

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

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Ifs and Buts of Peace Talks

Regional stakeholders and Afghanistan's neighboring countries have engaged in peace process more seriously so as to break the stalemate of peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Recently, Pakistan hosted a meeting, in which a number of Afghan political figures, including the leader of Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) Gulbuddin Hekmatyar participated. Hekmatyar is cited as saying, "Pakistan is a very important country and Islamabad could play a key role in bringing peace in Afghanistan and now they are doing it."

The relations between Kabul and Islamabad is beginning to thaw as Imran Khan administration has vowed to support the peace process.

Moreover, reports say that a Taliban delegation had visited Beijing to hold talks with Chinese officials as part of peace process ahead of the seventh round of talks with the US in Qatar.

The seventh round of talks, slated for June 29, will carry great significance as regional states have stepped up their struggles for the peace process urging the Taliban to hold direct talks with the Afghan government.

The Taliban still deems the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan as a progress in peace process. "A timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces is the key to progress in the talks," said a former Taliban member Mawlawi Qalamuddin. "Talks with the Afghan government will begin and other issues will be solved if there is an agreement on this."

With the support of regional stakeholders in intra-Afghan dialogue and Afghanistan's military pressure on the Taliban, the Taliban leadership seems to have softened its tune towards the intra-Afghan talks. Perhaps, the release of the Taliban prisoners by Ashraf Ghani administration would have also put an impact on the process.

It is also believed that the Taliban have been pressured by the public since their leadership warned that it would target media staff if national media outlets did not stop their business advertisement against the Taliban.

It is self-explanatory that Afghans, who bore the brunt of casualties in terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, have been frustrated with the ongoing conflict. Besides killing a large number of civilians within the last 18 years of conflict, the Taliban have turned down the demand of Helmand Peace Marcher for stopping violence and negotiating with the government. They also refused the demand of people's representatives in Loya Jirga, Grand Assembly, who urged the Taliban to declare truce.

The Afghan government has been calling on regional actors to engage constructively in the peace issue and nudge the Taliban to the negotiating table with the government. China is one of the countries, which has supported the "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-owned" peace process and played very positive role. Therefore, the Afghan government and Afghan ordinary people have very positive attitude towards China and welcome its role in this regard.

Hekmatyar's statements regarding Pakistan's role do not carry much weight and seem more complimentary since he has a strong tie with Pakistan and resided their before signing peace agreement with the Afghan government. So far, he has played no positive role in the peace talks. Worst of all, he has been a very controversial figure as he touched some sensitive issues in his speeches. Entering Kabul, after inking peace pact with the government, Hekmatyar called the Taliban "brother", which angered the CEO Abdullah Abdullah. He also lambasted Ahmad Shah Masoud, known as national hero, who was killed by the Taliban. In his interview with a national media outlet, Hekmatyar once put the usage of some Persian terms under question claiming that the terms linked to Iran.

It should be noted that Pakistan is able to play an essential role in Afghanistan peace process. But there has been a trust deficit between Kabul and Islamabad. The two countries have to strengthen their ties and carry the issue of peace forward with mutual cooperation.

It is evident that it is hard for the US to carry the peace talks forward on its own. Hence, the US representatives have traveled across regional states for several times to ascertain their views and muster up their supports.

Reaching peace agreement with the Taliban is very significant before the upcoming presidential election, which will be held in September. That is, if the negotiating sides reach a peace agreement before election, Afghans will be able to flock to ballot boxes without concern about security issue. This will increase the public hope for democracy and election.

Regional supports will catalyze the peace process and pave the ground for reconciliation. Which countries will play more important role in this regard, it will be clear with the passage of time.

Tech Know-How Modernizes China's Century-Old Industrial City

By: Wang Jinye, Wang Hongfeng and Li Laifang

With the head sheaves whirling on top of the derrick, the century-old No.1 pit of the Kailuan colliery still lifts coal from deep underground. The icon of the old industrial city of Tangshan is also a tourist site.

The shaft, the country's earliest of its kind that began operation in 1881, is at Kailuan national mining park, a sign of modern industrial heritage that includes the country's first rail track with a standard gauge. Culture and tourism are just part of the efforts of the mining company and the city's diversified development.

