

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



October 09, 2018

Afghanistan: Increasing Women Political Representation as a National Priority

The past two decades have witnessed an impressive rise in women's political representation around the world. During this period, the global average in the share of women in national parliaments doubled, and all regions made substantial progress towards the goal of 30 percent women's representation in decision making.

While some countries have made giant strides in women's political representation, Afghanistan has achieved very little progress. Considering that women's role in the country's socio-economic and cultural landscape appears to be increasing, and it is expected that the increasing role of women in the society would translate to greater inclusion of women in the political process. Social scholars have identified four major socio-economic and cultural changes with potentials to positively transform women's political representation in developing countries.

The first is the growing "voice" and rising profile of women in the economy, community work and various spheres of professional and public engagements. The second is the gradual but steady withering of cultural restrictions on the perception of women in public affairs since the last three decades. The third is the rapid expansion in the work of activist women organizations supporting increased participation of women in politics and a resultant rise in the number of women joining politics and standing for elections. While the fourth is the increasing tendency of women to take up economic roles in the family previously reserved for men and to question the myth of the "male as-bread winner" in many middle and low income families.

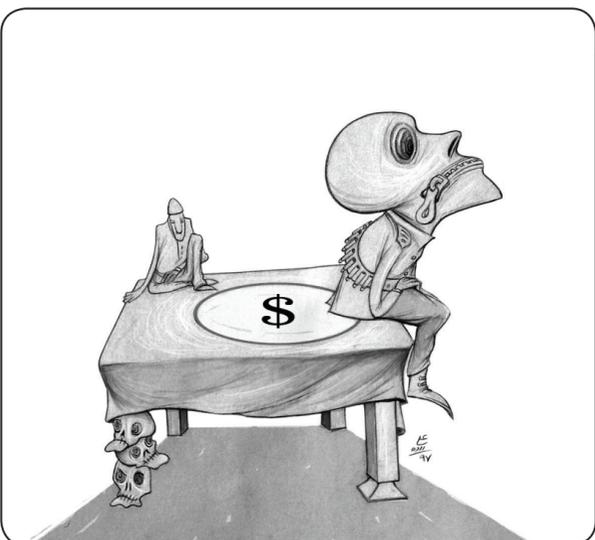
Generally, Afghanistan has a policy environment that would appear to support gender equity. Firstly, the country is a signatory to most of the international conventions on gender equality and women empowerment. Secondly, successive governments in the country have established a vibrant institutional structure for the development and implementation of gender policies, coordinated by the Ministry of Women Affairs. Thirdly, there seems to be a widespread appreciation of gender issues as both government and non-governmental organizations emphasize gender mainstreaming in their activities.

Although the prospect for increased representation of Afghan women in political leadership appear strong, a look at the data on the political representation of women in Afghanistan indicates that gender gains of the last decade have not reflected in the level of women's representation in political leadership.

The question, then, is why does the gender gap in political representation continue to exist even when the socio-economic and cultural landscape in Afghanistan favors greater political representation of women?

Social scholars argue that slow progress with women's political representation in Afghanistan is intimately connected with the diagnosis of the problem - how the problem of women's underrepresentation is perceived and understood as well as the strategies seen, strictly, as a question of women's lack of resources. Discussion of barriers to women's participation in politics focuses largely on issues that diminish women's political resources and undermine their capacity to engage in the politics. These issues include traditional values and norms, community expectations, conservative family upbringing, lack of good education, lack of work or professional experience, structural and physical violence against women, and discriminatory roles assigned to women in the political parties.

Efforts to address women's political underrepresentation in Afghanistan have typically focused on expanding women's political resources by, among other things, educating women, mentoring them, expanding their networks, and providing them with financial assistance. As experience has shown, these efforts have produced marginal results and incremental change. Therefore, to address women's political underrepresentation in Afghanistan, the efforts shall be focused on increasing the representation of women at the leadership level; they shall be at the policy making level. Thus, supporting women candidates for the Afghan National Parliament election is one of the political means that can serve to advance women political representation in the country.



Pakistani poker: Playing Saudi Arabia against China

By James M. Dorsey

A podcast version of this story is available on Soundcloud, Stitcher, TuneIn and Tumblr.

Desperate for funding to fend off a financial crisis fuelled in part by mounting debt to China, Pakistan is playing a complicated game of poker that could hand Saudi Arabia a strategic victory in its bitter feud with Iran at the People's Republic's expense.

The Pakistani moves threaten a key leg of the USD60 billion plus Chinese investment in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crown jewel of Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road initiative.

