

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



November 06, 2018

## Invitations of Peace Talks to Taliban

As the prospects of peace and tranquility remain distant from Afghanistan, Afghan government seems confused as how to deal with the situation. Currently, it has only one slogan that it keeps on repeating and that is calling Taliban for peace talks, which seems to fall on deaf ears. In fact, it seems to be repeating the gesture that used to be shown by previous Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, who used to call Taliban 'brothers' and used to invite them for talks but did not seem to have any strategy to further the peace process with them. Taliban, like they were during Karzai's era, do not appear interested in these calls as they have kept on insisting for direct talks with the United States (US). National Unity Government (NUG) under the leadership of President Ashraf Ghani, however, seems to check all possibilities that can somehow provide an opportunity for direct talks with Taliban.

On Saturday, November 04, talking in a meeting with religious scholars and tribal elders in Paktia province, President Ghani, once again invited Taliban to 'participate in intra-Afghan peace talks'. He also emphasized that a consensus exists for peace, and the Islamic world and region is prepared for reconciliation. President Ghani once again called on Taliban group to participate in intra-Afghan peace talks, emphasizing that a consensus exists for peace and the Islamic world and region is prepared for reconciliation. He also remarked that Afghanistan will not hand over the authority of reconciliation efforts to outsiders.

It is interesting to see how Taliban would respond to the open invitations of talks by President Ghani. Previously, they had made clear that they would only talk with Afghan government after the foreign troops leave the country completely. With the US in Afghanistan, Taliban argued that they would only talk to them, because the authority would lie with them not the Afghan government. On many occasions, Taliban have termed Afghan government as a 'puppet government'.

On the other hand, they have kept their violence continue. During the parliamentary elections, they targeted innocent civilians and tried their best to disrupt elections. They seem to realize that they may have some leverage in talks if they continue their violence, since they have been able to gain ground as well. A recent report by Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) - SIGAR's 41st quarterly report on the status of reconstruction in Afghanistan to the US Congress - showed that Afghan government's control and influence of districts is at lowest level (55.5%) since the institution began tracking in November 2015.

SIGAR also stated in its report that the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) had 312,328 personnel in July 2018 (not including civilians), down 1,914 personnel since last quarter and down 8,827 personnel since the same period last year.

The report said Afghan forces "made minimal or no progress in pressuring the Taliban over the quarter" and "failed to gain greater control or influence over districts, population and territory this quarter". SIGAR's report also highlighted several "discouraging developments" over the past few months, including the Taliban's rejection of a second ceasefire and its five-day siege on Ghazni. It also cited last month's attack in Kandahar that killed the regional police and intelligence chiefs.

With the control of 45% of the districts slipping away from the Afghan government, it is hard to see that Taliban would readily agree to peace talks with Afghan government. It is also a fact that the control that Afghan government seems to exercise is because of the support of the United States. Moreover, Taliban seem to be more reliant on their Qatar office for peace talks. Currently, Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, said that the five members of Taliban who were freed from the US prison in Guantanamo Bay in exchange for captured American Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl have joined the Taliban office in Qatar, and they will be among the Taliban representatives negotiating for peace in Afghanistan.

It is important to see how Afghan government would react to this development. It has kept on emphasizing that any peace negotiations with Taliban must include Afghan government; however, it is possible that in the initial stages when Taliban are not ready to accept Afghan government, it is possible that Washington may seek ways to negotiate with them and, later on, include Afghan government representatives.

Afghan government must ensure that its representatives include all the stakeholders - particularly, representatives from different ethnic groups. Moreover, it must also ensure that the concerns of regional countries are also addressed. Neglecting the concerns of regional countries may give rise to misunderstandings and ambiguities among the neighboring countries and that cannot be helpful in acquiring lasting peace in the country. Though Afghanistan has to keep its interests as top priority, neglecting different stakeholders and the regional countries in order to achieve quick fixes will not help solve the complex nature of the conflict in Afghanistan.

## Role of Russia in Afghanistan's Peace Process

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Afghanistan was one of unique area where U.S and Russia have had cooperation both in toppling the Taliban Regime and creation of the new government. They have also taken parts in reconstruction efforts in the country, including training the Afghan security forces, supplying military equipment, supporting joint counter-narcotic activities with the United States, and providing some level of development aid. As the post-2001 phase of the conflict in Afghanistan has lingered for more than 17 years now, and the Taliban have re-emerged as a force that contest more than half of Afghan territory. With the war at a stalemate, Afghanistan, the United States, and regional powers are trying to seek a political solution. Russia, too, is trying to do its part by reaching out to the Taliban to help kick-start a peace process, however, there is confusion over Moscow's overtures to the Taliban and the end goal of its efforts.

