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Supporting Intra-Afghan Dialogue a "Shared Responsibility"

With President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani's state visit to Pakistan, the trust deficit between Afghanistan and Pakistan is likely to diminish. The Afghan-Pak officials have reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening friendly relations and crafting "a forward-looking vision of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations".

The two sides "agreed to open a new chapter of friendship and cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan, based on mutual trust and harmony for the benefit of the two peoples and countries and for advancing the cause of peace, stability and prosperity in the region," said a statement released by the Pakistani Prime Minister Office.

The two leaders also talked about Pakistan's role in peace process and Prime Minister Imran Khan believed that "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-owned" peace talks were the only viable option to end the conflict saying that Pakistan would support a result-oriented intra-Afghan dialogue.

President Ghani also met the heads of Pakistan's leading political parties, which include Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz president Shahbaz Sharif, Pakistan's Peoples Party chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Jamaat-i-Islami chief Sirajul Haq. Prior to Ghani's visit, an Afghan political delegation, including leader of Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, has been hosted by Pakistan to discuss the peace process. Hekmatyar called Pakistan's role very important in peace issue.

Generally speaking, Afghan officials believe that Pakistan is among the countries which can play the most essential role in Afghanistan's peace process. It has strong leverage on the Taliban and could nudge them to hold direct talks with the Ghani administration. With this in mind, building trust between the two countries is highly significant and would contribute much to the peace talks.

It is self-evident that a peaceful Afghanistan and Pakistan would contribute to regional peace and stability. If the two countries join forces to combat terrorism and put pressure on the Taliban group to resolve its tension through dialogue, the security situation will improve in the region.

It should be noted that the bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been fluctuating. The Afghan-Pak high-level officials exchanged trips frequently, which have been stepped up with Imran Khan administration, and the relations between the two sides were hoped to improve, but it went no more beyond words.

It will be very helpful if the two countries work on achieving a productive bilateral relations and a peaceful future for the region, especially as the talks between the Taliban and US have reached a critical stage. That is, the ongoing negotiation is likely to be more fruitful if Pakistan puts her weight behind it.

Although Pakistan released the Taliban's co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar from prison, demanded by the US, to catalyze the peace talks between the Taliban group and its US interlocutors, she has not put pressure on the group to hold talks with Ghani administration. Hence, the Kabul government expects Islamabad to pressure the Taliban to come to the table with the government's representatives.

Since the trust deficit and blame game were proved counter-productive, Kabul and Islamabad have to repair and improve their bilateral relationships based on mutual trust and mutual respect. If Pakistani officials believe that a peaceful Afghanistan will be in the interest of Pakistan - it certainly is - she has to play more active role in brokering intra-Afghan dialogue. Since Khan called for a "qualitative transformation" in relations and Ghani reaffirmed the need for "political alignment" between the two countries, it is hoped the two sides will take more practical steps.

Although Khan and Ghani also discussed about trade and economic issues, security and peace talks should be prioritized by the two sides. That is, if the conflict is ended in the ongoing peace talks, the trade will be also improved between the two countries.

It is clear that both Afghan and Pakistani nations were the main victims of terrorist attacks within the past years, Kabul and Islamabad have to step up their struggles to dismantle terrorist networks and push moderate groups to peace table. Afghanistan has intensified its offensive attacks against the Taliban to put military pressure on them to surrender to direct talks with the Kabul government. Pakistan also needs to pressure the Taliban to end the conflict.

Overall, a strong friendly relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan will contribute to regional security. Thus, combating terrorism and supporting peace talks are a "shared responsibility" and both sides need to play their role in an active and constructive way.

What was the goal of Afghan President Trip to Pakistan?

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

A few days after Afghan political leaders' trip to Pakistan that attended the Lahore peace conference, the Afghan president also visited to Pakistan. During his visit, he met with Prime Minister Imran Khan and Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and other top Pakistani officials. According to the formal reports, his trip aimed to discuss about several issues such as security, peace talks with the Taliban, regional connectivity, trade ties and economic investment. In his initial meeting with Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Ghani said that he visited Pakistan as per demand of almost 3,200 delegates of the grand peace council to improve relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In order to move forward, I do not want to dwell on the past but differentiate between good and bad strategies. Bad strategy is truly repeating the mistakes of the past," Ghani said.

