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Current Military Situation in Afghanistan



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About the Author

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Current Military Situation in Afghanistan

Background

Afghanistan is a mountainous and land locked country which has tremendous domestic and economic problems leading to instability. The country has a population of about 31.6 million people with Dari and Pashto as the main languages. Islam is the principal religion and life expectancy is 59 years. The current problem dates back to December 1979 when the Army of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) invaded the country.¹

In April 1978, Afghanistan's centrist government headed by President Daud Khan was overthrown by left wing military officers led by Nur Mohammed Taraki. Power was shared by two Marxist Leninist Groups, the People's (Khalaq) Party and the Banner (Parcham) Party. The new government which had little popular support, forged close ties with the Soviet Union and launched ruthless purges of all domestic opposition. They also undertook land and social reforms, which were bitterly resented by the Muslim population. Insurgencies rose against the government in the tribal and urban areas and these had an Islamic orientation. These uprisings along with the internal fighting and coups within the government between the two factions resulted in the Soviet invasion on the night of 24 December 1979, sending in 30,000 troops and toppling the short lived presidency of People's Party leader Hafizullah Amin. The aim of the Soviet operation was to prop up Afghanistan with a leader whom they got from abroad a Banner Party Leader, Babrak Karmal. Babrak failed to get popular support and the situation became worse.²

Initially, the Soviets left the fighting to the Afghan Army, but the latter was beset by mass desertions and remained largely ineffective throughout the conflict. The Soviet Army had to fight and finally more than 100,000 Soviet troops were deployed. They were able to control at best the cities, communication centres, military installations and a few other critical areas. The countryside was largely controlled by the Mujahideen rebels. The Mujahideen were an exceptionally diverse lot and comprised Pashtun, Uzbeks, Tajiks and others. Some were Shia's sponsored by Iran, while most factions were Sunni Muslims. In addition to Muslims from Afghanistan, fighters from other countries volunteered to join the ranks. They were mainly Arabs and Muslims from Chechnya.³

It is pertinent to note there is another angle to this aspect. This pertains to the United States (US) and the Pakistani angle. In the mid-1970's, Pakistani intelligence officials began privately lobbying the US and its allies to send material assistance to the Islamist insurgents. Pakistani President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's ties with the US had been strained during Jimmy Carter's presidency due to Pakistan's nuclear program and the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in April 1979. But Carter told the National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance as early as January 1979 that it was vital to "repair our relationships with Pakistan" in light of the unrest in Iran.⁴ In May 1979, U.S. officials secretly began meeting with rebel leaders through Pakistani government contacts. A former Pakistani military official claimed that he personally introduced a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) official to the rebel leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar that month.

After additional meetings on April 6 and July 3, Carter signalled aid to the Mujahideen. In the aftermath of the invasion, Carter initiated a program to arm the Mujahideen through Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) and secured a pledge from Saudi Arabia to match US funding for this purpose.

The US support for the Mujahideen accelerated under Carter's successor, Regan, at a final cost to US taxpayers of some US \$3 billion. The Soviets were unable to quell the insurgency and withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, precipitating the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself. However, the decision to route the US aid through Pakistan led to massive fraud, as weapons sent were frequently sold on the local market rather than delivered to the Afghan rebels; Karachi soon "became one of the most violent cities in the world." Pakistan also controlled as to which rebels received assistance -of the seven Mujahideen groups supported by Zia's government, four espoused Islamic fundamentalist beliefs, and these fundamentalists received most of the funding.

The US built Stinger anti-aircraft missile, supplied to the Mujahideen in very large numbers beginning in 1986, struck a decisive blow to the Soviet war effort as it allowed the lightly armed Afghans to effectively defend against Soviet helicopter landings in strategic areas. The Stingers were so renowned and deadly at that, in the 1990's, the US conducted a "buy-back" program to keep unused missiles from falling into the hands of anti-American terrorists. This program may have been covertly renewed following the US intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001, out of fear that remaining Stingers could be used against US forces in the country.

On 20 July 1987, Soviet withdrawal from the country was announced pursuant to the negotiations that led to the Geneva Accords of 1988, with the last Soviets leaving on 15 February 1989. Soviet forces suffered over 14,000 killed and missing, and over 50,000 wounded.⁵

Withdrawal of the Soviets saw Pakistan come into the field with the support of the US. President Najib became the President in 1987 but his forces gradually gave in to the Mujahideen who hanged him in 1992. A coalition built from the various parties of the Mujahideen set up a fragile interim government but there was chaos and consternation. Gradually the Taliban emerged and extended its hold over the country backed by Pakistan. They had minor opposition from the Northern Alliance. They stabilised their hold in 1996.⁶

The Taliban Phase and Entry of the US

The Taliban was formed in the early 1990's by an Afghan faction of Mujahideen, Islamic fighters who had resisted the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–89) with the covert backing of the US' CIA and its Pakistani counterpart, the ISI. They were joined by younger Pashtun tribesmen who studied in Pakistani madrassas, or seminaries. Taliban in Pashto means 'students'. Pashtuns comprise a plurality in Afghanistan and are the predominant ethnic group in much of the country's south and east.

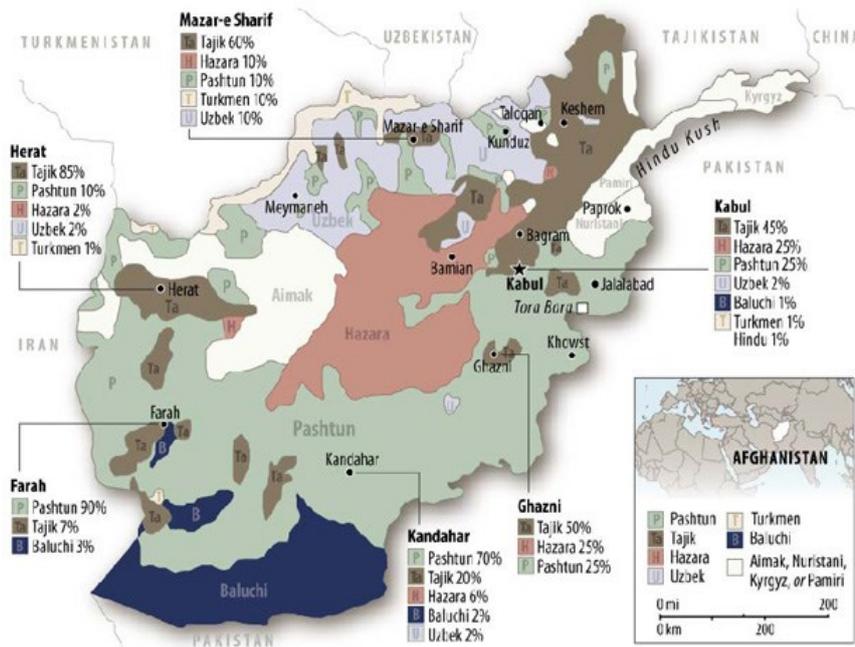


Taliban moving on a tank in the outskirts of Kabul (Source Image: www.google.com)

