

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



December 16, 2018

### Trilateral Dialogue – Light at the End of the Tunnel

Officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan and China are meeting in Kabul to discuss security issue. The three sides will hold their second trilateral ministerial dialogue to reaffirm their support for facilitating peace talks and pushing the Taliban to the table with Ghani's administration. Pakistan, under Imran Khan's leadership, seems more willing to back peace talks as it released Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a key member of the Taliban, in October to facilitate talks between the US and the Taliban. However, a sense of mistrust is still felt between Afghanistan and Pakistan and it is feared that the blame game will emerge between the two sides if insurgents continue their attacks or peace talks come to a dead-end. Realizing Pakistan's essential role in peace talks and Afghanistan's strategic position in Asia, China is seeking to bring the two countries closer. "As a friend of both countries, China is making every effort to build confidence between Pakistan and Afghanistan," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is cited as saying. Stressing negotiation as a solution to the crisis, Wang said, "We urge the Taliban to take advantage of this chance for peace and hold negotiations." It is widely believed that Pakistan's support for peace talks carries much weight. "I don't think China is in the position to bring the Taliban to negotiating table. Taliban, as you know, is proud and tough. I do not think China developed a strong leverage that changes Taliban's track. As to Pakistan, yes, Pakistan has a leverage over Taliban," said Dr. Zeng Xiangyu, a professor of South Asia Studies at Sichuan University. The tripartite dialogue is highly essential in this sensitive time as the US is seeking to step up the peace talks with the Taliban so as to end the 17-year conflict in Afghanistan. If regional powers push the Taliban to reach an agreement with their interlocutors, insurgency will certainly subside in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the dialogue will not only mitigate the mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad but also cement ties among Afghanistan, Pakistan and China.

Afghanistan expects its international allies and neighboring countries to persuade the Taliban's leadership to hold talks with Kabul government, which has been refused by the Taliban so far. Holding firm stance for talks, Kabul has established Peace Advisory Board, which consists of high-level officials and jihadi leaders, to decide in consultation with political elites regarding the negotiations. Both Kabul and its US ally intend to reach an agreement with the Taliban before Afghanistan's presidential election, which will be held in less than five months.

It is self-explanatory that terrorism has had its toll on Pakistan in general and Afghanistan in particular. Despite its strong counterinsurgency, Afghanistan has borne the brunt of terrorism. That is, Afghan soldiers and civilians have sustained the largest number of casualties in the wake of terrorist attacks within the past years, especially after the withdrawal of NATO troops as the Taliban intensified their attacks. To put an end to Afghanistan's conflict, international and regional powers, including Pakistan, have to use their leverage to push the Taliban to the peace table. Currently, all regional stakeholders – including Pakistan, China and Russia – believe that dialogue is the only solution to the conflict, however, designing an undisputed roadmap and holding an inclusive meeting, with the presence of all international stakeholders, are challenging the desired result of such meetings. Hence, all sides need to draw a roadmap for talks and put enough pressure on the Taliban to come to the table with bona fide intention.

It should be noted that the Taliban have capitalized on peace talks up to now without taking a single step for peace. They have continued their intensified attacks and refused to negotiate with Kabul government – which signal that the Taliban are seeking privileges rather than truce. Bargaining for much higher price with international powers such as the US and Russia, the Taliban's confidence has been boosted in the battlefields. So, giving further privileges to the Taliban will backfire. With having a strong leverage on the Taliban, Pakistan is believed to be a highly heavyweight stakeholder in peace talks. Thus, it is hoped that this round of meetings between the three neighboring countries will bear more fruitful result.

With the strong determination of regional and international stakeholders for meaningful talks, the ball is now in the Taliban's court. The Taliban should not forget that military deal is always the second option.



