

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



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Seeking Higher Price – A Blow to Peace Talks

After the peace talks between the Taliban and United States representatives had been called off by US President Donald Trump, militancy continues unabated. The Taliban leadership seems disappointed after holding nine rounds of peace talks with their US interlocutors and continue their militancy to show that their militant fighters are not demoralized by Trump's decision. But their attacks against non-combatants and infrastructures suggest that they have been undermined seeking to put pressure on the Afghan government through carrying out indiscriminate attacks.

At the negotiating table, the Taliban confessed with their US interlocutors that they would not win through war. It is self-evident that the Taliban have also sustained heavy casualties in the conflict, especially in recent years. Their suicide bombings and attacks against women and children do not only indicate the Taliban's radical ideology but also their weakness. To signal that the Taliban support talks, their delegation visited Moscow this week as part of regular meetings with Russian officials, which have continued parallel to the American talks with the militant groups brokered by Qatar.

Meanwhile, top Taliban negotiator Abbas Stanikzai is cited as saying, "Our stance is that there is no solution to the conflict except negotiations and except peace on the table." He added, "We hope that Mr. Trump rethinks his announcement and comes back to where we were."

Whatever the reason was behind canceling the peace talks, the Taliban have consistently broken the rule of talks. In the draft agreement between the Taliban and US representatives, the Taliban sought to impose their unilateral demands without declaring ceasefire, which was in the agenda of negotiations.

In a commentary titled "Political Reconciliation: Prospects", Dr. Zeng Xiangyu, a lecturer in Institute of South Asia Studies at Sichuan University, said that "the prospects for political reconciliation in Afghanistan is largely unpromising, despite some progresses have been made. Political reconciliation would die out, if military means could succeed in settling Afghan issue, no matter who wins the game. However, this is an unlikely scenario." He added, "The prevailing side, if conflict intensified, will definitely bargain for a much higher price. However, since the present price offer made by each side is too high to be accepted as perceived by the other side, higher price would of course hardly be accepted unless it is made by someone in an overwhelmingly advantageous position." The second possible he mentioned was that "both sides fall in a deadlock where each side expects a breakthrough by a coup de grace".

The Taliban have constantly broken the rule of talks and intensified their attacks to gain higher price at the negotiating table. However, they did not consider that pushing for higher price would not be acceptable to Afghan people and would simply generate further fear and hatred among people. That is, although Afghan representatives had no seat around the table, Afghans are one of the main sides of the talks. There will be no agreement if Afghans or their representatives do not sign the deal.

Although Russia hosted the Taliban delegation this week, it will not lead to peace. The Afghan government does not seem optimistic about the role of Russia and views it with doubt. If Russia seeks to broker talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, it has to support "Afghan-owned" and "Afghan-led" peace process rather than hosting the Taliban delegation whenever they want without the consent of the Afghan government. In other words, if Russia hosts the Taliban delegation repeatedly, it will be construed as both legitimizing the Taliban and continuing their political rivalries with the United States – the fact that Moscow is aware of.

If the talks resume between the Taliban and US representatives, three issues should be considered: First, a "comprehensive ceasefire" must be an inevitable part of the agenda. No agreement should be signed unless the Taliban agree to declare ceasefire. Second, the concern of Afghan people have to be heeded seriously and their representatives should participate in the negotiations. Third, all struggles should be made so that the agreement is a win-win situation.

The Taliban should understand that targeting civilians and infrastructures will not be a solution at all. They have to observe the rule of war and stop violating humanitarian law.

Meanwhile, if the Taliban genuinely seek peace in Afghanistan, they have to be reasonable at the table and prove their sincerity through respecting the rights and freedoms of civilians. In short, intensifying attacks against civilians, mainly women and children, will be a strong blow to the peace process.

Pre-Taliban Political History of Afghanistan

By: Rajkumar Singh

Modern Afghanistan emerged during the nineteenth century as a buffer state squeezed between the Russian and British empire. From the beginning it was a pawn in the battles between world powers. It had to accommodate different ruling regimes of diverse character in her state structure through coups, counter coups, strife, invasions, etc. entailing into a permanent war-like culture especially from the early 1970s. As a matter of fact, decades of conflict had shattered government and social structures in Afghanistan, the world's fifth poorest country with a life expectancy of 43. According to the UN report more than seven million people are chronically hungry, and 53 per cent live on less than a dollar a day. One in four children do not survive beyond the age of five. Seventy per cent of the population suffers severe malnutrition. Less than a quarter has access to safe drinking water, only 12 per cent to adequate sanitation and 10 per cent of electricity. The life expectancy of 45 is 20 years lower than in neighbouring countries. In some provinces, the maternal mortality rates are the worst ever recorded, anywhere.