Taliban movement attracted popular support in the initial post-Soviet era by promising to impose stability and rule of law after four years of conflict (1992–1996) among rival Mujahideen groups. They entered Kandahar in November 1994 to pacify the crime-ridden southern city, and by September 1996 seized the capital, Kabul, from President Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik whom they viewed as anti-Pashtun and corrupt. The Taliban imposed its brand of justice as it consolidated territorial control. Taliban jurisprudence was drawn from the Pashtuns pre-Islamic tribal code and interpretations of Wahabi doctrines of the madrassas run by Saudi benefactors. The Regime neglected social services and other basic state functions even as its Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice enforced prohibitions on such behaviour as the Taliban deemed un-Islamic - requiring women to wear the head-to-toe burqa, or chadri, banning music and television, and jailing men whose beards it deemed too short.

The Regime was internationally isolated from its inception. Two United Nation Security Council (UNSC) resolutions passed in 1998 urged the Taliban to end its abusive treatment of women. The following year the council imposed sanctions on the regime for harbouring the Al Qaeda. The government was only recognised by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE). Many analysts say Islamabad supported the Taliban as a force that could unify and stabilise Afghanistan while staving off Indian, Iranian, and Russian influence.

Distribution of Population in Afghanistan



(Source: Congressional Research Service⁷)

Mullah Omar, a cleric and veteran of the anti-Soviet resistance, from 1996 to 2001 was the leader of Taliban. He granted the Al Qaeda sanctuary on the condition that they would not cause trouble of the US, but Osama bin Laden reneged on their agreement in 1998 when he orchestrated bombings of US embassies in East Africa. The Taliban was inward looking while Al Qaeda had its sights set on global jihad. After the US blasts of 11 September 2001, Omar rejected US demands that he give up Osama bin Laden.

The ethnic minorities of the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras in Northern Afghanistan opposed Taliban rule and formed the Northern Alliance, which assisted US-led forces in routing the Taliban after 9/11. Though the Regime was dismantled during the operations, Mullah Omar and many of his top aides escaped to the frontier territories of Pakistan, where they reconstituted the Taliban's central leadership. Mullah Omar expired in 2013 and Hibatullah Akhунzada is their current leader. The military aspects of operations launched by the US and other countries are described below from a military perspective.

Operation Enduring Freedom, Relative Strengths and Progress of Operations (2001 -2014)

The US invasion

Immediately after the attacks on 11 September 2001, General Tommy Franks, the C-In-C of the US Central Command, proposed an invasion by 60,000 US troops after preparation of six months. This was not agreed to and it was decided to insert the Special Forces. The invasion was to be coordinated with the Northern Alliance. The countries

involved in this phase were the US, UK, Canada, Australia and Germany. The opposition was as enumerated below:-

- Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. (Taliban).
- 055 Brigade (whose foreign fighters in Afghanistan were not numbering more than 2000 under Osama Bin Laden).
- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.
- Tehreek Nifaz-e-Shariat-e- Muhammadi.
- East Turkestan Islamic Movement.
- The Haqqani Group.

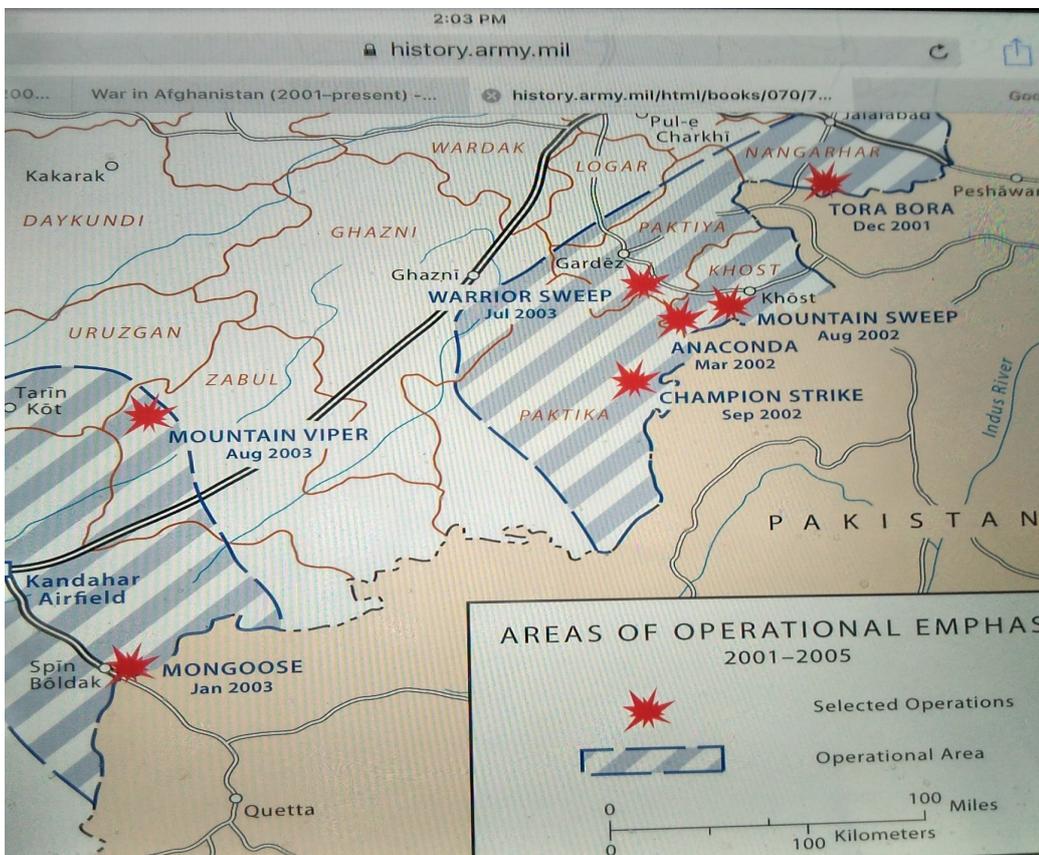
Within 17 days of the dastardly 9/11 attack, the US inserted members of CIA Special Activities Division led by Gary Schroon as part of 'Team Jawbreaker' into Afghanistan to form the North Afghanistan Liaison Team. They linked up with Northern Alliance as part of Task Force Dagger.⁸ Two weeks later, Task Force Dagger's Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 555 and 595 - both 12 men Green Beret teams from the 5th Special Forces Group - along with Air Force Combat Controllers were airlifted by helicopter from the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan, across more than 300 km and over the 16000 feet Hindu Kush Mountains in zero visibility conditions by two SOAR MH-47 E Chinook helicopters. The Chinooks were refuelled in flight three times during the 11 hour mission, establishing a new world record for combat rotor craft missions at that time. The force linked up with the CIA agents and the Northern Alliance. Within a few weeks, the Northern Alliance captured several cities from Taliban with US assistance.