Like Germany's Ruhr region, Tangshan, to the east of Beijing, is one of China's old industrial bases with major coal, steel and chemical industries. As China deepens supply-side structural reform for high-quality growth, the coastal city is struggling to upgrade its traditional sectors, cut pollution and foster emerging sectors through innovation, investment and integrated regional development.

THE WAY OUT

The Kailuan colliery has produced 1.67 billion tonnes of raw coal and 408 million tonnes of clean coal over the past seven decades.

In recent years, the mine has been facing woefully inadequate resource reserves. "The transformation is pressing," said Zhang Yuliang, a senior executive of Kailuan (Group) Limited Liability Corporation.

To promote structural transformation, the company decided in 2017 to optimize and strengthen its backbone industries -- coal, coal chemical industry and modern services -- with advanced equipment and technology, and develop strategic emerging industries such as new energy and new materials.

"The corporate research team has been developing new coal chemical products to extend the industry chain toward the high-end," Zhang said. The company has piloted intelligent mining with one unmanned working face, conducted mixed ownership reform of its subsidiaries, and gone global with a mine-related service business in India and Kyrgyzstan. Last year, the company's revenue hit 76 billion yuan (about 11 billion U.S. dollars). The coal chemical sector accounted for nearly a quarter of the total revenue and its profit soared by 146 percent year on year, while the logistics services created revenue of over 40 billion yuan. As China made cutting overcapacity one of the major tasks in supply-side structural reform in late 2015, Kailuan was assigned to cut coal capacity by 18.55 million tonnes from 2016 to 2020 by the provincial authorities, involving 25,000 workers. "Kailuan encountered difficulties in the first two years of the reform. My salary was sometimes delayed," said Li Wei in charge of the company's electrical and mechanical department.

"Today's Kailuan is quite different from the past when my grandfather and father worked there. What it needs is not more labor but technological innovation," he said. Li joined Kailuan after graduating in automation at Hebei University in 2008.

Intelligent production is also promoted by HBIS Group Tangsteel Company, a large steel enterprise founded in Tangshan in 1943. Designed to produce 1.8 million tonnes of finished products a year, the high-strength automobile plate factory has been a landmark project of Tangsteel to upgrade products with intelligent manufacturing.

"We have made big efforts to push technological progress and upgrading of products through investment and cooperation with institutes and universities," said Wang Lanyu, chairman of Tangsteel, a major subsidiary of Hebei Iron and Steel Group Co., Ltd. (HBIS), one of the world's largest steelmakers.

In 2018, Tangsteel's output of high-end key products reached 5.7 million tonnes, or 41 percent of its steel products. The sales of steel for automobiles and home appliances jointly accounted for 26 percent of its total steel products. The company realized a profit of 2 billion yuan last year. "Through hard work, Tangsteel has developed from a steel plant that used to produce ordinary construction steel into a large modern high-quality steel base for automobiles and home appliances," Wang said.

NEW GROWTH DRIVERS

With a population of about 8 million, Tangshan is aiming to become a window city for economic cooperation in Northeast Asia, a new-type industrialization base in the Bohai Rim area and an important pivot of Beijing's economic circle. In 2017, Tangshan became one of the country's first 12 cities or economic zones which are demonstration areas for industrial transformation and upgrading.

Five emerging industries such as intelligent rail transit, robotics, electronics and intelligent instruments, are forming new drivers for the city's economy.

Home to CRRC Tangshan Co., Ltd., one of China's major high-speed train manufac-

turers, the city has established an intelligent rail transit industry alliance and an innovation and development center for the rail transport industry.

The annual output value of 56 robot manufacturing companies hit 6 billion yuan last year, or half of the total output value of the Tangshan Hi-tech Industrial Development Zone, according to an official of the state-level development zone.

"We invest more than 6.5 percent of our main business revenue in research and development each year to ensure our leading position in technology," said Lu Wentao, general manager of CITIC Heavy Industry Kaicheng Intelligent Equipment Co., Ltd. in the high-tech zone. Eyeing a world-class special robotics manufacturing base, the company has more than 30 types of special robotic products.

