

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

Daily Outlook

AFGHANISTAN

The Leading Independent Newspaper

April 13, 2017

Mounting Security Challenges

As international community is not sure of its role in Afghanistan and National Unity Government (NUG) stands without any comprehensive strategy to tackle the issue of insecurity, Afghanistan will be tested to a large extent in the times to come. The capabilities of Afghan security forces and the determination of the people of Afghanistan will also be put to test. Nevertheless, it will not be a smooth sailing for Afghanistan in war against Taliban, Daesh and other insurgents, particularly, in this spring season.

Main challenge for the forces and the government would be to control the security situation in major cities of the country, particularly, Kabul. The situation in Kabul, however, seems to be fragile particularly after the attacks on Parliament convoy, Police Headquarters and Military Hospital and the unpreparedness of the relevant authorities. On Wednesday, April 12, there was another attack in Kabul city. As per the news reports, the attack was a suicide attack that was carried out in front of the presidential palace's administrative affairs office, close to the PD2 headquarters and the defense ministry. The attack resulted in the death of at least five people, including two presidential palace guards. However, the officials did not confirm the death of the palace's guards.

With the ongoing situation in hand, there are fears among the people in Afghanistan that their lives would once again be influenced badly by the wave of terrorism and insurgency. After the downfall of Taliban, Afghan people had hoped that their lives would change and the circumstances would lead towards a better and peaceful future, but the last few years have pointed towards worsening security situation. The year 2016 proved to be the most deadly for Afghan civilians; particularly, for women and children. And, as Taliban and Daesh insurgents have spread over many provinces in the country now, there are no good expectations for the ongoing year as well, unless there is a major breakthrough in peace talks with Taliban and a policy shift in the government corridors regarding the issue of insecurity.

As far as the capability of Afghan forces to tackle the security situation in the country is concerned, there are some evident grey areas, which require immediate improvement and the international community should play a key role to ensure that training and capacity building sessions must start immediately so that Afghan forces are in a better position to face the security challenges this year.

There is no doubt in the fact that Afghan security forces have given some great sacrifices; however, the important thing is that their sacrifices should bear some fruit and Afghanistan should see the sun of peace and tranquility dawn quickly. But, that does not seem to be near as the rise in insecurity seems to be consistent and it has been taking the lives of numerous people.

The suicide bombs and the assaults by insurgents that try to target the security officials, in some way or the other, target the civilians as well. In certain cases, they even target the civilians directly. This has made the life miserable for the people in Afghanistan.

The response of the government in the face of the rising insecurity is really lethargic. It has been largely influenced by the differences that prevail within the ranks of the government regarding the approach that has to be adopted against the situation. The members of NUG see the issue with different perspectives and are not ready to cooperate with each other in designing a comprehensive and unanimous policy to tackle the situation. This has led to misunderstandings and ambiguities in the war against terrorism on operational level as well.

Afghan government, therefore, has to get united and strive to control the situation properly. It needs to understand that as a result of decades of instability and socio-economic and political problems, the Afghan people have been suffering from myriads of problems. Apart from the issue of insecurity, there are some very concerning issues that exist in our society and threaten the lives of the common people of Afghanistan.

There are claims by the government officials that changes have been brought within Afghan society; however, it should be noted that if the effectiveness of the changes have to be felt or observed, they should be observed by the changes in the lives of the common people. If there is any change in the condition of living of the common people as the outcome of the change; the change should be guarded for and even backed and supported vehemently. If not, either the claim must be discarded as wrong or the efforts should be improved to make the changes effective. And that is what Afghanistan needs to do - it has to improve its efforts to bring about necessary changes in the lives of the common people that have been jeopardized both by insecurity and lack of rudimentary requirements of life.

Afghan government must therefore get serious in tackling with the issue of the insecurity and at the same time strive to provide at least the rudimentary requirements of life to people as they can also play a tremendous role in fighting against the insurgents. If the people are sure that the present government can strive honestly to provide them their necessities they will definitely join hands together along with the security forces to fight terrorists and terrorism successfully.



Will Peace Talks Lead to Stability?

By Hujjatullah Zia

Terrorism, which hampered democracy in Afghanistan, has been a controversial issue and the peace negotiation came to stalemate after years of fluctuation. Afghanistan's neighboring countries and international allies promised to broker the talks and bring the Taliban elements to the peace table, but the attempts were proved abortive and militancy continued unabated up to now. The Taliban insurgents intensified their attacks with the establishment of the National Unity Government (NUG) and inflicted heavy casualties upon Afghan soldiers and civilians within the past two years.

