

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



December 26, 2017

The Challenges Ahead

Afghanistan is standing at a very crucial juncture of its history. In fact, it is at a point that can decide whether the country will be able to stand on its own and move towards peace and tranquility, or whether it will be further pushed towards instability and chaos. At such a deciding time in its history, the most imperative role must be played by the leaders of the country; particularly, the ones that are in the government. The decision-makers and the policy makers have a challenging task ahead of them if they are interested in leading the country towards better future.

At the same time, it appears that Afghan government does not have any other option but to be more responsible and deal with the situation on its own. Currently there are many concerns about the Afghan government; addressing them is in its total control if other things are out of it. Afghan government can listen to the different voices in the country that are peace-loving and want a better future for Afghanistan in the form of better political system. Moreover, Afghan authorities can efforts so that strong foundations of a democratic setup are put in place. At the meantime, they can work on developing the political institutions and make them as much strong as possible as it is the institutions that make the evolution of political system towards stability and prosperity possible. This is possible if the government is ready to adopt a flexible and democratic attitude towards different opinions regarding the political amendments in the country.

Afghan government can control the rampant corruption that has incapacitated the assistance from being used in the right direction. It has penetrated deep within the country's socio-political and socio-economic atmospheres and will keep on doing so unless proper attention is paid to it. It can adopt a strict policy regarding the poppy cultivation and smuggling that has not only debilitated the lives of Afghan people but has been fueling the terrorism to a large extent, as well.

Afghan government can adopt a clear policy regarding the reconciliation process in the country. Ambiguity and indecision would not solve the issue easily. Taliban, even after very welcoming remarks have denied to take initiative regarding talks with the government. In fact, they, as a response, have continued violence and terrorism, while Afghan government apart from a confusing stand has not been able to offer anything else. It is not necessary that Afghan government must pursue the issue militarily but they have to come up with a practical policy regarding the issue.

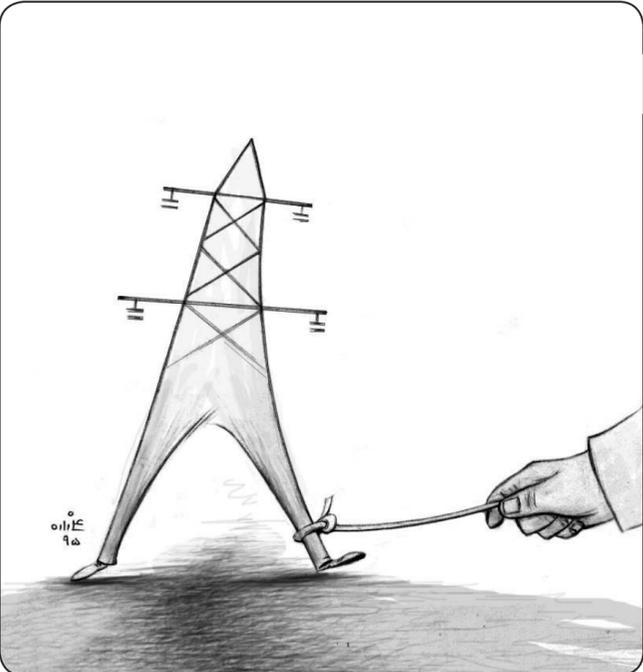
At the same time, Afghan government can revise its relations with the neighboring countries so that they should be improved. It is correct that neighboring countries have not fulfilled much as far as their responsibilities are concerned, yet Afghan government has to bring about innovations and flexibility and diplomatic prudence in its approach towards them.

Afghan government has to keep in consideration as well that as a result of decades of instability and socio-economic and political problems, the Afghan people have been suffering from myriads of problems. Though there have been certain important improvements made in the last decade or so, some very concerning issues still exist that threaten the lives of the common people of Afghanistan. There are claims 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. Insecurity is not the only trouble for the common people of Afghanistan.

There are many other problems as well that haunt their lives and make them miserable. Some of the problems are directly linked to insecurity; like, people are not able to have access to health and other facilities of life. Moreover, development works to improve the standard of living of the common people are not carried out because of the security threats, thus the desired objectives are not attained in this regard. People, in some parts of the country, are not able to have access to education as well. Schools are shut by force and the school going children are irritated.

While living in a state, the people expect and expect rightly that they should be provided their basic requirements of life by the state and the government. In the modern concept of state, protecting the basic rights of the people and providing them the requirements to live a better life are considered as the basic functions of a state. The government of Afghanistan, therefore, needs to make sure that the common people of Afghanistan are provided their basic requirements like food, cloth, shelter and security and other important requirements of life like education, health facilities, job opportunities and other facilities.



