

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



May 14, 2015

NATO Post-2016 Military-Civilian Mission

NATO foreign ministers agreed on a framework to continue its military-civilian presence in Afghanistan after the alliance's ongoing Resolute Support mission ends in 2016. Speaking after a meeting of the NATO foreign ministers in Turkey's Antalya attended by Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that despite that the presence will be a civilian-led mission it will have a military component as well. The alliance's current Resolute Support mission aims to train and equip Afghan National Security Forces in order to make it sustainable in dealing with the country's ongoing and foreseeable security challenges. The mission began in January this year after the US-led NATO combat mission ended last December. The decision taken by NATO members is aimed at preserving the achievements of the past fourteen years of NATO efforts in Afghanistan and continuing a security and civilian partnership with the country beyond 2016.

The agreement is coming as a major development for ensuring a long-term security - as well as civilian - partnership between Afghanistan and NATO member countries. The decision is coming at a time when Afghanistan is struggling to contain a resurgence of the long-lasting insurgency in the country, which has become further complicated with the rising of Islamic State group as a new player in the field. In recent months, Afghanistan has witnessed a stiff insurgency as the militant groups have launched a deadly spring offensive in the country. The exacerbation of security situation across the country and the gains made by the militants in a number of provinces has sparked widespread concerns that the ANSF may be fighting a dead-end war with the Taliban.

Given the security prospect of the country, Afghanistan still needs substantial support from the US and NATO to contain the insurgency and lead a successful anti-insurgency campaign in the years to come.

Afghanistan needs to ensure it will be provided with long-term security support in forms of weaponry, logistics, intelligence and training by its international backers such as the United States and its allied countries in NATO. For this, Afghanistan needs robust, extensive and long-term security deal with the United States and the NATO. The decision made by NATO member countries to have a military mission as part of its mainly civilian presence after 2016 is coming a major breakthrough for ensuring long-term security support to Afghanistan after current Resolute Support mission ends by end of next year.

The decision for some sort of prolonged presence of NATO in Afghanistan is a result of a shift in approaches by both the government of Afghanistan and the United States as well as its allies in NATO after the National Unity Government came to power in Afghanistan. Former President Hamid Karzai's approach towards the West particularly the United States was mostly unstable and erratic, and his unwillingness to secure a robust and long-term security deal with the Western powers was a major disappointment for many in Afghanistan.

Karzai refused to sign the bilateral security agreement with the United States, which was approved by the Afghan Mishrano Jirga, until his term was over. He also repeatedly criticized the United States and NATO for their handling of the war and recent the peace affairs with the Taliban.

This led to a visible and increasing frustration of the United States and its allied nations in NATO with the Afghan government. Despite that Afghan and American negotiators had agreed on a ten-year security agreement and long-term security partnership, the United States surprisingly announced last year that it was planning for a complete withdrawal by end of 2016 except remaining a small contingent for diplomatic premises in Kabul and elsewhere. The decision by Washington was a major setback for a long-term security partnership between Afghanistan and the United States. This was a heavy blow for the 14-year long US-led NATO mission in Afghanistan.

Since coming to power, the unity government of Afghanistan has taken concrete measures to undo the harms done to the relations between Afghanistan and its Western supporters. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani immediately signed the bilateral security agreement with the United States signaling its reliability to the US and other NATO nations.

During their visit to Washington, the leaders of the National Unity Government urged US president Barack Obama to backtrack his announcement of complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by end of 2016. The United States responded to Afghanistan's demand for reconsideration of the withdrawal and keeping troops beyond 2016. The NUG's new approach towards NATO and the US has considerably helped the relations between Afghanistan and its major international backers.

NATO military presence after 2016 will mean a stronger partnership between Afghanistan and the West. The United States already provides a large portion of Afghanistan's national budget and funding necessary for its military. In absence of a military role of the US and NATO, the financial support that Afghanistan receives from its major donors will decline considerably. In absence of domestic revenue alternatives, such a decline in international funding for Afghanistan could be the beginning of major challenges in areas of security and development. Afghanistan needs a sustainable funding from the world until it improves its domestic revenue base and substitute with donor aid. Afghanistan and its Western supporters in NATO need to realize that the past achievements in military and development areas must be preserved. And the only way for this is to secure a long-term and robust partnership in security as well as economic and development areas.