The Operation 'Enduring Freedom' was officially launched on 07 October 2001 with UK's assistance. The forces drove the Taliban from power and built military bases near major cities. Most of the militants escaped into Pakistan or to the remote mountainous regions. On 25 November 2001, the forces seized 'Objective Rhino', a desert airstrip south of Kandhar and established a Forward Operating Base there. During the last remaining days of November 2001, Konduz fell and Bagram near Kabul became the Forward Operating Base.⁹

Meanwhile, at the Bonn Conference in December 2001, Hamid Karzai was selected as the Interim Administrator, who after a Loya Jirga (General Assembly) in Kabul, became the Transitional Administrator. In the elections in 2004, he was elected as the President. He formally ratified the Constitution on 26 January 2004. Further he won the elections again in 2009 and remained in power up to 2014.¹⁰ On 20 December 2001, the United Nations authorised an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) with a mandate to help the Afghans in maintaining security in Kabul and the surrounding areas. 18 countries contributed to the force by 2002. The build up in the mountains was noticed and the US launched operations on 02 March 2002, as part of 'Operation Anaconda'

along with Canadian and Afghan Forces. There were about 400 Al Qaida fighters killed but the Afghans performed poorly.

In August 2003, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) became involved and there were about 56 countries involved with the ISAF between 2001 to 2014. The initial land based connectivity was achieved through Uzbekistan. While the route to Uzbekistan was opened, the road from Karachi to Kabul was opened with Road Opening Parties as an axis of maintenance from 2003. This was possible due to successful operations launched to identify, isolate and decimate the Al Qaeda and Taliban forces and to deny them sanctuary and freedom of movement in Paktiya, Paktika and Uruzgan provinces. Further, an air assault was launched on Tora Bora in Nangrahar Province. The Special Forces recruited local militia to search and destroy militants in the city of Jalalabad which sat on the Kabul–Peshawar road to Pakistan.



Areas of Operational Emphasis (2001-2005)

(Source: "Map showing Areas of Operational Emphasis", The United States Army in Afghanistan, March 2002-April 2005, https://history.army.mil/html/books/070/70-122-1/CMH_Pub_70-122-1.pdf)

General Tommy Franks created two Combined Joint Task Forces (CJTF) - CJTF-180 and CJTF-82. Various operations were launched by these CJTF which included the areas needed to ensure that the axes from Quetta to Kandhar and Peshawar to Jalalabad, and onwards to the capital were kept open. The militants escaped into Pakistan and the Pakistan Army was directed to launch operations which they did selectively.¹¹ Pakistan did not target the Taliban or the Haqqani Group and only targeted some elements of Al Qaeda.

Raising the Afghan National Army

The plan for raising an Afghan National Army was started in January 2002, but the process required more time and effort than creating an Afghan National Government. Afghanistan did not have the professional tradition or capabilities to establish and sustain such a force. Despite the country being at war for decades, the personnel were the militias loyal to a particular warlord or Mujahideen guerrilla fighters. The warlords served as irregular military and their militias continued fighting alongside the coalition forces. However, the lack of broader ethnic representation and the politicised leadership of the militias made them poor representatives of the national authority. The linguistic differences in the country and absence of common procedure to train became major impediments to mould a cohesive Afghan Army.

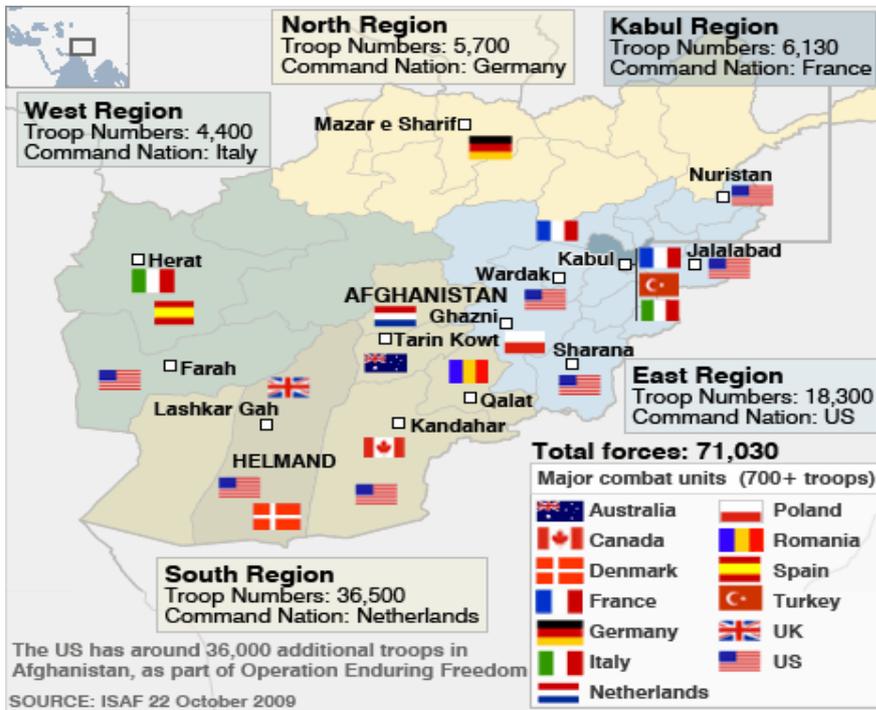
In April 2002, at a meeting in Geneva, the allies agreed on five pillars of reform, with different nations taking responsibilities as enumerated below:-

- US would create and train an Afghan Army.
- Germany would build the Afghan Police.
- Italy would reform the justice system.
- UK took on counter narcotics problem.
- Japan became the lead nation on disarmament, demilitarisation and reintegration of Afghan warlords and civilians.

