

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

Daily Outlook
AFGHANISTAN
The Leading Independent Newspaper

May 16, 2019

Peace Talks Should be Give-and-Take Process

Afghan peace process has been highly controversial and unproductive. The first official talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government were held in July 2015, in Pakistan, in the presence of observers from the US and China but the second round was stalled following the confirmation of Mullah Mohammad Omar's death. In the hope of resuming talks with the Taliban leadership, a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), comprises Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and China, was formed, but the death of Omar's successor Mullah Akhtar Mansour in the US drone attack in Baluchistan triggered mistrust between Washington and Islamabad leading to QCG's disintegration.

Although the Taliban and the Afghan government held second round of talks in late October 2016, it was also proved abortive.

However, the Taliban offered peace talks with the United States after the election of Donald Trump as the president. Before US response, diplomats from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Iran and China attended a peace conference in Moscow to facilitate talks between Afghanistan and the Taliban. On 23 October 2017, the then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said Washington was willing to negotiate with the Taliban. A meeting between a senior US state department official and the Taliban representatives was reported in July 2018, but it could not be confirmed. On 12 October 2018, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad held talks with the Taliban representatives in Doha, which continued up to now as the sixth round of talks was held recently. But the Taliban still refuse to negotiate with the Afghan government.

The result of the latest round of backdoor talks in Qatar has not been leaked to the media, but, in the fifth round of talks, the Taliban and their US interlocutors agreed in principle on a frame for two crucial issues: the US troop pullout, and a commitment that Afghan soil would not again be used to launch terrorist attacks against the US and its allies.

One of the most prominent issues thwarting progress is said to be a disagreement over the ambiguous term of terrorism and terrorists since there is no universal definition. The Taliban agreed that they would not allow Afghanistan to be used as a launching pad for international attacks, but urged their US interlocutors to define "terrorist" groups without ambiguity.

However, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo considers the Taliban themselves terrorists as he said, "I have team on the ground right now trying to negotiate with the Taliban terrorists in Afghanistan, trying to find a way to achieve an Afghanistan that's not at war".

In addition to those core parties to the conflict, for any deal to endure, other regional actors, especially Pakistan, need to agree, too. The US put pressure on Pakistan saying it was harboring terrorist groups, but Pakistani officials denied the claim. In early January, Pakistan's Qureshi assured Mohammad Umer Daudzai, who had a trip to Pakistan, that Islamabad "would do all to help the people of Afghanistan see the earliest possible end to bloodshed and enter a new phase of peace and prosperity".

To ally the public concern in Afghanistan, the US negotiators have to bargain for seven main points at the table: First, the Taliban have to agree on ceasefire and allow the US and the international community to monitor the process and have to hold direct talks with Afghan government. Second, the Taliban rank-and-file have to be disarmed under the international observation and the Taliban must accept that military and police forces are the only institution to deal with arms and use force in the legal frame.

Third, resorting to violence should be accepted as crime. The Taliban should concede that it would be legally forbidden for any group to impose their mindset on others through resorting to violence and they should be able to continue their relations with foreign states only if they are legally allowed.

Fourth, the Taliban should re-open its political office in Afghanistan. Subsequently, the names of their leaders need to be removed from the blacklist.

Fifth, constitution amendment committee needs to be formed and chaired by Afghan government with the inclusion of the representatives of all parties, including the Taliban and civil society, and send the amended items of the constitution to Loya Jirga, grand assembly, for approval.

Sixth, the US troop withdrawal needs to occur gradually and be completed after conducting presidential election, in which the Taliban should also be entitled to participate with suffrage.

Seventh, a specific court should immediately deal with the cases of the Taliban's prisoners, jailed in Afghanistan, and put them on fair and just trial.

So far, the Taliban have bargained for higher price and had been granted concessions without taking a single step towards peace or reconciliation. Worst of all, they have intensified their attacks against Kabul government, especially after declaring their spring offensives. If the Taliban push for imposing their peace package without accepting that of their interlocutors, reaching an agreement will not be possible. Finally, only an Afghan led and Afghan owned peace talks ensures a lasting and dignified peace in the country.

Taliban Optimism: the United States on the Verge of Defeat and Withdrawal from Afghanistan

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

The Taliban's chief negotiator, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai recently declared the United States is on the verge of defeat and will soon withdraw willingly or by force. He made these remarks just two days before he led a Taliban team into fresh talks with US interlocutors. Pro-Taliban social media outlets on Friday released video of Mr Stanekzai's speech, one day after the US special reconciliation envoy Zalmay Khalilzad wrapped up the week-long negotiations with Taliban representatives in Doha.

Simultaneous to this, Robert Gates, the former U.S. Defense Chief, also warned that there is a "real risk" that the Taliban will retake control of the country if American troops leave before the Afghan government is stable. Some of the internal political elements also believe that the Afghan government and troops would collapse without U.S. support and assistance. Conceding that a military victory is impossible at this juncture, the U.S. President Donald Trump's administration has intensified peace negotiations with the Taliban, fighting to establish a sharia-compliant Islamic emirate in the country.

As report quoted, the Taliban negotiator praised the bravery of the Afghans who defeated past British and Soviet invasions on the country and continued to resist the current foreign military occupation, referring to the U.S.-NATO coalition currently training, assisting, and advising Afghan troops in the country. "God has helped us defeat three superpowers in the last century. The third superpower that we are currently confronted with is also on the verge of defeat, inshallah [God willing]". You will soon hear they also will withdraw [from Afghanistan] either of their own accord or they will be forced out. ...We pray to God they [U.S.] withdraw in a manner results in peace and stability in Afghanistan, and an Islamic system or Sharia is established in Afghanistan, and there is no further bloodshed among Afghans", Stanekzai said

Earlier the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid had said that the April 28 internal gathering was aimed at commemorating the day in 1992 when Afghan jihadis overthrew the communist regime in Kabul. Stanekzai lambasted Afghan President Ashraf Ghani during his speech, comparing him and his allies to government leaders who supported Moscow during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s that ultimately gave rise to the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The Taliban has rejected Trump administration proposals for a residual American counterterrorism force to remain in Afghanistan following a significant withdrawal to ensure the terrorist group keeps its promises. Last week, Khalilzad noted on Twitter that the two sides are making "steady but slow progress on aspects of the framework for ending the Afghan war." He pointed out, however, that the current pace of negotiations is insufficient when you consider that "so much conflict rages and innocent people die." "We need more and faster progress. Our proposal for all sides to

reduce violence also remains on the table," Khalilzad said.

Echoing other jihadi groups, the Taliban has urged Muslims to escalate attacks during the ongoing holy month of Ramadan. Taliban Jihadist, who have repeatedly rejected President Ghani's offer of a ceasefire and official recognition as a political group, have intensified their attacks amid the peace negotiations with the United States. Likewise, the war in Afghanistan has come at a tremendous blood and treasure cost to the United States of nearly 1 trillion, 2,285 American military deaths, and 20,452 injuries.

On contrary to recent optimistic expressions of Taliban, the Commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan Gen. Scott Miller reaffirmed support to Afghan forces amid ongoing efforts to find a negotiated settlement to end the ongoing conflict in the country. "I'm always very proud and supportive of the security forces. What's interesting now is listening to the people. And I hear the Afghan people saying it's time for peace. Unfortunately as we work toward peace there is still fighting. And there are far too many Afghans losing their lives as a result of this fighting. So you do know I am committed to peace but at the same time I know there is a fight and we remain committed to supporting you in that fight," Gen. Miller said in his speech during a security Shura in western Herat province.

Thus, the U.S. and Afghan officials on Tuesday began a joint review of U.S. Government civilian assistance to Afghanistan, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul said in a statement. The joint review, requested by President Ashraf Ghani and supported by the United States, focuses on strategic results, alignment with National Unity Government development priorities, and identification of challenges and successes, the statement said. The joint review will support greater prioritization of U.S. civilian assistance in Afghanistan, strengthen Afghan institutions, and Afghan self-reliance, the statement added.