Renovating Af-Pak Relation on Avenues of Resolute Ties

By Asmatyari

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan have been cooperative neighbors, however the tales history recorded on various occasion diffuses this dictum, instead depicts a low level of confidence existing between the two. There might variant reasons, but one being is the altering state's policy and fluctuating priorities. The porous border, along the Durand line, has turned the bone of discontents between Afghanistan and Pakistan, hosting numerous terrorists. Seemingly both Pakistan and Afghanistan claim to be front states, fighting insurgency and terrorism, yet proper cleanup operation is not undertaken, to crush the militant's hideouts across the border. Consequently the terrorist easily undertake malicious activities and followed by safe back return to their hideouts that seem to be inaccessible if not impossible for security institutions of the two countries. A joint and coordinated operation may uncover the terrorists and foil their evil intention. Without soaring the confidence level, the two states can not undertake a joint venture to fight this very menace.

It was the US policy makers who introduced the Af-Pak neologism on an account deeming Afghanistan and Pakistan through single myopic lens as being single "theater of operation" despite marked differences. It was assessed the border separating the two countries, turned into breeding grounds of terrorists and most terrorist plots were planned on eastern side of border and hatched on the western side. It was under the influence of this dominant perception Afghanistan and Pakistan's relation went quivering amidst dense fogs of accusations, previously. With the changed dynamics of war, policies altered and priorities shifted that consequently changed the parameters of relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most if not all affairs seem to have mediated that helped renovating the relation towards normalization.

To revitalize the Pakistan and Afghanistan's relation formerly, Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif accompanying a high level delegation paid a visit to Kabul, met with President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah to build close cooperative relations with Afghanistan. This will be the Prime Minister's second visit to Afghanistan and the first after the installation of National Unity Government in Kabul. This visit certainly further strengthens the positive momentum in bilateral relations and help intensify common endeavors in the pursuit of durable peace, stability and prosperity in the region. There were many issues of common interest that were put forth on the table during the joint press conference.

One of the issues that drew in was that of terrorism causing havoc in both the countries was affirmed to be tackled iron handed. Terrorism and potentially growing terrorism has turned a nightmare to Afghanistan and Pakistan alike. Earlier, it rendered believable that Pakistan interfered in political affairs of Afghanistan -the Afghan chapter of Taliban was deemed to have good ties with Pakistani government. Perhaps it was the first stance; the Prime Minister Sharif warned any militant or group to destabilize Afghanistan would be dealt with severely and such elements would be outlawed

and hunted down. The statement can be deemed a red signal to Afghan Taliban who have waged spring offensive "Azam" against Afghan government and Pakistani Taliban against Pakistani state. It is assumed the two warring splintered group could be manipulated against the interest of the corresponding state. It is therefore, the two premiers resolved to stick to principle of non-interference in political affairs of each other.

On the other hand Pakistan too underlined some serious reservations, relative to the TTP whose high profile leadership has sought save sanctuaries on the Afghanistan's side of border. The fugitive leader of TTP, Mullah Fazullah who is rumored to be in Afghan custody, is demanded to be handed over to Pakistani security officials, went into delusion.

It was an unending demand of the two countries to inflict heavy losses to insurgents and militants on the two sides of border. Pakistan started cleanup operation Zarb-e-Azab that forced many terrorists, ran cross the border. To minimize the porosity of the border and restrain unchecked movement of terrorists of TTP, Afghan government was asked to tighten security and launch operation on their side of border. The same resolve was renovated at the meeting stating coordinated operations would be planned and conducted on mutually agreed basis to target militant hideouts along the border, he continued. Undoubtedly, Pakistan and Afghanistan would succeed thwarting terrorism in rooting out the menace of terrorism through their firm determination and by adopting a comprehensive and coordinated strategy.

Both the premiers assured that an enemy of one state can not be friend of other. This refers to both Taliban offending the two states and cautions the neighboring state of their evil designs may not hatch in this piece of land.

Earlier, some realistic shifts crystallized on international political fronts; one, US labeled Taliban political reality in Afghanistan, freed them of terrors charges, set a political office in Doha, Qatar's capital, in the bid to resume peace talks. Pakistan, did exercise her influence to push forth Taliban on the table of negotiation with Afghan government, as witnessed in previous talk that took place in Doha ended with positive note. The successful furtherance of peace talk might turn a milestone in the history of war torn Afghanistan and may bridge the mutual relationship of the two countries.

It should be learned both state faces a common invisible enemy of poverty, illiteracy, terrorism, extremism that are manifold malicious and threatening to the very existence of the two states. They should be defeated with iron claws before they turn unbeatable. It is timely and rational to two countries realize pragmatically the full potential of well resourced pool of human and material resources, including through expanding trade, increasing investments, improving infrastructure, building road and rail links, and enhancing energy collaboration; hence redefining the Af-Pak neology for extended cooperation and coordination in various fields of human endeavors between the two neighborly states.

