

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



February 29, 2016

Political will must be Mustered

The war in Afghanistan has long turned into a tough challenge on the hands of the U.S. and its military generals as well as politicians. The American approach to the war in Afghanistan has long been characterized by a lack of understanding or disregard of some of the most pertinent ground realities that needed due attention from the very beginning of the war. The U.S., during the Bush administration, effectively neglected the war in Afghanistan. While the Taliban were gradually regrouping and finding increasing audacity to organize attacks on Afghan and foreign troops, the American policymakers were optimistic that these were only temporary hiccups. They believed that these temporary setbacks could be overcome through pumping in more money and helping the government of Afghanistan consolidate its authority. The U.S. has learnt it the hard way that seeking a smooth transition and withdrawal would be highly dependent on its ability to pacify the country in the lead-up to the deadline. Broadly speaking, there have been two real options in front of the U.S. from the beginning. Calming Afghanistan permanently through helping it reach a broad-based intra-Afghan consensus that also involves the Taliban and other insurgent groups. This would have been the more difficult path to take. The other has been seeking a short to medium term solution to the Afghanistan conflict through patching up together a shaky deal that never stands a chance of being comprehensive. Unfortunately, what the U.S. seems to be more interested in is the second option as opposed to the first one. This has the potential to become the fountain head of renewed instability and conflict in Afghanistan.

At the end of the day, Afghanistan still finds itself saddled with a multitude of challenges for which no easy solution is forthcoming. The challenges ahead of Afghanistan remain extremely complex and, to be certain, the government of Afghanistan alone would not be able to resolve these challenges single-handedly but would require active contribution from the international community. In the areas of economy, security, bureaucracy and service-delivery, governance and politics, Afghanistan, right now needs to take stock of the situation and act proactively before it would be too late. Above all, it is the responsibility of the country's national leadership, leaders of National Unity Government, the cabinet and the national parliament to set the stage for working proactively to resolve these range of challenges and problems.

Afghanistan's political and security challenges are intimately correlated with the outcome of the so-called peace process and the ongoing talks with the Taliban. Unfortunately, the possibility is strong that the Taliban insurgency may drag on for many more years since the ongoing talks within such a framework, evidently, cannot bring about a final and comprehensive resolution of the Afghan conflict. When military deaths and civilian deaths are occurring on daily basis, high-profile authorities are under serious security threats and Taliban's sympathizers in Afghan security forces launch attacks on foreign soldiers and mentors than talking of progress in Afghanistan is no more than a tale of futility.

No doubt Afghan national army and police have nurtured well but one must not forget that the Taliban are still potent. The Afghan security forces have still a long way to go to defend Afghanistan on their own.

The challenge in front of the government of Afghanistan and its political and military leadership would be to prepare for a long-drawn war and conflict that would last for many more years. Under such circumstances and when the country would remain in the throes of instability and conflict, economic and political development would take the beating. Under the conditions of war and instability, Afghanistan's developmental projects would remain under-funded and largely abandoned.

Analysts are of the view that between development and lingering instability Afghanistan should choose one. The fact is that Afghanistan, in actuality, cannot make a choice; its hands remain tied, the future still uncertain and continued instability gradually becoming a guaranteed future of Afghanistan.

As if these grave challenges are not enough, Afghanistan also faces the challenge of developing and consolidating a befitting political and administrative system – one that can deliver 'good governance' and be commensurate with the real needs of the country.

A culture of accountability and answerability needs to be built into the current ailing and corrupt system. For this, the reform must start from the country's highest leadership positions. For the system to be purged and cleansed, enough and substantive political will must be mustered and this would remain impossible until the national leadership sets aside acting out of political expediency and considerations and do not prioritize upholding of the rule of law as the over-arching objective.



Negotiating Peace from a Weaker Stance

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

As first meeting of face-to-face peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban is being planned by the Quadrilateral Coordination Group in the first week of March, the militants are attempting to step up military offensive and mount further bombings across the country. The two deadly suicide bombings which rocked the capital city of Kunar province and the city of Kabul on Saturday left 23 people dead and more than fifty people wounded. The bombings are coming as part of greater efforts by the Taliban to expand violence and threaten major areas in the north and south of the country. The attacks, which are among the deadliest assaults organized by the Taliban in recent months, are sending worrying signals from the Taliban over their participation in the talks planned for early March and their overall approach to the future peace negotiations.

