

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

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**Integration and Unity
are Vital for Peace**

As the prospects of peace talks with Taliban seem to be getting brighter, it is imperative that Afghan society, especially the authoritative people of the society, must make efforts to bring the people together and work for integration and unity. The only possibility that Afghanistan will be able to face the challenges of insecurity and stand strong against political challenges is through a comprehensive process of integration. Unfortunately, the authorities and leadership currently heading the government does not appear to have enough legitimacy to declare itself as a unified whole against Taliban, which is further complicating the prospects of direct talks between the government in Afghanistan and Taliban.

US special envoy for peace in Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, has been able to make some improvements in talks with Taliban; however, Taliban have not shown any sort of willingness to talk directly with Afghan government, which is a matter of concern for authorities in Kabul. Even Zalmay Khalilzad in his recent trip to Kabul said that the prospects of peace now lie with Afghans themselves, and they have to take advantage of the opportunity. He seemed to be indicating towards the need of Afghan government and other stakeholders in Afghanistan to come to same page regarding the reconciliation process. Nevertheless, President Ashraf Ghani seems reluctant to gather all the stakeholders on the same platform and proceed for peace talks. A political solution in Afghanistan – which is really important for the integration of Afghan society – is likely but not very close, and the present attitude of Afghan government is further hindering the process. The policy of reconciliation with Taliban seems to be out of shape and the Afghan people do not appear to be having confidence that the government will be able to achieve anything worthwhile regarding reconciliation process. The process, that was led by government, did not reach anywhere though there were many attempts to make it move.

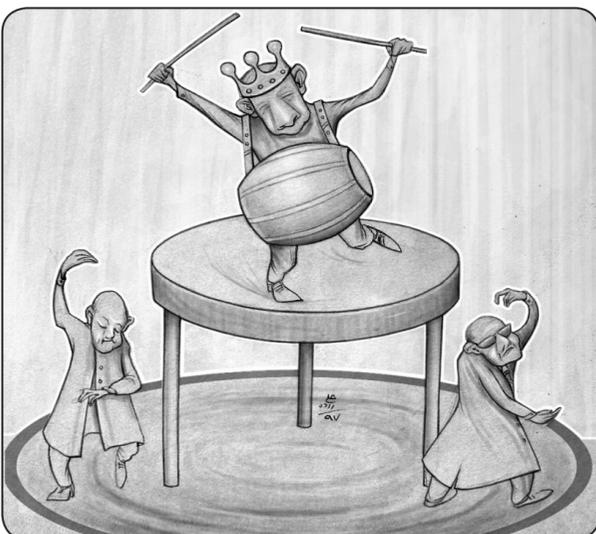
The experts agree that a lasting solution for Afghanistan is not through the war; it is political solution alone that has the hope of stability in the country, yet the measures have not been carried out appropriately in the same direction. Instead of the process being participatory and inclusive, it has been the reason of widening the gap among the Afghan people themselves, and the current situation is making sure that this gap should keep on increasing – further disintegrating the society.

Though it is not possible that the reconciliation process alone may generate a sort of reintegration within Afghan society, it may, to a certain extent, prove helpful to it, provided that it is handled with prudence. However, at the same time, it must never be forgotten that the reintegration is quite a different phenomenon and require attention and devotion of its own. It is largely dependent on the political system and socio-economic environment prevalent within Afghan society.

For the reintegration of Afghan society, it is necessary that all the major social and political groups within the Afghan society must start feeling a sense of attachment with the social, political and economic lives of the country.

The reintegration of the Afghan society is only possible through a separate process – it can neither be the outcome of a miracle nor the result of any sort of reconciliation process alone. With the present attitude of NUG, even it seems improbable that the reconciliation process may reach to any sort of viable agreement with Taliban, let alone the integration of the entire nation. For reintegration to happen it is necessary to bring about some very basic structural changes within the Afghan political setup. One of the most basic of them is a true democracy within the country that has the capacity to represent different ethnic and minority groups appropriately so that heterogeneous Afghan society must be integrated within a single whole. Different ethnic and minority groups will not be integrated within the society if they are kept away from participating within the affairs of the country and the most crucial decisions of the nation. Therefore, it can be said that the reintegration process is a two-fold process. Along with making these groups the part of the ongoing reconciliation process, there have to be important political amendments within a short span of time; otherwise, neither reintegration will take place nor will reconciliation produce any fruitful outcome.

