

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



March 10, 2019

## The Rocky Road of Afghan Peace Process

Both the Taliban delegation and U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said that the two sides had made headway in the ongoing peace talks in Qatar. But the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described the talks "incredibly complicated" and said Washington was trying to "find pockets" where there was "sufficient agreement" that everyone could begin to move forward.

Afghan officials prepare for consultative Loya Jirga to achieve a national consensus and believe that only an intra-Afghan peace talks will bear the desired result. Afghans also support an "Afghan-owned" and "Afghan-led" peace process.

In the fifth round of peace talks, the Taliban and U.S. representatives are still bargaining for the withdrawal of U.S. forces - the timeline and presence of military bases in Afghanistan are mostly likely to be controversial - and guaranteeing that Afghan territory must not be used against the U.S. and its allies. The U.S. urges for gradual troop pullout to be completed in 2024, however, the Taliban demand pullout in one year. The U.S. haggling over keeping military bases in Afghanistan has been denied by the Taliban.

U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton said, "National security officials have been discussing this issue and how to try to bring it about... but there is no blind trust in the Taliban in this administration". Bolton's remarks suggest that there is trust deficit between the Taliban and the U.S. and they will bargain further at the table. In his upcoming trip, Pompeo is likely to bargain over the two aforementioned issues.

A number of individuals believe that the troop pullout will create a vacuum in Afghanistan, however, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi denied this claim. Meeting the press on the sidelines of the second session of the 13th National People's Congress, Wang Yi said, "There is no vacuum in Afghanistan needs to be filled, because the land belongs to the people of Afghanistan." He added, "This year marks the centenary of Afghanistan's independence. We ardently hope that this country, after suffering so much, will have a rebirth, take destiny into its own hands from now on, and enjoy genuine independence and lasting peace". Reiterating China's support to peace and stability in Afghanistan, Wang said, "China will respect its people's wish and needs, continue to do its best for reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan".

Meanwhile, Uzbekistan and Russia have also signaled their intention for supporting peace process and urged for a regional consensus.

In my past commentaries about peace talks, I reiterated that involving regional stakeholders would yield positive outcome.

It is self-explanatory that the participation of the Taliban's deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and U.S. Secretary of State's upcoming trip to Qatar indicate seriousness of the two sides for peace talks and has generated much optimism.

Nonetheless, ending 18 years of conflict seems a highly challenging issue and will not take place overnight. Therefore, the two sides will bargain over the ins and outs of the agreement and push for many other issues. For instance, the U.S. seeks to persuade the Taliban to hold direct talks with Afghan government and declare ceasefire. On their part, the Taliban bargain over higher price.

In Afghanistan, lack of national consensus on the one hand, and mistrust between Afghans and the Taliban on the other hand are one of the main obstacles. As a result, heads of political factions, including Hamid Karzai and second deputy CEO Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, participated in the second round of Moscow meeting held by Afghan diaspora despite the government's disapproval, which suggests a rift between political parties and government officials. Moreover, Afghan women fear that the return of "Islamic Emirate" of the Taliban will put their rights and freedoms at stake. In turn, they voice their concern, demand active participation in the peace parley, and urge the Taliban's interlocutors not to compromise 18 years of women's achievements at the table. Thus, the rift has to be bridged and national consensus yet to be achieved for meaningful negotiations.

China's Wang Yi said, "We call on the international community give firm support for the 'Afghan-led', 'Afghan-owned' peace and reconciliation process, play a constructive role from the sideline and build a momentum for dialogue".

Indeed, the international community, regional stakeholders, and Afghanistan's neighboring countries have to play their role constructively in this regard and push the Taliban to stop fighting. Meanwhile, Kabul government needs to struggle for achieving national consensus and bridging the gap between officials within the government's machinery as well as between officials and political parties.

## Trust Building: The Most Important Mission of the New Members of the Electoral Commissions

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

As a first ever move in democratic history of the country, the new members of the electoral commissions were elected and had them sworn to run the two main electoral institutions of Afghanistan - the Independent Election Commission and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission. Their oath and introduction ceremony were formally held in the presidential palace in presence of government officials as well as media representatives. Among them, seven individual have been chosen as commissioners of the Election Commission, five individual as Electoral Complaints Commissioners and two other as chairmen of the secretary of the two commissions. Initially, there were 81 candidates for whom 17 presidential candidates voted at a gathering in Presidential Palace on Friday, March 1.

During the ceremony, the president warned the new Commissioners of Electoral Commissions that any violation of law and misuse of their duties was considered as a serious crime under the newly modified election law and would be prosecuted by the country judicial system. Mr. Ghani called on the electoral commissioners to carefully do their jobs and create quarantine system to prevent corruption and misuse of duties. He added that all commissioners would be quarantined. He also called the commissioners, "After this, any communication with the parties should be discontinued; otherwise it is a kind of violation."