In 2016, Russia initiated a series of meetings among countries neighboring Afghanistan known as the Moscow Process. In the first meeting, Afghanistan was not even invited only Russia, China, and Pakistan attended the meeting. In 2017, Afghanistan, India, and several Central Asian countries were added. The United States did not attend any of the meetings and perceived them as an overlapping effort that lacked clarity. In 2018, a third multilateral dialogue was planned to which the Taliban were invited. The Afghan government declined to attend on the grounds that the Taliban were invited to the meeting as an equal peer, and the Taliban on the other hand refused to engage in direct talks with the Afghan government.

For Kabul, the move undermined the legitimacy of its own initiative, the U.S.-backed Kabul Process. The dialogue was ultimately postponed, and may or may not take place in the future, as sides have not been able to agree on the purpose and the content of the meeting. Moscow's contact with the Taliban is not new and there have been contacts since 2005. Russia has allegedly shared intelligence with the Taliban, and there has been much speculation that Moscow has even armed them. Whether these claims are true or false, Russia's contact with the Taliban has given the group a degree of legitimacy and recognition at a time when the Afghan government could use some of that legitimacy and recognition itself. To add to the confusion, since 2016, Russia has been conducting annual joint military drills with Pakistan along the Afghan border. Some Afghans are concerned that Afghanistan once again may become a geopolitical battlefield between the two great powers, this time the United States and Russia. This could take Afghanistan to a different and more dangerous level of turmoil than even the current conflict.

Russia's main concerns in Afghanistan are linked to the expansion of the Islamic State's regional iteration, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and the flow of narcotics northward. These are legitimate concerns. Russia has said its contact with the Taliban is for the safety of

its citizens present in Afghanistan's Territory, and for putting an end to the Afghan conflict. However, Russia does not have a sizable footprint in Afghanistan to protect, and its engagement with the Taliban has had no impact on the level of violence in the country. Moscow has rejected the idea that it is using the Taliban to fight ISKP. The Afghan Taliban has a narrow national focus on reinstating a puritan system in Afghanistan whereas the Islamic State is considered a transnational threat with a continental agenda.

Afghan Officials insist that the Afghan reconciliation process must be "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned," but has shown flexibility. Afghanistan has cautiously welcomed efforts that may help initiate a genuine peace process involving the Taliban. In late 2012, the group met with a number of Afghan factions, representatives of the government and international observers in Chantilly, and in later years in Oslo and several other venues, including the most anticipated semi-direct talks in Murre, Pakistan, in 2015. In February 2018, when Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced a roadmap for peace, including a bold offer to recognize the Taliban as a political party in return for peace, further political dialogues were held in Mecca, Tashkent, Jakarta, and elsewhere. These efforts display Afghanistan's realization of the importance of creating an international consensus on peacemaking in the country and bringing the Taliban into the political fold. However, parallel processes that seek different outcomes for short-term gains can be counterproductive. Thus, the United States has avoided the Moscow Process and emphasized alternatives, such as the Kabul Process. Russia, on the other hand, has insisted on the usefulness of its own process. At a time when U.S.-Russia relations are soured in several areas including disagreements on Syria, Ukraine, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF). Afghanistan may be one of the few areas where the two countries could cooperate.

Overall, the Moscow's efforts can be useful when they are well defined and are held in harmony with efforts by Afghanistan and the United States, as two major parties to the conflict. Engaging with the Taliban for humanitarian causes and the initiating of a peace process is inevitable. Nonetheless, contacts that can embolden and disincite the group to come the negotiating tables goes against the stabilization needs of Afghanistan. Russia's peacemaking efforts must meet Afghanistan's needs, which include initiating negotiations, achieving a political solution, and ultimately peace, and then maintaining that peace. This entails encouraging the Taliban to the negotiating table without undermining the Afghan government. Afghanistan can only achieve and maintain peace when the Afghan state is capable of governing, accountable to its citizens and acts as a responsible member of the international community. Afghanistan cannot be stabilized when actors rely on non-state actors to secure their perceived national interests.

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## Angela Merkel's Tragedy

By: Ashoka Mody

What we care about most is often our undoing. So it was for Angela Merkel, who recently announced her intention to step down as leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in December and as Germany's chancellor in 2021.

History placed Merkel amid raging storms: a series of eurozone crises that drove wedges between Europeans; economic tensions at home that fueled social fragmentation; and the largest migration wave since World War II, which intensified European and domestic anxieties. But, rather than rocking the boat, risking her survival, she chose temporary fixes that let the vulnerabilities fester.

