

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



August 14, 2019

Peace – A Win-Win Result for All Parties

The US and Taliban have wrapped up their eighth round of talks in Doha, Qatar's capital, which were cited as "productive" by the US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad. Although the Taliban carried out a deadly suicide attack in Kabul last week amid the peace talks, their leadership urged not to target civilians on Eid Days.

Afghans held out hope that the latest round of talks would lead to ceasefire and reduction of violence in the country, but the conflict still continues.

Afghans seem to be in limbo as talks and presidential elections loom large and it is not clear whether the talks will postpone elections, as rumors suggest, or elections would be held at all costs. The Taliban interlocutors, along with presidential candidates except for President Ghani, are most likely to prefer peace talks to elections. If peace talks reach an agreement, the Taliban will not accept presidential elections to be conducted. On the other hand, Ghani administration insists on holding elections. The gap between Ghani's presidential teams and his presidential opponent is felt strongly. That is, Ghani's political opponents side with Khalilzad through preferring talks to elections. They have constantly stated that they would step down from their nomination if peace talks reach an agreement.

Meanwhile, the Taliban also warned people not to participate in the polls adding that the outcome would be engineered by foreigners not by public votes. They said they would target polling stations.

The public believe that the issue of peace carries much weight. That is, peace will be welcomed by Afghan men and women at the cost of presidential elections. It is more logical to prefer the issue of peace to elections since the main objective of elections is to support peace and prosperity in Afghanistan and provide a platform for Afghan citizens to exercise their rights and freedoms. If elections do not lead to peace, neither the public dream will come true nor the objective of elections come to fruition.

One of the main concerns in the public air is that peace talks are taking place behind closed doors and Afghans have no idea about the content of the talks. Neither of the negotiating sides are willing to share their backdoor exchanges to the public or media.

Afghans are highly frustrated with the conflict and wait impatiently for ceasefire. Although the talks are being cited "productive" at the end of each round, violence goes on.

Despite the lingering fear of the Taliban's return with radical mindset, public hope and optimism for the fruition of peace talks have increased. Afghans hold out hope that peace is imminent and the Taliban would stop violence.

An intra-Afghan dialogue is likely to be started soon after an agreement is signed between the Taliban. Spokesman to Taliban's political office in Doha Suhail Shaheen said that the negotiating sides were reaching their leaders to consult about the details of the topics, which had been discussed in the latest round of talks. Subsequently, the two sides are expected to sign a peace agreement within the next few days which will provide the ground for US troop pullout, intra-Afghan dialogue, and reduction of violence in the country.

Afghan political officials have to bury their differences and adopt a single approach towards peace talks. Since peace is vital to the war-torn country, all high-level officials should put their weight behind the peace process.

The long sought-after intra-Afghan dialogue is a good news to the public and will be more productive. It is hoped that, after direct negotiations, the Taliban and the Kabul government will also reach an agreement soon.

Earlier, Ghani said that only the Afghan government had the authority to negotiate with the Taliban and reach an agreement with the group. "It should be clear to all that only an elected government can bring peace to this country," Ghani is cited as saying.

It should be noted that an intra-Afghan dialogue will be productive when it is inclusive – a combination of ethnic groups and both genders.

Overall, Afghan nation supports peace process and urges the government to leave no stone unturned for bringing in peace. Peace will be a win-win situation since all parties as well as regional states will be the beneficiaries of a peaceful Afghanistan. Thus, negotiating parties have to show flexibility and do not bargain for much price at the table. They should seek to reach an agreement as soon as possible so that Afghans should no more fall victim to militancy. The last but not the least, Afghan citizens do not accept a peace deal that sacrifices the "republic" for the "Emirate" system.

The India-Pakistan Historic Tensions and Its Spillover on Afghanistan

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

India and Pakistan have had historic odds and hostility which resulted in several wars, conflicts, and military standoffs against each and other. The roots of the continued conflicts are complicated but have centered mainly on the earthly paradise state of Jammu and Kashmir. After the 1947 partition of India, the newly-formed independent states of Pakistan and India squabbled over it, which led to the Indo-Pakistani War of 1947-1948 and a subsequent sharing of the state. The settlement was non-agreeable to both the parties and since then, this had become an ongoing intractable issue leading to a war in 1965. The nations also partook in another war in 1971 which led to the formation of Bangladesh. Both countries developed nuclear weapons in the 1990s and this had a sobering effect on the next major conflict – the 1999 Kargil War.