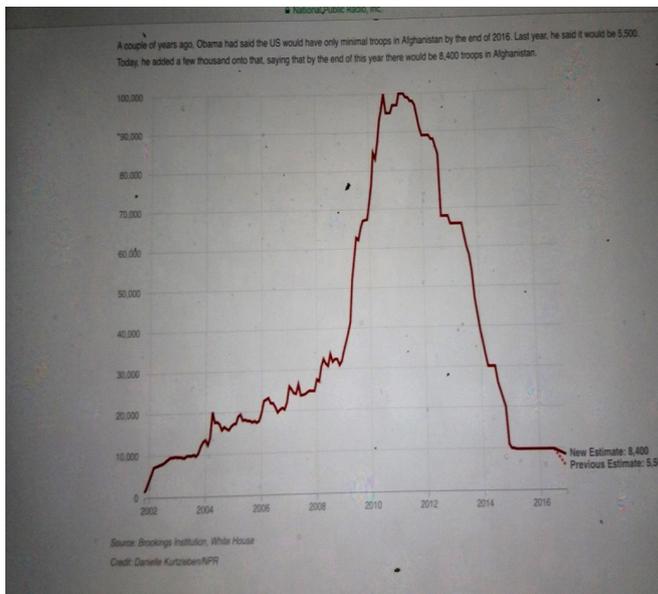
Training in the Afghan Army was extremely difficult. All partners cooperated with the US and by 30 August 2003, three Afghan Army brigades of a total of 10,000 soldiers were deployed at Pul-e-Charkhi, just east of Kabul. Gradually, improvements took place and the three brigades provided security for the ratification of the Afghan Constitution in 2004. Eventually, they provided security to Kabul, Kandhar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif.

Surge in US Troop Level under President Obama and subsequent Downsizing

The US and the allies were able to move to the country side and even attacked the militants occasionally in Pakistan but despite elections and Ashraf Ghani becoming the President the militants could not be eliminated. In 2009 President Obama unveiled a new strategy for Afghanistan and decides to increase the US troops and train Afghanistan National Army. He also stated in December 2009 that he would begin withdrawing forces by 2011. The map showing deployment in 2009 is as under:-



12



Graph Showing US Troop Levels in Afghanistan-2002 to 2017(years on X-axis, troops on Y-axis from zero to 100,000); in 2004 -11,000 troops, in 2011 -100,000 troops (maximum), in 2016 -8400 us troops.¹³

(Source: "ISAF troops in Afghanistan", bbc news, www.bbc.com)

Meanwhile, General David Petraeus took over as the Commander of US forces and the ISAF on 04 July 2010. Strategically, in a Counter-Insurgency scenario, it was incorrect to announce the date of withdrawal as the militants played a waiting game and decided to strike once the ISAF commenced the thinning out process. The coalition forces fought well but the Taliban, Al Qaida and the Haqqani Group fought a conflict based on hit, run and hide, and with the covert support of Pakistan. Meanwhile, the US Navy Seals undertook Operation 'Neptune Spear' and killed Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan on 02 May 2011. While the missions continued an Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed between Afghanistan and the US on 02 May 2012. On 21 May 2012, the leaders of NATO agreed in Chicago that the ISAF would transfer command of all combat

missions to Afghan Forces by the middle of 2013. They would then continue to advise, train and assist the Afghan Security Forces. Meanwhile, a temporary office was opened for Taliban in Qatar in 2013 and that opened a door for possible negotiations. By June 2013, the Afghan National Army took charge of all combat operations. President Ashraf Ghani is sworn in as President in September 2014. By October 2014, the US and UK ended their combat operations in Afghanistan. On 28 December 2014, NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan, handing over to Afghan Security Forces. 2014 was stated to be the bloodiest year since the war started in 2001. A total of 4,364 Afghan National Security Forces personnel were killed in that year.¹⁴

Operation ‘Freedom Sentinel’

Operations from 2015 to date - Resurgence of Taliban

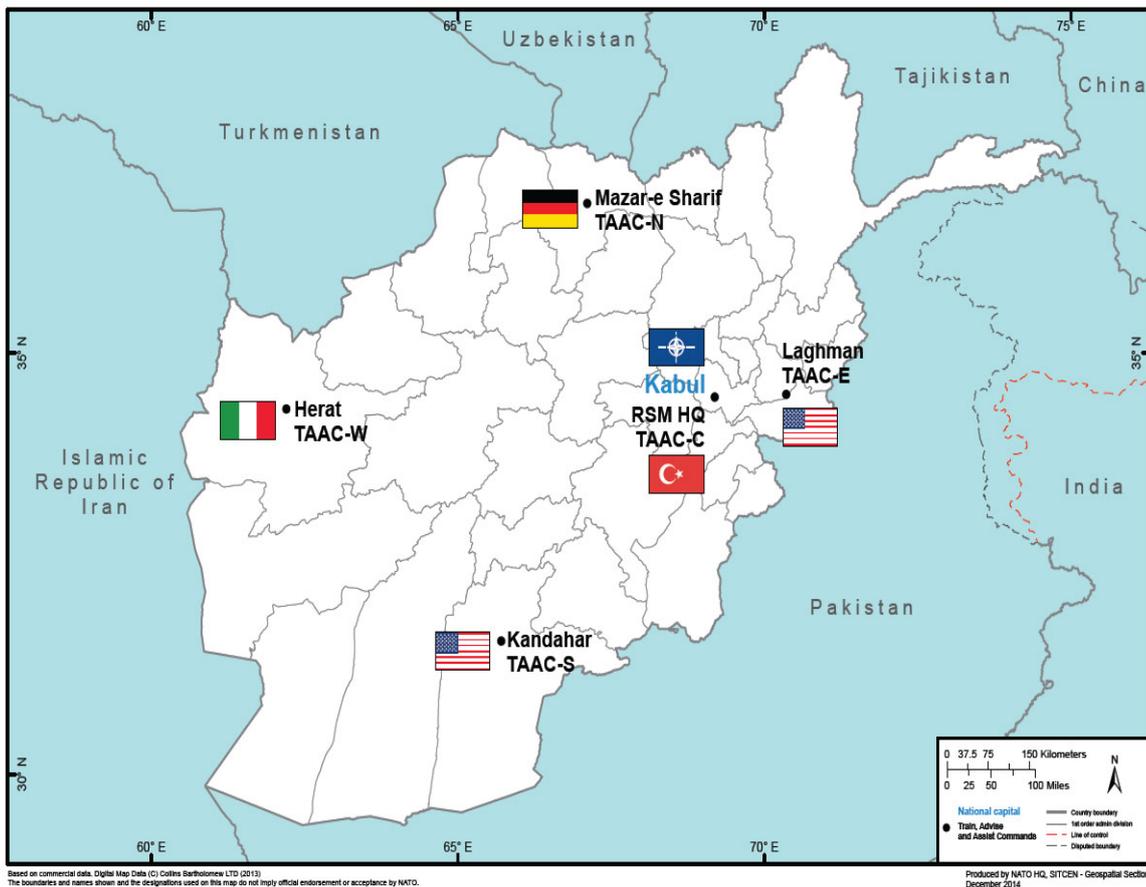
The US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel promulgated the beginning of Operation ‘Freedom Sentinel’ on 27 December 2014. He stated that in 2015 the US would begin the operation which would help to secure and build up on the hard fought gains for the last 13 years. The Operation was ensured resolute support. The US President Barack Obama proposed new guidelines which would allow the US troops to engage the Taliban and also provide air support whenever required. He also authorised them to undertake missions against militants that threaten them or the Afghan Government by using jets, bombers and drones. Resolute support was all about getting the Afghans to get involved at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Further, by 2015, US, Turkey, Italy and Germany started operating their training, advice and assistance Centres.¹⁵

