

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



November 11, 2018

Ghani: Pursuing Nation Building

President Ghani and Vice president Sarwar Danish travelled to Daikondi and Bamyan provinces accompanied with a high ranking delegation on Friday and Saturday. They were warmly welcomed by the people in these provinces. The way people received the President and Vice President was different from other provinces; and even it can be a role model for other provinces of the country.

One of these outstanding differences was the high participation of women in this event. The other significant difference was the security and confidence of the delegation that no major security incident may happen during the event; an issue that is nearly impossible to ensure it in many other parts of the country. Many pictures show the President and Vice President among the ordinary people with peace of mind and people can reach them easily and share their support and concerns with their leaders.

There were some concerns that specific elements may try to disturb the meetings of the President with the representatives of the people; fortunately, such an incident did not occur in Daikondi or Bamyan as well. Indeed, it does not mean that the President and Vice President have fully fulfilled their pledges to the Daikondi and Bamyan citizens. However, it showed that people trust the government that it is pursuing one of its campaign promises saying that "we will end up the natural geographical prison of the central Afghanistan". To realize this promise, President Ghani inaugurated work four projects in Daikondi. These projects include construction of Nili Road, Hydro-power project, distribution network of Nili city power and Sokhtook Dam. In addition to this, President acknowledged promotion of Daikundi to 2nd grade province as well. Furthermore, the President inaugurated work on three power projects in central Bamyan province. The projects included construction of 220/20kv substation, 220kv electricity transmission line from Doshi to Bamayn and establishment of electricity supply network for 20,000 houses.

So, what happened in Bamyan and Daikondi provinces indicate a strong political will for nation building in Afghanistan. It has been a failed attempt in Afghanistan for many years. As a result, nation building and social cohesion have changed to a disappointment in the country. Ethnic, religious, linguistic and locality factors have contributed to the failure of any attempts on this regard.

Thus, the warm welcome of the people in Daikondi and Bamyan showed that they are tired of any further conflicts in Afghanistan. The incredible enthusiasm and support of the people of the most deprived and marginalized ethnic groups of Afghanistan to the government indicated that they strongly welcome nation building efforts in Afghanistan. All the symbolic and actual interactions of the Daikondi and Bamyan people showed that they are fed up with hypocrisy, discrimination and injustice.

Nevertheless, the failure or success of this process depends to the Afghan government and politicians and how they respond to the legitimate demands of their people. President Ghani took a bold and historic step in Daikondi and Bamyan to remove the historical inequalities in the central Afghanistan. President Ghani showed that he is serious for nation building in Afghanistan. Now, it is the duty of all of us to use these opportunities and make any efforts to realize this goal in our country.



Afghan Peace Talks – A Political Jigsaw Puzzle

By: Hujjatullah Zia

The recent Moscow meeting and peace talks between US and Taliban sides with the presence of 11 countries' representatives, including China, Iran and Pakistan, to settle the conflict in Afghanistan have triggered a sense of optimism among some political figures, especially with the release of Mullah Abdul Ghani Bradar, the co-founder of the Taliban movement, from Pakistani jail. But the Taliban insurgents have intensified their attacks across the country.

Baradar's release is said to be due to the personal request of US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad. His release and joining of five high-ranking members of the Taliban faction – including the chief of the Taliban regime's army, a minister, a deputy intelligence chief, and two governors – the Taliban's political office in Qatar might nudge the nascent dialogue process forward.

As part of the promised cooperation on not providing shelter to Pakistan's enemies on Afghan soil, Afghanistan's allies have killed a number of TTP leaders including Mullah Fazlullah and four other senior TTP commanders in drone attacks in Afghanistan. This was followed by the killing of Umar Rehman, another leading TTP commander. In return, Kabul government expects Islamabad to engage more actively in peace talks and push the Taliban not only to peace table but also to reach an agreement with their interlocutors.

Imran Khan's leadership has pledged support to the peace talks as Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said, during his visit to Washington, that Islamabad would back the US move to engage the Taliban. Mullah Bradar's release reveals Pakistan's good intention and will increase the bonhomie between Pakistan on the one side and Afghanistan and US on the other side.

