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Afghanistan: Militants Posing Imminent Threat to Central Asia (I)

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The civil war in Yemen, the following intervention by Saudi Arabia to aggravate the stand-off with Iran, the capture of Iraqi Ramadi and Syrian Palmira by Islamic State (IS) – all these events hit radar screen today to distract attention from Afghanistan where the situation creep is gradually turning into a burning security problem to threaten many nations.

Situation creep

Watching the events unfold, the following trend is eye catching – Afghan Taliban fighters used

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to target urban areas to acquire springboards along the Afghan border with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. It's not the case anymore. Today they are moving north and south - from Herat to Kandahar. It coincides with the projected TAPI route (Herat - Kandahar - Quetta, Pakistan). The Trans-Afghanistan pipeline project to include Afghanistan – Pakistan – India is developed to transport Caspian Sea gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan into Pakistan and to India. The framework for the project's launch has been pushed back for many years. This April 2015 Afghan President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai said in a statement that the pipeline should become operational in 2020. The areas along the projected route are hit by instability threatening to stymie the announced plans.

The Afghan national security forces (ANSF) continue to face huge challenges maintaining security across the country as the U.S.-led international military coalition has shifted to a supporting and advisory mission over the past year and the Taliban insurgency has launched its most recent spring offensive. Last month, Taliban militants in northern Kunduz Province initiated one of the fiercest attacks this year striking at multiple districts on the outskirts of the province's capital city. Heavy fighting also took place in the provinces of Badakhshan, Farah, Kunar and Faryab.

Assessment of belligerents combat capabilities: weak and strong points

Government security forces

The Afghan national security forces (ANSF) react too slowly to the Islamists attacks. Police forces often fail to hold positions because it takes too long for military reinforcements to come. Many a time check points under attack failed to call reinforcements in due to slow reaction of commanding officers or faulty communications equipment. The ANSF face serious problems with fuel because of irregular supplies or corrupt practices when it is stolen and sold. The Afghan officials and military commanders are not the only ones to blame. The US servicemen have a finger in the pie. At least 115 American enlisted military personnel deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan have been convicted since 2005 for committing theft, bribery, and contract rigging crimes which have totaled more than \$52 million in damages. One of the massive scams that was uncovered involved soldiers selling US military fuel to citizens in Afghanistan and pocketing the money. The fuel thefts alone have totaled at least \$15 million since the start of the war, the Center for Public Integrity reported in its May, 5, 2015 report.

Contracts for the transport of fuel allowed seven days for a truck to deliver it to its destination, even if the destinations were only a few hours away. This loose control led to one out of three truck convoys being «pilfered» and losing approximately 11,000 gallons of fuel, or over 800,000 gallons in just one year. The US Inspector General has said these cases are only the tip of the iceberg, and that far more fraud has been committed than has been prosecuted.

There were still 327 active investigations into crimes by military personnel as of February, and officials investigating the cases believe that the total losses from these crimes will tally up to billions of dollars. Adding to weak points, Afghan police and other security forces fail to track the militants formations moving north. The ANSF lack helicopters, professional commissioned officers and sergeants, the morale is not up to par. Still the Afghan security forces are capable of

holding key urban areas till reinforcements arrive, as well as dissipating inferior enemy forces.

Taliban

In 2014 the Afghan government stuck to the tactics of pushing the armed opposition away from the country to make it move north. The Taliban retreated while maintaining its military capability. Morale remains high. There is no desertion. The Islamic State is predominantly joined by warlords that were not part of Taliban or those who left the group to act on their own. The Taliban managed to provide the combat forces with logistics support, including transport, fuel and means of communications. The weak point is inability to seize large populated areas and break through fortified areas, something that strikes the eye when you go through the chronology of the recent fighting, for instance the recent operation in Kunduz. The Taliban tactics mainly boil down to striking check points and blocking highways. With all strong and weak points, the cost of the Taliban's spring campaign was high: 4,950 Afghan police and soldiers killed or wounded in the first 15 weeks of the year – an increase of 70 percent compared with the same period in 2014.

Islamic State

This spring the Islamic State, or to be more precise - Wilayat Khorasan, a militant group linked to it, has penetrated Afghanistan from Pakistan. The IS intrusion will undoubtedly change several long-standing dynamics in the region's many conflicts involving state and non-state actors.

The IS poses a serious threat to Afghanistan that has just begun to take baby steps towards normalcy - because several terrorists strewn across the country have pledged allegiance. The group has potential inroads in Western Afghanistan via Farah and Faryab Provinces. In eastern Afghanistan, IS supporters are already indulging in violence in Logar, Ghazni, Parwan and Zabul provinces. The report suggesting establishment of training camp by IS in Logar province came as President Ashraf Ghani acknowledged for the first time last month that the terrorist group was gaining influence in the country. Speaking during a press briefing ahead of his March visit to United States, President of Afghanistan said, «Daesh's characteristic is that it is man-eating. It swallows its competitors». «Here, it is not physical presence of people from Syria or Iraq. It is the network effect», President Ashraf Ghani added.