

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

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The Taliban are not Trustworthy Negotiators

The US-Taliban peace talks will be a pyrrhic victory for Afghan nation rather than "diplomatic victory", as Pakistan's Qureshi described the six-day talks between US diplomats and the Taliban in Qatar, since democratic principles and women's rights - entered in Constitution following the post-Taliban regime - are at stake.

In the Moscow talks, held between the Taliban and Afghan political heavyweights without the presence of Kabul's envoy, heads of the Taliban delegation Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai reiterated that they "want an Islamic Constitution". The Taliban also said it did not want a "monopoly of power" but "an inclusive Islamic system".

With the establishment of Afghan Constitution Commission under the Bonn Agreement, Afghanistan's Constitution was drafted and then adopted by the Loya Jirga (Grand National Assembly) on 4 January 2004. This Constitution, which adheres to the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has come in for the Taliban's disapproval.

With this in mind, Afghans fear that the Taliban are likely to curtail the rights and freedoms of women similar to that during their regime (1996-2001) and push for a patriarchal system.

To allay the public concerns, however, Muhammad Sohail Shaheen, a spokesman from the Taliban delegation in the first round of Moscow meeting, said that the Taliban were "ready to give women all the rights that exist in Islam", which include "education", "work" and "property" on condition that they "observe wearing the veil".

Nonetheless, there is a trust deficit between Afghan and US officials on the one side and the Taliban on the other side. In turn, Ryan Crocker, the former US ambassador to Afghanistan, is cited as saying, "If we withdraw as we're talking about in an 18-month timeline, you will simply see the Taliban move in and retake the country. We've seen this before, at the Paris peace talks with Vietnam."

One likened the US-Taliban framework agreement to the negotiated exit of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan under the cover of the 1988 Geneva Accords, which failed to bring peace to the country, and called the agreement on withdrawal of US troops "sheer naiveté".

It is believed that mistrust is generated by the Taliban's intensified attacks. Notwithstanding the peace talks, the Taliban outfit continues its offensive against Afghan soldiers and civilians and refuse to hold talks with Kabul government. In other words, the Taliban's bargaining for higher price and their heavy attacks leave little room for trust. Thus, the idea of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate return fills the air with fear and disappointment in Afghanistan.

The Taliban had demanded the lifting of sanctions against the group's leaders, release of prisoners, recognition of their office in Qatar, withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, establishment an Islamic system, and amendment to the Constitution. In return, they have agreed not to allow international terrorists to use Afghan territory for staging attacks against any countries, including the US, not to monopolize the power, and sanction women to exercise their rights and freedoms in the frame of Islamic law.

I believe that peace talks will bear the desired result if the Taliban are pushed to the negotiating table with Kabul government. If the Taliban are pressured militarily, they will succumb to talks with the government. An "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-owned" peace process is also trustworthy for Afghan people. Above all, if the Taliban and their interlocutors reach a consensus, it has to be acceptable to Afghan state and nation. Hence, the talks will not come to fruition if the Afghan government is sidelined.

It is most likely that the Taliban refuse to talk to the Afghan government so as to haggle over further concessions with their US interlocutors.

Now as the next round of talks is slated for February 25, the Taliban's interlocutors and regional stakeholders have to push them for two issues: First, to come to the table with Kabul government. Second, to declare a truce so as to build trust and prove their bona fide intention for peace and reconciliation. Meanwhile, it should be noted that "Islamic system" and "Islamic Constitution" carry very broad and vague meanings. What if the Taliban seek to exert "Sharia law" based on their own radical interpretation? There should be no ambiguity in these terms when the Taliban and their interlocutors reach an agreement.

The desire of Trump administration to not act as "the world's policeman" is understandable. But it has to play the role of an umpire and make sure that the Taliban practice the peace agreement rightly if they strike a deal in the wake of their negotiations. This way, Afghans' concerns will be allayed, too.

Reflection on Promoting Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Afghanistan in the background of "One Belt And One Road"

By: Ting Zhao, Jin Shi, Xiaoran Fu & Yue Zhou

On September 7, 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping first proposed the "Silk Road Economic Belt" during his speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. In the background of the implementation of "One Belt and One Road" Initiative and the stable political relations between China and its neighboring countries, China and its neighboring countries will enter a new era through economic integration, political mutual trust and cultural inclusiveness. Afghanistan is one of the most significant neighboring countries of China. The two countries have been sharing friendly bilateral relations for a long time. Afghanistan is a landlocked country suffering civil war for many years. Recently, Afghanistan has ended the civil war and started its reconstruction process. By virtue of the bountiful natural resource and particular geographical position, Afghanistan displays huge potential in economic development. Meanwhile along with the implementation of the "One Belt and One Road" Initiative, China and Afghanistan will achieve further development in economic and trade cooperation. In the new era, economic cooperation between China and Afghanistan is faced with new opportunities and challenges.

