

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

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How to Address Mistrust to Afghan Electoral Commissions

The democratic transition that started in Afghanistan in 2001 has made significant progress. Arguably, a major landmark in the Afghan democratic experiment was the successful transfer in 2014.

Nonetheless, Afghanistan has its own share of the tensions and conflicts associated with elections. For example, Disputes over the results of the 2014 Presidential elections and 2018 parliamentary elections signaled that some aspects of Afghan electoral system are susceptible to contestation. Indeed, the Afghan nascent democracy still exhibits certain tendencies that suggest a need for improvement.

Pre-election worry

The upcoming presidential elections, scheduled for 20 July, will be the fourth since Afghanistan's transition from Taliban rule in 2001. A total of 18 persons have been verified by AIEC in running for the presidency. These candidates have purposed formation of a takeover government to replace the Afghan National Unity government. In addition, the country is threatened by 20 terrorist groups and is witnessing every now and then deadly terrorist attacks in the big cities including the Kabul. The country also has witnessed several troubling events and trends, including violent speeches by candidates and their supporters, rising levels of citizen dissatisfaction and frustration, and the demonstrable predisposition of certain youth groups to resort to violence. All these developments have far-reaching consequences for the course and outcome of the upcoming presidential elections.

By all accounts, the elections will be keenly contested. Also, no sitting Afghan president has lost an election. Considering past and present trends, there are concerns in some circles that the contest between Ghani and other Main candidates may not produce a clear winner in the first round of the elections. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the elections will take a surprising twist. All these trends have contributed toward heightening pre-election anxiety in Afghanistan.

Disappointment in the NUG

The outcomes of the 2014 presidential elections, including the legal battle over the results, raised the stakes for future elections in Afghan. Not unexpectedly, based on the lessons of the 2014 elections, politicians and their supporters are strategizing and working with some novel scenarios in the current electoral environment.

In Afghanistan, more than in previous elections, there are deep concerns about issues of governance, service delivery, accountability and peace process. A majority of Afghans are also worried about the unimpressive performance of the national economy, unemployment and increasing internal insecurity including rise of ISIS and its growing presence in different parts of the country including in the North of Afghanistan. The government is not seen as having done well in the management of the economy, in spite of the country's initiation of road and air corridors and Chabahar port, TAPI, BRI and lapis lazuli Corridor. Furtehr, the value of afghani has decreased nearly 50 percent within the last four years.

Also, there is a perception of a high incidence of corruption. The scandals surrounding governmental projects in the military and public service institutions exemplify this unwholesome trend.

Mistrust of the Electoral Commissions

EC has a mandate to conduct free and fair elections in Afghanistan. Citizens' perception of the EC as an objective and independent body seems to be eroding fast. Its weak performance to announce the parliamentary elections results has further disappointed the citizens. The AIEC's decisions have generated continuing organized reactions by disqualified candidates, and their supporters.

Afghan presidential elections is one of the crucial political events that the AIEC must ensure it will be conducted as fair and free in July 20. It is important for the Afghan government and election observers and stakeholders in the national and international community to be aware of and address the risk factors including maintaining security of the voting centers, sufficient provision of the ballots, timely opening of the voting centers, timely announcement of the results, and adequate addressing of the grievances. The success of the June elections is the responsibility of all the stakeholders especially the candidates, parties, civil society groups, police and security and development partners. Thus, there should be regular interactions among these stakeholders to enable periodic analysis of the electoral environment as well as prompt attention to issues that might have far-reaching adverse consequences for the upcoming Afghanistan presidential elections.

**Staying Focused and Taking Solid Actions For a Brighter Future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

By: Xi Jinping

Your Excellency President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, Dear Colleagues, It gives me great pleasure to attend the 19th meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of State in the beautiful city of Bishkek. Let me begin by thanking our host Kyrgyzstan for the great preparation and thoughtful arrangements for this event. China highly commends the tremendous efforts Kyrgyzstan has made to promote the development of the SCO since taking over the SCO presidency last June.

The SCO has maintained a sound momentum of development since the Qingdao Summit. The propositions on development, security, cooperation, civilization and global governance put forth by China at the Qingdao Summit were warmly received by all sides and added to the SCO's vision on cooperation. Guided by the Shanghai Spirit and the consensus of the leaders, SCO members have deepened cooperation in various fields and scored new achievements in moving the organization forward from a new starting point.

Despite immense changes in the international situation, peace, development and win-win cooperation remain the irreversible trend of our times. As a line in the Chinese classics goes, "Those who farm observe the shift of seasons, those who govern follow the change of the world." We need to keep a profound understanding of the overriding trend toward multi-polarity and economic globalization, draw inspiration from the wisdom of the Shanghai Spirit, and seek strength from solidarity and cooperation so as to jointly build a closer SCO community with a shared future.