The Unbreakable Peace Stalemate

By Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Nonviolent mechanism for mitigating violence and conflicts, mainly in Afghanistan, has been stressed by world politicians. Afghan officials also seek to bring the Taliban to negotiating table since military deal could not bear the desired result within the past decade and so. The Taliban are urged to hold talks without any preconditions set by Afghan government and even opening a political office in Kabul is offered to the Taliban outfit. So far, the Taliban have been refusing to succumb to repeated calls for peace. Nonviolent strategy will be the best option for persuading militant fighters to lay down their arms and join peace process. To view Afghanistan, both Afghan state and nation are exhausted from unending militancy which has inflicted heavy casualties upon soldiers and civilians. That is to say, the escalated militancy, on the one hand, slowed down the process of democratization in the country, and on the other hand, left no gleam of hope for Afghans for peace or prosperity.

To form a civil society, in which all individuals be able to exercise their rights and liberty without a sense of fear, putting an end to violence is an essential precondition.

Persuading the Taliban to stop violence or having them nudged to peace table has been the top priority for Kabul government. The High Peace Council (HPC), which was established in 2010 to facilitate talks with warring parties, has sought all possible ways to hold talks with militants, particularly with the Taliban. It persistently calls militant groups to lay down their arms and resolve the issue through diplomatic strategy. However, the militants have been adamantly opposed to peace talks and continue violence and bloodshed without hesitation. So, peace talks came to an unbreakable stalemate. To break the deadlock, political pundits believe that Pakistan is able to play a key role but its bona fide intention is still doubted. Afghan-Pak officials exchanged harsh rhetoric in the past that aroused a sense of mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad.

Moreover, the relation between US and Pakistani officials hit rock bottom when the US President Donald Trump declared his strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia and slammed Pakistan saying that "Pakistan often gives safe haven to agents of chaos, violence and terror." However, the mutual relations thawed when US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defence Secretary James Mattis visited Islamabad for talks aimed at reversing the downward trend in bilateral ties. "Pakistan is still an important and valued partner of the

United States. Over the last decade, the relationship had drifted, and we've got to bring this relationship back to one of common interest.

Today that's just not the case," said Tillerson. He added that a pivotal point in the new US strategy was to deny any safe haven to terrorist organizations, because a number of terrorist organizations were still operating in the Afghan-Pakistan region. Promising to support the US suggestion for encouraging peace process, Pakistani officials stressed that a military solution would not work.

Instead, it suggested working with those Taliban who want to talk and fighting those who do not.

Nonetheless, the statements of US Vice President Mike Pence, who had a trip to Afghanistan, about Pakistan to stop harboring terrorists and target their safe havens in its soil hurt the feelings of Pakistani officials who accused the US of double-dealing. Overall, the US government seeks to pressure Islamabad to campaign terrorism with genuine intention and eradicate their safe havens from its soil.

The fact is that besides the US and Afghanistan, all neighboring countries stress the engagement of Pakistan in peace process. To reduce mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad, Beijing is hosting a dialogue between Afghan-Pak foreign ministers today.

Officials hope that the trilateral meeting will lead to a positive result. The level of tension might be reduced, however, it will not be productive enough and, according to Afghan officials, Pakistan is unlikely to use its leverage to push the Taliban to come to negotiating table. Meanwhile, Pakistan claims that its leverage on the Taliban has diminished.

A regional agreement over bringing the militants to peace table will reduce militancy but neighboring countries, except for few, do not seem ready to play their role genuinely in Afghanistan's peace process. In such a case, persisting on peace will be in vain.

That is to say, nonviolent mechanism and diplomatic strategy have been prioritized and followed by both Kabul and Washington, but the militants turn a deaf ear to frequent calls for peace and intensified their attacks in the last two years. Now what will be the next strategy?

Since the militant fighters, especially the Taliban, left no room for peace talks, military deal will be the only option left for Afghanistan and its international allies. In short, the militants force the government to adopt the strategy of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" and pursue tit-for-tat. *Hujjatullah Zia is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at zia_hujjat@yahoo.com*

Fake Brexit or No Brexit

By Anatole Kaletsky

Since last year's Brexit referendum, the United Kingdom has been likened to a suicide who jumps off a 100-storey building and, as he falls past the 50th floor, shouts "so far, so good." This comparison is unfair to suicides. The real economic and political message today is "so far, so bad." The "deal" to begin negotiations for a post-Brexit relationship, announced at the EU summit on December 15, followed Prime Minister Theresa May's capitulation on all of the demands made by European leaders: €50 billion (\$59 billion) of budget contributions, European court jurisdiction over the rights of EU citizens in Britain, and a permanently open border with Ireland.