The special geographical position of Afghanistan endows it with a special identity. It is the pivot between the east and the west as well as the place where nomads migrate and soldiers fight for. Naturally, it is also one of the most important country along the ancient east-west trade routes. The economic and trade exchange between China and Afghanistan have a long history which can be traced back to the ancient silk road in the Han Dynasty. Historically, China and Afghanistan enjoy stable and friendly bilateral relations. Given Afghanistan's special geographical location and complementary resources in both countries, the two countries enjoy great potential and broad prospects for economic and trade cooperation. At present, the economic and trade cooperation between China and Afghanistan mainly involves in energy and mineral resources, infrastructure construction assistance, light industrial products and agricultural products, etc. However, the trade between China and Afghanistan has reached a certain amount and scale, the current scale of economic and trade cooperation is far from enough to match the domestic economic development speed of Afghanistan and domestic demand of the two countries. Therefore, there are still a series of problems in economic and trade cooperation between the two countries, such as small trade scale, concentrated investment fields, single structure and single investment subject. Moreover, the security situa-

tion in Afghanistan fluctuates greatly, which erects a bad influence on the economic and trade cooperation. These factors lead the current economic and trade cooperation do not match the sound political relations between China and Afghanistan.

The economic and trade cooperation between Afghanistan and China bears a bright future. Hence, both sides need to seek proper settlement of these issues. With the proposal and implementation of the "One Belt And One Road" strategy, economic and trade cooperation faces new historical opportunities in the new era. In order to further deepen China-Afghanistan economic and trade cooperation, both sides need to make joint efforts to make economic and trade cooperation develop in a healthy, stable and fast direction. China and Afghanistan should deepen strategic cooperative partnership, consolidate political foundation, increase cooperation scale and expand cooperation areas. Besides, China and Afghanistan should make good use of China-Afghanistan economic community, China-South Asia Expo and other platforms and mechanisms to raise the popularity and number of transactions of competitive Afghan products in China. Corresponding measures should be taken to lower the threshold of access of Afghan featured agricultural products to China's market. China and Afghanistan both need promote trade facilitation.

In addition, China and Afghanistan should increase special freight trains. Moreover, the trade freight routes can be extended to southern China, eastern China and other coastal areas. At the same time, China and Afghanistan can promote the construction of China-Afghanistan free trade zones in Xinjiang province and Yunnan province and reduce non-tariff barriers and investment restrictions. Both sides should strengthen exchanges and cooperation in culture, education, health and media and conduct various forms of cultural and people-to-people exchanges to further enhance the understanding and friendship among people. In the new era, there is still a long way to go in the development of bilateral economic and trade cooperation. It requires the joint efforts of the people and the governments. It will lay a solid foundation for raising the level of economic development of the two countries and improving the living standards of people in both countries.

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Suicide Attacks on Iranian and Indian Security Forces: Fate of Pakistan in the Balance