A Taliban resurgence after the withdrawal of the coalition partners was expected. The other reasons for the resurgence are as listed below;-

- Pakistan conducted a military operation, Zarb-e-Azb, in North Waziristan tribal area in June 2014. This dislodged large numbers of Uzbek, Arab and Pakistani militants. These moved into Afghanistan and swelled the Taliban ranks.
- International community was diverted to other conflicts like Syria, Iraq and Ukraine. This emboldened the Taliban to launch the offensive.
- Political infighting in the Afghan Government and poor governance across the country.
- In May 2015, Russia closed a key transport corridor which allowed NATO to deliver military supplies to Afghanistan through Russian territory.

The map below shows the deployment of Training Advise and Assist Command (TAAC) of Turkey at Kabul, the US at Kandhar and Lagham, Italy at Herat and Germany at Mazar-e-Sharif.

Afghanistan: Resolute Support Mission



(Source: https://www.nato.int/nato.../20131018_131022-MediaBackgrounder_ANSF_en.pdf⁶)

The major offensive actions launched by the Taliban are elucidated as follows:-

- The Kabul Parliament was attacked on 22 June 2015. The Afghan Security Forces responded appropriately.
- The Kunduz offensive in late September 2015, when the Taliban captured outlying villages and blocked the route to the Airport. The same was recaptured by Afghan and American forces in 2015. This was followed by the major Helmand offensive which continued till April 2018.

The Helmand Offensive by the Taliban (2015 to date)

The Taliban began an offensive in Helmand province in June 2015. They seized control of Dishu and Baghran, killing 5588 Afghan Government personnel, a large number of them police officers. By the end of July they had over run Nawzad District and in August they further increased their areas. In October 2015, Taliban forces had attempted to take the capital of Helmand province, Lashkar Gah. The Afghan National Army's 215 Corps and Special Operations Forces launched a counter-offensive against the Taliban in November 2015. The assault was repelled and Taliban forces remained dug into the city's suburbs.

The focus now shifted to Sangin. The District fell to the Taliban on December 21 after fierce clashes that killed more than 90 soldiers in two days. It was reported that 30 members of the British SAS alongside 60 US Special Forces operators joined the Afghan Army in the

battle to retake parts of Sangin. Further, about 300 US troops and a small number of British troops in Helmand advised Afghan commanders at the Corps level.

On 23 December 2015, approximately 200 Afghan Police and Army forces were besieged inside the town's police headquarters, with ammunition, military equipment and food having to be air dropped to their positions, the rest of Sangin being under Taliban control, and an attempted relief mission failing. On 27 December 2015, the Taliban controlled the districts of Musa Qala, Nawzad, Baghran, Disho while the districts of Sangin, Marja, Khanishin, Nad Ali, and Kajaki experienced sustained fighting.

It is pertinent to note that the Afghan troops in the province have lacked effective leaders as well as the necessary weapons and ammunition to hold off the persistent Taliban attacks. Some Afghan soldiers in Helmand had been fighting in tough conditions for years without a break to see their families, leading to poor morale and high desertion rates. In February 2016, Taliban insurgents renewed their assault on Sangin after previously being repulsed in December 2015, launching a string of ferocious attacks on Afghan Government forces earlier in the month. As a result, the US decided to send 700 to 800 American troops from 2nd Battalion of 87 Infantry Regiment of the 10 Mountain Division to reinforce existing troops.

On 23 February 2016, CNN announced that Afghan troops pulled out of Nawzad and Musa Qala Districts in Helmand Province on February 20 and 21 in what a senior military official said was a "tactical" move. Head of the local provincial council, Mohammad Karim Atal told CNN, "Afghan soldiers had paid a heavy price and had recaptured some of the areas in those districts by shedding their blood only few months back, but now because of mismanagement, lack of coordination and weak leadership they left them in the hands of enemies."

Despite the setbacks, the Afghan Security Forces did not give up. In early April 2016, 600 Afghan troops launched a major offensive to retake Taliban-occupied areas of Sangin. Further, an offensive to retake the town of Khanisheen was repelled by the Taliban. The ding-dong battle continued and it only witnessed battle hardening of the Afghan troops. General Nicholson, the four star US General in Afghanistan said, "Now, fighting season's not over. We anticipate we'll see other enemy attempts to regain territory in Helmand. But thus far, things are on a real positive trajectory." The Taliban did continue their attacks throughout the year.

It was estimated that the Taliban has retaken more than 80 percent of Helmand Province. According to Defense Department statistics, nine US service members were killed in action and another 70 were wounded in the Province by hostile activity throughout 2016. *The Washington Post* reported that the Afghan Government controlled two districts while six districts were contested and the six others were largely controlled by the Taliban. During the early hours of 23 March 2017, Sangin district was captured by the Taliban. In earlier phase of the war, almost a quarter of British casualties were caused by fighting for the town, while more recently, hundreds of Afghan troops lost their lives defending it. On 29 April 2017, the

new US Administration deployed an additional 5,000 US Marines in the Southern Helmand Province.