Phase of political instability
The history of Afghanistan in recent past has provided us with many significant revelations. In 1973, King Zahir Shah was overthrown from power in a Soviet supported coup led by Mohammad Daud Khan. Since then, Afghanistan's role as a buffer state among superpowers began to change obviously, and the geo-political balance was broken up. Now the Soviet influence became dominant which disturbed the US. The US policy in Afghanistan was in tune with its overall policy towards the oil producing countries, especially in the Middle East. In addition to geopolitical factors, access to sources of energy has been a great concern for the US. It knows that world oil reserves are depleting faster than few discoveries of the fuel. The impending depletion of the world's oil has been motivating the West in pinning its faith on the Caspian region. In the days of Soviet domination the relatively radical social reforms practised by Daud threatened the status of traditional tribes and religious powers, and their interests as well, many kinds of confrontations, including armed revolt had been building up. The intensification of social conflicts made Daud regime which had not strong and firm foundation fall into predicament and caused domestic conflicts and clashes to escalate continuously. In April 1978, a communist-led 'Saur Revolution' eventually brought out the collapse of Daud Khan. He was replaced by a pro-Soviet Noor Mohammad Tarakki, he however, was killed due to inter-factional conflict in the ruling party, leading to Soviet military intervention on 27 December 1979. Thus Afghanistan lost its role as a buffer state completely and became the front land of the Soviet Union's southward expansion.

The Leftist coup in Afghanistan installed Babrak Karmal, a leader of Moscow's choice, in the place of Hafizullah Amin as the new ruler of Kabul. The coup in Afghanistan and its possible fall-out for the two neighbouring countries, Iran and Pakistan was noticeable. It had upset the precarious balance gained in bilateral fields, particularly, with Pakistan during Daud. Before the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the fall of Shah's regime in Iran and the emergence of Khomeini in his place marked a new revival of Islamic tenets. In late 1970s it got an emphasised meaning in Libya and Iran. Further it caused a new surge of revivalism in Pakistan which was manifest in Bhutto's latter years and was culminated in General Zia's programmes of Islamic reforms. The new rising tendency, at least, in general was the result of the failure of the secular ideologies. The increasing hegemony of the two world political and economic systems—as represented by the military, technological and economic domination of the United States and the former Soviet had left little room for the autonomy of the liberal/nationalist or Marxist/nationalist movements. They made the course of development a difficult one in Muslim countries.

Background for arrival of Soviet Union

In the changed circumstances the region became a valuable area for the global

narcotic trade. Two areas of the world—the 'Golden Crescent' of South West Asia consisting of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and the 'Golden Triangle' of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos are traditionally known for narco cultivation in the world and provides for 60 per cent of heroin reaching America and 80 per cent for Europe. Opium cultivation and use has been continuing in this region for the last few centuries. Under the British rule opium production was licensed. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British used to import opium from India to China for reducing the balance of payments' deficits caused by large tea purchases. Drug money has changed the economic and social scene in the country. Although a small and powerful group of narco barons has reaped the major profits, members of the law-enforcing agencies, bureaucrats and hangers have also benefited from the trickle. The conflict following the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan facilitated increased opium production. It also provided a source of funding for the anti-Soviet war efforts and allowed traffickers to exploit the support to the Mujahideen by Iran and Pakistan, by using those countries as transit routes. The drug problem became even more serious with the civil war and political anarchy reigning in Afghanistan.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 it had to confront directly with two kinds of powers. The first was the domestic opposition parties, including national, tribal, and religious powers, as well as part of the social forces that approved of democracy and modern reforms. All these compose a loose union under the banner of anti-Soviet. The second was the Western countries headed by America and Pakistan. In the later period of Daud's regime, the US began to interfere into Afghanistan's affairs and opposed the Soviet Union's presence and expansion in Afghanistan. After the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan, the US immediately strengthened its support to the opposition parties in Afghanistan. Taking Pakistan as a base, the US supplied with abundant financial, military and staff assistance as a guarantee for the final military success of Afghanistan's opposition powers. It was during this period that the religions of the Gulf Bay, mainly the Wahabi, entered Afghan with the slogan of 'Jihad'. Osama bin Laden was the most active participant and organiser. He also set up a fund named 'Volunteers' home' enrolling volunteers from Saudi Arabia and other Arabic countries to go into Afghanistan for Jihad.

Long term effects of the event

To flush out the Soviets, Islamic zealots were brought from all parts of the Islamic world to Pakistan and Afghanistan forging a unity among those who shared nothing in common but willingness to die for a cause they considered Islamic. This convergence, enabled by western powers, not only made a superpower to retreat and eventually fall apart but made Islamists aware of the potential of Jihad and force multiplication effect of networking. Its aftermath saw ascendancy of Taliban—recruited, trained, weaponised and militarily backed up by Pakistan, an ally of the West. More sinisterly, Taliban under the patronage of Pakistan, converted Afghanistan into a breeding ground for Islamic terrorists with training bases and infrastructural support to extremists from Turkey to Indonesia, Chechnya to China and Europe to Africa. It became the home of Al-Qaeda and gave Islamists a geographical space to pursue their global agenda with impunity. The situation aggravated in Afghanistan when Jihad was launched by the Mujahideens sponsored by the US and Saudi Arabia through ISI of Pakistan against Soviet occupation. The fact is that the motivations of those who finance and train them are hardly religious per se. From Al-Qaeda to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorist organisation misuse the faith of Islam to justify terrorism in its name, even though their principal terrorist motivation is political. For the next ten years after intervention there was a continuous conflict between the Soviet troops and the Mujahideen and the US actively supported the latter throughout the period.