Perhaps her nail-biting ascent to the chancellorship conditioned her. In the September 2005 election, she enjoyed a large early lead in opinion polls. Then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had failed to bring down the unemployment rate, which stood at almost 12%, and his Social Democratic Party had lost a string of state elections. Yet Merkel's poor communication of her policy priorities, together with a lackluster debate performance, nearly cost her the election.

In subsequent elections, Merkel refused to campaign on substantive policy matters. In 2009, her campaign was deliberately boring and banal, embracing - however reluctantly - her opponents' characterization of her as a "Mutti," an unflattering stereotype of a mother managing the family home. In 2013, she bolstered the Mutti image with the slogan "You know me."

Having established no clear policy platform, Merkel has governed largely without a mandate. After each election, various interest groups have hoped that she would adopt a position favorably aligned with their particular preferences. But she knew that refusing to do so was precisely what had enabled her to survive.

Merkel's preference for muddling through has been apparent in her approach to eurozone reform. She has long known that fixing the monetary union would require her to issue a politically risky call for financial sacrifice by Germans. The call was risky, because the former Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the man who single-handedly carried the euro across the finish line, had promised that no sacrifice would be required.

Hence, for fear of alienating Germans, Merkel has consistently done the minimum to hold the eurozone together. She agreed - after an agonizing delay - to a joint European Union-International Monetary Fund lending package to Greece in May 2010. That led to the creation of a more permanent bailout facility, the European Stability Mechanism.

Moreover, during the euro's existential crisis in July 2012, Merkel supported European Central Bank President Mario Draghi's initiative to create an "outright monetary transactions" mechanism, whereby the ECB could purchase the bonds of struggling eurozone countries. Although these fixes helped to prevent the eurozone from collapsing, they were not enough to ensure the monetary union's long-term resilience - a failing that has left the eurozone vulnerable to Italy's brewing crisis.

Merkel was felled by the one principled stand she took. In 2015, with Europe being inundated by asylum seekers and economic migrants, Merkel announced an open-door policy for Syrian refugees. When Hungary's nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orbán, suggested that Germa-

ny should build a fence to keep migrants out, she flashed rare (and raw) emotion. Recalling her East German upbringing, she said, "I lived a long time behind a fence. It is not something I wish to do again."

Merkel's humanity won her praise from the international community. But, at home, opposition to her refugee policy gathered momentum. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), created in February 2013 to oppose the euro, gained a new lease on life as a strident nationalist anti-migration party, siphoning supporters from Merkel's CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU).

In 2016, Merkel successfully eased migration pressure on Europe by securing a deal to keep migrants in Turkey. But the deal remains highly controversial, not least because of humanitarian concerns. With the same model being applied elsewhere, migrants are at increasing risk.

Although Merkel's characteristically dull campaign approach won her a fourth term as chancellor last year, her electoral base has weakened considerably - a trend that has been reinforced by domestic economic failures. Merkel has to cope with the legacy of Schröder's controversial labor-market and welfare reforms, which, among other things, made it easier to fire workers and, by reducing unemployment benefits, forced many unemployed people to take insecure jobs with few benefits. The reforms helped to reduce the jobless rate, but at the cost of stagnant inflation-adjusted wages and widespread personal financial stress.

To be sure, rising inequality, wage stagnation, and working-class frustration are evident across the developed world. Merkel, like her counterparts elsewhere, did little to address the problems. This is not because Merkel lacked vision: in April 2010, she described a Germany powered by improved education and innovation. Only a society that advanced technologically, she concluded, could provide decent opportunities for all.

But, unwilling to challenge the domestic political consensus on fiscal austerity, Merkel refused to invest in Germany's future, say, by repairing decaying infrastructure and upgrading educational opportunities. Instead, she made flailing efforts to protect the increasingly obsolete diesel technology base of Germany's car producers. Such delays in reinventing the country's auto industry could drag down the entire economy. Merkel's failure to reverse social fragmentation led to rising support for the AfD. In the 2017 election, AfD voters tended to be men between the ages of 30 and 59 with only secondary education or vocational training, working blue-collar jobs - often with little job security - in small cities and rural areas. Many such voters once supported the CDU and CSU, but were attracted by the AfD's nationalist, xenophobic platform. The CDU has been weakened, and Merkel's hold over her own party has eroded. It is time for her to step down.

Merkel held the ship steady, but the storms continued to rage. Amid continuing widespread popular frustration and political turmoil, future chancellors could easily be swept away.

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