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Turmoil within the Taliban: A Crisis of Growth?

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The year 2012 was characterized by an unprecedented level of infighting within the Taliban. A decentralized organization, however, the Taliban is better able to cope with infighting compared to more centralized organizations, which often endure splits during power struggles. The Taliban have in fact been suffering from internal conflict since their re-emergence as an insurgent movement in 2002 and have survived largely unscathed, even continuing to expand their ranks and extending operations to new territories every year. In 2012, however, internal conflict reached new heights with a large number of Taliban beginning to be worried about the long-term consequences if conflict is not somehow brought under control. Mullah Omar played this role in the past, intervening to resolve conflict by taking decisions that placated all internal

Key Points

The main axis of intra-Taliban tension is between the Peshawar Shura and the Quetta Shura, there having been a significant transfer of power from Quetta to Peshawar in recent years.

In the short term, a formal split of the Taliban would provide a vital breathing space for the Kabul government, whose leverage in potential negotiations would be strongly enhanced.

Crises of growth can only be defined as such ex-post. They result in a stronger and more united organization, but are serious crises nonetheless that may also engender the risk of organizational collapse.

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factions. In 2012, particularly in the second half of the year, Mullah Omar failed in this regard, lending credibility to rumors according to which he is dead, incapacitated, or in captivity.

Friction within the Taliban occurred in 2012 at multiple levels. The main axis of tension is between the Peshawar Shura and the Quetta Shura, due to a major transfer of power, a process which has been gradually underway since 2009, from Quetta to Peshawar. Peshawar now controls most of the financial resources and is trying to impose a new system of command and control centered around Peshawar. Many among the Quetta-based Taliban resent this shift and dislike being told by Peshawar how they should be organized.

The Peshawar-based Taliban are closer to the Pakistani jihadist groups, several of which actually “sit” in the Peshawar Shura, and its leaders and cadres possess a somewhat different profile to the Quetta Taliban being less clerical and more state- and university-educated. Peshawar is trying to build a more efficient administrative machinery for the Taliban, starting with military command and control. This is encountering resistance in Quetta, where the old Taliban networks remain resilient and are not inclined to surrender their prerogatives without a fight.

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Friction and even violence in the field between selected Taliban networks aligned with Peshawar and Quetta has occurred where areas of activity overlap. In the north-east, for example, clashes have occurred between fighters belonging to the networks of Mullah Sattar and Mullah Dadullah on the one side, and Jundullah (in fact the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) on the other. The first two networks are based in Quetta, while Jundullah is affiliated with Peshawar. In Wardak, occasional tensions and violence flare up between armed groups aligned with Quetta and Peshawar, in particular the Haqqanis and several southern networks.

The Peshawar-Quetta divide is, however, not the only source of friction within the Taliban. Peshawar, thanks to its superior financial resources, is trying to co-opt some of the southern networks, getting them to accept the modernization proposed by Peshawar in exchange for being given key positions in the new command and control structure.

The main beneficiary of Peshawar’s tactics has been Abdul Qayyum Zakir, one of the new generation of Taliban leaders who emerged during the post-2001 insurgency. A highly committed, energetic, and fanatical military leader, Zakir is now Peshawar’s main interlocutor in Quetta, where he led until recently the southern Military Commission, in charge of all military affairs. Zakir also leads the largest of the southern networks, but supports the new, relatively more centralized system propounded by Peshawar precisely because he led it in the south until his recent promotion to military leader for the entire country. Zakir became in 2012 by far the main recipient of funds from Peshawar in the whole of the south, a fact which has allowed him to expand his influence and attempt to buy off other Taliban networks. However, these networks are reluctant to fully align with him, although some are more reluctant than others.