However, there were different interpretations and questions about the real purpose of Mr. Ghani to Pakistan. Some of the analysts ascribed it to the long-lasting talks between the United States and the Taliban, and marginalization of government while the Afghan peace process has reached critical stages. The second interpretation, given that the presidential election is on the way, assessed his visit to Pakistan to win Pakistan's support for his election campaign, especially gaining support of Pakistan for the Taliban dominated area. This analysis immediately comes after their participation of Afghan political leaders in Lahore peace conference; they were also blamed for having close relations with Pakistan and may be they have bargained about support of Islamabad from certain candidate.

Based on the apparent outcome of the visit, it seems that the main goal of the president's trip to Pakistan was to improve economic relations such as improvement of trade and transit of goods between the two countries or through both countries. President Ghani is well aware of Pakistan's position in the region as well as about its overt and hidden role in Afghanistan. He also has clear views on general economic situation of the region and importance of Afghanistan's relations with its neighbors. After two day, he came back with outcomes that Pakistani officials have accepted to allow the transition of Afghan goods through Wagah-Etar to India. For several last years, Pakistan prevented Afghan goods to pass through this route to India and caused similar reaction from Afghanistan with blocking their lorry way to Central Asia.

Nevertheless, there is no optimism in materialization of the diplomatic pledges as the issues between the two countries are far deeper to be solved this easily. Pakistan is considered as an unambiguous supporter of terrorist group and the persistence of conflict in Afghanistan. Most explosions in Afghanistan are attributed to ISI of Pakistan. Everybody agrees that Pakistan decisively and

vigorously manage the conflict in Afghanistan with undertaking a lot expenses. However, there are different views about real motives of Pakistan from support of Terrorism group in Afghanistan. Some politicians attribute it to Dawran-Line while others ascribe it to other issues such as the completion between India and Pakistan as well as monopoly Pakistan on the water of Afghanistan.

The root cause of the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has long history, and deeper to be decided immediately. Thus, no deep changes have been occurred in the mentality of both countries so as to start deeply talk about the root issues. Many of the local analysts believe that Pakistan had not and will not easily change their main views about Afghanistan. Pakistan is blamed for having its strategic depth in Afghanistan which was initially raised in the 80s by General Aslam Baig, head of the Pakistani army headquarters. Indirectly pointing to this, Ghani implied that he is in Pakistan as the representative of the sovereign state of Afghanistan to seek a relation of equality and cooperation between two sovereign states. Hence most people think that it is unlikely that president and government of Afghanistan expect Pakistan to refrain and cease its intervention in Afghanistan.

Based on this complicated issues and distrusts, it is more logical to say that the main goal of the president to Pakistan can be economic and trade relation between the two countries. President Ghani wants to draw Islamabad's attention on importance of economic and transit relation between the two countries. It is said that Pakistan has nearly \$ 60 billion in debt. The Economic pressure and cut-off international assistance, including the United States, has increased in recent years due to its support from the terrorist groups. It seems that some Pakistani officials have also realized the issue but they have not taken any practical plan to improve its economic situation and provide resources to repay its huge debts. In this regard, Ghani said Afghanistan will be a partner of Pakistan in reduction of poverty, in overcoming institutional difficulties and connecting to a wider regional market

In fact, the Afghan president has a plan to help Pakistan's economy and trade. Some Parts of these plans can be implemented through good relations with Afghanistan. It is unlikely that President Ghani ask Pakistani authorities for political support from his team in the upcoming elections. But it's natural that he would mention the ideas and views of Afghan people and government as president of the country. As aforementioned, the outcome of President Trip to Islamabad is improvement in economic and trade relations between the two countries but it can be expanded to the political relations provided that no parts breach their commitments.

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As Populists Rise, Latin America's Economies Will Fall

By: Kenneth Rogoff

Though US President Donald Trump tends to grab most of the headlines, he is hardly a global exception. Populist autocrats have enjoyed a breathtaking rise to power in countries around the world, and nowhere is the trend more pronounced than in Latin America following the elections of Mexico's leftist president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), and Brazil's right-wing president, Jair Bolsonaro. Americans are right to complain about Trump's autocratic tendencies, but, as former Chilean Finance Minister Andrés Velasco would remind them, Trump is a mere apprentice compared to Latin America's populists.

