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Is There a Way Out of the Afghan Deadlock?

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In-depth Report: AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan has always been of particular interest to world powers and they would most certainly try to conquer it. But not for the sake of earning bragging rights, but to secure control over a bridgehead connecting the countries of Central and South Asia. It is for this reason that over the past few decades, Afghanistan has been the scene of bitter hostilities between major Western powers and local resistance groups unwilling to surrender their sovereignty so that Washington could pursue its own national interests. But this rivalry did nothing to improve living conditions of the local population or ensure peace and security in Afghanistan, instead we witness this proud country being transformed into a brewing pot for instability and chaos. Almost two decades after the initial invasion of this country American servicemen are almost universally perceived as an illegal occupation force here.

As it's been pointed out by the Stars and Stripes with a special reference to the US Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) special report, between the start of the year and the end of October, US dropped 5,982 munitions on Afghanistan. Even though this report doesn't study the whole year, the number stated surpasses the previous annual record of about 5,400 recorded in 2011 at the height of the US troop surge.

Unsurprisingly, the same AFCENT report states that the number of civilian casualties over the same period of time reached an all time high. This results in the Taliban increasing the number of its operations, inflicting one crushing blow on pro-Western security forces after another. So it's only logical that we see reports stating that Afghan ground forces have suffered heavy casualties in recent months. This brings the total of Afghan soldiers and local policemen who perished since 2015, when local troops took over combat operations from the US and NATO, to a rather grave death toll of 30,000 men.

Just recently, the Brown University released its own evaluation of the Afghan war casualties, stating that at least 140 thousand men lost their lives in direct hostilities. Over the period of seventeen years, at least 6 thousand American servicemen sacrificed their lives defending Washington's grand designs in Afghanistan, together with eleven hundred servicemen from the countries of the so-called US-led coalition. The authors behind the study showed their exceptional integrity by stating that those the lowest possible number of casualties, as nobody has precise numbers on his hands. To make the matters worse, we don't have any reports on the number of American men and women who were broken mentally or physically by this brutal war and were sent home in order not to skew the numbers. To make the matters worse, if unofficial sources are to be believed, the total number of casualties of the Afghan war, including those that perished because of the total destruction of the Afghan civil infrastructure, leaves us with a mind-numbing number of one million human lives lost. Additionally, 2,6 million Afghan citizens were displaced in the course of the hostilities and had to flee the country.

That is why the lingering US and NATO military presence in Afghanistan can hardly be described in any other way than a complete and total mess. It seems that local citizens share pretty much the same evaluation of the situation on the ground, as there's reports of an ever increasing number of protests against the actions of the US Air Force being held all across Afghanistan.

Unsurprisingly, the Weekly Standard would feature an article with a very telling title that goes: The "Afghanistan War Is Over. We Lost". The article itself states that the Trump administration has been voicing its plans to withdraw American troops, but it never fulfill those due to the nature of American foreign policy.

As it's been pointed on Zero Hedge, a peaceful Afghanistan led by a single central government is highly unlikely to go in the wake of Washington's global designs. Yet, Washington loves to brag that the US is playing an instrumental part in bringing peace to Afghanistan, while as a matter of fact it is the only obstacle standing in the way of peaceful negotiations.

Meanwhile, the US-backed Afghan government is rapidly losing ground to the Taliban and other rebel groups. Last year's report by the Special Inspector General for Reconstruction of Afghanistan states that the government controls or has influence over no more than 57% of the territory of Afghanistan. According to a recent BBC study, Taliban militants are freely operating across 70% of Afghanistan's lands. According to Pentagon's evaluation, there was no more than 15 thousand militants operating in Afghanistan a decade ago. Today this figure is believed to exceed 60 thousand men.

It's been pointed out that it is not the incumbent Afghan government but the United States which is really calling the shots in Afghanistan. Indeed, the US has a number of strategic interests in this region. These interests compel it to stay in Afghanistan. Therefore, the US will naturally be more interested in preserving its broader strategic interests than bring peace to this war-ravaged country. At present, there is a sort of deadlock in the dialogue process between the US-backed Afghan government and the Taliban as both are trying to reach a negotiated settlement on their own terms.

According to the Nation, the US and its allies should seriously evolve a comprehensive exit strategy to completely pull their troops out of Afghanistan. In fact, the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from this conflict is also a major precondition by the Taliban and other insurgent groups to make peace in Afghanistan.

However, NATO's secretary general Jens Stoltenberg would still insist that the price of withdrawal from Afghanistan both in financial expenditures and human lives is going to be much higher that NATO is paying now for staying. This was stated on December 5 at Stoltenberg's meeting with heads of foreign ministers of the alliance. In his comments on the results of this meeting, the spokesperson for the Afghan high peace council, Sayed Ihsan Taheri stated that NATO and its partners told the Afhgan government that they were prepared to withdraw their troops should the people of Afghanistan explicitly express their will on this matter.

Yet, the Indian Punchline would reveal that the recent Moscow conference on Afghanistan brought to light that the peace talks will get a big fillip if the US and Russia work in tandem. It would also add that everything depends on the Trump administration reversing course

and accepting a Russian role. But this will have to be a political decision at the highest level in the White House. So far, the sitting US president has left it to the Pentagon commanders to pursue his Afghan strategy. But the strategy to weaken the Taliban to the point they would sue for peace is simply unworkable and is counterproductive.

Stabilization of Afghanistan is, perhaps, where US-Russia cooperation is "doable". There is no real backlog of bitterness or contradictions. The US cannot say Russia is responsible for its defeat in Afghanistan. In the interests of regional security and stability in Central Asia, Moscow helped out wherever, whenever the US wanted help. Simply put, what is needed is a reset of the American mindset.

Yet, it's been added that the US has now started realizing two important things in Afghanistan. Firstly, it looks convinced that it can't control or stabilize Afghanistan through military means alone. Secondly, it has started considering the Taliban an important reality on the ground without engaging whom through a meaningful dialogue, there can hardly be peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Last month, one could come across numerous reports about Donald Trump evaluating the possibility of visiting Afghanistan before the end of the year. However, it seems unlikely that he will be able to make visit in the last couple days of the year, which means that the White House hasn't fully grasped the ground realities of Afghanistan. Yet, one can only hope that sooner or later the Trump administration will realize that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is just as imminent as withdrawal from Syria was.

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