their side.

Since Trump came to power in the US, Mattis is the second senior US official to visit Afghanistan. Before this, the US National Security Advisor had visited Afghanistan and in his meetings with the Afghan officials had stressed on the continuation of the US cooperation and support for Afghanistan.

The relations between the National Unity Government (NUG) of Afghanistan and the Trump administration, the objective of Mattis's visit to Kabul and the Future of Kabul-Washington ties are issues that are analyzed here.

The NUG's relations with the Trump administration

After the 2004 US Presidential elections, it was for the first time that the two leading candidates did not clear their stance regarding Afghanistan and even during their campaigns they did not bring up the issue of Afghanistan in their discussions. Therefore, both the Afghan government and countries in the region were concerned whether how the US is planning to deal with Afghanistan.

After Trump's victory in the elections, the Afghan leaders congratulated him and demanded the expansion of bilateral relations between the two countries. Later, in a phone conversation, besides inviting Ghani to visit the US, Donald Trump stressed that the US would continue to support Afghanistan. Ghani in his turn demanded the US support from Afghanistan in various fields.

In addition, the participation of the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs in the ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS, hosted by the US in Washington, was also a significant step in relations between Kabul and the Trump administration.¹ In this meeting, Afghanistan called on the US to send more troops in Afghanistan to combat ISIS in this country.

After the installation of the new government in the US, The US National Security Advisor General McMaster was the first high-ranking US official who visited Afghanistan. In his visit to Kabul, McMaster met the Afghan President, Chief Executive and the Afghan National Security Advisor and discussed the expansion of bilateral relations, fight against the armed groups, and regional issues. Besides assuring the continuation of the US support from Afghanistan, McMaster stressed that bringing reforms in the Afghan administrations were important and that the Afghan government had to appoint committed individuals in the administrations.

²

Although it became three months since the beginning of Trump's Presidency, which is a very short time to evaluate bilateral relations, it seems that relations between Kabul and Washington has become more active in the second half of this

¹ The Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <http://mfa.gov.af/fa/news/foriegn-minister-participate-in-defeat-isis-world-coalition-ministerial-meeting>

² The Afghan Presidential Palace :<http://president.gov.af/fa/66600>

period compared to its first half, especially after the US Secretary of Defense paid a visit to Kabul. However, the Trump Administration has newly begun its work and has not yet revised the US policy towards Afghanistan.

The US Secretary of Defense visits Kabul

The US Secretary of Defense pays a voyage to Afghanistan while in the first weeks of 2016 (solar year) Afghanistan witnessed some significant events. First, the utilization of the “mother of all bombs” in the Achin District of Nangarhar Province which was apparently aimed to destroy ISIL hideouts³. Second, the deadly attack on the 209 Shaheen Corps in Dehdadi District of Balkh Province, which left 140 Afghan soldiers dead and dozens wounded, and the Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack. The US Secretary of Defense’s visit to Kabul coincided with the resignation of the Afghan Minister of Defense as well.

In his meeting with the Afghan President, Jim Mattis discussed the security issues in Afghanistan and the region, fight against the armed groups, and cooperation between the two countries in various fields. Mattis said that “Our mission in Afghanistan is not terminated and we will remain alongside the Afghan people and government.” He also added that “Our Presence in Afghanistan is for good and we have to coordinate our diplomacy and military issues with each other.” In addition, he demanded from the Afghan government to undertake measure in areas of reforms, good governance and struggle against corruption. The Afghan President also emphasized that he is committed to reforms and the fight against corruption. He demanded the expansion and improvement of relations between the two countries. It is said that in this meeting the two sides also discussed the issue of increasing US troops in Afghanistan.

In a joint conference with the Commander of “Resolute Support”, Mattis said that both the US and the world would continue to support Afghanistan in its fight against armed groups, but added that 2017 would be a challenging year for the Afghan forces. He also stated that the US was concerned about Russia’s support

³ However the “mother of all bombs” is said to have been used to destroy tunnels and caves that ISIL used but there exists other opinions behind its aims which are brought in 203 issue of the Weekly Analysis of CSRS : <http://csrskabul.com/pa/?p=3514>

of the Taliban and added that they would deal with Russia through political and diplomatic channels, but if Russians acted in violation of international law, the US would confront them.

The US Secretary of Defense visits Kabul while the US, on the one hand, has almost finished approving a policy for Afghanistan and, on the other hand, is concerned about Russia and Iran's role in Afghanistan, particularly their relations with the Taliban. Therefore the US is trying to improve its ties with Kabul and thus wants to control Russia and Iran's activities in Afghanistan.

The future of Kabul-Washington relations

Although between 2001 and 2008 the Afghan government had better relations with the US republicans, but this time the republicans have seized power in a different situation and with a different person as President. On the one hand, the US's political climate and US's relations with the international community have entered a new phase, and, on the other hand, Trump's contradictory remarks regarding various issues, and his unpredictability and unclear policy especially regarding Afghanistan are issues that would affect the future relations between the US and Afghanistan.

The Afghan government relies on the US support and, therefore, after the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan, this government immediately signed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US, and this issue is assumed one of the reasons why the Afghan peace process has reached a deadlock. On the one hand, the Taliban are opposed to the foreign military bases in Afghanistan and on the other hand countries in the region (for instance Russia and Iran) are against the existence of the US bases in the country. However, the Afghan government, to some extent, is concerned about the Trump administration's policy towards Afghanistan because, given Trump's knowledge and experience regarding Afghanistan and its related issues, his policy towards Afghanistan is likely to change at any time.

While the NUG sees the US support and the BSA vital for its survival, because no other country would be willing to assist billions of dollars to the Afghan government in areas of security, economy and other aspects, in order to end war

and peace with the Taliban, the Afghan government have to gamble on these relations and supports, something that currently does not seem possible for the Afghan government. Therefore, the NUG, both for its survival and continuation of war with its armed opposition, may in any ways possible try to attract the US support and maintain warm relations with this country.

On the other hand, the US National Security Advisor, whose trip to Kabul was part of the revision of the US strategy regarding Afghanistan, after his return to Washington has said that given the decreased military engagement of the US in Afghanistan, the Taliban had doubled their activities. The Commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan has also called on the new US administration to deploy more US troops to Afghanistan.

Although, given his contradictory remarks regarding Afghanistan in the past one and half decade and his lack of political experience, Trump's policy towards Afghanistan cannot be predicted, the utilization of "mother of all bombs" in Afghan soil and the unclear policy of the new US administration regarding the Afghan peace process on one hand and the remarks made by the US officials regarding Russia's relations with the Taliban and increasing the number of US troops in Afghanistan on the other hand implies that the US would rather focus on strengthening its military presence and would thus intensify war in Afghanistan. Therefore, the fate of peace and war in Afghanistan could become further complicated.

The end

Contact Us:

Email: info@csrskabul.com - csrskabul@gmail.com

Website: www.csrskabul.com - www.csrskabul.net

Office: (+93) 784089590

Contact with Officials:

Dr. AbdulBaqi Amin, General Director of CSRS: (+93) 789316120 abdulbaqi123@hotmail.com

Hekmatullah Zaland, Senior Manager: (+93) 775454048 hekmat.zaland@gmail.com

Note: Please let us know your feedback and suggestions for the improvement of Weekly analysis.