In 2019, this is the second time that the tension intensified between the two countries; the first tension increased when a suicide car bombing carried out on 14 February 2019 in which 40 Indian security personnel were killed. A Pakistan-based militant group, Jaishe-e-Mohammad claimed responsibility for the attack. India blamed Pakistan for the bombing and promised a robust response. India has regularly accused Pakistan of utilizing militants to destabilize Indian-administered Kashmir. Pakistan, however, denied any involvement in the bombing. As a result, some two weeks later, India and Pakistan conducted airstrikes against targets in each other's territory.

The latest tension intensified in recent days when India announced the decision to revoke a bill which granted special status to the semi-autonomous state of Jammu and Kashmir, meaning it will be controlled by the Indian central government. The move strains already fragile relations between India and Pakistan, as both countries lay claim to the territory, and Pakistani politicians have condemned the action and warned of consequences. This issue caused a lot of concerns in Afghanistan as it may cast a dark shadow on the future of Taliban peace talks with Afghan government.

According to Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and other Pakistani officials Pakistan is not willing to take military option over Kashmir but the closure of Pakistan's airspace to commercial flights between Kabul and New Delhi can largely decrease Afghanistan's exports to India. Afghanistan exports dry fruit, vegetables, fresh fruit, carpets and handicrafts to India but Pakistan closed its airspace to all commercial flights late in February after escalating tensions with India. The airspace was opened to some certain flights but it is yet to be opened for Afghan flights en route to India. Afghan airlines are using Iran and China routes for Kabul-Delhi flights which according to airline companies are expensive and time-consuming.

Politically, India-Pakistan tension has happened in a sensitive step

of Afghan peace process. Afghan analysts worry that Pakistan's proximity to the Taliban could prompt it to use the Afghan peace talks as leverage for a favorable resolution in Kashmir. Pakistan knows that they are much more important to the US than India and on the other hand, the role of the US is also very important to the Kashmir Issue. Trump's withdrawal from Afghanistan is aimed as a domestic reason and South Asian stability is not a core aim. To achieve this, Pakistan is a bigger player than India.

Now Pakistan can trade off the Afghan peace process with the Kashmir issue. According to some analysts the India's move in Kashmir could be a reaction to neglect in the continuing talks. Moreover, Pakistan's economy has decayed due to long involvement in the conflicts of Afghanistan. Therefore, it is right time for India to increase its focus on Kashmir while it is not a right time for Pakistan to use from military option, and so decided to downgrade the diplomatic ties with India over what it called New Delhi's "unilateral and illegal" move to revoke the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. In addition, Pakistan is to close its aerial and terrene route, especially the Wagah border to India and Afghanistan to stop goods exchanged between the two countries.

In reaction to this, Afghans angrily reacted and blamed a number of Pakistani politicians for deliberate attempts to relate the Kashmir dispute on the situation in Afghanistan. The Former President, Hamid Karzai, who believes that the issue of Kashmir and the war in Afghanistan are totally two separate issues, called on Pakistan to avoid merging the two issues. "I call on Pakistan government to stop using extremist violence as an instrument of policy in the region. We hope the new measures by the government of India will lead to the betterment and prosperity of people in Jammu and Kashmir as the citizens of India," he added.

The Taliban also reacted, saying the India-Pakistan rift over Kashmir should not be linked with the situation in Afghanistan. Linking the issue of Kashmir with that of Afghanistan by some parties will not aid in improving the crisis at hand because the issue of Afghanistan is not related nor should Afghanistan be turned into the theater of competition between other countries," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed said in a statement.

