

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



August 03, 2019

Optimistic Approach to Afghan Peace Process

US President Donald Trump voiced optimism that Islamabad could help broker a political settlement to end the 18-year conflict in Afghanistan as Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, during his visit to Washington, pledged to "urge the Taliban to talk with the Afghan government and come to a political solution".

In turn, Suhail Shaheen, the spokesman for the Taliban's political office in Qatar, has said that the Taliban would accept Islamabad's invitation for a meeting.

Pakistan is a heavyweight stakeholder in Afghan peace process with a strong leverage on the Taliban leadership. Afghans believe that Islamabad can nudge the Taliban to negotiating table with the Kabul government, which is also demanded by Trump. After Trump-Khan's meeting, a bonhomie emerged in Afghanistan that Islamabad will put its weight behind the peace talks that would step up the process.

Afghan-Pak relations also improved since Khan took office as the two countries' high-level officials exchanged trips and pledged to promote mutual support in terms of economy and counterterrorism. As a result, the trust deficit between the two countries declined to some extent and both sides stopped the blame game that had had a very adverse effect on their bilateral relations.

To broker talks between Kabul and the Taliban so as to end the conflict, three steps will be effective to be taken by Pakistan: First, Islamabad has to put pressure on Taliban political leadership to come to negotiating table with Kabul and on Taliban military commander to conform. It is believed that military commanders are against intra-Afghan dialogue and intensified their attacks on Ghani administration despite the ongoing peace talks - which suggests a rift between Taliban political leadership and military group.

Second, Islamabad should urge Pakistani clerics to issue fatwa (religious decree) against "Jihad" in Afghanistan. As religious scholars carry much weight among religious individuals and ideologues in Pakistan, their fatwa will be proved highly effective and cause "Jihadist/militants" to doubt their beliefs and mindset concerning jihad - which will be another pressure on the Taliban military commanders.

Third, it will be acceptable to both parties if Islamabad offers hosting direct talks between Ghani administration and Taliban leadership as an ice-breaking meeting.

Islamabad brokered and hosted the first round of talks between Kabul official representatives and the Taliban leadership in Murree in 2015 vowing its support to "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-owned" peace and reconciliation process. It was indicative of Pakistan's leverage on the Taliban. But the second meeting never happened as the death of the Taliban founder Mullah Muhammad Omar was leaked out.

Even with the Murree talks, disagreement between the Taliban political leadership and their battlefield commanders was reported. Nonetheless, the ongoing disagreement between the two segments is too latent to be resurfaced to the media.

The nature of the 2015 Murree talks was different of the ongoing talks between the Taliban and the US representatives. For example, the Taliban ushered in negotiations in 2015 with the Kabul government from a weak point, but the current talks are with the US representatives from a strong stance. In turn, the Taliban refuse to hold talks with Kabul and haggle over higher price with their American interlocutors.

If Islamabad fears the spillover of instability to its soil from Afghanistan, as some Pakistani analysts have voiced their concern, ending conflict in Afghanistan will be also in the interests of Pakistan. With this in mind, Pakistan has to push harder for organizing talks between Kabul and the Taliban - regardless of the fact that it is the demand of Trump administration.

Shah Mehmood Qureshi confirmed the Taliban were ready for talks with Pakistan, which will play the role of a mediator for restoring peace in Afghanistan, he said. Now both Kabul and Washington are eyeing Pakistan whether or not it would or it could play the role it is expected.

But if Pakistan fails to bring Afghan and the Taliban representatives to the table and facilitate the honorable exit of the US forces, it is feared that mistrust between Islamabad on the one side and Kabul and Washington on the other side will resurface.

Overall, with the preparation of US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad for eighth round of talks with the Taliban, and Pakistan's reiteration of support to the Afghan peace process, the air is filled with hope and optimism. Although I have been viewing the peace talks with doubt and mistrust - since the Taliban played a foul game with the Afghan government at the table in the past and assassinated the former head of Afghan High Peace Council Burhanuddin Rabbani in 2011 under the peace terms - I believe that the support of regional stakeholders, mainly that of Pakistan, will find a political solution to the conflict.