The deadly bombings occur a few days after the four-nation peace coordination group – which is comprised of Afghanistan, Pakistan, US and China – announced the plans for peace talks in March and called on the groups of Taliban and other militants to join the first meeting of peace talks to be held in the Pakistani capital Islamabad. Pakistan, which is believed to have influence over the Taliban, also announced that it has contacted the militant groups and asked them to introduce their competent representatives in the Islamabad meeting. The Taliban have so far declined to confirm their participation. After the conclusion of QCG in Kabul, a spokesman of the group's political office in Qatar said they were unaware of what are going on in Kabul for resumption of peace talks. With such remarks, Taliban's participation in the talks still remains uncertain.

This is an approach seemingly being tactically used by the Taliban. Despite the beliefs that the group is prepared to join the Table of negotiation, they apparently are not willing to rush into negotiations for peace as they see themselves in advantageous position. The Taliban do not seem to miss any opportunity to boost their stance and come at the end from a stronger position. Most probably, the Taliban will continue to play with the peace plans and buy time to take advantage of warmer seasons ahead to increase violence. While the four-nation group is waiting for their response, they are mounting further bombings and suicide attacks along their military offensives across the country.

On the contrary, the Afghan government seems to be in hurry to pursue Taliban to come to the table ahead of another year of heightened insurgency in the country. This is while almost all the developments on the ground do not seem to be in favor of the government. Taliban continue threatening major towns and cities in the north and south of the country while government forces are struggling to contain the insurgency by fighting the militants in several fronts. The challenges for the Afghan National Security Forces are particularly compounded by instability and uncertainty in the higher leadership of the armed forces.

While the army is led by a caretaker minister, the police and intelligence agencies are suffering from frequent changes and replacements in the leadership of the forces. The government recently announced that the interior minister has resigned and a new minister would be introduced for the slot.

The challenges facing Afghan security forces are extensive and far-reaching. A large part of the challenges are believed to stem from lack of leadership in the forces. A recent leaked report suggest that tens of thousands of police soldiers desert each year as result of high rate of casualties, low incentives for the serving soldiers and other problems. The ANSF also face immense institutional and operational problems in the fight against the Taliban. American military commanders recently advised the ANSF not to rely on staying in protected check posts but to take the war into the enemies' ground. NATO commanders have also recommended to make reforms in the army and police by bringing changes to senior leadership. All these challenges contribute to the lackluster performance of the security agencies in tackling the insurgency. The problems are not limited to the security agencies. The entire political system in the country is in disarray due to economic challenges, corruption and political rifts among the political community in the country. The government's fight against corruption has been criticized in recent weeks by national and international transparency groups. They even alarmed that a serious anti-corruption campaign was a prerequisite for peace and democracy in the country. The national unity government's policy to tackle corruption is believed to have doomed to failure. Morales among both the security forces, government officials and politicians are very low. There are talks in the media and political circles of deteriorating situation close to brink of a political breakdown in the country. An undeniable fact is that political cohesion is now largely absent in the country.

The facts on the ground leave the government in a weaker position in the talks with the insurgent groups. The Taliban have been consolidating power in recent months, with organizing successful operations against rival groups such as the Islamic State and the rival Taliban faction led by Mullah Rassoul. Other rival groups are no longer matching the Taliban in terms of power, better organization and ability to launch offensives. This is another factor giving the Taliban a military supremacy against the government. All these military superiority puts the Taliban in an upper hand in the future talks with the Afghan government. It would be crucially hard, if not impossible, for the government to be the winner of such talks. It is crucial for the government to ensure that it is at least in a balanced stance, if not having an upper hand, in the talks. The government needs to gain some notable military achievements and promote political cohesion along with good governance in the country. Only this would help the government to negotiate from a stronger position and secure a viable peace deal with the insurgent groups.

Abdul Ahad Bahrami is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at ahad.bahrami@gmail.com

The Problem with Evidence-Based Policies

By Ricardo Hausmann

Many organizations, from government agencies to philanthropic institutions and aid organizations now require that programs and policies be "evidence-based." It makes sense to demand that policies be based on evidence and that such evidence be as good as possible, within reasonable time and budgetary limits. But the way this approach is being implemented may be doing a lot of harm, impairing our ability to learn and improve on what we do.

