

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

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Afghan Peace Talks: Challenges and Opportunities

Afghan Peace talks have entered to their most crucial phase. The US and Taliban may agree on counter-terrorism assurances by the Taliban and troop withdrawal by the US.

Once everything is finalized on these two issues, then the Afghan government and politicians will start intra-Afghan negotiations with the Taliban on a political settlement and a comprehensive & permanent ceasefire.

However, there are certain challenges and opportunities that require heed attention in order to reach a sustainable peace deal in the country. These include:

Challenges

The first challenge of the peace talks is the US withdrawal. The US invaded Afghanistan because Al-Qaeda had attacked the US and destroyed the twin towers and killed hundreds of the US citizens. After 18 years of war, the US not only has not eliminated Al-Qaeda, but currently ISIS and many other terrorist groups operate in Afghanistan. These terrorist groups are considered a major threat to the US, Russia, India and China. How the US will ensure when it signs an agreement with the Taliban, its interests will not be threatened by ISIS, Al-Qaeda and the more conservative part of the Taliban?

The second challenge is the Taliban's mindset. As the behavior of the Taliban show, they nearly hold the same perspective about the governance system in the country; they insist on the Emirate and deny the Republic. Many Afghans believe that Accepting the Emirate system, means returning back to the past and starting a new round of conflicts in the country. Further, under an Emirate system, we will lose all the achievements gained during the past 18 years.

The third challenge is the interference of the neighboring and regional countries. It is clear cut that different neighboring and regional countries have strategic interests in Afghanistan. These countries include Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, China and some south and Central Asian countries. It is not clear how the peace agreement will address the conflicting interests of these countries.

Opportunities

Those Afghans, who believe in a democratic system, can form a united front to defend the democratic values and the current governance system against the Taliban. Some of these politicians are already part of the Afghan negotiating team. Thus, the Afghan government and Politicians negotiating team must be in close contact with different groups of the people during the Intra-Afghan talks in order to ensure that most of the concerns and modern values of the people are included in the peace agreement.

The second opportunity is the economic development in the country. Afghanistan has numerous mines and other natural resources that need investment. A peace deal will help Afghanistan to attract national and international investors to invest in different sectors in the country. Thus, Afghanistan may realize its vision as a country with strong economy, to become a regional economic hub and ensure the regional and international connectivity.

The third opportunity is the relative consensus of the international community and regional countries on the Afghan peace process. Currently countries including Pakistan, Iran, China, India, Russia, Central and South Asian countries and Arab countries have voiced their support of the Peace talks. The main question that remains unanswered here is that, Are these countries really interested in peace and instability in Afghanistan or they just look for an opportunity that the US leaves Afghanistan and then they start a new political game in the country?

The US and Taliban may soon reach to an agreement on the US troops withdrawal and giving a guarantee by the Taliban that they will not let the terrorist groups to pose a threat to the US interests from Afghanistan. Then an Intra negotiations that lead to a political settlement and a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire in the country. As peace agreement is a compromise, it depends on the Afghan negotiating team how they can represent the Afghan nation to protect its 18 years achievements, democratic system and modern values. It is clear cut that the US and international community support Afghans to preserve these achievements and universal values, but it is the Afghans who decide how to negotiate and preserve them.

Many Ifs and Buts in Peace Talks

By: Hujjatullah Zia

The eighth round of talks has been ushered in between the Taliban and US representatives in Qatari capital of Doha. The two sides seem hopeful about the outcome of this round, but Afghans still view the talks with hope and fear.

The US-Taliban talks continued for almost a year, but so far they put no practical result on Afghanistan's security situation. Instability lingers on and Afghans continue losing their lives in suicide bombings and terrorist attacks carried out by the Taliban militant fighters, which triggered public mistrust in the Taliban.

US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad tweeted that "if the Taliban do their part, we will do ours, and conclude the agreement we have been working on".

Before starting talks with the Taliban, Khalilzad met with Afghan officials citing it "most productive visit" adding that "negotiating team and technical support group are being finalized". He, then, visited Islamabad and discussed with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, and Chief of Army Staff General Javed Bajwa. Khalilzad outlined the positive momentum in the peace process.