Public Concerns over Electoral Challenges

By: Hujjatullah Zia

To celebrate democracy, Afghans flock to ballot boxes to cast their votes so that their ballots could prevent bullet and ensure their rights and freedoms, but challenges linger on. Notwithstanding their strong hope for democracy, their rights are violated flagrantly.

Afghans paid heavy sacrifices for democracy and participated in presidential and parliamentary elections despite the life-threatening circumstances. Both men and women sought to use their suffrage regardless of the messages of threat sent by the Taliban militants. They supported the government, constitution, and democratic principles so that they could live a peaceful and prosperous life in the future.

However, militancy did not end and Afghans suffered severely. The Taliban fighters continued targeting civilians, including women and children, and trampled upon their rights in the worst possible way. That is, their dreams for democracy did not come true and they fell victim to the Taliban's terrorist attacks and suicide bombings.

With the start of the upcoming presidential elections, the Taliban militants have intensified their offensives against combatants and non-combatants. In turn, dozens of people, including women and children, were killed in a "Taliban roadside bomb" on Herat-Kandahar highway on Wednesday - which Sediq Seddiqi, a spokesman for the Afghan presidency, confirmed that all victims were "civilians" adding that the bomb was "planted by Taliban".

The blast came one day after the United Nations said civilians were being killed and wounded at a "shocking" level in the conflict in Afghanistan despite the efforts to end the 18-year war in the country.

There are many challenges before the upcoming presidential elections: First, since the Taliban are against elections, they are most likely to intensify their indiscriminate attacks so as to spread fear and threaten Afghan citizens to reduce the number of voters in the elections.

Second, the mistrust between Afghan nation and political officials continue. For example, Afghan candidates make mouth-watering promises during their presidential elections, but do not fulfill them after being elected as president. Since 2014 elections, neither security issues nor poverty or unemployment has been tackled. A large number of civilians were killed, their rights and freedoms violated, and their life conditions worsened. Now it is too difficult to earn the public trust.

Third, mistrust has been compounded by electoral rigging. Even

officials and candidates fear electoral rigging let alone the ordinary citizens. Manipulating the result of election is a real nightmare for voters. Hence, some candidates seek to be elected as president at the cost of electoral rigging and violation of national laws and citizens' rights - which is against democratic principles.

Fourth, Afghan people have lost their trust in democracy as a result of repeated violation of Afghan Constitution as well as lawlessness. The bulk of constitution's items were violated by officials within the government's machinery, including judges and the police, who are considered law-enforcers.

Considering all the aforementioned facts, the number of participants in the upcoming elections is likely to be low. Some argue that they do not want to risk their lives in return for nothing.

However, Afghans are still thirsty for peaceful life. There are still many men and women who are decided to cast their votes at all costs. Despite all the challenges, they hold out their hope for democracy and smooth implementation of law. They believe that their votes will bring about positive changes to their country and nation. A number of Afghans deem their participation in the polls as their national and religious obligation.

To earn the public trust and increase the number of voters in the elections, three steps have to be taken: First, the government has to ensure the life of voters and seek to counteract the Taliban's attacks. Tight security measures should be taken across the country from now on, mainly in restive provinces.

Second, the government should take all the required measures to ensure that electoral rigging would not take place or at least will be at a minimum level. The number of national and international observers should be increased in polling centers.

Third, the presidential candidates must not promise beyond their abilities. They have to say what they can and will do for the nation.

Fourth, efforts for peace talks should be stepped up and the Taliban should be pressured to declare ceasefire and reduce their violence against civilians.

What Afghan nation expects from the upcoming costly elections is that citizens should be able to live a peaceful and prosperous life and the rights and freedoms of each individual has to be respected and protected. Indeed, if a candidate ensures me a job and a safe life, why should I not vote in his favor? It is what every Afghan wants.

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Who Will Win the Twenty-First Century?

By: Joschka Fischer

The first two decades of the twenty-first century are beginning to cast a long shadow over the Western world. We have come a long way since the turn of the century, when people everywhere, but particularly in Europe, indulgently embraced the "end of history."