The last concession was a game changer. The open border in Ireland has forced May to abandon her promise to "take back control" from the EU and its regulatory framework, as confirmed in the summit communiqué: "In the absence of agreed solutions, the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the Internal Market and the Customs Union which, now or in the future, support North-South cooperation." The result of this crucial concession on Ireland is that both scenarios usually proposed for Britain's relationship with the EU can now be dismissed. With no parliamentary majority to revoke the agreement, a "hard Brexit," in which Britain breaks free of EU regulations and trades simply on the basis of World Trade Organization rules, is no longer possible. And a "soft Brexit," which attempts to preserve the commercial benefits of EU membership without the political obligations, is equally impossible, because European leaders reject any such "cherry-picking" - and now have the whip hand over Britain.

If hard and soft Brexit are both excluded, what other options are there? The obvious one, apparent after May's failed election gamble, is some form of associate EU membership, similar to Norway. Britain would retain many of its current commercial privileges, in exchange for complying with EU rules and regulations, including free movement of labor, contributing to the EU budget, and accepting the jurisdiction of EU law. While May foolishly rejected all three of these conditions early this year, the likely result of the Brexit negotiations will be to blur all her "red lines" out of existence.

While businesses, investors, and economists would welcome such a Norwegian-style "fake Brexit," it would carry a huge political cost. Britain would have to adhere to EU laws, regulations, and legal judgments in which it would no longer have any say. Instead of a rule-maker, the United Kingdom would become a "rule-taker" - or, in the emotive language adopted recently by Brexit hardliners, Britain would be reduced from an imperial power to a "vassal state" or a "colony" of the EU. This "rule-taker" status is what the UK has already requested for a two-year "transition period," beginning in April 2019. May claims that this will be a "strictly time-limited" arrangement, while she negotiates a free-trade agreement with the EU. But the EU has repeatedly made clear that two years is

too short a period to negotiate even a simple FTA, never mind the "imaginative, bespoke" deal that May is seeking.

In truth, there is almost no chance of Britain ever negotiating the "deep and special partnership" May has promised. It is simply inconceivable that European leaders would offer Britain's service industries access to the EU single market without imposing the legal and budgetary conditions accepted by Norway and Switzerland.

What, then, will happen at the end of the transition period in April 2021? The only plausible answer is a further transition, if only to avoid an economically devastating rupture in trade regulations just before the UK general election due in 2022. And, assuming the transition is extended from 2021 to, say, 2023, aren't further extensions likely, probably evolving into a quasi-permanent arrangement? Norway's EU relationship via the European Economic Area, also designed as a brief transition, has now lasted 24 years.

This "Hotel California" scenario, in which "you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave," would ultimately enrage both Brexiteers and Remainers. So what are the other options?

If a hard Brexit is economically unacceptable to British business and Parliament, a soft Brexit is politically unacceptable to EU leaders, and a fake Brexit is unacceptable to almost everyone, that leaves just one alternative: no Brexit.

It is still entirely possible to abandon Brexit by revoking Britain's withdrawal notice under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union. This decision would have to be made by Parliament before the treaty deadline of March 29, 2019, and it would probably have to be ratified by another referendum.

A necessary condition for this sequence of events would be the collapse of May's government, perhaps caused by a Brexiteer revolt against the "vassal state" conditions imposed by the EU during the transition period. Under these circumstances, a general election would almost certainly produce a Labour-led coalition based on a promise to "think again" about Brexit. This was exactly the scenario suggested last month by one of May's few remaining loyalists, Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who became the first senior Tory to admit publicly that Brexit might never happen if zealous Euroskeptics ever rebelled against May. For the time being, the threat of a Labour government has been sufficient to intimidate Brexit hardliners. But the forced quiescence of the Euroskeptics makes it more certain that May will negotiate a "vassal state" transition that evolves into the Euroskeptics' nightmare of an inescapable "Hotel California," based on the Norway model. As the Brexit hardliners grasp this logical conundrum, they could well decide to bring down May and risk a general election rather than collaborate in Britain's demotion to "vassal statehood." The suicide jumper is still falling, and, until he passes the first-floor window, we will not know whether he is attached to a bungee cord. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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