To be sure, this does not mean that the Mexican and Brazilian economies will share the same fate as that of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and its current strongman, Nicolás Maduro. Chávez and Maduro managed to take Latin America's richest country - home to one-quarter of the world's proven oil reserves - and turn it into a basket case with inflation over 1,000,000% and a poverty rate over 90%. At least four million of Venezuela's 32 million people have fled the country, and forecasts suggest that number could double this year if Maduro remains in office. Venezuela owes its plight not so much to Trump-era economic sanctions as to its own populist leaders. The country has been declining for years, with most of the drop in its social and economic indicators far predating the Trump administration.

AMLO, like the charismatic Chávez two decades ago, was swept into office last year on the promise that he would improve the lives of ordinary people. One of his first official acts was to abort construction of a desperately needed new airport in Mexico City - even though the project was already 30% complete - on the grounds that airlines are for the rich. He then launched a new airport project in an impractical, mountainous location farther away, where it stands even less chance of being finished.

Though AMLO campaigned on a promise to end corruption, his government has eschewed competitive bidding for more than 70% of the contracts it has awarded. Like Trump, he dismisses media critics as "fake news," and warns reporters to "behave well," or "you know what will happen to you." Still, global investors are encouraged by the fact that AMLO has left the central bank alone, at least so far.

But even if the market isn't pricing in a massive "Venezuela risk" for Mexico, many of the left-leaning celebrities, writers, academics, and politicians who once praised Chávez to the skies have been notably reticent to cheerlead for AMLO. Having watched Trump turn the Venezuelan tragedy to his political advantage, outsiders who may be sympathetic to AMLO's socialist ambitions

are wise to be cautious. The one exception, of course, is the British Labour Party's far-left leader, Jeremy Corbyn, a longtime supporter of Venezuela's corrupt Chavist regime, who attended AMLO's inauguration in December 2018.

While AMLO poses a threat to Latin America's second-largest economy, Bolsonaro is jeopardizing its largest. As the sad old saying goes, Brazil, with its bountiful natural resources and talented people, "is the country of the future - and always will be." Its new president, a former army captain who wants to arm the citizenry and raze large swaths of the Amazon (which would significantly accelerate global warming), has become a lightning rod for student protests, environmentalists, and gay-rights activists. Anticipating massive protests, he recently canceled a trip to New York after receiving biting criticism from its mayor, Bill de Blasio.

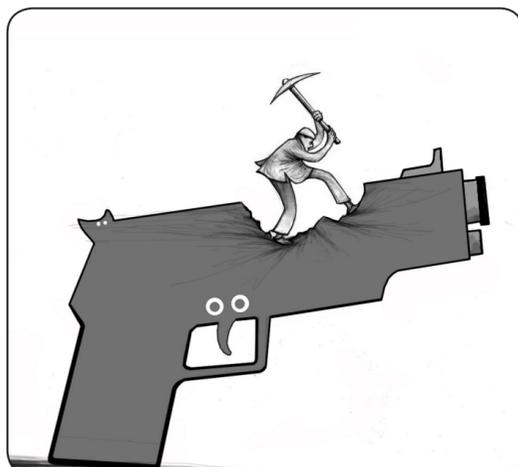
Things aren't much better at home. Bolsonaro's approval ratings have fallen by half since he took office at the beginning of the year. Early scandals make it far from clear that he will be able to clean up the endemic corruption that cripples Brazil's governance, much less demonstrate the coalition-building skills needed to implement his government's ambitious economic reform agenda.

Making matters worse, Latin America's third-largest economy, Argentina, is now facing the prospect of a return to corrupt, autocratic socialist rule after a presidential election this coming October. The country's current president, Mauricio Macri, came to office in 2015, having promised a return to economic sanity after former President Nestor Kirchner and his successor/wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, squandered the benefits of an agricultural export boom in the early 2000s. Yet Macri, who inherited an extremely difficult situation - not least a large budget deficit and limited borrowing capacity - has also made some critical mistakes.

To bring down inflation, which had probably reached around 30%, Macri's government sought to slow the rate of money growth and find alternative sources of finance. But officials chose to rely on short-term foreign-dollar borrowing (a classic mistake), and Argentina soon found itself unable to pay its debts. The exchange rate has now collapsed, inflation is up to over 50%, and the Kirchners' party is poised to regain power.

If all autocratic leaders were as competent as the late Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding father, recent political developments in the Americas might not be so worrisome. Sadly, this is not the case, particularly when it comes to the populists in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina. As matters stand, it looks like Latin America will remain the region of the future indefinitely.

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