The Washington Post reported on 16 April 2018 that the Afghan Government believed they had Lashkar Gah and Gereshk under control, and had expanded security as far south as the Garmser District Centre and as far west as the Marjah District Centre. However, most of those two districts and many others remained under Taliban influence or control. On 1 April 2018, Afghan forces, with US air support, launched an offensive in Nad-e Ali district. The Afghan troops are doing well in combat as per US Brigadier General Turner.¹⁷

Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) in Afghanistan

On 26 January 2015, Islamic State of Iraq and Levant's (ISIL, just IS or Daesh) official spokesman released an audio statement in which he accepted the earlier pledge of allegiance and announced the expansion of ISIL's caliphate with the creation of *Wilayat Khorasan*, a historical region incorporating parts of modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hafiz Khan Saeed was appointed as its local leader. The ISIL began actively recruiting defectors from the Taliban, particularly among those who were disgruntled with their leaders or the lack of battlefield success. This prompted a senior Taliban leader to write a letter addressed to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, asking for the recruitment in Afghanistan to stop and arguing that the war in Afghanistan should be under the Taliban leadership. Nevertheless, fighting between the two groups broke out in Nangarhar Province, and by June 2015, ISIL had been able to seize territory in Afghanistan for the first time. After successfully driving the Taliban out of several districts of Nangarhar, the ISIL Group started carrying out their first attacks against Afghan forces in the province. They also developed a presence in other provinces, including Helmand and Farah. In late 2015, ISIL began radio broadcasting in Pashto language in Nangarhar Province, and later in Dari language too.

The ISIL group was boosted in August 2015 when the Afghanistan-based militant group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), pledged allegiance to it and declared they were now members of Wilayah Khorasan. Clashes broke out between the IMU and the Taliban in Zabul Province following this pledge. The Taliban launched an offensive against the Uzbeks, causing heavy casualties and eliminating its presence in the Province by the end of the year. The Taliban also succeeded in dislodging ISIL from Farah Province over the same period.

The ISIL Group suffered further reversals in 2016, losing control of much of its territory in Nangarhar Province. It was driven out of Achin and Shinwar Districts by Afghan Security Forces, while clashes with the Taliban led to them being driven out of Batkot and Chaparhar Districts. Following the loosening of targeting restrictions by US Forces in Afghanistan earlier in the year, the US Air Force began conducting scores of air strikes against ISIL targets. In April 2016, the Taliban reported that a number of senior and mid-level leaders of Wilayah Khorasan in Nangarhar Province had defected from ISIL and pledged allegiance to Taliban. The defectors included members of the Group's central council, judicial council and prisoner's council, as well as several field commanders and their fighters.

On 13 April 2017, a GBU43/B, the ‘Mother of All Bombs’ was dropped in an airstrike on a cave complex in Nangarhar Province. It was the first use of the bomb during operations. The Afghan Defence Ministry reported it to have killed over 36 militants and destroyed the tunnel complex including a cache of weapons. No civilian casualties were reported. On 26 April 2017, a joint raid operation undertaken in the Nangarhar Province by US Army Rangers and Afghan Special Forces resulted in the death of Sheikh Abdul Hasib, the leader of the IS in Afghanistan. Along with Hasib, a number of other top commanders of the IS were killed, according to a statement by the US Military. Two US Soldiers were killed during the operation, possibly due to friendly fire.

On 09 April 2018, an American airstrike killed the leader of the ISIL in northern Afghanistan, the latest in a series of crippling setbacks for the extremist organisation in the country. The American military commander in Afghanistan, General John W. Nicholson Jr, said that “the strike in Faryab Province had killed Qari Hekmatullah and his bodyguard on Thursday.” Hekmatullah was a key commander of the ISIL in Khorasan. General Nicholson described the killing as a joint operation between American Special Operations troops and Afghan Special Security Forces, and said it was the latest in a series of successful efforts to kill ISIL leaders. The spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Defense, Brigadier General Mohammad Radmanish, said that “Afghan-operated drones had tracked Hekmatullah to his hiding place”.

The killings followed a series of setbacks over the past year for the IS in the Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan. American strikes have killed IS ‘emirs’ and other leaders in that region, while government ground forces, supported by American Special Operations troops and air power, have driven the Group from many areas it had previously held in the Province. A *New York Times* reporter who visited the IS-Khorasan stronghold of Achin District, recently found government forces firmly in control there.

Even as it has lost territory in the north and east of Afghanistan, the IS faction has apparently been stepping up suicide bombings in the capital, Kabul, claiming responsibility for a series of deadly assaults, mostly on targets in Shiite neighbourhoods.¹⁸ 30 April 2018 was the deadliest day for journalists in Afghanistan; nine journalists were killed in two blasts in Kabul and one journalist was killed in a blast in Khost. The ISIL claims the responsibility for the blasts. The Kabul blasts were by suicide bombers. A total of 36 people were killed in the attacks. These attacks were aimed at preventing the Parliamentary Elections in October 2018.¹⁹

Military Assessment of Relative Strengths of the Opposing Forces

The Taliban, Haqqani Group and the ISIL are the main opponents of the Afghan Government at this juncture. Their estimated strength is as under:-

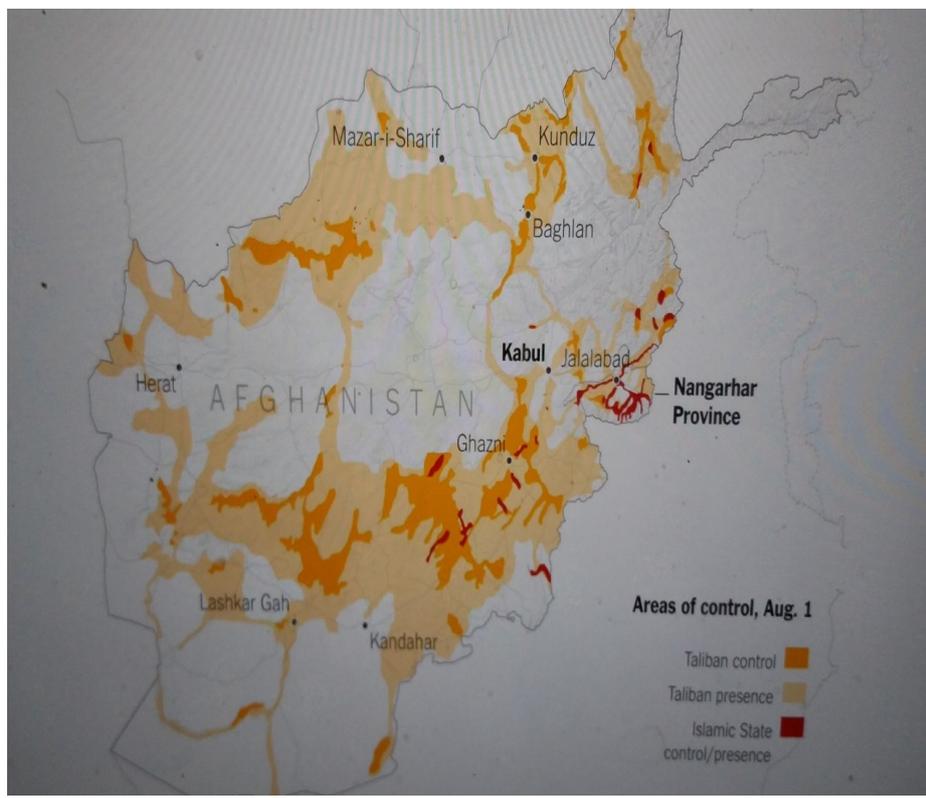
- **The Taliban.** As Kabul reels from a deadly wave of terror attacks, the facts are not easy to find as the Pentagon has stopped issuing figures. The percentage of the Afghan population under the control of the Central Government is shrinking and the numbers of Taliban fighters have doubled in the past four years. In 2014, US officials

