

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

Daily Outlook

AFGHANISTAN

The Leading Independent Newspaper

July 26, 2018

Sports: A strategic Opportunity for Nation Building in Afghanistan

Afghanistan National Taekwondo Team won two Gold Medals in Korea Open Int'l Taekwondo Championships. Farzad Mansuri won the first gold medal and Nesar Ahmad abdulrahizay won the second gold medal for Afghanistan.

This victory brought much awaited happiness, as always our champions put a smile on the lips of the sad people of the country stuck in prolonged conflict, admitting the quote of King of Bhutan who said that "gross national happiness is more important than gross national product and therefore happiness takes precedence over economic prosperity in worst of financial crises".

Nation building is a must for Afghanistan. Nation-building is constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state. Nation-building aims at the unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. According to Harris Mylonas, "Legitimate authority in modern national states is connected to popular rule, to majorities. Nation-building is the process through which these majorities are constructed."

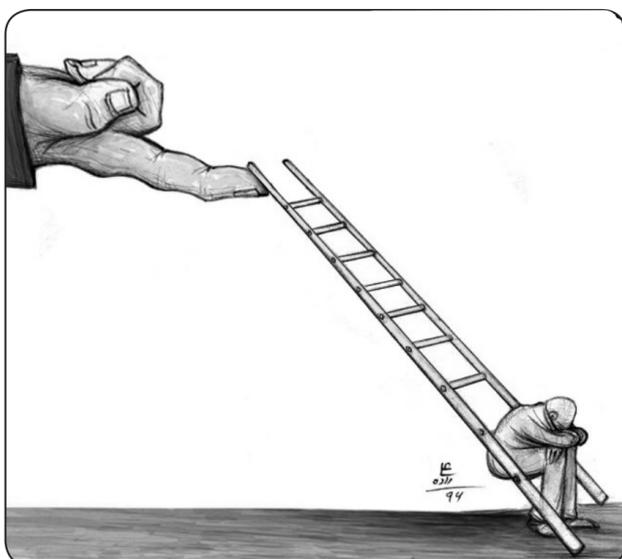
Afghanistan suffers severely from the lack of national identity that all the ethnic groups accept it based on a consensus. Afghanistan nation's builders have not been able to take initiatives to develop the national community through government programs, including national content mass schooling. The main ingredients of nation building, namely using of propaganda or major infrastructure development to foster social harmony and equal economic growth have nearly been absent in the initiatives on this matter so far. According to Columbia University political scientist Andreas Wimmer, three factors tend to determine the success of nation-building over the long-run: "the early development of civil-society organizations, the rise of a state capable of providing public goods evenly across a territory, and the emergence of a shared medium of communication."

Sports as the "shared medium of communication"

Research findings show that international sports events, like the FIFA World Cup, regional and national contests, have the ability to bring together people from neighboring and beyond neighboring countries in a spirit of fun, togetherness and, ultimately, peace. Another, study on the role of sport in fostering social integration among different ethnic groups in South African schools showed that several factors contributed to the use of sport being successful in bringing about exchange and building relationships between different groups, including sport's non-verbal means of communication; sport as a means to engage in collective experience and establish direct physical contact; and sport's ability to transcend class divisions.

As such, sports moments can transform broader society for the better. It closes the gap between different walks of the society and helps them focus on one shared goal. For instance, Nilson Mandela's skillful promotion of the rugby team as a vehicle for racial healing is a remarkable instance of the symbolic power sports can hold to move people together for the common good. Building on such success stories and good lessons, Afghanistan can take the necessary measures and initiatives to have a holistic and inclusive approach to sport as a strategic means of nation building in the country. Sports experts hold that, Afghan government in some cases has not acted in an integrated manner to support sport national teams. Such approaches not only prevent sport to play a critical role in nation building in the country, but would lead to more divisions among the ethnic groups of Afghanistan. For example, the way the Afghan government has supported the cricket and soccer teams have totally been different. The different supporting mechanisms of sports teams can further divide the ethnic divides our war torn country. Therefore, politicians should not use sport for their political objectives because it only exacerbates ethnic tensions in the country.

In a nutshell, sports is one of the best tools for fostering social integration among different ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic society and brings about exchange and building relationships between different groups and can transcend ethnic divisions of the society. It also can positively contribute to strengthening national pride and forming a cohesive national identity. Considering such immense impacts of sport on nation building, it is vital for the Afghan government not only shall provide a balanced support to national sport teams but also ensure balanced participation as well.



Why is the Afghan Government Afraid of the US Direct Talks with the Taliban Group?

