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The Audacious Taliban Attack on the Parliament

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The Monday's attack on Afghanistan's Parliament was one of the most audacious attacks organized by the Taliban as part of the group's ongoing spring offensive in the country. According to security officials, all attackers were gunned down, and the attack left at least five dead and 31 injured. The attack seemingly meant to target the Wolesi Jirga's Monday session in which the Second Vice President Mohammad Sarwar Danish was due to introduce the newly picked nominee for Ministry of Defense for a vote of confidence. The attack is coming at a time when the Taliban spring offensive has taken fresh momentum in a number of provinces including Northern Kunduz province. The Monday attack shocked the whole nation, and raised the question whether the government is able to provide security for key institutions like the parliament which are highly vulnerable to Taliban attacks.

The attack on the Parliament's Monday session was of crucial symbolic importance both because of the significance of the legislative institution and the agenda of the House for Monday. The Ministry of Defense is spearheading a national campaign against the Taliban and other militant groups to counter their deadly spring offensive across the country. The Ministry, however, have not had a minister in recent months due to differences among the leaders of the National Unity Government over who should lead the top security agency. Many were criticizing the NUG for lack of leadership from the Ministry of Defense in the ongoing combat against the Taliban. However, still the defense ministry manifested remarkable determination in leading the nationwide anti-insurgency campaign. The Monday attack on the parliament was meant to target

the defense department and the efforts to have appointed a minister for the key security institution.

The attack was not the first of its kind. The Afghan parliament was also targeted in the past. However, the militants' storm on the parliament on Monday was exceptionally important because of its timing and the overall trend of war in the country. The Taliban sent a message of determination and resolve in targeting high-valued targets such as key government institutions. The Taliban militants fighting in northern Kunduz province have just seized two key districts in the province. The territory gains in Kunduz and the spectacular attack on the parliament are seen as a key achievement for the insurgents' spring offensive. The scale of the attack on the parliament was surprising for many as the premises of the parliament were highly guarded due to the vulnerability of the parliament to terrorist attacks. Some of the lawmakers were enraged by the government's inability to protect the parliament particularly when an attack on the house was predicted in recent months.

The Monday attack on the parliament and security deterioration elsewhere across the country are indicating intensification of the Taliban spring offensive started two months ago. In recent months, it was expected that the peace efforts would bear fruit and lead the militant leaders to come to table of negotiations with the government of Afghanistan. Afghan officials hoped this would ultimately impact the ongoing war in the country. However, the Taliban have pursued a two-track path of war and diplomacy efforts this year. The militant groups have heightened their insurgency campaign in form of the spring offensive.

On the other hand, the militant group has also taken a different approach towards the groups' diplomacy as they have started engaging diplomatically with the foreign stakeholders as well as Afghan non-government parties. Partly, the Taliban's two-track war and peace efforts is because of Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan's role and influence for bringing Taliban leaders to table of negotiations. The Taliban have expressed their grievances of the recent Afghan and Pakistani thaws in relations and the Afghan government's approach of seeking peace with Taliban through Pakistan. The Taliban have always been sensitive to how their relations with Pakistan are interpreted. As Islamabad have indicated that Pakistan has no full control over the Taliban, the Taliban leadership is eager to show that they are acting independently in matters of the ongoing war and the peace efforts. Afghanistan's reliance to Pakistan for peace has further encouraged the Taliban to wage a deadly last-minute war before any inevitable peace dialogue with the government of Afghanistan.

On the other hand, this while the Pakistani government is yet to exert any serious pressure against the Taliban in response to Afghanistan's calls for a genuine support from Islamabad regarding the peace process. Recently, President Ashraf Ghani also urged Islamabad to take concrete measures against Taliban leadership operating in the country. Lack of any concrete action from Pakistan has provided the Taliban the opportunity to pursue a dual track of war and peace diplomacy for having an upper hand in any possible peace talks in the future. The Taliban seem to be preparing for entering peace talks with the government of Afghanistan.

On Tuesday June 23, 2015, Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's prime minister's adviser on foreign affairs and national security said that Afghan government and Taliban will likely meet in a week time.

With the same tone, Aziz expressed optimism an unprecedented breakthrough is expected in three months time. He informed Islamabad helped facilitated a meeting between Taliban representatives and Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) headed by Masoom Stanekzai in Urumqi, China, last month.

The Taliban have been engaging in preliminary talks with a number of foreign mediators and informal talks with different parties from Afghanistan.

The group's dual track of war and peace diplomacy is benefiting the group both in the battlefield and at any stage for peace talks. The expansion of the war, gaining territories in frontlines and the spectacular attacks such as Monday attack on the parliament are all benefiting the Taliban and giving them the upper hand both on the ground and at table of peace negotiations. The two-track war and peace approach by the Taliban is also empowering the Taliban against other newly emerging players such as the Islamic State group which is threatening the Taliban supremacy in Afghanistan. The Taliban heightened war is also meant to overcome its internal challenges and the rifts between the moderate and more hardline members of the group.

The government of Afghanistan needs a dedicated transitional plan for countering the new war-and-peace approach of the Taliban. If the government fails to effectively counter the Taliban's pre-peace war approach, it would not be able to enter successful peace negotiations with the militant groups.