Since his emergence as a major player in 2009, the main opponent of Zakir in the south has been Akhtar Mansur, head of the Political Commission. In the summer of 2012, Mansur and Zakir reached an agreement which was supposed to lead to a power-sharing arrangement between the two leaders, but it was short-lived. In November infighting resumed, featuring even a number of killings in Quetta and an attempt by Mansur to sack from key positions some of Zakir’s men. If during the summer, encouraged by Mansur, most southern networks were aligning under the Zakir-Mansur diarchy, the new split saw them mostly gathering around Mansur, a fact that reflects the persistent hostility harbored toward Zakir, seen by many in the south as arrogant and being too willing to sacrifice Taliban fighters for the cause of the jihad.

Even within Mansur’s camp there were divisions, although Mansur appears now to be trying to unify all the anti-Zakir networks. Some networks

had been opposed by Mansur because they were seen to be too keen to start negotiations with Kabul and to challenge Pakistani interests. In comparison, Peshawar is fairly united despite the presence of a number of different networks there as well, of which the largest is the Haqqani network. Whereas the Haqqanis caused trouble for Peshawar in the past, at least in the last couple of years they appear to have been more cooperative.

Even where there are relatively solid political alliances among components of the Taliban, issues may still well exist. Zakir, for example, is aligned with Peshawar and its system in the south. In the north-east, however, where his network maintains a strong presence in the province of Kunduz, his men refuse to follow the Military Commission and respond only to Zakir himself. It would appear that the alignment between Zakir and Peshawar is a marriage of mutual convenience, and that their alliance might only be temporary.

Many Taliban wonder why Mullah Omar is not intervening to resolve the dispute between Zakir and Mansur by making an authoritative decision. Indeed, it is widely believed that it is precisely the figure of Omar that has served to keep the Taliban united through the most difficult crises of the post-2001 period. Omar's conspicuous absence from the Taliban scene, except in the form of pre-recorded messages, makes the escalation of in-fighting in Quetta much more likely. In fact already in the spring of 2012 Zakir tried to create his own Quetta Shura, now called the "New Quetta Shura," and shape it according to his and Peshawar's ideas.

What is now becoming known as the "Old Quetta Shura" has been fluctuating in terms of composition since the spring, at one point being limited to a few, strongly anti-Zakir networks, including that of Mullah Baradar. However, the Old Quetta Shura now gathers under Mansur almost all the southern networks. The two sides seem to consider a formal split as a real possibility; already in the spring Zakir was talking about leaving the Quetta Shura. At the moment it would appear that some effort to recompose the southern Taliban might be going on, with the involvement of Pakistani advisers, but sources within the Peshawar

and the Zakir camps seem to indicate that a departure of Mansur and some other southern networks would not be seen as a disgrace.

Yet another division in Quetta, although a comparatively minor one, is between the network of Dadullah (revived in 2010–11 after having been in organizational disarray for several years due to the death of its founder) and most other networks, which consider Dadullah's men too close to the Pakistanis and too keen to attack civilian targets like schools.

Many Taliban in Peshawar think that the unruly southern networks are more of a liability than an asset, and that they should either be re-educated or abolished. The Peshawari Taliban believe that the managed decentralization which they advocate makes the Taliban more capable and competitive, as opposed to the fragmentation which has long characterized Quetta. They have been able to spread the system to much of Afghanistan, gradually reducing the role of the old semi-autonomous networks, but not in the south. So if some of the networks were to split or reconcile with the government, they would leave a space open to Peshawar and its allies to occupy it, exporting the new system to the south. From the perspective of Peshawar, even if the crisis in Quetta was to escalate, it would be a crisis of growth, rather than a threat to the viability of the Taliban as a whole.

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The Peshawar Shura has undoubtedly been consolidating its presence in eastern Afghanistan, where the Taliban were, until at least 2008, very weak. Peshawar has also taken over operational control of the Taliban in the north-east (including over southern networks which have branches there, but not Zakir's) and is in the process of doing so in the north, while Quetta's and Peshawar's areas of operation overlap in the central region (around Kabul). Therefore, Peshawar's assertion that it would be able to expand southward cannot be entirely discounted, particularly

with the presence of strong local allies such as Zakir.

