

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



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How to Break the Peace Talks Stalemate

Third Intra-Afghan Peace talks will soon start in July 7-8 to be jointly hosted by Qatar and Germany in Doha of Qatar.

The US and Taliban have already met 7 times to negotiate how they may reach a peace deal on Afghanistan. However, the efforts of the peace talks had little achievements so far. The question that raises here is that, what is the main obstacle to the talks?

One assumption says that the real negotiations – Afghan-owned and Afghan-led – have not started, yet. The reason is not simply that the Taliban refuses to recognize the current leadership in Kabul as a legitimate government. Political analysts hold that expecting Taliban leaders suddenly to recognize a government they have fought for more than 18 years seems unrealistic. One of the main causes of the current stalemate is the inability of the Afghan political establishment to appoint a real negotiating team able to negotiate on behalf of the wider Afghan society. Further, the Presidential elections make the challenge even more complicated. Some political analysts think that the peace process is – unfortunately – becoming a victim of the upcoming elections. If the two cannot be separated in the minds of prominent politicians, the peace process between Afghans will surely fail.

What the solution is

Taliban cannot decide independently. If the countries that have influence over the Taliban put them under pressure, they will accept to talk with the Afghan government. On the other hand, the Afghan government shall form a negotiation team that represents all Afghans.

Second, inclusion of all stakeholders is impossible and they all must not insist on being represented. In fact, large team is useful if the purpose is only to conduct an initial dialogue. However, real negotiations visibly require a much smaller format.

As a result, specific pragmatism and discipline is required in order to start real preparatory talks. Without such mechanisms there will not be any real peace process. If not so, the international community would be more than fed up and start disengaging from the talks. As a sign of good will, stakeholders in Kabul should make their best efforts to agree on a small team of individuals – around 15-20 – to represent the Afghan society. For example, the team may include a meaningful number of women, and other minority groups who would ideally be appointed by their own organizations or groups.

Such a mechanism would ensure inclusiveness. Also, an international convener would be useful and should be appointed. The convener shall facilitate each meeting; assist in establishing the agenda and sum up conclusions and decisions and help overcoming the any likely breakdown obstacles.

How to address the distrusts between the stakeholders

It is clear that the real challenge lies within the Afghan society. Therefore, how will they agree on a small team to conduct meaningful negotiations? This is a very critical question. To address this issue, any such convener must be trusted and accepted by all parties and shall be familiar with the parties and the issues at hand. Khalilzad and Taliban have conducted seven peace talks and some Afghan politicians and Taliban have conducted two rounds of negotiations so far. However, these talks did not have much tangible achievements. The experience of other countries show that, it is necessary to establish a small team trusted by almost all stakeholders and supported by an impartial convener to facilitate and mediate during the talks.

Afghanistan's Economic Opportunities and Challenges

By: Hujjatullah Zia

Stepping up commercial exchanges and promoting trade and transit are highly essential for Afghanistan to tackle economic challenges. Afghanistan is seeking to enhance connectivity and link itself to regional states to lift people out of poverty and capitalize on the economic potentials for public betterment.

Afghanistan is a fast growing emerging market of strategic importance close to some of the largest and fastest-growing markets in the world, Afghanistan is strategically located between the energy-rich republics of Central Asia and the major seaports in South Asia providing a key transit route for central Asian oil and gas to markets in South Asia as well as overseas.

It has been stated that Afghanistan holds greater than one trillion dollars' worth of mineral resources, including gold, iron, copper, aluminum, gemstones, chromite, Sulphur, and talc.

In terms of agriculture, a source said that "about 85% - 90% population in rural areas is engaged in the agriculture sector which plays a vital role in the livelihood of 76% of the total population. It is responsible for about a quarter of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the recent years. Fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, olive, wheat, maize, sugar can, sugar beet, barely, dairy, honey, poultry, meat, milk, fish, sunflower, sesame, linseed, saffron, cumin and anise are the agricultural products of Afghanistan."

After 2015, Afghanistan's economic growth raised from one person to two percent and government and private sectors started investing in several economic sectors. For instance, Afghanistan was linked to Turkmenistan through Aqina port, it was also connected with Uzbekistan via railway and its route creating the way to trade with China. Afghanistan opened the Lapis Lazuli corridor, which facilitated trade and transit with Turkmenistan and some of the Asian and European countries. Moreover, Chabahar port increased Afghanistan's trade volume.

Last month, Afghanistan signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with Turkmenistan in a bid to expand rail network and increase energy import and attract investment. Afghan Acting Finance Minister Mohammad Humayon Qayyoomi is cited as saying that the MoUs are aimed at attracting investment for the Torghondai-Herat and Aqina-Andkhoy rail networks and increasing 110 megawatts of electricity import from Turkmenistan to Farah province via Herat's Shindand district.

Afghanistan opened air corridors with some countries, including India and China to support private enterprises and businessmen

to export Afghanistan's products, which include dried fruit, fresh fruit, saffron, and precious stones. Although the air corridors will not address the current huge economic constraints, they will mitigate the challenges to some extent. For example, the price of water melon dropped drastically despite the recent inauguration of air corridors, which discouraged a number of farmers.

In addition to exporting the country's agricultural products overseas, those products should also be exported across the country. That is, the government has to seek a balanced development through connecting far provinces to capital cities. A Chinese saying goes that if you want to be rich, you must build roads at first. It suggests that connectivity plays a key role in economic development. Roads, which include all sea, air, and land routes and airports, will link a country to the region and the world and a remote province to large cities. Thus, building roads and enhancing connectivity contribute much to a country's economy.

Illegal mining deals a strong blow to Afghanistan's economy. Militant fighters and strongmen and influential figures are said to be involved in illegal mining and smuggling Afghanistan's precious stones outside the country. Afghanistan has to bring the illegal miners to justice and prevent illegal mining immediately. Moreover, mineral resources have to be secured.