First, we must make the SCO an example of solidarity and mutual trust. The SCO has maintained a strong momentum of development and become an important and constructive force for regional security, stability and prosperity. The ultimate reason for its success lies in the Shanghai Spirit, which calls for continued enhancement of solidarity and mutual trust. We have on our shoulders the expectations of the people of SCO countries and we must think and work in one mind to build the momentum we need to achieve our common goal.

The Shanghai Spirit embodies the core values and common vision of the SCO. It has to be upheld and kept up-to-date in light of the evolving circumstances and the development of the organization. We must abide by the purposes and principles established by the SCO Charter and the Treaty on Long-term Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation, strengthen political mutual trust, give each other greater support, expand convergence of interests and create more favorable conditions to deepen bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

Second, we must make the SCO an example of common security. Over the years, guided by the vision of common security and a shared future, SCO members have carried out practical and highly efficient cooperation on the security front and ensured the overall security and stability of the region. Facing grave challenges from terrorism, extremism and other threats, we must all act together and with forceful measures to tackle our common challenges.

We must pursue common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security. We must further improve the legal foundation for security cooperation. We must step up information sharing, joint operations and cyber law enforcement to strengthen the SCO's ability to respond to complex situations. We must take a multi-pronged approach against terrorism, separatism and extremism, and fend off the resurgence of extremist and terrorist forces. As the SCO Convention on Countering Extremism enters into effect, we must further strengthen cooperation on deradicalization to curb the spread of extremist ideology. Afghanistan is neighbor to many SCO member countries and an important observer state of the organization. We have been following the developments in Afghanistan closely. Our thoughts are with the Afghan people who are suffering from war and chaos. The SCO firmly supports the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process. We will make full use of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, step up cooperation in various fields and play a constructive role in the early realization of peace, reconciliation, stability and development in Afghanistan. China will continue to do what it can to help with Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction.

Third, we must make the SCO an example of mutually beneficial cooperation. SCO countries enjoy a sound momentum of development on the whole, as evidenced by the steady increase of the region's share in the world economy and its contribution to global growth. Our region's incomparable advantages like rich natural endowment, a huge market, and strong scientific and technological innovation capability provide us with abundant driving force for devel-

opment and bright prospects for cooperation. We need to seize the momentum and strive for new progress in the integrated development of the region.

We must uphold the multilateral trading system, build an open world economy, work toward more institutional arrangements on trade and investment liberalization and facilitation, and make full use of such cooperation and sharing platforms as the China International Import Expo to pursue greater economic openness, exchange and integration in our region. It is important that we earnestly deliver on the outcomes of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) and give full play to the unique strengths of countries in the region to better synergize the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the development strategies of countries in the region as well as regional cooperation initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). We need to leverage the Joint Commission on Facilitation of International Road Transport and other relevant mechanisms to make railways, highways, and oil and gas pipelines more interconnected, so as to achieve all-round connectivity.

We need to pursue innovation-driven development and foster new areas of cooperation such as digital economy, e-commerce, artificial intelligence and big data. China will be happy to set up an SCO demonstration base in Shaanxi Province for exchange and training on agricultural technologies to strengthen cooperation on modern agriculture with other countries in the region.

Fourth, we must make the SCO an example of inclusiveness and mutual learning. Our region is home to many ancient civilizations where different nations, cultures and religions have coexisted and drawn strength from each other. We need to celebrate the diversity of civilizations as a precious asset of our region, and say no to the idea of clash of civilizations. We need to uphold openness, inclusiveness and mutual learning, with a view to creating durable impetus for the lasting friendship between our peoples and the common development of our countries.

We need to deepen our cooperation in culture, education, tourism, sports and media, and strengthen exchanges between women, the youth and other communities to ensure greater involvement of and greater benefit for our people. Last month, an International Medical Innovation and Cooperation Forum was successfully held in Fangchenggang in Guangxi Province of China, where participants from medical institutions and businesses of SCO countries reached extensive common ground on cooperation. We also support the initiative to set up an International Medical Opening-up Pilot Zone (China) in Fangchenggang to further promote medical innovation and cooperation within the SCO. China will be happy to host an SCO forum on traditional medicine in due time to help improve public health and medical services through traditional medicine. Since last year, Chelyabinsk of Russia and Chongqing of China have successfully held the first and second SCO Heads of Region Meetings. We need to earnestly implement the documents on sub-national cooperation to be approved by this summit and mobilize local governments and private actors to make sub-national cooperation a new highlight in our people-to-people cooperation. Colleagues,

In the face of increasing global challenges, it is imperative that we live up to our international responsibilities, stay committed to the vision of global governance based on extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, and step up coordination and collaboration. It is imperative that we uphold the international system with the United Nations at its core, promote multilateralism and free trade and make the international order more just and equitable. The SCO needs to improve its network of partnerships, encourage broader participation in cooperation by observer states and dialogue partners, strengthen exchanges with the UN and other international and regional organizations, play a more active role in international and regional affairs, and jointly contribute to durable peace and common prosperity of the world.