Talking to officials in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Khalilzad stated peace would require reliable assurances from Afghanistan and Pakistan and neither of the two country's soil should be used as threat to the other. He added, "Such assurances on top of an intra-Afghan comprehensive peace agreement will allow increased regional economic integration, connectivity and development".

Khalilzad also tweeted that the Taliban were signaling to conclude an agreement and the US side was ready for that. It indicates that the two sides will reach an agreement this time. Washington is also seeking to reduce its forces in Afghanistan, which is part of an agreement with the Taliban. If the US and Taliban wrap up their meeting with a positive outcome, the Kabul government is likely to start talks with the Taliban leadership.

To view the talks from the prism of an ordinary Afghan, people have mixed emotions about the outcome. Generally speaking, Afghans feel relieved when they hear that peace will emerge soon. They imagine that they would be able to breathe in a violence-free country and their life will not be threatened any more by daily suicide bombings or terrorist attacks, or at least the level of violence will reduce to a great extent.

But there are still feelings of fear and despair. First, what if the Taliban resume their harsh ideology after returning. They view the Taliban with mistrust and do not believe that their ideology has been moderated despite the Taliban's claim. Women fear the most for being more vulnerable to the Taliban's parochial mindset.

Second, Afghans ask what if the country falls into civil unrest as it did after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union. They fear that the Taliban and the Afghan government will not reach a peaceful agreement. With this in mind, Afghans urge the Taliban interlocutors for strong assurance and an international group to make sure that the agreement is being observed by the two sides.

Since Afghans paid heavy sacrifices for democracy and human rights, they are concerned that peace talks should not put them at stake. Furthermore, there is lack of trust between state and nation. Therefore, Afghans fear that there are a number of power thirsty individuals within the government's machinery to jeopardize national interests for their self-interests.

Pakistan is also expected to play its role constructively in the peace talks. The repaired relations between Islamabad and Washington trigger hope that Islamabad will put its weight behind the peace process to facilitate the US honorable exit and broker talks between Kabul and the Taliban.

Khalilzad said, "We are pursuing a peace agreement not a withdrawal agreement; a peace agreement that enables withdrawal". However, the Taliban seem to have focused all their energy and attention on the US troop pullout.

What Afghans want is that troop withdrawal should not create a vacuum in the country so that neither the US investment of "blood" and "treasure" nor Afghans' sacrifices are wasted. Talks should not be a pyrrhic victory for Afghan nation and no decision should be made out of excitement.

Meanwhile, the negotiating sides should leave no loophole in the written agreement to be capitalized on later by the Taliban. They have to clarify everything after the agreement, too. So the Taliban interlocutors must consider the public concern in Afghanistan and try to bring in sustainable peace and prosperity and Afghanistan's territory should be neither used against any other territory nor do any other countries violate Afghanistan's territorial integrity.

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What About Rochester?

By: Kenneth Rogoff

The rise of megacities as centers of strong job creation is one of the defining characteristics of the twenty-first-century global economy. But it is not always a positive feature.

In the developing world, as staggering as the challenges are (greater New Delhi, for example, has been absorbing 700,000 new inhabitants per year), urbanization remains the best hope for alleviating poverty. But in advanced economies, far along the so-called Lewis development curve, it is far less obvious that concentrating economic opportunity in ever-larger cities is necessarily the right or only path forward.

The reasons why powerhouses such as New York, San Francisco, and London have become increasingly dominant economically are well known. Large cities offering a huge array of interesting jobs, cultural attractions, and nightlife are a magnet for young unattached workers. And the combination of large masses of highly specialized workers and firms leads to network and agglomeration effects that are difficult for smaller cities to match, particularly in areas like tech, biotech, and finance.