The NUG is beset with insurgency and Omar's second successor Mullah Haibatullah - who is also changed into a reclusive leader - orchestrates attacks against Afghan government.

To show a backlash against the Taliban's heavy offensives, the NUG, unlike former administration, adopted hard policy towards warring parties and carried out deadly attacks. The interminable conflict between the government and militant fighters continue without a positive result.

Worst of all, the NATO combat mission ended without the fruition of "war on terror".

Threatening regional peace and stability, the issue of terrorism involved many countries. Now the public believe that war will lead only to casualties and instability and its cycle will never stop. Therefore, Russia is set to host an international conference on Afghanistan on April 14, 2017 bringing representatives from China, Pakistan, Iran, India and five central Asian countries where they would hold discussions on how to strengthen the peace process in Afghanistan by dragging the defiant Taliban to the negotiations table. This comes as bilateral relations between Afghanistan and the Russian Federation recently soured following the confirmation by Russian officials that Moscow had been in talks with the Afghan Taliban.

The stability of Afghanistan is menaced not only by the Taliban fighters but also by the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group. Little wonder, after gaining firm foothold in Afghanistan, the ISIL group stoked sectarian violence and killed people, including women and children, on the grounds of their race, color and creed and filled the air with a sense of strong fear and disappointment.

Hence, the ISIL group intended to destabilize the country and pressurize the government through murdering non-combatants. They also sought to recruit soldiers via poisoning the minds of teenagers, temptation or threat. It is really surprising to see the rapid growth of the ISIL group.

The caliphate was announced on June 2014, but some 90 terrorist attacks were either carried out or inspired by ISIL in 21 countries around the globe until early 2016. This reflect the fact that the group is supported by a strong mysterious hand. In

Afghanistan, ISIL continues a guerilla-style fighting but if this trend goes on, it will widen the realm of its influence.

Both the issue of the Taliban and ISIL groups will be discussed in the upcoming conference. But the question is that will this conference bear the desired fruit?

It is the third conference being hosted by Moscow but the issue of terrorism remains as serious as ever before. No wonder, if the Taliban do not show the green light, such conferences will be void of a tangible result. Secondly, the trust between the Taliban and Afghan government has been eroded since the militants played foul game within more than a decade and even killed the head of Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani on September 20, 2011. They did not cease violence and bloodshed, either. It is believed that pushing the Taliban to hold a genuine peace talk with Afghan government will be far significant.

In fact, the armed opposition groups, which violate the rights of people and destroy buildings, are not called political parties and will hardly make a peace agreement with government. In other words, the insurgents do not favor diplomacy over militancy and try to impose their words by the barrel of gun. Furthermore, their aggressive ideology pigeonholes both the nation and state to justify their acts of violence.

In short, they are ideologue and/or militant outfit rather than political one. Just think of the ISIL group, will it hold negotiation with countries? The answer is negative for its highly fundamental ideology.

Considering these issues, Afghan nation nurtures no gleam of hope for such conferences for repeated failures. Their rights and freedoms were trampled upon despite the establishment of democratic administration. They flocked to ballot boxes within three rounds of presidential elections dreaming for a society void of violence and bloodshed. On the other hand, the government vowed to "establish an order based on the peoples' will and democracy; form a civil society void of oppression, atrocity, discrimination as well as violence, based on rule of law, social justice, protecting integrity and human rights, and attaining peoples' freedoms and fundamental rights". These commitments are yet to be fulfilled.

It is likely that terrorist groups are the greatest obstacle before democracy and show no willing to peace talks. Furthermore, they do not observe the rule of war and violate human rights and humanitarian law flagrantly.

In such a case, there seems no way left for Afghan government other than practicing upon the well-known maxim "if you want peace, prepare for war". So, the regional and international countries had better strengthen Afghanistan militarily for the elimination of terrorism.

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A Fiscal Reality Test for US Republicans

By Nouriel Roubini

US President Donald Trump's first major legislative goal - to "repeal and replace" the 2010 Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") - has already imploded, owing to Trump and congressional Republicans' naiveté about the complexities of health-care reform. Their attempt to replace an imperfect but popular law with a pseudo-reform that would deprive more than 24 million Americans of basic health care was bound to fail - or sink Republican members of Congress in the 2018 mid-term elections if it had passed.