Dr. Rajkumar Singh is Professor and Head of P.G. Department of Political Science in BNMU, West Campus P.G. Centre, Saharsa-852201. Bihar, India.

Joining the Technological Frontiers

By: Tej Kohli

Artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology are both on an exponential growth trajectory, with the potential to improve how we experience our lives and even to extend life itself. But few have considered how these two frontier technologies could be brought together symbiotically to tackle global health and environmental challenges.

Consider the pace of recent developments in both fields. Biotechnology, in cost-benefit terms, has been improving by a factor of ten every year. The cost of deciphering the human genome has dropped from \$3 billion in 2001 to about \$1,000 today; a process that took months ten years ago can now be completed in less than an hour. Likewise, based on current developments, PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates that AI's contribution to global output will reach \$15.7 trillion by 2030 – more than the current combined output of China and India.

Yet, if anything, these predictions underestimate the economic impact. AI applications will eventually be so broad and so embedded in every aspect of our daily lives that they will likely contribute three to four times more to global output than the Internet, which today accounts for around \$50 trillion of the global economy. Moreover, the siloed nature of current analyses means that potential AI/biotech combination technologies have not been fully considered or priced in.

For example, combination technologies could tackle a global health issue such as organ donation. According to the World Health Organization, an average of around 100,800 solid organ transplants were performed each year as of 2008. Yet in the United States, there are nearly 113,000 people waiting for a life-saving organ transplant, while thousands of good organs are discarded each year. For years, those in need of a kidney transplant had limited options: they either had to find a willing and biologically viable living donor, or wait for a viable deceased donor to show up in their local hospital.

But with enough patients and willing donors, Big Data and AI make it possible to facilitate far more matches than this one-to-one system allows, through a system of paired kidney donation. Patients can now procure a donor who is not a biological fit and still receive a kidney, because AI can match donors to recipients across a massive array of patient-donor relationships. In fact, a single person who steps forward to donate a kidney – either to a loved one or even to a stranger – can set off a domino effect that saves dozens of lives by resolving the missing link in a long chain of pairings.

Since the first paired kidney exchanges took place in 2000, nearly 6,000 people have received kidney transplants from donors identified by algorithms. But this could be just the start of AI-facilitated organ transplantation. AI can al-

ready identify potential donors and recipients; in the future, it will be able to account for even richer patient data, perhaps including moral and religious factors, to help with sequencing and triage decisions (that is, determining whether someone should get a transplant before someone else).

The biggest hurdle preventing these AI models from reaching their full potential is biological. In theory, AI applications could draw on data sets encompassing all living and deceased organ donors and all patients worldwide. But, in practice, there is a time limitation on most organ pairings, because organs from deceased donors are viable for transplantation for only a short period. To be paired, recipients must be located within a geographic radius that can be reached in time.

Fortunately, synthetic biotechnology could vastly expand the scope of feasible pairings. Globally, the synthetic biology market is growing fast, and is expected to exceed \$12.5 billion by 2024, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of 20%. Within this emerging industry, there are companies (including one in which I am an investor) exploring methods of preserving and even regenerating organs outside of the body, potentially for multiple days at an ambient temperature. This could extend the distances that organs can be transported, thus enabling a network effect by increasing the size of viable data pools from which AI models can draw to produce more efficient chains of pairings.

Perfecting new biotechnologies usually takes years. But, if successful, these innovations could revolutionize large areas of public health, with the global organ-donation regime being just the start.

The moral and ethical implications of today's frontier technologies are far-reaching. Fundamental questions have not been adequately addressed. How will algorithms weigh the needs of poor and wealthy patients? Should a donor organ be sent to a distant patient – potentially one in a different country – with a low rejection risk or to a nearby patient whose rejection risk is only slightly higher?

These are important questions. But I believe that we should get combination technologies up and working, and then decide on the appropriate controls. The matching power of AI means that eight lives could be saved by just one deceased organ donor; innovations in biotechnology could ensure that organs are never wasted. The faster these technologies advance, the more lives we can save.

AI and biotech are undergoing rapid development precisely because they have such far-reaching potential. As they move forward, we must keep looking for new combinations to unlock. I suspect that we will find we have underestimated their potential by considering them in isolation.

Tej Kohli is a London-based technology and real-estate entrepreneur, businessman, and philanthropist.



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




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