By Hamidullah Bamik

Since the beginning of the Afghan peace process, the Taliban group have always refused to negotiate directly with the Afghan government but have called for direct talks with Washington. In the month of Ramadan this year (2018), Ashraf Ghani, the President of Afghanistan, announced a seven-day ceasefire, hoping to encourage the Taliban to come to the negotiating table. In return, the Taliban announced only three days of Eid as a ceasefire, and after the end of the Eid Ceasefire, they continued their suicide bombing and attacks on the Afghan military bases. The government of Afghanistan after the seven-day ceasefire expired, extended the ceasefire unilaterally for another 10 days, but the Taliban responded to the Afghan government's ceasefire with severe onslaughts on the Afghan military citadels. Finally, Ashraf Ghani ended the one-sided ceasefire and ordered the security forces to step up their military operations against the Taliban.

Unfortunately, these ceasefires did not change the stance of the Taliban - not to negotiate directly with Kabul. When Kabul's actions from pleading Taliban to announcing subsequent ceasefire for bringing them to the peace talks process did not get anywhere, the Trump administration finally urged its diplomats to seek direct talks with the Taliban, reflecting a dramatic change in American policy - not to communicate directly with the Taliban - against war in Afghanistan. But the silence of the Afghan government in this regard is indicative of fearsome dreams of Kabul from Washington's direct talks with the Taliban group.

On the first days of his reign, President Trump held a press conference to announce what was considered a major change in US policy towards the Afghan government - although the new American policy was really a bold, new policy, it was not a strategy. Political analysts argue that President Trump's office is quietly looking for significant changes in its approach, leading senior US diplomats to direct talks with the Taliban.

The US new approach to the peace process led by the Afghan government is brought up at a time that the Taliban views the Afghan government as an illegitimate and the US handpicked government and has long argued that it only negotiates with the United States that overthrew the Taliban regime in 2001. While the United States constantly insisted that the Taliban should talk directly with Kabul. A recent report by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), points to another factor that could persuade Washington to seek direct talks with the Taliban. According to the report, the Afghan government has control or influence over only 229 districts from 407 districts, and the Taliban controls 59 districts and in 119 other districts, there are battles between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgents. Meanwhile, the United Nations said that in the first six months of this year, civilian casualties reached 1692, which represents the highest casualties since the start of the United Nations investigations in 2009 in Afghanistan. It is argued that the above factors, eventually, led the US to begin direct talks with the Taliban groups.

On Sunday last week when the New York Times reported that US officials are looking for direct talks with the Afghan Taliban insurgents because peace talks led by Afghans will get nowhere, it was

a kind of heart attack for the Afghan government. That is why Kabul did not take a vivid stance about the new approach of the US against the peace talks with the Taliban yet. Now that Washington wants to negotiate directly with the Taliban - why is the Afghan government afraid of the US direct talks with the Taliban?

Kabul's fear from Washington's direct talks with the Taliban group is derived from several issues. First, the political legitimacy of the Afghan government - that is, if the Afghan government is sidelined in peace talks with the Taliban, it echoes that the Afghan government is a puppet state of the United States and it does not have full authority in large-scale political decision-making. Second, the Afghan government fears that it may not be able to bring up all its demands in peace talks with the Taliban if the US leads the negotiations.

Third, apart from the aforementioned reasons, political experts believe that the Afghan government leaders want to campaign for themselves for the next presidential election via winning the Afghan peace process. For this reason, the Afghan government persistently insists on the direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban group. Because if Ashraf succeeds in bringing the Taliban group to the negotiating table, this can be a great success during his rule, and the president will both be adored inside, and outside Afghanistan. Moreover, he will be marked the hero of the 17-year-old Afghan war with the Taliban if he can end it.

The Afghan government's unilateral ceasefire has raised Ashraf Ghani's popularity so much that even Harvard's professor Zarfif Aminyar penned an article about him entitled "Could Ashraf Ghani Become the Gandhi of Afghanistan?" Mr. Aminyar holds that Ghani is a reformist leader, whom the US government strongly needed as a partner over the years of unforeseeable Karzai's regime. If the United States wants to restore peace and prosperity in Afghanistan, Dr. Ghani is undoubtedly one of the best options for leading Afghanistan. President Ghani is full of love and passion to end the war and conflict in Afghanistan, but the United States seems to be suspicious. When the prospective conqueror of the Afghan war is praised in such manner, then it is obvious that the US direct talks with the Taliban group can overturn and cloud these sweet words.

Last but not the least, every smart politician knows that the Afghan conflict is a multidimensional conflict that involves Afghan, regional and global actors. Given its inherent complexity, none of the key actors have the key to solving the crisis in Afghanistan. Therefore, the peace process in Afghanistan will be challenging and require time. The only alternative to this continuing bleeding and instability is that the parties involved in the Afghan war should provide a path to the peace process. Therefore, if the leaders of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan have a dream that they will win the Afghan battlefield through holding direct talks with the Taliban and can manipulate this victory in the future presidential elections in their favor, is a false and short-sighted calculation.