Nonetheless, the assassination of Maulana Samiul Haq, who is known as "father of the Taliban", seems to be planned to blow the whistle on the Taliban's negotiators. Perhaps, those who plotted the assassination believed that Bradar's death would be similar to that of Taliban's leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, the news of which stalled the peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban in Murree, Islamabad. But it failed to interrupt the peace talks despite being celebrated happily by Afghan people. His followers, however, warned of the intensification of their attacks against Afghanistan in the wake of Afghans' celebration and reiterated "jihad"

as legitimate action in the country, which has been strongly condemned and delegitimized by Afghan Ulema Council and high-ranking religious clerics.

The peace negotiators should take it into consideration that a mysterious group is seeking to blow the whistle to sabotage the peace process. In the past, the talks were stalled for one reason or another. For example, a number of high-profile Taliban officials who declared to hold talks with Kabul government were assassinated. The appointment of more radical leaders such as Mullah Mansour and his successor Mullah Haibatullah were likely to be the next reason for blocking the way for talks. Political players must have been behind the designation of those two.

Those high-ranking Taliban individuals who were pushed by external power to the table rather than being sent by the Taliban's leadership are unlikely to carry much weight in peace deal. Although the Taliban respect them, they no more wield their past authority. In short, their presence is valued but will not be as effective as it is expected.

I have frequently talked of the involvement of regional stakeholders in Afghanistan's peace issue and deem their presence around a single table more effective and productive. It should go without saying that centralized and organized efforts for peace talks will bear the desired result. But what is a matter of question for me is that whenever the US increases its struggle for talks, Russia also shows more tendency in bringing Afghan and Taliban representatives to the table in Moscow. It seems like a political rivalry rather than real concern for stability. What if the results of the two meetings conflict with each other?

All in all, since the Taliban do not decrease or stop their attacks against Afghanistan, it will be naïve to believe the Taliban's genuine intention for talks. Two issues have to be considered in the negotiations: First, the peace negotiators have to talk about the end of insurgency before the withdrawal of foreign troops. Accepting Taliban's peace package without any preconditions or any positive steps by them will be counterproductive. Second, if negotiators are not able to continue the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, they, at least, should join their forces through forming a single group of all regional stakeholders to continue the talks.

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Moscow Peace Conference: A New Twist in Afghan Peace Process

By: Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

After the initial botched attempt by Russia and Pakistan to organize a peace conference on Afghanistan in Moscow few months back where participation of Taliban was planned, stake holders agreed to allow for Moscow Peace conference on Afghanistan to take place on November 10, 2018, one of the first where representatives of Afghan Taliban have directly participated, sitting next to, and face to face around a large round-table along other participants. Moscow peace conference was opposed by Government of Afghanistan when it was first planned to take place. Along with many other attendees, representatives of Afghanistan High Peace Council and unofficial participation of the representative of the Government of India has somehow balanced the event. Afghan Taliban have sent a delegation of five members who presented long statement outlining their 'position on peace', asking for 'international guarantor' for ongoing peace process, casting doubts and complaining about 'dishonest' initiatives on the part of US and Afghanistan Governments for peace in the country, narcotics and myriad of issues which Taliban put the blame for their existence on US Government and 'Kabul Administration'. Though there have been many meetings held between representatives of Taliban and the US Government, Afghanistan Government and other countries including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, the hallmark of this conference is that Taliban have openly attended it with their sizeable delegation and presented their demands and position openly to the participants and the press.

