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Taliban, Spring offensive and Transition in Afghanistan

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Introduction

It was the biggest ever attack by the insurgents on capital Kabul, in terms of the number of suicide attackers employed. It was also one of the most audacious and well coordinated attacks in recent times. On 15 April 2012, simultaneous attacks on the Afghan capital and three other eastern provinces – Nangarhar, Logar and Paktia – left 51 people dead. Counted among the dead were four civilians, 11 members of the security forces and 36 insurgents.² The Taliban announced the launch of its spring offensive and Afghanistan, which had registered some days of peace and tranquillity, has braced itself for another season of bloody violence.

The assaults began simultaneously at 1:45pm, and residents were quick to discern nearly identical patterns of attack – light gunfire, followed by explosions and protracted fire fights with Afghan security forces, with the militants in several cases fighting from vacant buildings or unfinished construction sites near their main targets.

The spectacular attacks that took almost 18 hours to quell once again brought to the fore the fragility of transition process based on arbitrary time tables. Coming ahead of the Chicago

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² "Afghan leader Karzai blames attacks on Nato 'failure'", *BBC* (16 April 2012), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17727036>. Accessed on 16 April 2012.

Summit in May this year, the insurgents have sent a loud and clear message. By targeting the diplomatic enclave in Kabul's green zone, specifically using enormous fire power, the insurgents managed to underline what President Hamid Karzai later highlighted as 'intelligence failure, especially that of the NATO'.³ In face of a retreating coalition army and waning international interest, the insurgents are indeed well poised to carry out such attacks in future. The Taliban spokesman who described the onslaught as the opening of the Taliban's spring offensive said, "This is a message to those foreign commanders who claim that the Taliban lost momentum. We just showed that we are here and we will launch and stage attacks whenever we want."⁴

A Fragile Transition

In the past year, United States (US) President Barack Obama's announcements of pulling American troops out of Afghanistan have met with several challenges. After recent weeks marred by the attacks on NATO units, riots after American military personnel burned copies of the Holy Quran and the killing of 17 Afghan civilians by an American sergeant, the US relinquished its right to carry out night raids and handed over the main coalition prison to the Afghan government in a bid to move ahead with the convoluted strategic partnership agreement before the Chicago Summit. However, with the beginning of the so-called 'spring offensive'; attempts at demonstrating some progress in the Afghan war by the US administration have once again been thrown into a quandary.

In recent times, individual and uncoordinated attempts at negotiations with the Taliban have emerged as the principal conflict management strategy for the US. A political office came up in Qatar in January this year. Some desperate moves were made to release imprisoned Taliban commanders from the detention centre at Guantanamo bay, failure of which led the Taliban to suspend the peace talks in March. Efforts, however, have continued to keep the fledgling peace process going, both by the US and the Karzai administration. On 14 April 2012, a day before the attack, Salahuddin Rabbani, the son of slain Burhanuddin Rabbani was chosen to lead the 70-member High Peace Council (HPC). The HPC is charged with reaching out to Taliban insurgents. The attacks, the very next day, shows a complete disdain from the insurgents' side towards the process of negotiations.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Alissa J. Rubin, Graham Bowley and Sangar Rahimi, "Complex Attack by Taliban Sends Message to the West", *The New York Times*, (15 April 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/world/asia/attacks-near-embassies-in-kabul.html?_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20120416&pagewanted=all. Accessed on 16 April 2012.

Capability of ANSF

Though the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) were able to successfully neutralize the insurgents, concerns abound on their capability of gathering adequate intelligence on the planning and execution of such well coordinated multiple sieges. The fact that the insurgents could slip into the protected city evading several security check points with a huge stockpile of weapons and penetrate the most secure inner circle of Kabul's ring of steel – the Wazir Akbar Khan district – is also a matter of deep worry. NATO commended Afghan security forces for effectively defending the city and ultimately quelling the attack. But Afghan forces did receive some back-up from helicopters and NATO Special Forces. The NATO's praise for the ANSF is understandable, for on such success that the exit strategy is predicated.⁵

Afghan officials pointed at the handiwork of Haqqani network, by underlining the pattern of the attacks and area of operations. The Haqqani network was directly involved in one of the last major attacks in Kabul, an assault on the American Embassy in September 2011, and that too involved militants raining down rocket and gunfire from an unfinished building nearby.⁶ The Taliban, however, have indicated that their commander for eastern front, Haji Lala, was behind the attack.⁷ Haji Lala is Taliban's shadow governor for Kabul and is known to be based in the Pakistani city of Peshawar. The coalescence of insurgent factions and movement of armed opposition closer to provinces to Kabul is indicative of things to come this summer.