Now, Trump and congressional Republicans are pursuing tax reform - starting with corporate taxes and then moving on to personal income taxes - as if this will be any easier. It won't be, not least because the Republicans' initial proposals would add trillions of dollars to budget deficits, and funnel over 99% of the benefits to the top 1% of the income distribution.

A plan offered by Republicans in the US House of Representatives to reduce the corporate-tax rate from 35% to 15%, and to make up for the lost revenues with a border adjustment tax, is dead on arrival. The BAT does not have enough support even among Republicans, and it would violate World Trade Organization rules. The Republicans' proposed tax cuts would create a \$2 trillion revenue shortfall over the next decade, and they cannot plug that hole with revenue savings from their health-care reform plan or with the \$1.2 trillion that could have been expected from a BAT.

The Republicans must now choose between passing their tax cuts (and adding \$2 trillion to the public debt) and pursuing a much more modest reform. The first scenario is unlikely for three reasons. First, fiscally conservative congressional Republicans will object to a reckless increase in the public debt. Second, congressional budget rules require any tax cut that is not fully financed by other revenues or spending cuts to expire within ten years, so the Republicans' plan would have only a limited positive impact on the economy.

And, third, if tax cuts and increased military and infrastructure spending push up deficits and the public debt, interest rates will have to rise. This would hinder interest-sensitive spending, such as on housing, and lead to a surge in the US dollar, which could destroy millions of jobs, hitting Trump's key constituency - white working-class voters - the hardest. Moreover, if Republicans blow up the debt, markets' response could crash the US economy. Owing to this risk, Republicans will have to finance any tax cuts with new revenues, rather than with debt. As a result, their roaring tax-reform lion will most likely be reduced to a squeaking mouse.

Even cutting the corporate tax rate from 35% to 30% would be difficult. Republicans would have to broaden the tax base by forcing entire sectors - such as pharmaceuticals and technology - that currently pay little in taxes to start paying more. And to get the corporate-tax rate below 30%, Republicans would have to impose a large minimum tax on these firms' foreign profits. This would mark a departure from the current system, in which trillions of dollars in foreign profits remain untaxed

unless they are repatriated.

During the presidential campaign, Trump proposed a one-time 10% repatriation-tax "holiday" to encourage American companies to bring their foreign profits back to the United States. But this would deliver only \$150-200 billion in new revenues - less than 10% of the \$2 trillion fiscal shortfall implied by the Republicans' plan. In any case, revenues from a repatriation tax should be used to finance infrastructure spending or the creation of an infrastructure bank.

Some congressional Republicans who already know that the BAT is a non-starter are now proposing that the corporate income tax be replaced with a value-added tax that is legal under WTO rules. But this option isn't likely to go anywhere, either. Republicans themselves have always strongly opposed a VAT, and there is even an anti-VAT Republican caucus in Congress.

The traditional Republican view holds that such an "efficient" tax would be too easy to increase over time, making it harder to "starve the beast" of "wasteful" government spending. Republicans point to Europe and other parts of the world where a VAT rate started low and gradually increased to double-digit levels, exceeding 20% in many countries.

Democrats, too, have historically opposed a VAT, because it is a highly regressive form of taxation. And while it could be made less regressive by excluding or discounting food and other basic goods, that would only make it less appealing to Republicans. Given this bipartisan opposition, the VAT - like the BAT - is already dead in the water.

It will be even harder to reform personal income taxes. Initial proposals by Trump and the Republican leadership would have cost \$5-9 trillion over the next decade, and 75% of the benefits would have gone to the top 1% - a politically suicidal idea. Now, after abandoning their initial plan, Republicans claim they want a revenue-neutral tax cut that includes no reductions for the top 1% of earners.

But that, too, looks like mission impossible. Implementing revenue-neutral tax cuts for almost all income brackets means that Republicans would have to phase out many exemptions and broaden the tax base in ways that are politically untenable. For example, if Republicans eliminated the mortgage-interest deduction for homeowners, the US housing market would crash. Ultimately, the only sensible way to provide tax relief to middle- and lower-income workers is to raise taxes on the rich. This is a socially progressive populist idea that a pseudo-populist plutocrat like Trump will never accept. So, it looks like Republicans will continue to delude themselves that supply-side, trickle-down tax policies work, in spite of the overwhelming weight of evidence to the contrary. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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