It is clearly noticeable that Moscow Peace Conference was initiated after relations between Pakistan and the United States of America had hit its lowest ebb, and Pakistan tried to warm up relations with her cold-war rival, Russia to counter-balance any untoward actions by US Government. In the advent of US president Donald Trump taking office, United States has drastically changed its policy toward her cold war ally, Pakistan, blaming her for 'lies and deceptions' in case of Afghanistan and has openly blamed Pakistan for supporting terrorism and hostile armed groups – including Taliban - who campaign to weaken Afghanistan central government and hinders attempts to stabilize the country. Pakistan was even put in the grey list of a watch dog, which monitors countries supporting terrorism. The pressure continues by US Government and fate of Pakistan lies in the balance as she should either terminate support to hostile groups campaigning against Afghanistan Government or face punishing measures. In the backdrop of this scenario, and in order to siphon off ongoing pressure by US Government and international community, Pakistani establishment cleverly planned for alternate policy to continue to provide support to Taliban through new allies and regional powers including Russia, China, Uzbekistan and Qatar so that her efforts put in place in bringing in Taliban back in military, political and social scenes in Afghanistan is not gone in vain. Pakistani establishment has successfully coaxed Russia and other countries with interest at stake in Afghanistan, for example Uzbekistan, to trust Taliban and helped them establish line of communication with the group. Russia and Uzbekistan quickly bought the idea keeping in view ground realities in the country that Taliban was organized force to reckon with. Henceforth, many meetings held between Russians and Taliban were reported in the press, which were confirmed by Russian embassy in Kabul. Uzbekistan also stepped in and hosted a meeting with Taliban in that country. Chinese have been engaged with Taliban, but they had always taken Afghanistan Government officials in confidence before their contacts with the group. Pakistan can now smartly claim it isn't them only to have contacts with Taliban, there are other countries engaged with the group, hence successfully brought in new actors in the game. Pakistan believes they have hit two targets with one bullet, meaning 1) support

to Taliban will continue through other countries including Russia in the event Pakistan was blacklisted or economically crippled under possible, heavy sanctions, and 2) Taliban are given international and regional recognition when Russia came in to the scene and invited Taliban delegations to Nov.10, 2018 peace conference on Afghanistan in Moscow. Other twists in ongoing Afghan peace process include assertive Russian position. With the help from Pakistan, Russia has successfully established working relationship with Afghan Taliban. This phenomena could have devastating implications on situation in Afghanistan in the event when Russia decide to use Afghanistan as leverage against USA and other European countries to settle issues in Syria, Europe, Ukraine or any other matter of importance to Russia. USA and NATO continue to invest heavily in Afghanistan, and they are powerful block. Their interest is in a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. These points – though at present only at inception phases – should be taken heed of and countries surrounding Afghanistan, regional powers and world powers should manage not to use Afghanistan as tool for their vested interests.

Though the government of Afghanistan has distanced itself from Nov.10 Moscow Peace Conference, attendance by members of High Peace Council is encouraging. India is a major regional power and important development partner of Afghanistan stabilization and development, and continues to assist Afghanistan with hundreds of millions of USD every year. Though unofficial, a two member delegation from India participated in the conference. This can be a start and pave the way to full engagement and participation of countries which have assisted Afghanistan to stabilize during last eighteen years, in future conferences and settings, held to bring peace and stability in the country. For any and all efforts initiated to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, they should be honest, void of any hidden agenda and vested interests. It is unfortunate to see so much at play around Moscow Peace Conference, putting the whole process questionable.

At this point in time, the only logical order to pursue peace in Afghanistan is to continue pressure on Pakistan – both economic and military – and to encourage Taliban to terminate relations with countries who have hostile designs for Afghanistan. In addition, Afghanistan's friends and development partners should assist Government of Afghanistan in intelligence, military, training, economy and empowerment in order to ward off ongoing relentless efforts by intelligence services of unfriendly countries to destabilize the country. Moscow Peace Conference and the likes of it should continue to follow up on pledges, promises and actions so that road to peace is narrowed. It is highly recommended that such conferences be inclusive, meaning all parties who have stakes and interests in Afghanistan should be part of all and any peace conferences – irrespective of which party initiated them. For Afghanistan to succeed in her efforts to stabilize and successfully chart development plan for her future, international community, development partners and regional powers – including neighboring countries – should work on an agenda and strategy that is not dictated by their home countries' policies. A separate Management Unit should be formed, which should be funded, guaranteed, directly observed and supported by world powers, and keeping Afghanistan Government and realities on the ground at its center, an overall inclusive strategy to bring peace, political and economic stability and national unity to the country should be formulated. Afghanistan is fighting for its existence, the people of Afghanistan deserve peace, stability and development, and it is the responsibility of world comity to support this nation at this critical juncture – NOT TO use it as tools to suit their vested interests.

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