told NBC News that the strength of Taliban was about 20,000. In the current year, a US defence official said that the current strength of Taliban is at least 60,000. Bill Roggio, a Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defence Democracies, says that 60,000 is the low end estimate of Taliban strength. He also states that Taliban controls 45 of the country's 398 districts and is battling in another 117. Further, Taliban is said to control about 40 percent of the Afghan population.²⁰

- **ISIL:** The ISIL cadres enter Afghanistan through the Northern Route and comprises fighters from Syria as also former AL Qaida personnel, besides those factions who are not satisfied with the Taliban. The Group is stated to have 1000 fighters and the numbers are likely to increase.²¹

- **Haqqani Net Work.** The strength of the Haqqani Net Work is extremely difficult to gauge. In all likelihood the number varies between 4000 to 15000.²²

These forces are in control of a reasonable geographical space as indicated on the map below.



Areas under Control of Taliban & ISIL

(Source: Sarah Almukhtar, "Taliban Forces control in Afghanistan", New York Times, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/06/, 06 June 2017)

Legend: Orange- Areas under Taliban Control; Light Orange- Areas Supporting Taliban; Maroon- Areas under Control of ISIL.²³

Afghan National Security Forces

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), also known as the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) has the following constituents:-

- Afghan National Army (ANA);
- Afghan Air Force.(AAF);
- Afghan National Police;
- National Directorate of Security.

The ANA has strength of about 200,000 and maintains six Corps and a Special Operations Command. They are deployed at Kabul, Gardez, Kandhar, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Laskar Gah. The ANA lacks artillery equipment and its mechanised forces are equipped with weapons and hardware which are well past their prime. The Special Operations Command controls the ANA Commando Brigade and the Special Forces. Each Corps has three to four brigades and each brigade has four kandaks (battalion). The ethnic composition of ANA is 43 percent Pashtuns, 32 percent Tajiks, 12 percent Hazara, 8 percent Uzbeks and the rest by other small ethnic groups.

It is pertinent to note that 111 Infantry Division is located in Kabul for its security. The AAF has four wings located at Kabul, Kandhar, Shindand and Mazar-e-Sharif. It has a total strength of 7100 and has the following aircraft:-

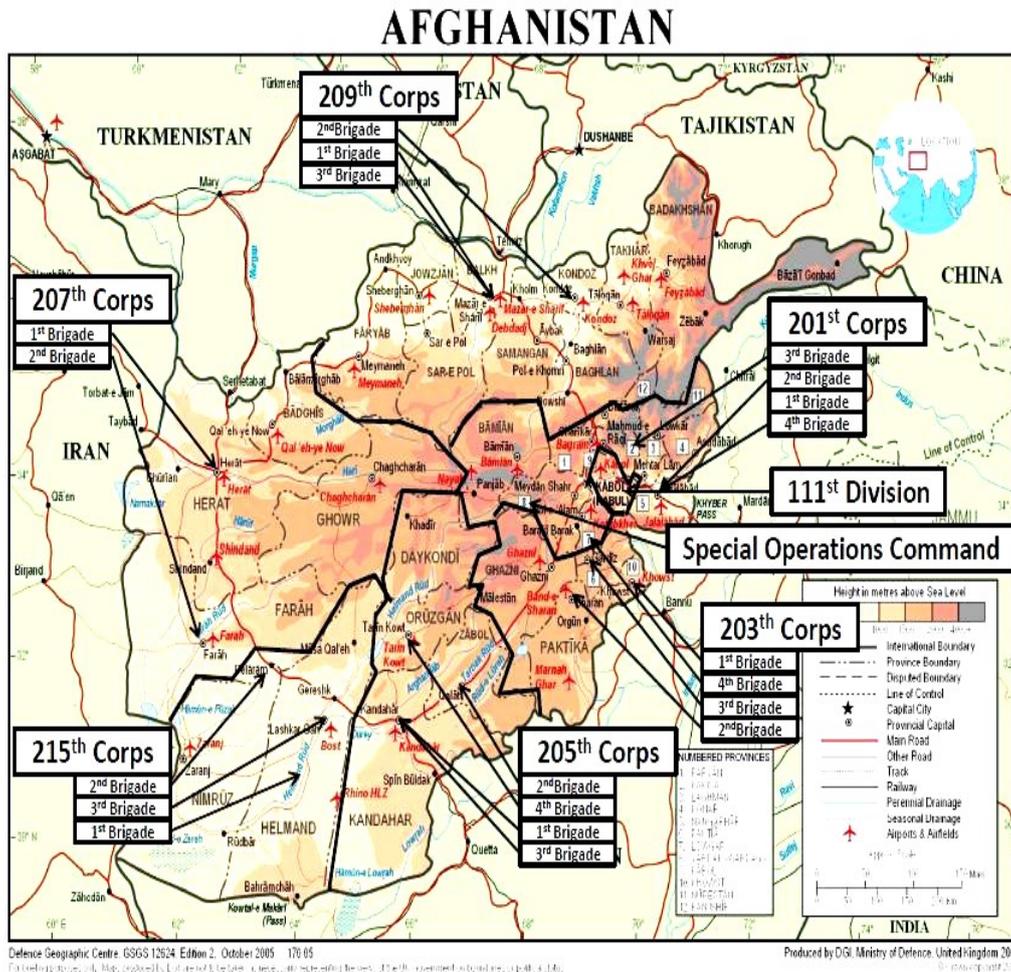
- Combat, Cessna -208 and A-29, currently ordered.
- Transport, Boeing-727, C-130, Pilatus, PC-12.
- Helicopters – Mi-17, Bell UH-1, Cheetah, UH-60 Sikorsky, MD -500
- Attack Helicopters- MI-35 -4.

In the overall operational effectiveness, the AFA is weak and needs to be assisted by the US.

The Afghan National Police has strength of 160,000. It has the following branches:-

- Uniform Police.
- Highway Police.
- Border Police.
- Criminal Investigation Department.