Generally speaking, although Afghanistan has a strategic geographical location with mineral resources and huge labor forces, economic constraint continues unabated. There are two main challenges before the economic development. First, militancy hampers economic activities and discourages businessmen and NGOs to invest in the country. With lack of investment and enterprises, unemployment will surge up. Second, corruption and the existence of corrupt figures within the government's body and illegal activities of strongmen also lead to poverty. Corrupt figures must be prosecuted and fined seriously.

To enhance the economy and lift citizens out of poverty, the government has to focus on both facilitating trade and campaigning against any factors which hamper economic development. The government has to promote connectivity and seek balanced development. That is, a platform for economic activities should be provided for all citizens and provinces so that all could participate and benefit. Meanwhile, the government should upgrade the country's agriculture.

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The Lessons of the EU Leadership Fight

By: Daniela Schwarzer

The haggling may have been unedifying, but the candidates nominated by the European Council to lead the European Union's governing institutions are undoubtedly impressive. If approved by the European Parliament, German Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel will become president of the European Commission and Council, respectively, and Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell will serve as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Then, in November, Christine Lagarde is set to succeed Mario Draghi as president of the European Central Bank.

The good news is that each of these candidates would strengthen the EU at a time of global insecurity. The bad news is that the EU itself will continue to face significant challenges from within. The struggle to fill the top leadership positions resulted in the elimination of the Spitzenkandidaten process – whereby the largest party grouping in the European Parliament selects the Commission president – and the return of backroom deal-making, which many see as undemocratic. The justification for that change needs to be explained, or the EU's credibility may suffer. After all, the Spitzenkandidaten process was introduced in 2014 to counter the perception that the EU suffers from a democratic deficit.

The leadership struggle has also intensified a clash of perspectives within – and about – the EU's sources of legitimacy. Whereas member states with a strong parliamentary culture think the top personnel should be selected based on the results of May's European Parliament election, others (like France) consider executive experience far more important than the link to those results. It is naturally a long process to devise a broadly accepted system for selecting EU leaders. Despite this year's setback, the principle of the Spitzenkandidaten system should be preserved and combined in the next elections, with additional transnational lists of candidates backed by stronger trans-European party structures. Beyond that, the EU also needs to strengthen the role of the European Parliament.

A number of MEPs are deeply frustrated by the Council's failure to nominate any of the Spitzenkandidaten on offer, and they could make their sense of betrayal known by voting against von der Leyen's appointment. Should her candidacy be rejected, months of institutional gridlock would likely follow. As a show of good faith, von der Leyen should announce early that she will work toward empowering MEPs de facto to initiate legislation. With an inter-institutional agreement with the European Commission, such a change would not require an amendment to any founding treaties. Moreover, if confirmed, von der Leyen and the new European Parliament president, David Maria Sassoli of Italy's Democratic Party, should establish a working relationship as close as that of their respective predecessors, Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz. But, given the new composition of the European Parliament, they should strongly involve the chairs of all parliamentary groups that wish to work toward a stronger Europe.

The fact that MEPs elected Sassoli instead of the Council's own candidate, former Bulgarian Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev, suggests that the European Parliament election in May has led to a renewed desire for institution-

al self-assertion. And yet the election left the body more fragmented than ever. The number of seats held in the 751-member parliament by the two main party groups, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), fell from 404 to 336, owing to gains by the Greens, right-wing nationalists, and liberal centrists.

The fall of Europe's grand coalitions and the emergence of new, smaller parties will impede decision-making, as already demonstrated by the Parliament's failure to agree on its own Spitzenkandidaten. Divisions among the parliamentary groups are not just political, but also geographic. The EPP has almost no MEPs from France or Italy, and large delegations from Germany and Northern Europe. The S&D draws far more support from the Iberian Peninsula and Italy, with relatively few MEPs from the Visegrad group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) or France.

The increased fragmentation in the European Parliament goes hand in hand with changing relationships between EU member states. France and Germany's days of working hand in glove are gone; and even if they do come together on a particular issue, blocking minorities can stand in their way at the Council. The latest round of EU leadership negotiations shows just how hard it has become to reach a majority, let alone unanimity. On the contrary, national governments fight increasingly recklessly for their interests. As a result, individual member states will face a strong temptation to pursue specific objectives in smaller, likeminded groups. The challenge, then, is to ensure that such initiatives follow official EU processes, rather than being decided through intergovernmental backroom deals.

The strong turnout in the European Parliament election indicates that the EU has not lost public support. The political center was strengthened at a time when Euroskeptic and nationalist parties are on the rise in member states. Overall, public trust in the EU is as high as it was in the 1980s, when European integration served as a defense against the Soviet Union. For most Europeans, being a part of the EU still means something.

But the outcome of the election also signaled a desire for change. Many citizens abandoned traditional parties, and a significant share of them did so out of fear. Like politicians at the national level, the EU's new leaders will have to answer to voters who harbor deep uncertainties about their and their children's future. Europeans are understandably anxious about great-power competition, new security threats, and a technological revolution that threatens to upend entire economic systems and societies.

The EU, working with member-state governments, will need to respond to these challenges with ambition and resolve. The European Council has already devised a strategic agenda for 2019-2024, and now the ball is in the European Parliament's court. Since the elections in May, MEPs from the four moderate party groups have been negotiating a shared program of policy priorities. In other words, they are putting substance over personnel; regardless of who fills the top leadership positions, the European Parliament will already have a shared platform in place. Despite the circumvention of the Spitzenkandidaten process, this effort, like the slate of promising candidates selected by the Council, suggests that the EU is slowly and steadily maturing.

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