Meanwhile, Abdullah Abdullah, the country's chief executive officer, urged the commissioners to prepare for the timely holding of presidential elections, and as soon as possible announce the results of the parliamentary elections. He said that holding presidential election never means belittlement to the peace process but respect to the people's will. He added that the new commissioners of the electoral commissions should rebuild the people's confidence in the elections and the electoral bodies.

There was no doubt that former members of the electoral commissions should have gone to their homes. There was also a complete consensus that they should be held accountable for their poor performance in regard to the latest parliamentary elections. They had to be dismissed from their jobs, but also deserve to be perused by the judicial institutions. Although there were a few among them who were relatively experienced and remained committed until the end but the general outcome of electoral commissions and numerous mistakes and weaknesses caused to sack all from their official responsibilities. Therefore, as frequently demanded by public opinion, people expect to openly see they undergo a fair trial.

Anyway, what is very interesting and new is discussion about how the new commissioners were selected. The electoral commission members were introduced by political parties and civil society organizations that were linked to the elections and finally elected by votes of the presidential candidates.

Though this mechanism was based on the newly modified electoral law, it was somewhat a new and had not been experienced anywhere for choosing the leadership of electoral commissions. That's why; this unique way has caused many questions and uncertainties in the public opinion.

Maybe, there were some ambiguity whether this selection method was in accordance with the rules and general spirit of the ruling law or not but in practice, given the atmosphere of distrust in the country's political arena, it was an important step and good initiative by the government leadership to manage the conflicts. The situation was so bad that the problems of illegal practices and misuse of powers were so widespread by the senior electoral commissioners that there was a kind of overt anarchism in holding elections, as well as in recount process of the votes. The abuse of senior executives and leadership of electoral commissions were so rampant that everybody had a story in their local meetings about them. The disappointing acts of the electoral commissioners were so dramatic that no one could have the slightest defense of electoral commissions.

The situation was so critical that all the means of public trust and resources for treating common values had been completely disrupted, and nobody had confidence in the election. For the first time, the foundation of this distrust was laid in the 2009 parliamentary elections and then the controversial presidential election of 2014. Unfortunately, the incomplete and controversial parliamentary election held on October 20, 2018, inflicted its latest blow on the public confidence which disappointed the whole people. Therefore, the government decided to entrust all authorities to the political parties and to rivals of the president in order to gain public confidence and have no interference in the election, except for the use of a solitary vote like other 17 candidates. This new way, though initially created some doubts but it turned out to be solely for trust building of political parties and civil society organizations.

Based on this analysis, everything now depends on the new leadership of the electoral commissions. Each member is indirectly affiliated with a political faction and, in fact the authority of electoral commissions is relatively distributed among all political factions. Each of political party and candidates has influence on electoral commissions so far as proportional to its political presence in the country. It is expected that the new leadership of the electoral commissions will re-examine all issues related to the elections and the electoral procedure with firm commitment to the supreme interests of the country. They need to establish new procedures appropriate to the conditions of Afghanistan and honestly act upon them. This is the only mission of the new members of the electoral commissions.

Mohammad Zahir Akbari is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at mohammadzahirakbari@gmail.com

## Iran and North Korea Highlight Pitfalls of Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Strategy

By: James M. Dorsey

Donald J. Trump's hitherto failed 'maximum pressure' approach to Iran, as well as for that matter North Korea, begs the question what the US president's true objectives are and what options he is left with should the policy ultimately fail.

In the case of North Korea, it remains to be seen whether the country's reported rebuilding of a rocket launch site after the US president last month walked away from his summit in Hanoi with Kim-Jong-un constitutes a negotiating tactic or a breakthrough. The site was partially dismantled as a goodwill gesture after the two men first met in Singapore last year.

A breakdown coupled with even harsher sanctions that similarly may not do the job risks leaving Mr. Trump with few good options beyond some kind of military operation. Mr. Trump has so far credibly conveyed his intent of wanting to fully denuclearize North Korea rather than ultimately change its regime, a further indication of the apparent comfort he finds in dealing with at least some autocratic and authoritarian leaders.

The picture with regard to North Korea and Iran is both similar and different. Iranian resilience backed by key players in the international community determined to salvage the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear program could blunt the impact of harsh US sanctions, again leaving the United States with few good options beyond either backing away from its maximalist approach or weighing overt or covert military action.

Mr. Trump's intentions regarding Iran, in contrast to North Korea, are far less clear. Increasingly strident language by the president's hard-line national security advisor, John Bolton, as well as his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, coupled with the specific changes of Iranian policies that the US is demanding, suggest that regime change rather than reform may be the president's true objective. It is hard to see how Iran could comply with the US demands without a change of regime.

For now, Iran's strategy appears to be circumventing sanctions in every way it can, ensuring continued support by Europe, China and Russia, and waiting it out to see whether Mr. Trump gets a second term in the 2020 US elections in the hope that a Democratic president comes to office who would negotiate a return of the United States to the nuclear accord.

"A pressure campaign will only be effective if enough time is dedicated to it. In other words, there are no quick and easy victories, as the North Korean case demonstrates. And attempts to get them will only push the goalposts further away," said political scientist Ariane M. Tabatabai.

In a twist of irony, carrot-and-stick-backed efforts by international regulators to get Pakistan and Iran to significantly upgrade their legal abilities to counter political violence potentially are proving to be more effective than maximum pressure.

Concern that Pakistan could be blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the international anti-money laundering and terrorism finance watchdog, compounded by mounting tension with India, prompted Pakistan in recent days to crackdown on long tolerated militant groups.

Blacklisting potentially would have a debilitating impact on Pakistan's crisis-ridden economy. It would restrict the ability of multilateral organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to aid or lend to Pakistan.

The fact that Iran faces a similar dilemma has sparked intense debate in the Islamic republic about how to deal with FATF demands that it join the watchdog and significantly upgrade its legal anti-money laundering and terrorism finance infrastructure to evade being blacklisted.

Iran's parliament has so far passed two of four bills required for membership and together with the Expediency and Discernment Council is debating Iranian accession to the Combating the Financing of Terrorism Convention (CFT) and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime or Palermo Convention.

The FATF demands have put Iran between a rock and a hard place.

Iranian ratification of those conventions coupled with FATF membership holds out the promise of more effectively and more quickly than US maximum pressure curtailing Iran's ability to fund regional proxies.

Failure to comply could significantly increase the pain of US sanctions by prompting those banks and financial institutions still willing to do business with Iran to rethink their positions.

It would also likely restrict the ability of supporters of the nuclear agreement to help Iran soften the impact of the sanctions.

"If you want us to succeed in the talks with Europe, at least the four proposed bills must be ratified," said member of the Iranian parliament, Abolfazle Mousavi.

"By joining, Iranian banks will be under what will be unprecedented international scrutiny. This will make it more difficult, although not impossible, for Iran to transfer money to terror organizations... such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. Additionally, Iranian membership in the FATF would weaken the financial strength of the Iranian hard-liners, who have always called for a more aggressive foreign policy in the region," said Iran scholar Meir Javedanfar.

That is what has fuelled opposition in Iran to acceptance of FATF's requirements. Hardliners have warned that FATF would effectively impair Iran's ability to pursue a defense strategy focused on fighting the country's foreign policy and military battles far beyond its borders and would give US sanctions more bite.

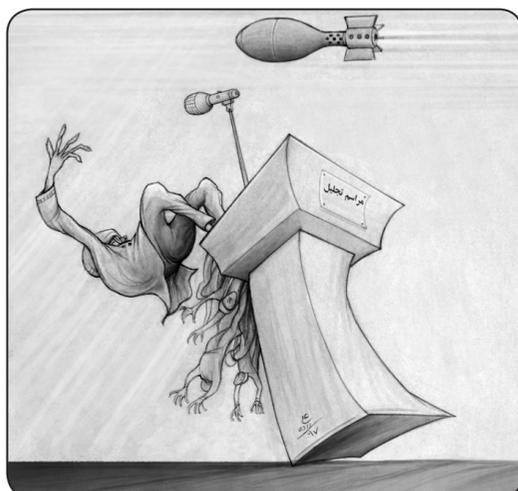
"Joining these conventions will lead to interference with Iran's internal affairs, including financial and economic issues," said Abolfazl Hasanbeygi, a member of the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission. Mr. Hasanbeygi warned that FATF would be the vehicle that the country's detractors would use to gain access to the workings of Iran's banking and economic system and its flows of funds.

As a result, Iran is at a crossroads more because of the application of a rules-based international and multilateral system than the coercion of punitive sanctions imposed by a world power. In reality, Iran is emerging as a litmus test of the effectiveness of varying forms of global governance.

If Iran "does not comply with the FATF regulations, the whole Iranian banking system could become thoroughly isolated from the global financial system. This means that it would be almost impossible to transfer the country's oil revenue internationally and even into its national economy," said political analyst Shahir Shahidsaless.

"And if it does comply, it will face complications such as the creation of an FIU, becoming exposed to sanctions as a result of its chaotic banking system, greater difficulty bypassing US sanctions and, finally, risk getting trapped in allegations of financing terrorism," he added referring to FATF's insistence that members create a financial intelligence unit that monitors and reports on the funding of political violence.

Dr. James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the New Books in Middle Eastern Studies podcast.




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



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.