They also could jeopardize Chinese hopes to create a second overland route to Iran, a key node in China's transportation links to Europe. Finally, they grant Saudi Arabia a prominent place in the Chinese-funded port of Gwadar that would significantly weaken Iran's ability to compete with its Indian-backed seaport of Chabahar.

Taken together, the moves risk dragging not only Pakistan but also China into the all but open war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Pakistan's first move became evident in early September with the government's failure to authorise disbursements for road projects, already hit by delays in Chinese approvals, that are part of CPEC's Western route, linking the province of Balochistan with the troubled region of Xinjiang in north-western China.

In doing so, Pakistan implicitly targeted a key Chinese driver for CPEC: the pacification of Xinjiang's Turkic Muslim population through a combination of economic development enhanced by trade and economic activity flowing through CPEC as well as brutal repression and mass re-education.

The combination of Pakistani and Chinese delays "has virtually brought progress work on the Western route to a standstill," a Western diplomat in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad said.

Pakistani Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid, in a further bid to bring Pakistani government expenditure under control that at current rates could force the country to seek a \$US 12 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has cut \$2 billion dollars from the US\$8.2 billion budget to upgrade and expand Pakistan's railway network, a key pillar of CPEC. Mr. Rashid plans to slash a further two billion dollars.

"Pakistan is a poor country that cannot afford (the) huge burden of the loans... CPEC is like the backbone for Pakistan, but our eyes and ears are open," Mr. Rashid said.

The budget cuts came on the back of Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party projecting CPEC prior to the July 25 election that swept him to power to as a modern-day equivalent of the British East India Company, which dominated the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century.

PTI criticism included denouncing Chinese-funded mass transit projects in three cities in Punjab as a squandering of funds that could have better been invested in social spending. PTI activists suggested that the projects had involved corrupt practices.

Pakistan's final move was to invite Saudi Arabia to build a refinery in Gwadar and invest in Balochistan mining. Chinese questioning of Pakistan's move was evident when the Pakistani government backed off suggestions that Saudi Arabia would become part of CPEC.

Senior Saudi officials this week visited Islamabad and Gwadar to discuss the deal that would also involve deferred payments on Saudi oil supplies to Pakistan and create a strategic oil reserve close to Iran's border.

"The incumbent government is bringing Saudi Arabia closer to Gwadar.

In other words, the hardline Sunni-Wahhabi state would be closer than ever to the Iranian border. This is likely to infuriate Tehran," said Baloch politician and former Pakistani ports and shipping minister Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo.

Pakistan's game of poker amounts to a risky gamble that serves Pakistani and Saudi purposes, puts China whose prestige and treasure are on the line in a difficult spot, could perilously spark tension along the Pakistan-Iran border, and is likely to provoke Iranian counter moves. It also risks putting Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, who depend on China economically in different ways, in an awkward position.

The Saudi engagement promises up to US\$10 billion in investments as well as balance of payments relief. It potentially could ease US concerns that a possible IMF bailout would help Pakistan service debt to China.

A refinery and strategic oil reserve in Gwadar would serve Saudi Arabia's goal of preventing Chabahar, the Indian-backed Iranian port, from emerging as a powerful Arabian Sea hub at a time that the United States is imposing sanctions designed to choke off Iranian oil exports.

A Saudi think tank, the International Institute for Iranian Studies (AGCIS) that is believed to be backed by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, argued last year in a study that Chabahar posed "a direct threat to the Arab Gulf states" that called for "immediate counter measures."

Written by Mohammed Hassan Husseinbor, an Iranian political researcher of Baloch origin, the study warned that Chabahar would enable Iran to increase its oil market share in India at the expense of Saudi Arabia, raise foreign investment in the Islamic republic, increase government revenues, and allow Iran to project power in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

Mr. Husseinbor suggested that Saudi support for a low-level Baloch insurgency in Iran could serve as a countermeasure. "Saudis could persuade Pakistan to soften its opposition to any potential Saudi support for the Iranian Baluch... The Arab-Baluch alliance is deeply rooted in the history of the Gulf region and their opposition to Persian domination," Mr. Husseinbor said.

Noting the vast expanses of Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Mr. Husseinbor went on to say that "it would be a formidable challenge, if not impossible, for the Iranian government to protect such long distances and secure Chabahar in the face of widespread Baluch opposition, particularly if this opposition is supported by Iran's regional adversaries and world powers."

Saudi militants reported at the time the study was published that funds from the kingdom were flowing into anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian Sunni Muslim ultra-conservative madrassas or religious seminaries in Balochistan.