In fact, the reintegration of Afghan society is a phenomenon that is much wider than the reconciliation process. For it to happen; there has to be consistent efforts and a true democratic system assisted with socio-economic stability and cultural integration. However, it cannot be said that reconciliation process, which is narrower in scope, is totally ineffective on the Afghanistan's reintegration. Rather, at the moment, it is one of the factors that will have a very important influence on the future of reintegration process in Afghanistan but it is important that the process must be led keeping the same concept in mind. Integrating all the important factions of Afghan society within a reconciliation process will definitely result in a promising episode in the reintegration of Afghan society.

**Belt and Road Initiative Puts Impetus to
Afghan Peace and Development (last part)**

By: Liu Jinsong

Afghanistan has already benefited from the BRI. Since November last year, the Chinese side has imported upon an inter-governmental agreement about 1250 tons of pine nuts, valuing 14 million US dollars. Afghan farmers and traders are very happy. Chinese consumers are also very happy with increased choices of high quality food. Isn't it a classical example of mutual benefit and win-win! Boosted by the BRI, even though the Afghan security situation has not been fully satisfactory, volume of trade in goods between our two countries has been kept at the level of 1 billion dollars a year on average, direct air flights and scheduled train services have been in stable operation and some new economic cooperation projects are under positive discussions. This has not been achieved easily.

The Chinese and our Afghan friends have both heard of the proverb: it takes two hands to clap. Early harvests in BRI will require concerted efforts from China and Afghanistan, including efforts by the Afghan side to give better play to the role of Afghan business people and chamber of commerce in China in promoting Afghan products and brands, supporting Chinese language programs and train more professional 'matchmakers' for China-Afghanistan economic and trade cooperation. As a man sows, so he shall reap. So long as the Afghan side earnestly engages itself in the BRI, it will for sure happily benefit from it.

While advancing the BRI, the Chinese side attaches equal importance, treats as equals and engages with equal enthusiasm to all participating countries. We are all members of the same band and every one of us is important and indispensable. Admittedly specific project design and construction must be done on the basis of resource endowments, market rules and risk assessments. The enterprises are the principal entities and they will select projects independently by weighing pros and cons. As a result, countries get different investments and gains, which is quite natural. If and when the Afghan security situation, infrastructure and business environment are improved, more international investors including those from China will certainly give more favorable consideration. Security remains the biggest challenge now.

The BRI is an economic cooperation initiative involving many countries. It is neither a geopolitical or geo-security strategy nor a so-called new Marshall Plan. It is not intended to compete against or confront any other country nor increase anyone's financial or security burden. China advocates and promotes the BRI but will not monopolize it or impose it upon others. Instead, we seek alignment with other countries' development strategies and embrace other connectivity and regional cooperation initiatives, believing that all countries will be better off through collaboration based on division of labor. China has always maintained that Afghanistan should be a haven for cooperation instead of a stage for gaming between major countries.

As we can not choose our neighbors, good-neighborliness and friendship are invaluable. The Chinese side sincerely hopes that Afghanistan and Pakistan will increase mutual trust and improve relations. The trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue successfully held not long ago expressed the desire to jointly advance the BRI, develop virtuous interactions between Afghanistan and Pakistan and promote connectivity between the two countries and others in the region. Afghanistan is located between the China-Central Asia-West Asia economic corridor and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). If relations with neighbors in the north and south are improved and trade is better facilitated, Afghanistan's position in the BRI will be further consolidated, with its geographic comparative advantage and pivotal position on the regional value chain more prominent.

Today it is the high-speed railway instead of the camels that lead the fast advancement of the BRI. With progresses made in various parallel projects, people's lives along the BRI are better with each passing day. In the words of Chairman Mao Zedong, 'ten thousand years are too long, seize the day, seize the hour.' It is hoped that together we will seize the current opportunity for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan and jointly advance the BRI so that the Afghan people will bathe in the sunshine of peace and development at an early date!