Hamidullah Bamik is a Fulbright Scholar and Graduate Student in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri-Columbia, USA E-mail: hamidullahbamik@mail.missouri.edu

Europe for Itself

By Mark Leonard

Donald Trump is the first US president to think that the US-led world order is undermining US interests. Though the current order obviously benefits the United States, Trump is convinced that it benefits China even more. Fearing China's ascendance as another pole of global power, Trump has launched a project of creative destruction to destroy the old order and establish a new one that is more favorable for the US.

Trump wants to pursue this objective by engaging with countries bilaterally, thereby always negotiating from a position of strength. He has shown particular disdain for traditional US allies, whom he accuses of free riding, while also standing in the way of his demolition derby. Likewise, Trump cannot stand multilateral organizations that strengthen smaller and weaker countries vis-à-vis the US. Given his "America First" strategy, Trump has spent his presidency undermining institutions such as the World Trade Organization, and abandoning multilateral agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Iran nuclear deal, and the Paris climate accord. And because Trump has been able to pick new fights so fast, other countries have struggled to keep up, let alone form effective alliances against him.

In recent weeks, Trump has set his sights squarely on the European Union. As Ivan Krastev of the Institute for Human Sciences recently observed, the EU now faces the possibility of becoming "the guardian of a status quo that has ceased to exist." As a committed Atlanticist and multilateralist, it pains me to admit that he is right. The time has come for Europe to redefine its interests, and to develop a new strategy for defending them.

First and foremost, Europeans will have to start thinking for themselves, rather than deferring to the US foreign-policy establishment. The EU clearly has an interest in preserving the rules-based order that Trump hopes to tear down, and its interests with respect to the Middle East - particularly Turkey - and even Russia have increasingly diverged from those of the US. Europeans should of course try to work with the US whenever possible; but not if it means subordinating their own interests.

Europeans must also start investing in military and economic autonomy - not to break away from the US, but to hedge against America's abandonment of its commitments. Fortunately, there is already a healthy debate in European capitals about increasing national defense spending to 2% of GDP; and both the EU Permanent Structured Cooperation framework (PESCO) and French President Emmanuel Macron's new European Intervention Initiative (EII) represent steps in the right direction. The question now is whether France's Force de Frappe (military and nuclear strike force) can be extended to provide a credible deterrent for the rest of the EU.

On the economic front, Europe is facing a dilemma as it weighs its values against its business interests. Former Belgian Foreign Minister Mark Eyskens once described Europe as "an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm." But Europe is now in dan-

ger of becoming an economic dwarf, too. The fact that the US can threaten secondary sanctions on European companies for doing business with Iran is deeply worrying. Though the EU is standing up for international law, it remains captive to the tyranny of the dollar system.

Looking ahead, the EU needs to gain more leverage for dealing with other great powers such as China and the US. If Trump wants to make the transatlantic relationship more transactional, then the EU needs to be ready to trade across different policy areas to make deals. Consider the US Department of Defense's recent request that the United Kingdom send more troops in Afghanistan. If the EU were taking a muscular approach, it would deny any reinforcements until the US drops its threats of secondary sanctions on European companies.

Moreover, Europe needs to develop a strategy for political outreach to others. The G7 is supposed to be the cockpit of the West, but at its recent summit in Quebec, it seemed to be short-circuiting. So shocking was Trump's behavior that some senior European officials now wonder if US allies should form an independent middle-power alliance, lest they be crushed between the rocks of a rising China and a declining America. In an increasingly deal-based world, a new G6 might offer a defense of the rules-based system. Still, one wonders if the EU is capable of putting up a united front. With the bloc splintering into distinct political tribes, it is becoming easier for other powers to pursue a divide-and-conquer strategy. This has long been Russia's strategy, and it is now being adopted by China and the US, too. For example, in 2016, southern and eastern EU member states that rely on Chinese investment managed to water down a joint EU statement on China's territorial encroachments in the South China Sea.

Similarly, Trump routinely reaches out to eastern and southern EU member states in order to sow divisions within the bloc. For example, US Department of State officials reportedly made it clear to Romania that the US would not press it on rule-of-law violations if it breaks ranks with the EU and moves its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. With US-EU relations already fraught, the Trump administration will be all the more tempted to engage in such tactics. It is unclear how the EU should respond. It could impose heavier costs on countries that break ranks on foreign policy, or it could invest more in security so that even countries on the periphery feel as though they have something to lose by undermining EU cohesion. Alternatively, the EU itself could strike a deal with member states, whereby it would go easy on internal political matters in exchange for foreign-policy cooperation.

Whatever is decided, the EU urgently needs to chart a new course. Rather than being perpetually surprised and outraged by Trump's affronts, Europeans must develop their own foreign policy with which to confront his behavior.

Mark Leonard is Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Moh. Reza Huwaida
Vice Chairman / Senior Editor: Moh. Sakhi Rezaie
Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com
Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019
www.outlookafghanistan.net

Daily Outlook
AFGHANISTAN
The Leading Independent Newspaper

افغانستان
The Daily Afghanistan Ma

The views and opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not reflect the views or opinions of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan.