

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

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Afghan Mining Investment Opportunities

Afghan market is open to domestic and foreign entrepreneurs for investment in all areas, including mining sectors, and has attracted the attention of private companies due to its favorable investment conditions.

Placing a high priority on the energy and mining sectors, the Ghani administration launched large mineral, oil, and gas development projects and the development process has been stepped up to a great extent. As a member of the World Trade Organization, the Afghan government has enforced one of the most liberal investment laws in the region and is committed to offering low taxes and tariffs to promote trade and investment in the country. In other words, trade and transport agreements with neighboring countries, preferential trade arrangements internationally, and passage of a customs reform package makes Afghanistan one of the most open economies in the region by simplifying the tariff structure and reducing tariffs and taxes.

Both domestic and foreign investors are satisfied with regulatory issues such as business registration, tax administration, and labor law, which are clear and efficient.

A draft paper issued by Afghanistan Ministry of Industry and Commerce Investment promotion and support Directorate said that the country "highly supports the private investment in Afghanistan through its strong commitment for Investment Climate Reforms and Ease of Doing Business." It adds, "Afghanistan provides the following incentives for investors: 0% duty on import of machineries, 1% duty on import of raw materials, carry forward of losses." The draft said, "All approved enterprises, domestic and foreign, are treated equally by the law, unless the legislation specifically provides otherwise. In other words, once a foreign investor has been granted a license for an investment project, the government extends national treatment to that investment."

With this in mind, China is one of the heavyweight trading partner of Afghanistan. In a commentary titled "China Contributes to the Development of Afghanistan", published in Daily Outlook Afghanistan Newspaper on 15 March 2016, Wang Daohao, the then Economic and Commercial Counselor in Chinese Embassy in Kabul, wrote, "China is now the largest investment origin country in Afghanistan. Chinese companies have invested a lot in different sectors in Afghanistan, generating government revenues and creating thousands of job opportunities." He added, "In the mining sector, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Amu Darya Oil Project and is ready to invest more. Metallurgic Corporation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation have invested about \$360 million and are going to invest billions of dollars more to develop Aynak Copper Mine. Huawei Technologies and ZTE have been operation in Afghanistan for many years, and contribute a lot to the great improvement of the telecommunication services in Afghanistan." Wang also mentioned the active participation of China Railway Shisiju Corporation, China 19th Metallurgic Corporation, and Xinjiang Beixin Road & Bridge Corporation in the infrastructure development in Afghanistan.

It should be noted that there are some obstacles before the investment, which include lack of skilled labor forces, railroad networks, and protracted conflict. As a result of the lack of skilled labors, national firms will find it very difficult to compete with those of the international. Although some returning Afghans have brought with them significant technical skills, the challenges still exist. Despite the fact that Afghanistan's central location in Eurasia makes it a hub for goods and services and the country is benefiting from its bilateral and multi-lateral trade agreements, lack of railroads is still felt. To fill the vacuum, Afghanistan is connecting itself with neighboring and regional countries through opening air corridors for imports and exports.

However, telecommunication and banking systems are not a problem at all. Thus, Afghanistan is changing from a "landlocked" to a "lank-linked" country.

The conflict is also cited as a challenge before the mining, except for the secure provinces. Recently, the government has reportedly stepped up its struggle to stop illegal mining, which is carried out by the militants or local strongmen. The militants are believed to excavate mines illegally and smuggle Afghanistan's mineral resource to some neighboring countries. But they are not able to gain access to large mineral resources or disrupt the legal mining.

Afghanistan's huge economic potential and untapped mineral deposits are beyond doubt. It is a very attractive destination for investment. Hence, foreign investors in general and domestic investors and businesspersons in particular should not miss this opportunity for investment.

The government should further support the businesspersons, uphold domestic products, and make the atmosphere more secure.

Trump's Lose-Lose Iran Strategy

By: Joschka Fischer

One can only guess what US President Donald Trump hopes to achieve in Iran. Does he have designs on a "better" nuclear treaty than the 2015 deal from which he withdrew the United States? Are he and his advisers assuming that if they pile up enough demands, the regime will be forced to submit, or even abdicate? Or are they setting the stage for an attempt at regime change through military force?

In all likelihood, they themselves have no idea. That may be just as well, because none of the above is going to happen.

To be sure, Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, as the 2015 nuclear deal is officially known) fulfilled one of his key campaign promises. The problem is that neither he nor his advisers seem to have considered what would come next.