Strategic Assets or Spoilers?

Irrespective of the involvement of particular persons or groups, the attack in a way could also signify the demonstration of control by the Taliban and, at a different but related level, the displeasure of the insurgents' Pakistani hosts for being sidelined in the peace talks. Pakistan, which had opted to stay away from the Bonn Conference hosted by Germany in December 2011 as a mark of protest against the US attack on Salala post in Mohmand Agency on 26 November that year, has decided to take part in the upcoming Chicago summit.⁸ However, heightened tensions between the US and Pakistan – over the issues of the Abbotabad raid last

⁵ Bilal Sarwary, Analysis: What Kabul attacks say about Afghan security, BBC News, Kabul, 16 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17725266>. Accessed on 16 April 2012.

⁶ Alissa j. Rubin, Graham Bowley and Sangar Rahimi, "Complex Attack by Taliban Sends Message to the West", *The New York Times* (15 April 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/world/asia/attacks-near-embassies-in-kabul.html?_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20120416&pagewanted=all. Accessed on 16 April 2012.

⁷ "Taliban Commanders Say Kabul Attacks Show New Strategy", *Daily Beast* (15 April 2012), <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/04/15/taliban-commanders-say-kabul-attacks-show-new-strategy.html>. Accessed on 16 April 2012.

⁸ Muhammad Saleh Zaafer, Zaradri to attend Nato summit next month in Chicago, 15 April 2012, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-7-103102-Zaradri-to-attend-Nato-summit-next-month-in-Chicago>. Accessed on 16 April 2012.

summer, closure of the NATO supply routes and the recent announcement of a \$10 million bounty for information leading to the arrest of Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) leader Hafiz Muhammad Saeed – continue to simmer. Pakistan’s Parliament last week unanimously voted to forbid the US from conducting drone strikes inside Pakistani territory. There are some signs that the civilian leadership is changing tracks.⁹ But at the same time, there are still indications that there will be attempts by the Pakistani establishment at holding on to their strategic assets to influence the intended outcome in Afghanistan. Any movement towards talks or negotiations in the past have evoked violent backlash in one form or other. The recent attack could have been part of the same trend.

What Lies Ahead?

Post-15 April 2012, Kabul may not be turning into an epicentre of insurgent activity. It has remained relatively safe, accounting for less than one percent of violent episodes nationwide.¹⁰ However, the relative safety of the national capital, in no way, marks the success of the stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan. The Taliban-led insurgency, in spite of the claims of the military about its weakening impact, remains a potent adversary capable of striking at will with huge demonstrative effect.

That poses challenges both to the stabilisation of Afghanistan and the transition plans for the present US administration. In a time when President Karzai has announced an early election time table¹¹, thereby complicating the already muddled transition process, further deterioration of security can be the worst possible development. As the summer sets in, the likelihood of targeted high profile killings, combined with spectacular attacks, would erode the public confidence. With the looming political uncertainty, whispers of a civil war, the insurgents are well positioned to fill in the vacuum. Ahead of the Chicago summit in May, there is, thus, a need for a realistic assessment on the ‘conditions and needs on the ground’ to which the security transition timetables of the coalition forces should be linked.

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⁹ With Pakistan’s economy in poor shape -- growth was 2.4 percent in 2011 and there is little foreign investment or aid -- its business community has convinced the military that expansion can come only through increased trade with India. Pakistan’s government has agreed to remove restrictions on the import of most goods from India by year’s end. Vali Nasr, Pakistan Spring Emerging From Winter of Discontent, Bloomberg, (16 April 2012), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-04-15/pakistan-spring-emerging-from-winter-of-discontent.html>. Accessed on 16 April 2012.

¹⁰ IAN LIVINGSTON AND MICHAEL E. O’HANLON, The State of Afghanistan, The New York Times, 13 April 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/14/opinion/making-sense-of-trends-in-afghanistan.html?smid=fb-share>. Accessed on 14 April 2012.

¹¹ Karzai considers changing Afghan election timetable, Radio Australia News, 12 April 2012, <http://www.radioaustralianews.net.au/stories/201204/3476232.htm>. Accessed on 13 April 2012.