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Mullah Omar's Death: Pakistan's Role in Afghanistan

By Halimullah Kousary

Synopsis

With western forces out of Afghanistan, Pakistan fears Taliban winning exclusive power in Afghanistan and thus tries to facilitate a power sharing deal between Taliban and the Afghan government. Mullah Omar's death is a factor behind this pursuit.

Commentary

THE MYSTERIOUS announcement recently of the death of Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader and commander of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the rise of Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour as successor, have raised questions about the role of external forces in the country.

Mullah Omar founded the group in 1994 and was conferred the title of "the commander of the faithful" with a pledge of allegiance from 2,000 Afghan and foreign Islamic scholars. The appointment of Mullah Mansour has led to suspicion and dissent within the group's core cadre as he is accused of conniving his way to the top leadership with Pakistan's help. This dissent within the Taliban could render the new leadership vulnerable to influence by external forces.

Pakistan's quest for influence

Pakistan seeks to gain influence in Afghanistan that is strong enough to counter India, even if that compromises Taliban's goal of empowering the "Islamic Emirate" in the country. Now that the Ghani government in Afghanistan is tilting towards it, Pakistan is trying to pressurise the Taliban to negotiate a power sharing deal and marginalise those within the group who oppose it. Mullah Omar could have been a sacrifice in this design.

Some of the key commanders of Taliban claimed that he did not die due to an illness but that he was killed as a part of a planned scheme. The timing of his death and the announcing of it came at two critical junctures. He is said to have died/or been killed in 2013 when most Coalition Forces were already withdrawn from Afghanistan. The announcement also came two years later when Pakistan purportedly became committed to facilitating face-to-face peace talks with the Afghan National Unity Government, headed by President Ashraf Ghani.

The announcement of Mullah Omar's death maybe an attempt to benefit the pro-peace talks Taliban by sending out a message to the cadre of the group at all levels that Omar has long gone; a new leadership now holds the reins and should be obeyed.

For the first time, Pakistan facilitated face-to-face peace talks in July 2015 between the Taliban and Ghani's government; it avoided going to such lengths when his predecessor Hamid Karzai was power. There are two explanations for Pakistan's differing gestures towards the two Afghan governments. It could be that Mullah Omar refused to bow to Pakistan's pressure to hold peace talks with the government. Or Pakistan had perceived President Karzai's government to be irreconcilably pro-India and any thought of bringing Taliban to the negotiation table with such government was not in its best interest.

Pakistan's former President Pervez Musharaf openly admitted that Pakistan strived to undermine Karzai's government through supporting Taliban's continued military campaign, while he described Ghani's government "balanced" and supported a sincere gesture of cooperation in peace talks from Islamabad.

Taliban's new leadership

Mansour comes to the forefront in this likely pursuit by Pakistan. Without having Islamabad on his side, Mansour would not have been able to take such a bold step as authorising direct peace talks with the Afghan government without the consent of other key leaders of the group. Mansour authorised representatives who attended the July meeting with Afghan officials in Murree, while the Qatar delegation - the official Taliban body to run political affairs - reiterated that Taliban would not hold peace talks with the Afghan government in the presence of foreign military forces in the country and that it does not recognise Ghani's government as legitimate.

Tayyeb Agha, head of the Qatar delegation, resigned following Omar's death. He described keeping Omar's death a secret a historic blunder and argued that the new leadership, appointed outside Afghanistan, is unlikely to serve the interests of the group – a reference to Pakistan's role in Mansour's appointment.

Mansour, in his first audio message as the leader of the group, vowed to continue the fight until Islamic rule is empowered in Afghanistan. But the prevailing sense among Afghan experts is that the message is aimed at addressing the current dissent to his leadership. They believe that Mansour and his supporters are bent on striking a power sharing deal with the Afghan government eventually.

Pakistan's larger fear

Although often described as a symbolic leader, the non-existence of Omar's leadership has a far-reaching impact on Taliban, leaving the group more vulnerable to Pakistan's influence. Omar's death can help Pakistan seek a political configuration in Afghanistan where power is shared between Taliban and the Afghan government. Pakistan's reason for seeking such a deal lies in its fears of Taliban winning exclusive power and reinstating the "Islamic Emirate" in Afghanistan.

This could encourage and even collaborate with the Pakistani Taliban to fight for the same goal against Pakistan. Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which recognised Mullah Omar as supreme leader and "commander of the faithful", long ago declared the "Islamic Emirate of Waziristan" in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

However, an important question for the Afghan government is whether power-sharing with the splintered Taliban could ensure stability in Afghanistan. Those elements within the group that try to act independently of Pakistan may ally with foreign militant operatives in Afghanistan to challenge any power-sharing deal and keep the conflict burning in the country.

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