### The Consequences of One Decade Negligence of Taliban

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Undoubtedly, from 2004 to 2014, it was one of the most suitable periods for Taliban to re-growth. The Taliban has so strengthened, during this period, that the Afghan government, the United States and other allies involved in Afghanistan's war and peace have come to believe that the Taliban must be recognized as a powerful political wing in the peace process. Even, there are bargaining at the international level meetings to get out the fate of Afghan government from the free election system. For example, we can point out to the time of peace agreement and the position of Taliban after signing the peace agreement. Anyway, this article is to have a glance at the causes and factors behind the growth of the Taliban due to negligence of governmental institutions and political parties that were monitoring the country's affairs. The peace process of Afghan government has lasted longer than it was expected, and this slowdown process led the Taliban group to use the opportunity for strength of its structure and army power. Since the beginning of the first peace talks, the government apparently hoped for symbolic movements and peaceful civil activities, which might lead the terrorist group to peace table through the promotion of peace culture and social activities. The truth, however, is that social peace advocacies need longer period of time and more systematic approaches; on the other hand, advocacies do not have necessary impact on the Taliban mentality. Therefore, the public opinion and the policies of the stakeholders wishing a political peace approach with the Taliban. The price of this political peace will be paid by the Afghan people, not the Taliban. Now the situation is so complex that people have to pay heavy price in any case. With the prolongation of the war, the people will have to suffer more victims while if the process accelerates, more privileges needs to be considered for the Taliban. Because during the strategic and rehabilitative decade they have got as much economic and political power that their victory in the battlefield or negotiation table are more than their true ability and expectation. During their strategic decade, which actually covers the years from 2004 to 2014, the Taliban group on the other side of the wall pursued three major goals: 1. Human reinstatement; 2. strengthening of weapons and fiscal sources; and 3. Acquisition of political credit and political support at the regional and international levels. During the period the post-Bonn conference when other political parties returned to a democratic system, each of them tried to gain more privilege in new the system, but beyond the borders of the sovereignty of democracy and beyond the eyes of the NATO drone, the Taliban tried to regain legitimacy within the community. During this time, the Taliban trained a new generation of terrorist troops with the idea of extremism and with uses of safe neighboring

mosques and villages of the country. On the other hand, in the insecure areas, they took the initiatives to successfully recruit new fighters using the opportunity of unemployment or compulsorily propelled them to the battlefield. Therefore, they are on the platform of power now.

In the other words, when the other political parties and Jihadist groups were busy to strengthen themselves in the government bodies but the Taliban group used the opportunity to influence and gain control over the fertile areas in the south and east, provided poppy cultivation and trafficking opportunities to fulfill their economic needs, and rely on a solid wall. Thus, extraction, smuggling and the plunder of Afghan mineral resources and the collection of taxes from people and businessmen along with financial assistance from the outside turned the group into a mafia band, not only enhanced the durability of war but also spread the war across Afghanistan.

The Taliban, at the same time as were increasing their funds, they were trapping weapons and ammunition from the Afghan National army and importing advanced weapons from outside the country; recently they have displayed their advanced weapons in Ghazni and Farah war. Eventually, this caused the Taliban to become an invincible group shortly after the withdrawal of the majority of US and NATO forces. Though their military power is nothing against national and international army but their ghostly image of the Taliban has given them the power that even the Chief of US Army General Joseph Dunford declares "the Taliban are invincible". What comes out of this message is that the Taliban is in a position and have international lobbies and even the news of their invincible power broadcast from the media of United States.

While the fact is that the Taliban are not invincible against the US military and NATO members. The invincibility of the Taliban with the power of the armed forces and the special forces of America is a ridiculous, let alone the support of the Afghan government and nation, and the legal permission from the United Nations to root out the group from inside Afghanistan. The point is that the Taliban have used the opportunities in right way to be used as a political tool to continue the representing war in the country. Though they have experienced heavily defeat from international forces in 2001 but their way of return remained open to the arena of politics and power. So, the empty chair of Taliban in Bonn conference was an excuse for continuity of war game and farther destruction of Afghanistan. Eventually, Taliban has successfully contributed to materialize the dream of Afghan enemy over domination of social and political condition of Afghanistan.

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### Prospects for US-China Relations in 2019

By: Kevin Rudd

Throughout 2018, much of Asia has been shaken by the new and increasingly unpredictable dynamics in Sino-American relations. One year ago, US President Donald Trump returned from Beijing after his "state-plus" visit, which China hoped had finally laid his anti-Chinese campaign rhetoric to rest. Twelve months later, China and the United States are caught in an unresolved trade war, and Trump's administration has replaced US "strategic engagement" with China with "strategic competition."

One year ago, moreover, the US, European, and Chinese economies and markets were roaring. Now, there is deep instability in financial markets, with growth slowing in China and Europe, and higher interest rates beginning to bite in America. Uncertainty over the future of the North Korean nuclear negotiations is also darkening the picture.