From January to April, the added value of the five emerging sectors jumped by 31.9 percent, or 20.7 percentage points higher than the average growth of the city, data from the Tangshan Industry and Information Technology Bureau showed.

"We take key emerging industrial projects as a booster for development," said Chen Jingming, deputy head of the municipal development and reform commission.

In the first quarter, Tangshan's GDP saw a year-on-year growth of 7.8 percent, the highest growth rate of the city in Q1 since 2014.

"Tangshan is in an overlapping period in which traditional industries experience arduous transformation while emerging industries are being fostered," said Zhang Gui, an expert on Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei integrated development at Hebei University of Technology based in Tianjin. "Technological innovation is the lifeline for the successful transformation of old industrial bases," Zhang said. "Tangshan must embrace the new round of industrial revolution backed by the Internet, big data and artificial intelligence." According to the 2019 Global Cities Outlook report by A.T. Kearney, an international consultancy firm, Tangshan ranks as the world's 77th most promising city.

The cargo throughput of Tangshan Port reached 637 million tonnes last year, jumping to third place in the country's coastal ports. In the first five months this year, the port's throughput grew by 7.1 percent year on year to reach 265 million tonnes.

As a new port area of Tangshan Port, the Caofeidian port zone in Caofeidian District is booming. It boasts two of the country's seven approved berths that can dock vessels of 400,000 tonnes. With a total of 101 berths for ore, coal, crude oil, LNG and containers, Caofeidian port zone has a handling capacity of 470 million tonnes.

With direct sea trade routes to more than 70 countries and regions, Caofeidian is a new growth pole for Tangshan as well as the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. It has attracted hefty investment and emerging industries from Beijing under plans to jointly build Caofeidian into a demonstration zone for integrated development.

Last year, Caofeidian port area realized a logistics trade volume of 100 billion yuan. This year, the figure is expected to double. The booming port area aims to develop into the world's largest logistics center for coal and ore.

FROM BLACK TO GREEN

Besides cutting industrial capacity in such sectors as coal and steel, the resource-based companies are urged to adopt advanced, new craft to cut pollution and try to realize green production. From 2013 to 2018, Tangshan has slashed nearly 80 million tonnes in iron and steel production capacity, dismantled and sealed off 147 converters and furnaces, and closed small polluting factories. The number of iron and steel firms in the city was cut by one third, from 58 in 2012 to 38 last year.

Apart from zero discharge of waste water, Tangsteel has invested 2.7 billion yuan in a number of projects aimed at reducing emissions and saving energy over the past two years, realizing ultra-low emission in all production lines. The company also took the initiative in cutting the emission of carbon monoxide.

"Tangsteel has been pursuing green transformation to realize green manufacturing," said Wang, chairman of the company.

Last year, the city's average PM2.5 density fell 9.1 percent year on year to 60 micrograms per cubic meter. This year, it targets a 5-percent fall in PM2.5 density.

In July, a greening project, "the Tangshan Sea of Flowers" in the Kaiping district, will open to the public as part of the city's efforts to restore damaged environment and develop tourism. The Nanhu area in downtown Tangshan used to be an untreated mined-out area and a stinky garbage dump. After massive restoration efforts, it has become a scenic park free to the public. Last year, it received 4.8 million tourists.

"We will make the Nanhu area an attractive and dynamic zone and an emerging growth point to serve the city's strategic transformation," said Xue Shaojiang, an official with Tangshan Culture & Tourism Group, a firm devoted to the city's tourism development.

Wang Jinye, Wang Hongfeng and Li Laifang Are Xinlun Writers

A Grassroots Antidote to Populism

By: Ismaël Emelien and David Amiel

The political parties that once dominated Western democracies have been shaken to the core. Many have suffered electoral debacles, not least in France, Italy, Greece, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. Others have changed so radically that only their name remains the same. The Republican Party of US President Donald Trump has little in common with that of former President Ronald Reagan.

These developments are similar across the West. Leaders of the once-dominant parties oscillate between denial and despair, while populists siphon off their traditional supporters. Some refuse to see any legitimate reason for their defeat, dismissing their opponents' supporters as "deplorables," as Hillary Clinton did shortly before losing to Trump in 2016; others are too petrified by the populist surge to mount a counteroffensive.