One of the few constants of Trump's approach to policymaking is its focus on winning the approval of his core bloc of supporters. Given that he also campaigned against America's foreign entanglements, it is safe to assume that these voters do not want the US to launch another war in the Middle East. A military conflagration with Iran would result in even more casualties, and prove to be even less winnable, than the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

For his part, Trump most likely wants to avoid war while still maximizing the pressure on the Iranian regime. The problem is that in the political environment of the Persian Gulf, the line between these two options is not particularly clear. Past experience shows that maximum pressure often creates the conditions for military confrontation.

Trump, unlike his hawkish national security adviser, John Bolton, claims that violent regime change is not one of the objectives of his Iran policy. Yet he is acting exactly as if the neoconservatives who led former US President George W. Bush into Iraq are still calling the shots.

This situation is all the more dangerous considering that US policymakers' room to maneuver in the Middle East has shrunk significantly since 2003. Iran's strategic position today is much stronger than it was then, precisely because the Iraq war toppled its foremost regional rival. And far from being isolated in the event of a military escalation, Iran would receive material and diplomatic support from both Russia and China.

At least since the fall of the Shah in 1979, Western policy toward Iran has been based on illusions. The West, led by the US, has long relied on economic sanctions to force the Iranian regime to alter its policies and behavior. But this approach, along with America's many other mistakes in the region, has actually strengthened Iran. The country's military forces or proxies now extend across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon - all the way to the Mediterranean and Israel's northern border. And though the Iranian economy is bending under

the weight of sanctions, it isn't breaking. And the security apparatus is showing no cracks whatsoever.

In response to Trump's decision to renege on the JCPOA and re-impose sanctions, Iran has threatened to restart enrichment of weapons-grade uranium. Should the regime acquire nuclear weapons, the likelihood of an immediate war or nuclear arms race in the region - and the threat to Europe's security - would be substantial.

Preventing such an outcome is precisely why the Europeans initiated nuclear negotiations with Iran in the early 2000s, following the US invasion of Iraq. But not until the arrival of US President Barack Obama did the overall Western strategy change. Now that Trump is reversing so much of the progress made during the Obama years, it is clear that Europe alone is too weak to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

It is worth remembering that in addition to its nonproliferation objectives, the JCPOA was also designed to reintegrate Iran into the international community. Like the Europeans, the Obama administration recognized that isolating Iran had not worked, and that another war in the region was not an option. By reversing course, Trump has sealed off the only viable path forward. Iran has been a distinct political and cultural entity for more than 2,000 years; it isn't going anywhere. The only question is what role this ancient, proud civilization should play in the region and the wider world. Without a satisfactory answer to that question, the entire Middle East will remain unstable, and the risk of a war extending well beyond the region will continue to increase.

Since the US began its partial withdrawal from the Middle East under Obama, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel have been fighting for regional domination. And, because the JCPOA raised the prospect of a US rapprochement with Iran, it did not alleviate the tension between these longstanding rivals. In the meantime, Iran has enhanced its position and extended its regional presence through the Syrian civil war and other conflicts. With the Saudis and Israelis already on tenterhooks, a restoration of the Iranian nuclear-weapons program would put the region on the cusp of a major war.

Significant diplomatic efforts will be needed to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and to formulate a constructive regional and international role for the Islamic Republic. But even then, stabilization of the region must come from within; the experiences of the past century have proven that.

By withdrawing from the JCPOA for no good reason, Trump has wandered into the Iranian maze. Soon, he could come to a fork where he will have to choose between losing face and launching a military confrontation. Either way, he will disappoint his loyal fans and make the Middle East - and the world - a far more dangerous place.

Joschka Fischer, Germany's foreign minister and vice chancellor from 1998 to 2005, was a leader of the German Green Party for almost 20 years.

A Battle for the Ethos of Afghanistan (Part 1)

By: R. Maxwell Bone and Abas Alizada

Between May 28 and May 30 of 2019, a delegation of Afghan political leaders from the opposition met with the leadership of the Taliban in Moscow. Afghan politicians ranging from former President Hamid Karzai to the former Governor of the Balkh Province Atta Noor engaged in multiple rounds of formal and informal discussions with Taliban leaders including the group's second in command Abdul Ghani Baradar and Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, its chief negotiator. The series of talks were opened with remarks by both the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the President's envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov. While no members of the current government in Kabul were present for the discussions because the Taliban has refused to recognize the government's legitimacy, all Afghans who partook did so under the oversight of the country's High Peace Council. Yet, at the opening of the discussions, both Karim Khalili the Chairman of the High Peace Council and the Ambassador of Afghanistan to the Russian Federation were present.

The discussions did result in some progress, as was noted in depth by the former Afghan Minister of Finance Omar Zakhilwal, who was present. Specifically, he noted the discussions "allowed both sides to share grievances, concerns, and views about the past present and future." Yet, the discussions ended in a deadlock, which was not unexpected given the inelastic positions of the two sides on key policy matters ranging from the constitution to the potential structure of the military. This deadlock was largely based on disagreements surrounding a proposed withdrawal of all non-Afghan military personnel from Afghanistan which referred to the troops of both the United States and the North American Treaty Organization (NATO).