So what are the prospects for US-China relations in 2019? It's probable that by March there will be an agreement on reducing the bilateral trade deficit and the import decisions that China will make to see it through. An agreement on tariff reductions by then is also possible, although its complexity may lengthen the timeline. A tariff-by-tariff approach could take a year. But if Chinese economic reformers take a more dramatic approach, by committing to zero tariffs over time and challenging the Americans to reciprocate, it could be concluded more rapidly. But this would run counter to decades of Chinese trade bureaucrats' training to give away little, let alone be seen as giving away everything at once.

The reform of so-called forced technology transfer should be relatively straightforward. Nonetheless, reform is different from how contractual arrangements may be interpreted in practice, even in the absence of any specific technology transfer provisions.

Intellectual property protection, however, is deeply problematic. Previous agreements reached under President Barack Obama's administration could be reconstituted. But the jurisdictional enforcement of breaches is still hopeless. One possible mechanism is to subject relevant contracts between Chinese and foreign firms to international commercial arbitration bodies located in Singapore or Switzerland, designed to deal specifically with the enforcement of IP protection.

If China objected, it might be possible to develop China's own domestically based international commercial arbitration system. But the country would need to appoint qualified foreigners to its panel of arbitrators to build international credibility. No one has any confidence in China's commercial courts. For its own domestic reform needs, China needs to move toward fully independent commercial and civil divisions of its court system, even if the criminal division remains subject to political control.

American concerns about Chinese state subsidies under the country's Made in China 2025 strategy will be almost impossible to resolve. The reality is that all countries use degrees of government support for their indigenous technology industries, although China uses the most. Even if we mandated a maximum level of state support for a given firm, compliance would be difficult to measure. I am not confident of a negotiated outcome in this area. America may simply need to outcompete China by increasing public investment in research and development across the information technology and biotechnology sectors.

We should also not rule out the possibility of China pitching tariff reforms to the wider international community as well. For example, China

could make a dramatic commitment to zero tariffs over time not just to the US, but to all World Trade Organization member states. This would represent an almost irresistible opportunity for China to champion global free trade and arrest the trend toward protectionism.

Such a turn by China could include approaching the Trans-Pacific Partnership's member states for accession, in an ironic effort to outflank the US (which Trump withdrew from the TPP immediately upon taking office) in the Asia-Pacific region. When it sees a political and market opening, China can be remarkably fleet of foot. Negotiations would be difficult, but Japan's reservations about China's TPP accession have softened since Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent visit to Beijing.

On the wider foreign policy and security front, China in 2019 is likely to "de-conflict" itself in its relations with other countries, given the core strategic challenges posed by the US. There is already some normalization in relations with Japan. Recent Japanese Coastguard data indicate a drastic reduction in Chinese incursions into the Senkaku/Diaoyu area in the East China Sea.

China also wants to de-escalate tensions with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations over the South China Sea through the accelerated negotiation of a "code of conduct." China is also likely to enjoy a calmer relationship with India, following the bilateral summit in Wuhan in April. And China may begin to moderate its stance on Taiwan, given the poor results of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party in last month's local government elections. This would, of course, change radically if the US proceeds with further significant arms sales to Taiwan, as is likely. Maritime incidents with the US in the South China Sea have continued, and the conflict may sharpen if the US pursues its Freedom of Navigation program more vigorously next year.

Across Eurasia, China will continue to roll out its Belt and Road Initiative. However, in recent months, the BRI has attracted less domestic political fanfare. There is already debate among Chinese officials about revising certain BRI modalities, following negative reaction to Sri Lanka's handover to China of the Hambantota Port, and concerns over the BRI's long-term affordability. We may therefore see less Chinese BRI triumphalism in 2019.

Moreover, China is likely to consolidate and expand its role within the existing United Nations and Bretton Woods institutions, rather than emphasizing new institutions of international governance. It will likely continue to be the WTO's new champion, and to sustain its posture on global climate change as agreed under the 2015 Paris climate agreement. To the more sober minds in China's foreign policy establishment, it is better to focus on the existing machinery of the global rules-based system, particularly when the US is demonstrating systematic contempt for it.

As China seeks to re-stabilize its relationship with the US, and ease tensions in its non-US relationships, its leaders are likely to use 2019 to form a deeper judgment about the future of US politics: the impact of the Mueller investigation on Trump and his administration, and whether a new president in 2020 (or sooner) would in any way change the emerging new US strategy. While they have already concluded that a deep shift in American attitudes to China has occurred, they remain uncertain about what precise form that shift is taking, and whether a fundamental shift in their strategy (as opposed to tactics) is warranted.

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