

The Battle Over Kunduz and its Implications

By Siegfried O. Wolf, Oct 08, 2015

On 28 September 2015 the Taliban launched a major offensive in North Afghanistan resulting in the overrun of city of Kunduz. The fact that some hundred Taliban fighters were taking over a major urban centre- an area which was held by 7000 regular Afghan troops, in less than 24 hours, is not only a military debacle for the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) but also an embarrassment for the provincial authorities. For it represents the greatest success of the Taliban in an open battlefield marked by an extraordinary 'propaganda coup'. The fact that the temporary fallout of Kunduz coincided with the first anniversary of the Presidency Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and its joint government with Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah underpins the political paramountcy and dramatic exposure of the security dimension of Afghanistan. Subsequently, the Afghan Army with support of the special NATO forces comprising US, British and German troops readily took to regain control over Afghanistan's sixth biggest city consisting of 300,000 inhabitants.

In this state of quandary, it is important to note that being one of the provincial capitals in the country's north, Kunduz is of tremendous geostrategic importance. The city is linked by highways to Kabul in the south, with Mazar-e-Sharif in the west and Tajikistan in the north- it serves as Afghanistan's most significant gateway to Central Asia. Having Kunduz in check means controlling not only formal trade but also the most lucrative informal one, especially the smuggling of drugs. Thereby, although the Taliban failed to hold onto Kunduz for long, but the ongoing battle for Kunduz has serious implications and is highly symbolic nature for several reasons.

First, a sustainable victory in Kunduz would clearly point at the total military defeat and the fruitlessness of development/reconstruction engagement of NATO/ISAF mission with its civilian components. Secondly, the establishment of Taliban administration in Kunduz (and/or in large parts of the urban hinterland) would signify that the Taliban are not only back in power outside Kabul but that all (smaller and bigger) achievements of the international community in Afghanistan regarding social, economic and political conditions of the Afghans, especially for women and girls, would come to an end. In other words, the changing facts on the ground and the desired overthrow of the 'current westernised, post-Taliban constitution' will justify as the final symbolic act that brings an end to the longstanding US

and European influence in the country's politics.

Thirdly, the recapture of the first major city in Afghanistan exemplifies the rise of the Taliban in northern Afghanistan and exemplifies the expansion of Taliban's movement beyond its ethnic Pashtun base in southern Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan. In this context, it is also interesting to note that the Taliban were able to gain control in areas (like the ethnic-Tajik dominated Badakhshan province) which were not only free of Taliban but also strongholds of their major, remaining enemy during the regime from 1996-2001, Afghanistan, the so called Northern Alliance. Given this, Kunduz also represents that there is no change in Pakistan's Afghanistan approach. The army's top brass and ISI seems to be stuck in traditional patterns of foreign policy, which is greatly dominated by a deep entrenched animosity towards India paralleled with a willingness to gain strategic depth in Afghanistan. In this context, it is obvious that they still believe to use the Taliban and other terrorists groups as instruments to secure their interests. For the launch of the military Operation Zarb-e-Azb against terrorist elements on Pakistani soil in summer 2014 and the approval of National Action Plan (NAP) in December 2014 do not mark at any paradigm shift in the 'working relationship' between Pakistani state agents and terrorist groups. These anti-terrorist measures are rather aiming to contain the terrorist threat within own borders by pushing the Jihadists into Afghanistan. The reasoning to this is two-fold: first, Pakistan attempts not only to whitewash its own role in the ongoing developments in international terrorism but also to jerk its closest partner China around. Latter phenomenon has a special connotation since Beijing is planning major investments in Pakistan in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and consequent Pakistani efforts to ensure stability in Afghanistan is a major Chinese condition/requirement. And second, it seems that the 'old guards' of Pakistan security establishment, representing the mind-set of hardliners like former Director General of ISI Hamid Gul, still believe that they are able to contain the Taliban within the Afghan borders and use them as an instrument. By doing so, they continue to underestimate the increasing significance of international Jihadist networks and their autonomous dynamics which are no more controlled by the ISI.

Fourthly, a sustainable victory is not just a PR-coup for the Taliban. For it is aimed at sending a clear message to the international community in general and to the Pakistan and Afghanis tan government in particular, that the Afghan Taliban movement stands united and that attempts to split them is a failure. In this context, a re-capture of Kunduz significantly

strengthened the position of the new leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour and will keep his opposition and the threat of factionalism at bay. Furthermore, the conquest of the city demonstrates the resurgence of the Taliban and its allies. It is a signal that the Jihadists are no longer just lurking in the background, but have the capacity to challenge the state apparatus- the crucial Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

Fifthly, the ‘PR-coup of the Kunduz victory’ will not only help to improve the ability to recruit new fighters in order to avoid defections to other (obvious more successful) militant groups but also help improve the position, status, and control of Taliban vis-a-vis the Islamic State, which has been challenging the Taliban's supremacy in Afghanistan. In addition, Kunduz is of symbolic significance for the Taliban because it was a key northern stronghold before the collapse of the Taliban rule in 2001 Sixthly, the release of two former Afghan Taliban cabinet ministers Mullah Abdul Salam Akhund and Mullah Mohammed Hassan from Pakistani custody and that their capability to move to north Afghanistan and organising the temporary overrun of Kunduz does not come with a surprise. For there is no change in the traditional pattern of operation between Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy and the subsequent instrumental role of the Taliban.

And finally, at the very core of the symbolism of Kunduz lies the semblance of a tectonic shift in the Taliban’s self-conception and especially self-portrayal- representing an inclusive movement. However, one should shed light on the composition of the ‘Taliban forces’ involved in the takeover of Kunduz and also about the other groups which were joining the fighting of the Islamists insurgents. Against this backdrop, it seems that the Taliban is trying to learn a lesson from the past and attempt to broaden their social structure and base by softening their stand toward Afghanistan’s’ non-Pashtun population and non-Afghan migrants. Thereby, the ‘battle over Kunduz’ symbolizes a change in overall political strategy and subsequently the recruitment patterns of the Taliban: from a mainly Pashtun-focused composition of its ranks and files towards a more ‘multi-ethnic force’ in order to improve their chances of maintaining rule over captures of territory, especially in the north of Afghanistan, a historical stronghold of anti-Taliban forces.

About The Author:

Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf, is Senior Researcher (member) at the South Asia Institute (SAI), Heidelberg University, and Director of Research at SADF (Coordinator: Democracy Research Program). He was educated at the SAI and Institute of Political Science (IPW) in Heidelberg. Additionally he is a visiting fellow at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST, Islamabad), affiliated researcher at the Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU, Durham University), and a former research fellow at IPW and Centre de Sciences Humaines (New Delhi, India).

He is the co-author of 'A Political and Economic Dictionary of South Asia' (Routledge; London 2006), co-editor of 'Politics in South Asia. Culture, Rationality and Conceptual Flow' (Springer: Heidelberg, 2015), 'The Merits of Regionalisation. The Case of South Asia' (Springer: Heidelberg, 2014) and 'State and Foreign Policy in South Asia' (Sanskriti: 2010), and Deputy Editor of the 'Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics' (HPSACP).

Furthermore, he has worked as a consultant for the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Germany, and is member of the external group of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Task Force, Federal Foreign Office, Germany.

He can be reached at his official email id: swolf@sai.uni-heidelberg.de

Originally published on:

<http://www.indrastra.com/2015/10/FEATURED-Battle-Over-Kunduz-and-its-Implications-by-Dr-Siegfried-O-Wolf-299.html>