It seems that Taliban dream may not come true if they do not come down from their obstinate position regarding peace talks with Afghan government and Afghan centered-interests. Kabul and Washington agreed that U.S. civilian assistance and also military support will continue as aforementioned. As newly committed, the United States in coordination with the Government of Afghanistan provides civilian assistance across a range of sectors including health, education, economic growth, energy, infrastructure, humanitarian assistance, and cultural heritage preservation. Reportedly, the U.S. investment in Afghanistan builds on the efforts of the international community to support Afghan prosperity. The United States and Afghanistan look forward to continuing their close partnership and working together to promote the journey to Afghan self-reliance.

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

Is Trump's Trade War with China a Civilizational Conflict?

By: Minxin Pei

Late last month at a security forum in Washington, DC, Kiron Skinner, Director of Policy Planning for the US Department of State, described today's US-China conflict as "a fight with a really different civilization and a different ideology, and the United States hasn't had that before." As a trial balloon, this apparent attempt to define the Trump administration's confrontation with China did not fly.

By framing the creeping cold war between the US and China as a clash of civilizations, Skinner - whose position was once held by luminaries such as George Kennan, Paul Nitze, Richard N. Haass, and Anne-Marie Slaughter - was being neither original nor accurate. The political scientist Samuel P. Huntington developed the concept more than a quarter-century ago, and the Communist Party of China itself is an ideologically bankrupt entity. Worse, Skinner's full remarks were freighted with racial overtones. Unlike America's competition with the Soviet Union, which she described as, "a fight within the Western family," the rivalry with China supposedly represents "the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian." Never mind that the US fought Japan in World War II.

One hopes Skinner's talk of a clash between Caucasian and non-Caucasian civilizations was just a slip of the tongue. Those who would intentionally traffic in such ideas must know that they could lead not just to the economic or military defeat of one side, but to the destruction of an entire society. How policymakers frame the US-China conflict will have far-reaching implications, and the US must demonstrate that its policies are motivated by a higher moral purpose if they are to gain wider international support.

Most commentators see the US-China conflict as a struggle between an incumbent power and its most plausible challenger. The two countries appear to be falling into the proverbial "Thucydides Trap," a self-fulfilling prophecy in which a hegemon's fear of being supplanted leads it to act in such a way as to precipitate a war for global dominance.

And yet, even if today's conflict is being driven by a zero-sum quest for power, that should not be the US's sole consideration. Given the threat of civilizational collapse posed by climate change, the Trump administration's focus only on US interests appears selfish and irresponsible to the rest of the world.

The fact is that most of the world - including a sizable share of Americans - has no interest in being plunged into another cold war just to preserve US hegemony. If the US government wants to garner international support for countering Chinese power and influence, it must make a more compelling case.

This shouldn't be all that difficult, given that the rise of China under a one-party dictatorship threatens not just American hegemony but the rules-based international order. Rather than framing the conflict as a race war, then, the US should focus on the Chinese threat to global institutions, which, by extension, is a threat to many other countries' growth and stability.

Whatever its flaws, the US-led international order offers far more benefits to other countries than any conceivable alternative system could. Indeed, during the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the US enjoyed widespread international support precisely because it was leading a defense of that order. And since the end of that conflict, most of the world has either welcomed or accepted American hegemony, on the tacit understanding that the US would continue to uphold the liberal framework.

Sadly, that condition no longer holds. US President Donald Trump's administration has unabashedly championed an "America First" foreign-policy agenda, alienating traditional allies and alarming the rest of world for the sake of narrow political objectives. It is no exaggeration to say that Trump's misguided policies pose as great a threat to the liberal order as China does. The Trump administration may continue to believe that US power on its own is enough to vanquish China. But going it alone will prove costly, and the chances of success would be much higher if the US were to marshal the support of its friends and allies.

The latest failure to reach a trade deal suggests that the US-China cold war is escalating to the next stage. Sooner or later, the Trump administration will realize that it actually needs the support of its allies to prevail against the Chinese. When that day comes, it would do well to abandon talk of civilizational conflict and racial rivalry, and instead offer a morally justifiable case for confronting China. The US is the traditional defender of the liberal order; it needs to start acting like it.

Minxin Pei, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College and the author of China's Crony Capitalism, is the inaugural Library of Congress Chair in US-China Relations.

Daily Outlook
AFGHANISTAN
The Leading Independent Newspaper

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

افغانستان ما
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.