However, the Embassy of Pakistan in Kabul said that the rift over Kashmir would not affect the peace drive in Afghanistan. Addressing a news conference, Zahid Nasrullah Khan, ambassador of Pakistan, said: "The issue of Kashmir has nothing to do with the violence in Afghanistan and it is unfortunately still unresolved, despite the so many sacrifices and acts of human rights abuses against the people of Jammu and Kashmir." But he did not say anything about why it should economically impact on relations between the two or the three countries.

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The Puzzle of Economic Progress

By: Diane Coyle

Do we know how economies develop? Obviously not, it seems, or otherwise every country would be doing better than it currently is in these low-growth times. In fact, cases of sustained rapid growth, like Japan beginning in the 1960s, or other Southeast Asian countries a decade later, are so rare that they are often described as "economic miracles."

Yet when Patrick Collison of software infrastructure company Stripe and Tyler Cowen of George Mason University recently wrote an article in The Atlantic calling for a bold new interdisciplinary "science of progress," they stirred up a flurry of righteous indignation among academics.

Many pointed to the vast amount of academic and applied research that already addresses what Collison and Cowen propose to include in a new discipline of "Progress Studies." Today, armies of economists are researching issues such as what explains the location of technology clusters like Silicon Valley, why the Industrial Revolution happened when it did, or why some organizations are much more productive and innovative than others. As the University of Oxford's Gina Neff recently remarked on Twitter, the Industrial Revolution even gave birth to sociology, or what she called "Progress Studies 1.0."

This is all true, and yet Collison and Cowen are on to something. Academic researchers clearly find it hard to work together across disciplinary boundaries, despite repeated calls for them to do so more often. This is largely the result of incentives that encourage academics to specialize in ever-narrower areas, so that they can produce the publications that will lead to promotion and professional esteem. The world has problems, as the old saying puts it, but universities have departments. Interdisciplinary research institutes like mine and Neff's therefore have to consider carefully how best to advance the careers of younger colleagues. The same silo problem arises in government, which is likewise organized by departments.

Moreover, fashions in research can lead to hugely disproportionate intellectual efforts in specific areas. To take one example, the ethics of artificial intelligence is clearly an important subject, but it is really the dominant research challenge today, even in the fields of AI or ethics? The financial incentives embedded in technology companies' business models seem to me at least as important as morality in explaining these firms' behavior.

At the same time, some important economic questions are curiously underexplored. For example, in his recent book The Technology Trap, Carl Frey expands on his gloomy view of what automation will mean for the jobs of the future, pointing to the adverse effects that the original Industrial Revolution had on

the typical worker. Yet Frey also notes that a later period of automation, the era of mass production in the mid-twentieth century, was one of high employment and increasingly broad-based prosperity. What explains the great difference between those two eras?

More generally, researchers need to distill their findings in an accessible way for policymakers – particularly when there are significant scholarly disagreements – and persuade decision-makers to act on them. Yet although the public broadly trusts academic research, most academics are poor communicators (which again reflects their professional incentives). Besides, the last thing some politicians want is evidence that disproves a dearly held belief. And even open-minded officials often struggle to find easily digestible academic expertise on the state of knowledge, particularly on questions concerning novel science and technology.

Today, the role of research in changing behavior – whether that of government officials or of businesses and citizens – is part of the broader crisis of legitimacy in Western democracies. By the early 2000s, technocrats – and economists in particular – ruled the roost, and governments delegated large swaths of policy to independent expert bodies such as central banks and utility regulators. But then came the 2008 global financial crisis. With real incomes stagnating for many, and "deaths of despair" increasing, it is not surprising that expertise has lost its luster for much of the public.

This leads to a final point about the need for a science of progress: what do we actually mean by "progress"? How should it be measured and monitored, and who experiences it? For many reasons, the standard indicator of real GDP growth, which leaves out much of what people value, will no longer do.

The debate about progress therefore raises profound political and philosophical questions about the kind of societies we want. If the global economy falls into recession, as now seems likely, then social divisions and political polarization will intensify further. And the clear message since the turn of the millennium is that if most people do not experience progress, then society isn't really progressing at all.

Current academic research – into the impact of new technologies, the economics of innovation, and the quality of management, for example – may be providing ever more pieces of the puzzle. But many crucial questions about economic progress remain unanswered, and others have not yet even been properly posed.

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