But there are downsides, particularly high living costs - especially for housing - and huge amounts of time lost in traffic congestion. Although architects and city planners are continually offering imaginative new blueprints for large cities, the severe strains on physical infrastructure are increasingly difficult to manage. Meanwhile, many smaller and midsize cities struggle to maintain economic dynamism. Rochester, New York, where I grew up, is mentioned prominently as one of many examples in MIT economists Jonathan Gruber and Simon Johnson's interesting new book, *Jump-Starting America*.

In the decades after World War II, Rochester was one of the wealthiest cities in the United States. Home to Eastman Kodak, Xerox, and Bausch and Lomb, Rochester was a mini-Silicon Valley. Unfortunately, these companies were hammered first by global competition (especially from Japan), and then by technological innovation: digital cameras in the case of Kodak, personal copiers and modular replacement parts in the case of Xerox. Today, at under 1.1 million people, the population of the greater Rochester metropolitan area has grown only marginally since 1990, and the city itself has shrunk to 200,000, from a peak of 300,000.

Although it is home to great universities, a world-class hospital, and a nationally recognized philharmonic orchestra, Rochester struggles to compete with large East Coast cities for dynamic job-producing industries, and increasingly lacks the resources to cope with growing urban problems. For example, East High School (which I attended) has struggled in recent years just to remain open. In general, many small and midsize cities find themselves abandoned by young professionals and left behind

to contend with aging populations and insufficient tax revenues. Is there anything policymakers can do to make these struggling cities more attractive, both to enhance growth and to relieve population pressure in the megacities? Gruber and Johnson suggest, among other things, locating new federally funded basic-research facilities in midsize cities that might serve as talent magnets and hubs for localized growth. Jim O'Neill has argued for creating regional economic powerhouses in the United Kingdom by building high-speed transport links between neighboring midsize cities, as China has done.

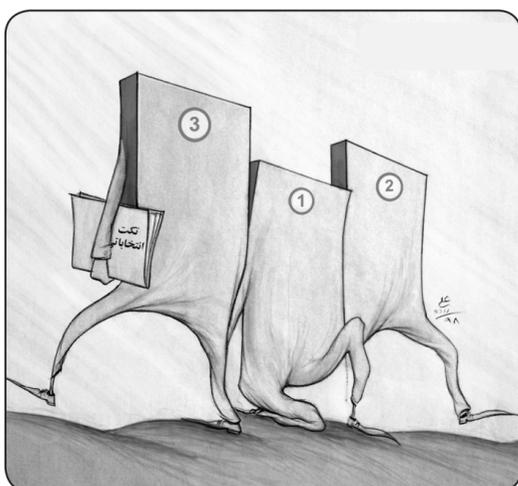
To these ideas I would add better enforcement of anti-trust policies. As matters currently stand, when the next George Eastman (the founder of Eastman Kodak) or Joseph Wilson (the founder of Xerox) comes along, some market-dominant incumbent will most likely persuade or force (or some combination of the two) them to move to an established tech hub. Rochester will receive much less spinoff benefit than it might have otherwise. One advantage to the anti-trust approach is that the government would not be picking winners and losers, just ensuring that the same region does not always win.

A second additional step would be to invest government resources in creating free high-quality online education resources, particularly technical material of all types. Surely, this is a much better and more forward-looking approach than investing in free college for all; for one thing, it recognizes that education and re-education in the twenty-first century is a life-long enterprise. One important input would be to provide universal free basic Internet (as legal scholars Ganesh Sitaraman and Anne Alstott advocate in their thought-provoking new book, *The Public Option*).

Perhaps the phenomenon of winner-take-all megacities will not last. After all, until about 1980, the trend had very much been in the other direction, going back to the start of mass production of automobiles, which helped fuel growth in smaller metropolitan areas. That all stopped, of course, with the rise of personal computers and the Internet. At some point, there will likely be an invention or new business model that helps more fully realize the promise of telecommuting - perhaps one that more thoroughly and continuously integrates remote workers into the central office. And perhaps global warming will sharply increase costs in coastal cities and make Rochester's winters milder.

There is much to be celebrated in the rise of modern megacities. But if the trend persists, greater public and private innovation will be required to strike a better regional growth balance. The need to address such development problems is not limited to emerging economies.

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