US President Donald J. Trump's national security advisor, John Bolton, last year before assuming office, drafted at the request of Mr. Trump's then strategic advisor, Steve Bannon, a plan that envisioned US support "for the democratic Iranian opposition," including in Balochistan and Iran's Sistan and Balochistan province.

All of this does not bode well for CPEC. China may be able to accommodate Pakistan by improving commercial terms for CPEC-related projects and Pakistani debt as well as easing Pakistani access to the Chinese market. China, however, is likely to find it far more difficult to prevent the Saudi-Iranian rivalry from spinning out of control in its backyard.

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Brexit and the European Order

By Joschka Fischer

There are only a few months left until the United Kingdom formally exits the European Union. So far, the debate about Brexit has been framed mainly in economic terms. Should the UK crash out of the bloc without a mutual exit agreement, the damage will likely be significant. And, as matters stand, such an agreement is far from assured.

A "hard Brexit" would mean that at 11:00 P.M. (GMT) on March 29, 2019, the UK's membership in all EU treaties - such as the customs union and single market - and international trade agreements concluded by the EU would end. Great Britain would become merely a third party, with far-reaching consequences for EU trade - not least chaos at the UK border.

But Brexit will of course have far-reaching political consequences, too. In terms of its day-to-day affairs, the EU is largely perceived as a common market and customs union. But at its core, it is a political project based on a specific idea about the European system of states. This idea - not the economics of the matter - is what Brexit is really about. And it is why the UK's decision to leave the EU - with or without an exit agreement - will have a profound impact on the twenty-first-century European order.

The slim majority of Britons who voted for "Leave" in the 2016 referendum weren't concerned with economic wealth, but with reclaiming full political sovereignty. They define sovereignty not in terms of objective facts about Britain's present or future, but in terms of Britain's past as a global power during the nineteenth century. Never mind that the UK is now a medium-size European power with little to no chance of ever becoming a global player again - be it inside or outside the EU.

If the rest of the continent were to follow the British example and opt for the nineteenth over the twenty-first century, the EU would disintegrate. Each country would be forced back into a cumbersome system of sovereign states struggling for supremacy and constantly checking one another's ambitions.

Under such conditions, European countries would lack any real power, and thus would be retired from the world stage for good. Europe, torn between Transatlanticism and Eurasianism, would become easy prey for the non-European major powers of the twenty-first century. In a worst-case scenario, Europe might even become an arena for the larger powers' fights. Europeans would no longer determine their own future; their fate would be decided elsewhere.

The old, declining European order of the nineteenth century originally emerged out of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). The medieval system that preceded it, based on a universal church and empire, perished during

the Reformation. After a series of religious wars and the establishment of strong territorial powers, it was replaced by the "Westphalian system" of sovereign states.

During the next few centuries, Europe ruled the world, and Britain itself was the dominant European power. Yet the Westphalian system was destroyed by the two world wars of the first half of the twentieth century - both of which were in fact European wars for world domination. When the guns fell silent in 1945, the Europeans - even the victorious European allies - had effectively lost their sovereignty. The Westphalian system was replaced by the Cold War bipolar order, wherein sovereignty rested with the two non-European nuclear powers: the United States and the Soviet Union.

The EU was conceived as an attempt to regain European sovereignty peacefully, by pooling the national interests of European states. The goal of this effort has always been to prevent a relapse into the old system of power rivalries, reciprocal alliances, and hegemonic head butting. And the key to success has been a continental system based on economic, political, and legal integration.

Brexit has thrown the material implications of this level of integration into sharp relief. Over the course of the UK's negotiations with the EU, an old problem has re-emerged: the Irish question. Once the Republic of Ireland and the UK both belonged to the EU, the impetus for Irish reunification disappeared, and the decades-long civil war between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland could be put to rest. The practical realities of EU integration meant that it no longer mattered which country Northern Ireland belonged to. But with Brexit throwing history into reverse, the specters of the past are threatening to return.

Europeans should watch the Irish issue closely, because there is even more potential for a return of such conflicts on the continent. A new world order is emerging, and it will be centered around the Pacific, not the Atlantic. Europe has one - and only one - chance to manage this historic transition. The old European nation-states will be no match for the new competition unless they are united. And even then, achieving European sovereignty will require a massive and concentrated effort of political will and ingenuity. Yearning for a glorious past is the last thing that will help Europeans confront the challenge they face. The past, by its very nature, is over. With or without the UK, Europe must see to its future.

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.

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