But neither denial nor complacency will break the political impasse. Progressives must rebuild, and that starts with diagnosing the traditional parties' shortcomings. Part of the problem is that traditional parties failed to recognize the real issues of the age. Still fighting on old ideological battlefields, they turned a blind eye to declining social mobility, mounting environmental crises, rising geographic inequality, tensions over multiculturalism, and other issues that actually matter to voters. Decades ago, they were the vanguard. Today, they are alone in the woods, wondering where everyone went.

The social sciences may hold an answer as to why the mainstream lost its way. The gap between their objective analysis of reality and government policies has become a chasm. In most Western countries, for example, economists have long known about the growing divide in terms of incomes and other indicators between some affluent cities -- which benefit from globalization -- and the rest of the country. Yet not until French President Emmanuel Macron's administration did a national leader enact tax cuts on the basis of where one lives. As a result, 1% of France's GDP is now being redistributed first to the poorest parts of the country.

Traditional parties could also learn something from listening to voters directly, rather than only through the filters of media and pollsters. Back in 2016, Macron's movement, En Marche!, started with the largest door-to-door listening tour in France's history. What voters told canvassers then became the foundation of Macron's presidential campaign.

For example, more than a year before revelations of Harvey Weinstein's alleged sexual predations, "La Grande Marche" had gathered innumerable testimonies from women about harassment, and Macron issued a pledge to fight the problem if elected. At the time, Macron's stance made him the butt of opponents' jokes; the laughter soon faded with the onset of the #MeToo era.

Still, an accurate understanding of society is not enough. Traditional parties also suffer from poor organization. They have long believed that modern politics should be organized around elections, with activists showing up periodically to hand out leaflets and cheer on the candidates. This was not cynicism, so much as a symptom of an approach that treats democracy as a marketplace comprising government providers and citizen

consumers. In this view, seizing and holding power is a party's sole raison d'être. It is little wonder that citizens and even party members feel ignored between elections.

Despite these weaknesses, established parties had a number of advantages that forestalled their collapse. In recent years, they have had a technological edge over less-established opponents, and they were the only political actors with organized constituencies that could mobilize people for elections, organize protests, and start petitions.

But this model is no longer sustainable. Citizens nowadays refuse to be mere consumers of public policies. With rising levels of education have come new demands for empowerment. Voters want to be treated as political actors in their own right, not as pawns in someone else's game.

Moreover, governments themselves are no longer the sole providers of policies. This is one of the hard lessons we learned during two years working alongside Macron at the Élysée Palace. The leading policy challenges today -- climate change, religious extremism, digital disruption, gender equality -- do not admit of solutions only by national governments. Such challenges demand deep cultural changes, and, in most cases, action at the sub- and supra-national levels.

Finally, technology has lowered entry barriers to political participation, such that traditional parties can no longer count on an incumbent advantage and entrenched support networks. When you have mastered Google, Twitter, and Facebook, you don't need a century-old party machine.

Political movements must be rebuilt accordingly. The focus should be on specific actions, not just elections. A party's formal management structure should serve as the administrative "back office"; the front office should be staffed by the people on the ground. At La République En Marche!, we refer to these as local citizen projects. They can include anything from after-class reading courses and migrant integration programs to cooperative vegetable gardens and digital training sessions for senior citizens. In each case, the point is to offer solutions tailored to local problems, thereby strengthening communities. Such projects should now be regarded as essential complements to public policies.

In the future, a party's ability to offer rewarding avenues for political and community engagement will be essential to its attractiveness. And by demonstrating progressivism in action on a daily basis, parties will have already laid the groundwork for success when election day arrives.

When voters refuse to hear what you have to say, shouting louder is not the answer. This is the hard lesson traditional parties learned. Only by demonstrating a commitment to improving lives, rather than simply winning elections, can you convince people to come to your side. Reconnecting with voters' concerns thus goes hand-in-hand with adapting party organizations. For a winning alternative to populism, we need grassroots progressivism.

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