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Thanks to the President

By Hujjatullah Zia

A number of anguished parents have breathed a sigh of relief when 19, of 31, hostages were released on May 11th; however few others yet wait and pray with a sense of deep grief. This should have sparked a glimmer of hope in the hearts of the unreleased abductees' families - who suffer excruciatingly.

Masked gunmen seized 31 passengers from a bus in the southern Afghan province of Zabul in late February as they were returning from Iran.

Government efforts to secure their release have been shrouded in mystery as the Taliban, waging a 13-year insurgency in Afghanistan, distanced themselves from the incident.

No militant groups, including the Islamic State, claimed the responsibility for the abduction, but reports suggested that the abductors demanded release of insurgents from Afghan prisons - that was later turned down by the Afghan president. Moreover, Afghan officials believed that the Islamic State were behind the incident, since the militants were said to have spoken in foreign language.

Regarding the release of 19 abductees, social networks and a Pakistani newspaper wrote that the men "were released Monday in exchange for scores of Uzbek militant fighters held in government prisons". Similarly, Asadullah Kakar, a provincial council member of Zabul province was cited that the men were freed "in exchange of 22 Uzbek militant fighters". But Hasan Reza Yousufi, a provincial council member in Ghazni province, said that there was a lower number of the exchanged prisoners, saying "10 to 16 Taliban detainees from Chechnya and Uzbekistan".

However, Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani stressed that there was no issue of exchange - neither for money nor for militant prisoners. He said that political issues need patience and tolerance and cannot be decided over night. He addressed people to be tolerant and act more cautiously in such conditions. Likewise, President Ghani stated that safeguarding the nation is government's responsibility and a cautious act - which will be done in a slow process - does not mean the officials' negligence. Finally, he hoped that the rest of the victims also will be released.

To the unmitigated chagrin of the victims' families, local media report that 2 of the abductees were killed and 2 others died within the past two months.

Anyhow, Afghan political elites say with strong belief that 30 militants, including women and children were released from the government's prisons in exchange for the 19 abductees.

In addition, local news reported that Afghan soldiers withdraw from Nawah district of Ghazni province due to mysterious reason after capturing it from the Taliban with heavy charges. In such a case, it will be recaptured by the militants. Reports say that it is doubted that surrendering Nawah district to the Taliban militants

might have been agreed upon as an exchange for the abductees' release.

I believe that if this rumor comes true, the abductees' release would be a pyrrhic victory for Afghan government. And it means that the militants bear great power which enables them to have their prisoners released through new political deception - which is taking hostages from the innocent citizens.

Constitutionally, protecting the rights and freedoms of people are government's responsibility - as it was mentioned by the President. This was also said in the Constitution's preamble to "form a civil society void of oppression, atrocity, discrimination as well as violence, based on rule of law, social justice, protecting integrity and human rights, and attaining peoples' freedoms and fundamental rights...."

Ill-fatedly, the citizens' rights are violated to a large extent in one way or another. As a result, people fall prey to sectarian tension caused by the militants - waving either the white flag of the Taliban or the black flag of the Islamic State. To put it succinctly, the citizens, including women and children, are victimized on the grounds of sex, color, race, belief, etc. The abduction of 31 passengers reflected a clear picture of sectarianism carried out by the militants.

Militants last month conducted IS-style beheadings of five Shias who were abducted in southeastern Afghanistan, highlighting a growing pattern of insurgent assaults on ethnic minorities.

They were kidnapped in the restive province of Ghazni after they travelled out of their home district to shop for cattle.

Such abductions send shockwaves through the community, evoking memories of the Taliban's rule from 1996 to 2001, when minorities were heavily persecuted.

The government will have to devise a new strategy to end the militancy and let not sectarianism take a stronger root in the country. A military backlash in response to "spring offensive" is a dire need to demoralize the militants and protect the citizens' rights, "strengthen national unity, safeguard independence, national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country".

It is time to shake a friendly hand with Pakistan and launch a joint attack against terrorism, especially across the Durand Line - as it was said by the Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who had a trip to Kabul along with high-ranking Pakistani officials. Yeah, it is time to bury the past differences with our neighbors and joint force against the common enemy. Hope Pakistan will fulfill her promise in this regard.

At the end, I have to thank President Ashraf Ghani for considering the citizens' rights and mollifying the victims' families via releasing them. It is hoped he will spare no effort to free the rest of the abductees and put an end to the grief of their anguished parents.

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