According to that illusory notion, the West's victory in the Cold War - the last of the three great wars of the twentieth century - had given rise to a global order for which there could be no alternatives. Thenceforth, it was thought, world history would march steadily toward the universalization of Western-style democracy and the market economy. The new century would merely be a continuation of the previous one, with a triumphant West extending its dominion.

The world is wiser now. The web of alliances and institutions that sustained the West's dominance is proving to be a product of the twentieth century, its future now in doubt. The global order is undergoing a fundamental change, as its center of gravity shifts from the North Atlantic to the Pacific and East Asia. China is on the threshold - economically, technologically, and politically - of becoming a world power and the sole challenger of the incumbent hegemon, the United States.

At the same time, the US is growing tired of its global leadership role. It began to step back under former President Barack Obama; but under Donald Trump, it has accelerated its withdrawal in a chaotic and dangerous manner. America's abdication of leadership poses a threat to the very existence of the transatlantic West, which rests on a foundation of shared values and political institutions. In the absence of any reasonable alternatives, the structure is crumbling.

Russia, meanwhile, is confronting the future by looking to its twentieth-century past. Like the Soviet Union, it is placing its bets entirely on nuclear weapons. Yet in the twenty-first century, power will be determined not by one's nuclear arsenal, but by a wider spectrum of technological capabilities based on digitization. Those who aren't at the forefront of artificial intelligence (AI) and Big Data will inexorably become dependent on, and ultimately controlled by, other powers. Data and technological sovereignty, not nuclear warheads, will determine the global distribution of power and wealth in this century. And in open societies, the same factors will also decide the future of democracy.

As for Europe, the Old Continent entered the new century in anything but optimal form. Living under the cozy post-historical illusion of everlasting peace, the European Union failed to complete the project of integration (though it did manage to expand eastward). The implicit withdrawal of the US security guarantee under Trump has struck Europe like a bolt from the blue.

The same could be said for the digital revolution. The first phase of digitization - consumer-facing platforms - has been led almost entirely by the US and China. There are no competitive European platform firms to speak of, nor are there any European cloud-computing companies capable of keeping up with the behemoths in Silicon Valley and China.

The most important issue facing the new European Commission, then, is Europe's lack of digital sovereignty. Europe's command of AI, Big Data, and related technologies will determine its overall competitiveness in the twenty-first century. But Europeans must decide who will own the data needed to achieve digital sovereignty, and what conditions should govern its collection and use. These questions will determine the fate of democracy in Europe, and whether the Old Continent's future will be one of prosperity or decline. As such, they must be decided at the European level, not by individual nation-states. Equally important, these questions must be answered now. Europe needs to get the digital ball rolling - or be run over by it.

In the years ahead, automotive design and manufacturing, mechanical engineering, medicine, defense, energy, and private households will all be disrupted by digital technologies. The data generated from these sectors will largely be processed through the cloud, which means that control of the cloud will be vital to countries' long-term economic and strategic fortunes.

To safeguard its digital sovereignty, Europe will need to make massive investments in cloud-computing capacity and the other physical resources underpinning the digital revolution. Europe has been far too slow and indecisive in this respect. Its challenge now is to catch up to the US and China, lest it be left behind permanently.

Europeans should not harbor any illusions that the private sector will take care of things on its own. Europe's competitive disadvantage calls for a fundamental change in strategy at the highest level. The EU institutions will have to lead on setting regulations and, together with the member states, on providing the necessary financing. But securing Europe's digital sovereignty will require a much broader effort, involving businesses, researchers, and politicians.

Following the recent 50th anniversary of the first Moon landing, there has been much media discussion about a potential manned flight to Mars. For Europe, though, space travel can wait. The top priority must be to establish and safeguard digital sovereignty, and to do whatever is necessary to arrest its own decline and protect democracy. For better or worse, the twenty-first century is well underway.

Joschka Fischer, Germany's foreign minister and vice chancellor from 1998 to 2005, was a leader of the German Green Party for almost 20 years.




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