By: Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

Two fateful suicide attacks last week, which were carried out in two different countries - one on elite Iranian security personnel near the border with Pakistan, which has killed 27 service members and injured 13 others, and the other one carried out on 14 February on Indian security forces in Indian administered Kashmir, which killed more than 40 security personnel, have caused anger and pain among the people and Governments of both Iran, the Islamic Republic and India. Timing of these attacks is mysteriously coordinated with the visit of Saudi Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman to the region - India and Pakistan. Also, tension simmering in Middle East between two major powerful countries i.e. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Islamic Republic over sphere of control in the region has triggered warnings and threats directed to one another over 'muddling' in each other's internal affairs - singling out Iranian support to Houthi militia in Yemen, who have been firing missile on the cities of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since last four years and threatens Saudi interests in Yemen, and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia' support to armed groups fighting in Syria against the interests of Iran. Most notably, Iran sees Pakistan as vehicle to furthering and implementing Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's design and interests at the door step of Iran, which could easily be infiltrated because Iranian provinces bordering Pakistan (Sistan and Baluchistan) are primarily Sunni dwellers, who 'harbor grudges against Iran's central Government' citing deliberate deprivation and marginalization by mainly Shia Government there, hence paving ways for manipulation and infiltration by elements hostile to Iran's central Government. Pakistan military and security establishment have been allowing for and fostering hardline religious fanatics to form and train in that country, which are then used by the establishment as proxies in Afghanistan and India to cause havoc and weaken central Government holds over the country by staging guerrilla type attacks on Government installations and security and defense personnel. Pakistan Government continues to defy international pressure and its neighboring countries' concern and blatantly allow these militant groups to cause killings and destructions in Afghanistan for the last more than seventeen years now. Emboldened by lack of response in kind for its actions which include meddling and support for terrorist activities in Afghanistan, Pakistan military establishment has either knowingly or unknowingly allowed these militant groups it harbors, to carry out suicide attacks on Iran and India soil, which has put fate of the country in the balance. Recent rescue package of billions of dollars offered by Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to Pakistan is seen by Iran as yet another softening of position of Pakistan to control and rein in activities of these militant groups. Iran, the Islamic Republic, has been bearing grudges against Pakistan for not being able to control militant groups active inside Pakistan since last two decades now. India has been victim of terrorist attacks, which it blames on Pakistan for years owing to strain relations the two countries have due to Kashmir issue and historical grudges dating back to the wars of 1948, 1965 and 1971, which changed South-East Asia's geographical demarcation by separating West Bengal province from Pakistan and giving birth to an independent country called Bangladesh. In all the three wars fought with India, Pakistan has suffered humiliating defeats at the hand of Indian military, which compelled Pakistan to opt for other ways to 'settle scores with India', and these ways include formation of militant groups around religious slogans and to use them as proxies in 'enemy state' in the form

of guerrilla warfare. Pakistani military establishment had enjoyed free hands to experiment guerrilla type warfare in Afghanistan during the 1980s decade when ex-USSR had invaded Afghanistan. Supported by Western nations including the United States of America and NATO member countries, Pakistan military and intelligence organizations had successfully put in practice the art of war 'behind the enemy lines'. These tactics have showed clear results in favor of Pakistani agenda for long-run benefits - including its 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan where it supported a waning insurgency and rekindled it to a 'force to reckon with' - the Taliban. But as the laws of nature govern the flow of things, fate will not be always at Pakistani side. They have gaffed and committed blunder by daring attacks inside Iran, the Islamic Republic, and Indian administered Kashmir. Both India and Iran enjoy far more leverages - in term of military power, prowess and economic stability. It is ironic to see Pakistan misadventure inside Iran, the country which helped Pakistan in 1948 by mobilizing its army in favor of Pakistan federal Government to bring a renegade province - Baluchistan - into the folds of federation of Pakistan.

Now, what are the responses of these two countries against Pakistan will be seen in the event Pakistan does not act immediately to bring the militant groups identified by both Iran and India, to justice. The options for military surgical strikes by Indian army inside Pakistan could not be ruled out. Opinion in India is in favor of military intervention against militant groups harbored inside Pakistan. But a military intervention could trigger response in kind from Pakistani military, which will not be feasible because India is stronger and has lots of leverage both in conventional and nuclear capabilities. In the event of attack by Indian army, it is obvious Pakistanis will resort to nuclear warfare because; 1) they understand they would not be able to stand Indian conventional warfare; and 2) they believe Pakistan will have little to lose in case it engages in nuclear war with India because the country is in the bottom of pyramid for economic, social and political stability - but on the other hand, India enjoys strong political, economic and military system. By dragging India into a prolong war, Pakistan might believe they can bring India to her knees, which would result in loss of economic growth...etc. But according to independent military observers, Indian army has already taken care of all scenarios. The addition of S400 anti-missile batteries in the army along with numerous other defensive caps, India has effectively constructed a formidable defense system, which can thwart any Pakistani misadventure. Same is true with Iran, the Islamic Republic where the Government and the army there have lots of leverage over Pakistani military strength. Iran enjoys support inside Pakistan through the Shia political and social organizations, where Shia population constitutes a considerable percentage of the total population of the country. It remains to be seen what course India and Iran adopt to 'respond in kind' to the two suicide attacks, it is advisable for Pakistan to stop making more enemies around her, which already encircled the country - India, Afghanistan and Iran, the Islamic Republic - and begin to crack down on terrorist outfits it harbors since last four decades to re-establish friendly and cordial relations with her neighbors by respecting national sovereignty, independence and peaceful existence.

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