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Mullah Akhtar Mansoor's Death: Implications of Taliban Chief's Killing

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The elimination of Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in a US drone attack is a major setback for the insurgent movement but is unlikely to change the overall nature of the conflict in Afghanistan. Mansoor's killing will trigger a new power struggle within the Taliban but whether prospects for peace will now improve remains an open question.

Commentary

THE KILLING of the Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in a US drone strike is a major setback for the insurgent movement. His death comes barely a year after the disclosure of the Taliban's founding leader Mullah Umar's death. Mansoor has been targeted by multiple US drones in Pakistan's Balochistan province. The US considered him a major hurdle to peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. However, it is yet to be seen if his killing will have a significant impact on the Taliban's ongoing spring offensive in Afghanistan, and whether it will improve the prospects of peace talks or undermine them further.

In July 2015 when Mansoor assumed the leadership of the Afghan Taliban, finding a political solution to the Afghan conflict looked achievable. Given his politically accommodative nature and closeness with Pakistani military establishment, the stakeholders of the Afghan conflict looked towards his appointment favourably, in hopes of reaching a political compromise. However, the developments that transpired following his appointment were concerning.

New Phase of US Drone Campaign

In the last meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), comprising the United States, China, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Afghan government demanded that all obstacles to political reconciliation in Afghanistan should be removed by force. Previously, under a secret agreement, Pakistan's military establishment assisted the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in its drone campaign against leaders and operatives of Al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network and the Taliban.

The killing of Mansoor can possibly be the result of a renewed understanding between Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and CIA to put the faltering Afghan peace process back on track, slow down the ongoing spring offensive, and work with the reconcilable Taliban groups by isolating the hardliners.

Of the 292 drone strikes that the US has conducted in Pakistan, the attack targeting Mansoor is the second one outside the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Previously, most of the strikes were strictly confined to FATA's North and South Waziristan tribal regions. By carrying out a drone strike in Balochistan province, US has crossed Pakistan's red line as agreed between the two countries in 2010.

This signifies a shift in US' Afghanistan policy following President Obama's hint previously of more drone attacks in future. This also signals the start of a new phase of the US drone campaign against the Taliban hideouts in Balochistan, which could in turn force Taliban leaders to relocate back to Afghanistan or take shelter elsewhere in Pakistan.

Fallout of Mansoor's Killing: Favouring IS?

The immediate fallout of Mansoor's death will be the crash of the QCG-led peace process. All stakeholders will adopt a wait-and-see approach and reassess the situation that arises following his death. The Taliban will not return to talks, if at all, until they have chosen a new leader. Meanwhile, the QCG members will closely observe the appointment of Taliban's possible new leader, and see what policies he adopts towards the peace talks.

Mansoor's death will spark intense power struggles within the Taliban's top leadership to choose his successor. Despite the solid hierarchical structure of the movement, the appointment of a new leader is not simple or straight-forward. Judging from the Taliban's current leadership hierarchy, one of Mansoor's two deputies; Siraj-ud-Din Haqqani — chief of the Haqqani Network — or Maulvi Haibatullah Akhundzada, former judicial chief and a religious scholar, may succeed him. Mullah Umar's son Mullah Yaqoob and Mullah Qayum Zakir, the most senior Taliban commander after Mansoor, may also be leading contenders.

His death will also provide a new opportunity for IS-Khurasan, the Afghan affiliate of Islamic State, to further entrench its presence in eastern Afghanistan. It will enable IS' local leadership to win the loyalties of disgruntled Taliban elements who may be attracted towards the former if their demands are not addressed in the leadership struggle. The Taliban hardliners, who might face US drone strikes or military operations, may gravitate towards IS-Khurasan if pro-talks elements prevail in the new power struggle.

Three Scenarios for Regional Peace

Mansoor's death can thus result in three possible scenarios for regional peace and security.

First, if Pakistan's complicity in Mansoor's killing is proven, it can result in the unification of the Afghan Taliban with their Pakistani counterparts and Al-Qaeda. The Taliban can launch reprisal attacks to avenge Mansoor's death on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. If this were to happen, it will herald a new phase of militancy in the region which will blur the lines between transnational, regional and local militant groups operating in the Af-Pak region.

Second, the opportunity for a positive outcome exists which might result from the empowerment of a Taliban leader who is favourably disposed towards a political settlement. However, the chances of this are slim because the new leader will face immense pressure from within the Afghan Taliban to continue the fight.

Third, further factionalisation and division of the Taliban movement may weaken their military prowess and political cohesion. If this happens, then Kabul and Washington will be inclined towards a divide-and-rule approach by politically accommodating the reconcilable elements while taking action against the hardliners.

Divisions within the Taliban ranks, following the death of Mullah Umar, neither changed the overall direction and nature of the Afghan conflict, nor did they affect Taliban's battlefield gains and spring offensive significantly. The fight continued as the Taliban Shura sorted out differences and leadership disputes. Mansoor's death is likely to take the same trajectory.

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