Such a pattern of conflictual re-organization of insurgent movements is not unique to the Taliban—for example, the Eritrean rebels in the 1970s and 1980s went through the same process. Eventually the best organized faction emerged to dominate and defeat the Ethiopian government. In the short term, however, a formal split of the Taliban would do a lot of damage to them and most importantly provide a vital breathing space for the Kabul government, whose leverage in potential negotiations would be strongly enhanced. The crisis occurs at a time when a greater internal coherence of the Taliban could reap some practical benefits for them, as foreign troops are abandoning combat operations and handing over to the Afghan security forces. The phase of asymmetric warfare is coming to an end, and the disorganization of the southern networks is increasingly becoming an impediment to exploiting the weaknesses of the government forces.

Crises of growth can only be defined as such ex-post. They result in a stronger and more united organization, but are serious crises nonetheless that may also engender the risk of organizational collapse. The current internal crisis of the Taliban has the potential to turn out to be a crisis of growth because Peshawar is not much affected and can act as a back-up option for the southern Taliban or part of them should Quetta collapse organizationally. In fact, several of the Taliban commissions and committees based in Quetta are already reportedly in a dysfunctional state.

However, there are major obstacles in the path of a Peshawari takeover of Quetta. Southern Pashuns tend to see themselves as constituting the natural leadership of Afghanistan, although such a tendency is more pronounced among the “royal” tribes (Barakzai and Popolzai), among whom not many Taliban are found. Perhaps more importantly, the fragmentation of the southern Taliban compared to the Peshawar Taliban is a reflection of the more fragmented character of society in southern Afghanistan. It thus begs the question whether Peshawar can really overcome such deep social and tribal fissures and impose a

greater level of organizational cohesion on the southern Taliban?

The final outcome of the internal crisis of the Taliban will also depend on circumstances external to the movement. The Taliban enjoy strong backing from a number of foreign supporters (state and non-state) and their attitude toward factional and personal rivalries within the Taliban might be a decisive factor in favoring a formal split or a reconsolidation. The various external supporters of the Taliban tend to compete with each other for influence within the Taliban (for example, Iran versus Pakistan), a fact which might encourage a split. Taliban sources claim that the Iranian Pasdaran has forged increasingly closer relations with Quetta and in particular some networks within it; while Zakir has been one of the beneficiaries, it is primarily anti-Zakir networks such as that of Mullah Naim that have been more favored. The same sources claim that the Pakistani intelligence services, by contrast, have increasingly favored Peshawar and Zakir in recent years, eventually having abandoned Quetta altogether.

At the same time, the Taliban’s foreign backers are probably aware of the cost in terms of image and of at least a temporary weakening of the Taliban that a split would imply and seem likely to try to prevent this from happening, at least in the short term. One possible exception to this tendency is represented by the Pakistanis, who are under stronger than ever pressure from Washington to help the Americans leave Afghanistan with some honor intact.

The Pakistani intelligence services view the southern Taliban networks as ineffective fighters. They also know that the old political leadership of the Taliban is part of the Quetta Taliban and that it is increasingly suspicious of Pakistani intentions.

Pakistan might see a split of the Taliban as not entirely opposed to its interests: it would provide the short-term benefit of delivering to the Americans what they want—that is, a step in the direction of high-profile Taliban figures reconciling with Kabul. Pakistan is in dire financial straits and needs U.S. money, so short term benefits

might appear attractive to Islamabad and Rawalpindi even if the medium- and long-term implications are somewhat uncertain.

The Pakistani intelligence services, in any case, view the southern Taliban networks as ineffective fighters who spoiled several good opportunities to achieve military successes before 2010, and who have since not been sufficiently effective in reclaiming ground after the U.S. surge. They also know that the old political leadership of the Taliban is part of the Quetta Taliban and that it is increasingly suspicious of Pakistani intentions. The issue is whether the reconciliation with Kabul of some southern networks would do lasting damage to the Taliban in the south, and how deep and lasting this would be. For all the growth of the Taliban in the east, without a firm hold on the south the Taliban's military and political weight is going to be greatly reduced. This would impact both their ability to negotiate a settlement on favorable terms and fight on for total victory.

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