The total strength of the ANSF is reported to be 382,000 which include personnel in the Directorate of Security.



Map Showing Deployment of ANA

(Source: “ANA in Afghanistan”, Images on Google, accessed on 03 May 2018.²⁴)

The US and Other Forces

President Trump unveiled his policy towards Afghanistan in August 2017. Currently, it is estimated that there are about 14,000 US troops and 6,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan.²⁵ There has been a spike in air strikes after Trump took office. In addition to the other fighters and Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAV), the A-10 Thunderbolt which is an excellent aircraft for close support has landed in Kandhar. 12 of these are going to make it difficult for the militants to operate in Afghanistan. The US and NATO Forces are gradually making the ANSF a professionally capable force.²⁶

Visualisation of the Pattern of Operations

Concept

Operations will be based on control of communication centres and keeping the following axes open for ground communications:-

- Quetta–Kandhar-Kabul.
- Peshawar-Jalalabad-Kabul.

- Tashkent–Kabul.
- Herat-Kabul.

Likely Pattern of Operations Opposing Forces

It is apparent that the Haqqani Net Work will operate in conjunction with the Taliban. The ISIL would undertake independent operations. Out of them, Taliban and Haqqani Net Work would be more powerful. The likely pattern of operations is appreciated to be as under:-

- Attempts to escalate complex attacks and assassinations against high level targets in Kabul. Through these attacks, insurgents will try to directly threaten key nation leaders and institutions, as well as the US and NATO personnel. They will also seek to undermine the overall security of Kabul in order to counteract the perception that the insurgency has been confined to rural areas in the provinces. The Haqqani Net Work in particular will attempt to conduct surveillance of high security installations, move weapons and equipment into safe houses in the capital, expand their underground and the sleeper cell net works to be activated based on requirement. The ISIL has also been similarly active in its own way.
- Taliban has commenced its ‘spring offensive’ when the emphasis will be to expand its control over rural areas around the Capital, particularly along its Southern approaches. They will interfere in the axis of maintenance from Quetta to Kandhar and onwards to Kabul and from Peshawar to Kabul via Jalalabad. They would also try and create impediments on the Northern route from Tashkent.
- The insurgents will put maximum pressure on the ANSF. The ANSF is however able to hold ground with US and NATO assistance.
- Currently, the insurgents would do their utmost to interfere with the parliament and district elections to be conducted in October 2018. The insurgents would scare the voters and leave no stone unturned to achieve their aim of disrupting the Government.

Thrust Areas of ANDSF Operation

The design of operations for the ANDSF is appreciated as elucidated:-

- To launch Information Operations against the militants. In this, the Haqqani Group, which is able to maintain the tempo of the blasts by providing valuable inputs to the Taliban and ISIL, would be accorded the highest targeting priority.
- To train to hone up expertise in operating stealthily and organise cordon, search and destroy missions against the militants, their over ground workers and sleeper cells.
- To keep continuous watch over the insurgent hideouts in Peshawar and Quetta through satellites, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and human intelligence.

- To be pro-active in launching offensive actions before the militants can launch theirs. Intelligence is the key to success.
- To provide protection to Afghan citizens to register as voters, plan protection of the polling booths and ensure elections are held in October for the Parliament and district bodies.
- To ensure that only militants and their supporters are neutralised. Common people and public administration must be protected.
- To make efforts to make the militants realise that they were losing and their best bet is in negotiating.

Goals of the US and NATO Operations

- To carry out detailed Net Assessment of the situation and put pressure on Pakistan to stop assisting the militants. To ensure that militant targets in Pakistan are regularly attacked.
- It takes about 20 years to make an army professional. The ANSF has started operating from end 2014. It would take the US at least another 15 years to make the ANSF fully stand on its own. The US troops are in Japan for the last 73 years, in South Korea for 68 years and nearly 140 other countries to ensure that freedom and democracy prevails. Afghanistan would need similar care and assistance.
- The US and NATO have to provide artillery and air support to the ANSF for all tasks whenever needed.
- Soldiers of the ANSF have to be cared for by the principal ally as their own brethren.
- The US must ensure that ISIL elements do not slip-in from Syria, using the Northern route.
- The commander in Afghanistan be accorded all support from the President and the Pentagon.

Way Ahead

The insurgency in Afghanistan is a political problem; the military can create the right conditions for diplomatic talks to begin. Currently, Taliban is in no mood to negotiate. They may be having talks with China, Russia, Qatar, US, and the Afghan Government, but these are abruptly broken off without any forward movement. The obvious question is that as to what should the military do to compel Taliban weak enough to come to negotiate? The Taliban have the resources through drug trafficking, ransom and extortion. 60 percent of the Taliban money comes from drugs. Accordingly, Taliban would like the fight to continue as long as possible.

The ANSF has improved itself professionally but it would take considerable time for them to really take the offensive into the Taliban Camp. Currently, the US and NATO are guiding them and they are able to combat tricky situations with wit, courage, gumption and valour. What then should the ANSF, US and the NATO focus upon? Here, intelligence is the key to dominate an insurgent situation. It is the Haqqani Group which provide valuable inputs and guidance to Taliban as also the ISIL in selection of targets and carrying out attacks. Therefore, targeting the Haqqani Net Work, the backbone of all terror attacks, would weaken the Taliban's ability to call the shots. Marginalising the Haqqani Net Work would be a complex task which has to be done with skill and dexterity. This effort has to be a joint initiative with Pakistan, by forcing that latter to comply. Destruction of the Haqqani Net Work would be a game changer and would force Taliban to relent.

Besides, the elections must be conducted in October 2018 and governance improved. Further, Taliban who are ready to come around must be granted favourable options. All this will take time and a lot of patience. Finally, a favourable situation would emerge only if the US and NATO continue to stay and guide the ANSF.

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Postscript: In early May, 2018 Afghan security forces suffered heavy losses in clashes against insurgents across the country. The Afghan interior ministry said that security forces have retreated from some areas that have high threat levels so as to avoid additional fatalities. According to security departments, since the start of the Taliban's Spring Offensive, the Group has carried out over 2,700 attacks which resulted in high fatality rates to both security forces and Taliban militants. During this time, Kohistan District in Badakhshan Province, Belchiragh District in Faryab Province and Tala Wa Barfak District in Baghlan Province have fallen to the Taliban. Tala Wa Barfak was still under the control of the Group while the other two have since been retaken. The Interior Ministry has stated that there are plans to improve the management of the security situation. - Editor

(The paper does not necessarily represent the organisational stance. The author certifies that the article/paper is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/web upload elsewhere, and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed, and are believed to be correct).

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