

Afghan president Ghani walks the tightrope on Taliban

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Islamabad: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's decision to send a delegation to Pakistan for prevailing over Islamabad so that its support to the Afghan Taliban stops clearly shows that with the death of Mullah Omar, Pakistan has acquired a new strategic depth in Afghanistan.

In the same vein Ghani had accused Pakistan of actively supporting the Taliban, which has been creating havoc not only in Kabul but also in other parts of Afghanistan.

Now the million dollar question is why Pakistan has suddenly done such a somersault after brokering peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, which abruptly broke up after the news of Mullah Omar's death came out.

The answer perhaps lies in the fact that the installation of Mullah Mohammed Mansour as the new Taliban head has given Islamabad a golden opportunity to extend its reach in Afghanistan as he is known to be extremely close to Pakistan.

It is also known that Mansour used to spend most of his time in Pakistan and had acted as a key figure behind the plan to hijack an Indian Airlines flight in 1999 that ultimately resulted in the release of several dreaded fundamentalist Islamic terrorists lodged in Indian jails.

For Mansour, the recent spurt in violent Taliban attacks on Afghan soil is necessary as he has to prove his credibility over that of Mullah Yaqoob, Omar's son, and Mullah Abdul Manan, Omar's brother.

Strangely, Mansour was more amenable to peace talks than the latter two but has now been forced to take a hardline stand as some factions in the Taliban have not taken very kindly to Pakistan's role in his anointment.

As per the Afghan Taliban tradition, its leader would have to be chosen in Afghan soil by a Leadership Council consisting of various tribal and religious heads. This tradition was clearly given a go-by when Mansour's selection was done by a congregation of his loyalists in Quetta under direct Pakistani tutelage.

But has Mullah Mansour really gone out of Pakistan's control? Although this question is now doing the rounds in security circles, the answer is perhaps negative.

It is a fact that the new Taliban chief is secretive in nature and he could successfully hide the news of Omar's death for more than two years.

But his association with Pakistan is neck deep and it is also believed that the ISI monitors his every move. Moreover, right now it is neither possible nor advisable for him to break free from Pakistan's control as he is being directly challenged by a hardened battlefield commander named Abdul Qayyum Zakir, a former inmate of the US prison in Cuba's Guantanamo Bay.

Zakir is tirelessly pushing for Mullah Omar's son Yaqoob and he has a sizable faction of the Taliban behind him.

Then why did Pakistan really take the initiative for arranging peace talks? Well, it has to be remembered that Pakistan was not alone in this venture and it had China by its side. The two countries had respective interests behind it.

While China wants to see stability and tranquility in its Uyghur militants infested northwestern areas that border Afghanistan, Pakistan has been nervously watching the spread of Islamic State (IS) control over large parts of eastern Afghanistan.

It is a fact that many disgruntled factions of the Taliban opposing peace talks have sided with the IS.

That the factions loyal to Mansour have suddenly thrown Afghanistan into chaos may be due to an urge to wean away the dissatisfied factions from the IS hold.

However, Pakistan's likely attempt for a firmer foothold in Afghanistan through its proxy Mansour may not fully succeed if Ashraf Ghani really decides to maintain an independent attitude, a trait he has been evincing after a long time.

It is because the Taliban consists of mostly the Pashtuns who are likely to face stiff challenges in the northern parts of Afghanistan where the former Mujahideen warlords still enjoy enormous influence.

In fact, for quite some time, Ishmail Khan and Mohammed Mohaqiq, two former mujahideen strongmen, have been warning against growing IS presence in Afghanistan and advising Ashraf Ghani to jettison his dictatorial way of functioning.

Apart from them, Ghani is also opposed by Atta Mohammed Noor, the governor of Balkh province, who is a very powerful figure in the north of Afghanistan.

In the changed circumstance after the death of Mullah Omar, these individuals can be termed critics-cum-sympathizers of Ashraf Ghani. The Afghan president also enjoys the support of Abdul Rashid Dostam, the Uzbek leader.

So, the ground situation in Afghanistan may not be a cakewalk for Pakistan and the Mullah Mansour-controlled Afghan Taliban.

However, Ashraf Ghani may have some anxious moments over the Afghan National Army, whose bottom rung consists of Pashtuns. But here also the commanders are mostly Tajiks, over whom the mujahideen warlords of the North enjoy influence.

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