Liu Jinsong is the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Afghanistan

**Marginalization of women in
Afghan Peace process**

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

The progress of Afghan peace process in Qatar has caused some hopes and also some fear among women community in Afghanistan. The hopes raised because of a possible end to the long term conflicts in which the women were the most vulnerable group in the country. The fear or concerns are raised because Afghan women have the bitterest experience from the time when our country was ruled by Taliban Regime. In 1995, when Taliban took over the power, women were the first group who were put in cage depriving them from social and educational activities. Schools got to be merely for boys and no woman could step out except she was fully covered until ankle-length Hijab. They were not allowed to work and they were only like dolls behind walls. In fact, it was the worst situation for women that Taliban laws provide men with the chance to abuse them. In a metaphor one can say "they were only cards in the hands of male players" or they were the walking chocolates which could come out of the cover only when men allowed them.

Legally, there was no constitution in place to give women their fundamental rights, the right to liberty, equality and pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, it was happening during the Taliban period in Afghanistan. Liberty, equality and democracy did stop at that time and gave way to fundamentalist, sexist, prejudice and traditional absolutist. Dignity for women was defined: to stay hidden and protect themselves from strange gazes. The socio-political functions of women were cut to zero. Eventually, Taliban did not last for more than 6 years. Immediately after September 11 attack in 2001, the dark period came to the end. Now, after 18 years the history seems to be repeated, and so the women community is becoming more active to voice their concerns in Afghanistan. Though women have buried too many husbands and sons and brothers in past 18 years, they fear that a peace that empowers the Taliban may repeat a new war on women, and they want the negotiators not to forget them. "We don't want to be the victims of the peace process with the Taliban," quoted from Laila Haidari, a businesswoman who also works with drug addicts. Ms. Haidari's would not have been allowed to work under the Taliban regime, when she lived in exile in Iran. "But the Afghan government totally ignores Afghan women on the peace process," she said. Shukria "We don't want a peace that will make the situation worse for women's rights compared to now," quoted from Robina Hamdard, the head of the legal department for the Afghan Women's network.

Paykan, another woman member of Parliament, recalls the Taliban years "forced to be inside a dark cage when out of our

houses – I mean the burqa." she was forced from her university professorship and her daughter's school was closed, like all girls' schools under the Taliban. She opened a clandestine school at home, pretending to teach girls the Quran and dress-making, among the only subjects allowed for them. The only women allowed to work then were women doctors, and even they had to have a close male relative as a chaperone at work. "I have been an M.P. twice and a university professor, but no one has ever asked me about peace talks with the Taliban, or neither told me that my rights will be secure," she said. "We had 40 years of war and everybody is tired of fighting, but that peace should not be at the price of losing our rights and freedom as women." Raising concerns about the lack of transparent negotiations, doesn't make anyone war monger, continuing war or negotiations for exit are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, Afghan women do not want peace at any cost.

It is still early days in this stage of the peace process, and last week's talks in Doha, Qatar, did not include any Afghan government officials, men or women. American officials hope to persuade the Taliban at a later stage to sit down with Afghan officials, which they have so far refused to do, and issues like the Constitution, which guarantees women's rights, would be on the table then. However, some women in government expressed satisfaction that talks had at least begun. "Women need to raise their voices so they are not forgotten," said Habiba Sarabi, the deputy of the High Peace Council in Kabul, and one of 15 women on the 75-member council, which is appointed by the government. "Without women it will be a broken peace. But we are optimistic about the peace talks." However, the Afghan government has always assured women times and again that their rights will not be affected negatively after a peace deal with the Taliban but the reality is that the top decision makers are more interested in the political peace rather than social peace. According to experts, no peace process is perfect unless considering justice, inclusiveness and sustainability, for this reason the current peace process without participation of women is neither fair and nor inclusive. Women comprise half of the society, and more vulnerable by Taliban. Hence, their rights and freedom must not be dealt at any cost. Furthermore, the government is responsible to safeguard all democratic values, especially the freedom of expressions have been attained within last 18 years by sacrifices of numerous national security forces.

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