Colleagues,

China extends congratulations to Kyrgyzstan for successfully hosting this summit upon wrapping up its SCO presidency, and to President Vladimir Putin for taking over the chairmanship of the SCO Council of Heads of State. China will work with all other SCO members to provide Russia with full support in its work.

As a Kyrgyz saying goes, "From solidarity comes our strength for survival." Let us act in the Shanghai Spirit, stay focused and take solid actions for an even brighter future of the SCO.

Thank you.

Xi Jinping is the President of the People's Republic of China At the 19th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Bishkek, 14 June 2019

Regional Stakeholders Need to Take Practical Steps toward Peace Process

By: Hujjatullah Zia

The Afghan government has been calling on regional stakeholders and neighboring countries to play more active and constructive role in intra-Afghan dialogue. Recently, Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani, who spoke at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's summit in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, called "regional consensus" significant for peace talks.

"We consider the US commitment to a political solution to be credible and are coordinating to build the necessary international consensus on peace. But without a regional consensus on peace and addressing Taliban's interdependencies with their supporters, breakthroughs will take time," President Ghani is cited as saying at the SCO summit.

Afghan officials believe that regional consensus is a prerequisite for making a breakthrough in peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government and its international allies. Neighboring countries, mainly Pakistan, and regional stakeholders are most likely to be able to push the Taliban to peace table with the Kabul government.

According to officials, Islamabad has strong leverage on the Taliban and called the Pakistani government to cooperate Afghanistan in peace talks. Moreover, President Ghani is going to pay a state visit to Pakistani in the near future to reinforce the diplomatic ties between Kabul and Islamabad and discuss the security issue and peace process with the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Alice Wells, the US State Department Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Principal Deputy Assistant, said, "We recognize that durable peace in Afghanistan requires consultation with Pakistan and Pakistan is encouraging the Taliban to negotiate. But our relationship with Pakistan is broader than just Afghanistan. We are asking Islamabad to take sustained and irreversible actions against terrorists who threaten stability in the subcontinent".

The Afghan government called on the Taliban to agree to power sharing and participate in the upcoming presidential election. However, despite the approach of the election, the Taliban have not signaled for participation or coming to the table with the Afghan government. The Taliban's interlocutors, US delegates, are seeking to break the stalemate and facilitate an intra-Afghan dialogue. The Afghan government convened Loya Jirga, Grand Assembly, in late April with the hope that the Taliban would admit the call of people's representatives

in Loya Jirga for holding talks and declaring ceasefire. Nonetheless, the Jirga was proved abortive since the Taliban turned a deaf ear to the public call for peace and intra-Afghan dialogue. Subsequently, the Afghan government intensified its offensive attacks against the Taliban, who sustain heavy casualties on day-to-day basis.

The public suggest that if the Taliban hold out against direct talks with the government, military force should be used against them.

A research done by Dr. Omar Sadr, a senior researcher at the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, a Kabul-based think tank, said that "peace cannot be concluded through a bilateral peace accord between the government and the Taliban.... Instead what is needed is a broad based 'national peace compact'". It also cited President Ghani's peace offer, which included a political framework consisting of a ceasefire and transformation of insurgents into a political party, and a legal framework consisting of lifting the sanctions and review of the current constitution.

It is believed that the Taliban are one of the most radical groups since they continue fighting despite the repeated peace offers from the Afghan government and ordinary people. Perhaps, they are not able to reconcile their fundamental ideology with the Afghan democratic principles, including human rights and women's rights and freedoms. Thus, they persist for the establishment of an "Islamic Emirate".

Moreover, it is widely believed that the Taliban are a pawn in a political game with a large number of mercenary fighters, who are involved in illegal profit-making activities. If peace talks reach an agreement, the Taliban militants will be restricted within the frame of law, in turn, they would not be able to make profit by illegal activities. Hence, they seek not to make ceasefire.

Afghans are better negotiators and intra-Afghan dialogue is likely to yield a positive result sooner. So, the support and cooperation of regional and global actors are crucial in facilitating intra-Afghan talks.

Now if regional stakeholders are concerned about Afghanistan's security issue and seek to support the Afghan peace process, they have to take more practical steps. That is, it is time for regional actors to stop void promises and aimless talks and use their leverage and power to end the conflict.

Hujjatullah Zia is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan and freelance writer based in Kabul. He can be reached at zia_hujjat@yahoo.com

Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Moh. Reza Huwaida

Vice Chairman / Exec. Editor: Moh. Sakhi Rezaie

Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019

www.outlookafghanistan.net

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