This is the result of the fact that the Taliban largely views such forces as "occupying" forces supporting a "puppet government" in Kabul. Many in the Afghan government see them as a security guarantee preventing the country from being overrun by militant groups. Similarly, negotiations between the United States and the Taliban which have been ongoing for nearly a year have reached a similar impasse over the same disagreement. In short, the Taliban are insisting that a timeline be agreed to regarding the withdrawal of international forces from the country prior to the signing of any agreement to end the devastating war in Afghanistan. This is not to say that certain groups within Afghan society do not support the eventual removal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan, as all support it as an eventual end-goal. However, significant portions of Afghan society strongly believe such a withdrawal cannot happen until a peace agreement with the Taliban is fully implemented.

At the surface level, agreeing to a timetable regarding the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Afghanistan could easily serve as a confidence-building measure aimed at demonstrating genuine constructive intentions from both sides in the negotiations. This would bode especially well if the Taliban were to similarly agree to a ceasefire in which they would cease targeting the Afghan government in deadly attacks and mining the streets of cities and rural areas across Afghanistan with improved explosive devices. In fact, similar strategies have been adopted around the globe to varying degrees in efforts ranging from the armistice agreement that halted the Korean War in the 1950s to the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) at the end of the twentieth century. While previous agreements on troop withdrawals prior to and during the implementation of peace agreements and armistices have seen cases of both success and failure throughout history, it is unlikely to be successful in Afghanistan. This is due to the actuality that the conflict between the Tal-

iban and the internationally recognized government of Afghanistan is not over the secession of a portion of the territory as in Palestine and Kosovo, but a battle over the ethos of Afghanistan.

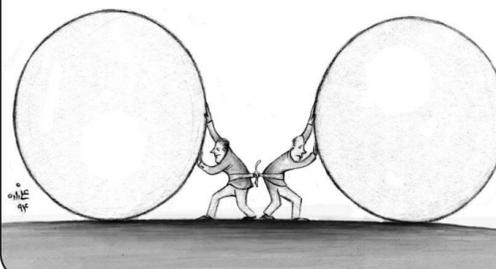
Despite the fact that the leadership of the Taliban appears eager to engage in peace talks with both the government of Afghanistan and the international community, it is imperative that the Taliban's historical record is not forgotten. Specifically, the fact that at the beginning of the twenty-first century when the Taliban controlled nearly the entirety of Afghanistan, barbaric laws were imposed on the population under its rule. Women who broke the group's strict law on their roles were publicly executed in soccer stadiums and no freedom of speech or assembly existed in the country. This is not mentioning the fact that the Taliban provided sanctuary to the deadly Al-Qaeda which allowed the group to carry out attacks in places ranging from the United States to Tanzania.

Further, in the territory that the Taliban controls across Afghanistan today the strictest legal codes are imposed on the population and those who express disagreement with them are publicly executed. Additionally, women live under medieval-like restrictions and are rarely seen outside of their houses. It is also worthwhile to examine the actions of the Taliban in the territory controlled by the country's internationally recognized government. For instance, in all of the presidential and parliamentary elections held in Afghanistan since democratic rule in the country was restored the Taliban have attacked polling stations. This was not due to disagreements with the way elections were conducted or out of fears that they would be rigged but in opposition to the very act of citizens being able to choose their own leaders. The Taliban also regularly threatens and attacks non-governmental organizations and civil society leaders across Afghanistan. This is not to mention the attacks that the group has carried out against diplomatic missions and news outlets. These horrific acts are only a few that have characterized the Taliban over the past several decades.

These actions stand in stark contrast to the record of the Afghan government since the establishment of democratic rule at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Regarding elections, the country has carried out over five separate elections to select both presidents and members of parliament. It is significant to note that the elections have had issues of fraud, such as in the most recent parliamentary elections when the Independent Electoral Commission took nearly seven months to announce the final results, but have been ranked as both freer and fairer than many of Afghanistan's neighbors. Further, all elections have turnout rates that dwarf those of elections in the United States and other established democracies, demonstrating the value that the Afghan populous places on a democratic culture. Further, the country is home to an array of civil society organizations, many of which are led by women, youth, and ethnic minorities that are regularly attacked by the Taliban. According to Freedom House (2019) the media environment in Afghanistan is ranked as freer than in countries located in the western hemisphere including Mexico, Honduras and Ecuador. Afghanistan is also ranked better in this regard than every country that it shares a land border with. This is despite constant threats and attacks waged against the media by the Taliban for their coverage.

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