The current so-called "gold standard" of what constitutes good evidence is the randomized control trial, or RCT, an idea that started in medicine two centuries ago, moved to agriculture, and became the rage in economics during the past two decades. Its popularity is based on the fact that it addresses key problems in statistical inference. For example, rich people wear fancy clothes. Would distributing fancy clothes to poor people make them rich? This is a case where correlation (between clothes and wealth) does not imply causation. Harvard graduates get great jobs. Is Harvard good at teaching – or just at selecting smart people who would have done well in life anyway? This is the problem of selection bias.

RCTs address these problems by randomly assigning those participating in the trial to receive either a "treatment" or a "placebo" (thereby creating a "control" group). By observing how the two groups differ after the intervention, the effectiveness of the treatment can be assessed. RCTs have been conducted on drugs, micro-loans, training programs, educational tools, and myriad other interventions. Suppose you are considering the introduction of tablets as a way to improve classroom learning. An RCT would require that you choose some 300 schools to participate, 150 of which would be randomly assigned to the control group that receives no tablets. Prior to distributing the tablets, you would perform a so-called baseline survey to assess how much children are learning in school. Then you give the tablets to the 150 "treatment" schools and wait. After a period of time, you would carry out another survey to find out whether there is now a difference in learning between the schools that received tablets and those that did not.

Suppose there are no significant differences, as has been the case with four RCTs that found that distributing books also had no effect. It would be wrong to assume that you learned that tablets (or books) do not improve learning.

What you have shown is that that particular tablet, with that particular software, used in that particular pedagogical strategy, and teaching those particular concepts did not make a difference. But the real question we wanted to answer was how tablets should be used to maximize learning. Here the design space is truly huge, and RCTs do not permit testing of more than two or three designs at a time – and test them at a snail's pace. Can we do better?

Consider the following thought experiment: We include some mechanism in the tablet to inform the teacher in real time about how well his or her pupils are absorbing the material being taught. We free all teachers to experiment with different software, different strategies, and dif-

ferent ways of using the new tool. The rapid feedback loop will make teachers adjust their strategies to maximize performance.

Over time, we will observe some teachers who have stumbled onto highly effective strategies. We then share what they have done with other teachers.

Notice how radically different this method is. Instead of testing the validity of one design by having 150 out of 300 schools implement the identical program, this method is "crawling" the design space by having each teacher search for results. Instead of having a baseline survey and then a final survey, it is constantly providing feedback about performance. Instead of having an econometrician do the learning in a centralized manner and inform everybody about the results of the experiment, it is the teachers who are doing the learning in a decentralized manner and informing the center of what they found. Clearly, teachers will be confusing correlation with causation when adjusting their strategies; but these errors will be revealed soon enough as their wrong assumptions do not yield better results. Likewise, selection bias may occur (some places may be doing better than others because they differ in other ways); but if different contexts require different strategies, the system will find them sooner or later. This strategy resembles more the social implementation of a machine-learning algorithm than a clinical trial. In economics, RCTs have been all the rage, especially in the field of international development, despite critiques by the Nobel laureate Angus Deaton, Lant Pritchett, and Dani Rodrik, who have attacked the inflated claims of RCT's proponents. One serious shortcoming is external validity. Lessons travel poorly: If an RCT finds out that giving micronutrients to children in Guatemala improves their learning, should you give micronutrients to Norwegian children?

My main problem with RCTs is that they make us think about interventions, policies, and organizations in the wrong way. As opposed to the two or three designs that get tested slowly by RCTs (like putting tablets or flipcharts in schools), most social interventions have millions of design possibilities and outcomes depend on complex combinations between them. This leads to what the complexity scientist Stuart Kauffman calls a "rugged fitness landscape." Getting the right combination of parameters is critical. This requires that organizations implement evolutionary strategies that are based on trying things out and learning quickly about performance through rapid feedback loops, as suggested by Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock at Harvard's Center for International Development. RCTs may be appropriate for clinical drug trials. But for a remarkably broad array of policy areas, the RCT movement has had an impact equivalent to putting auditors in charge of the R&D department. That is the wrong way to design things that work. Only by creating organizations that learn how to learn, as so-called lean manufacturing has done for industry, can we accelerate progress. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

Ricardo Hausmann, a former minister of planning of Venezuela and former Chief Economist of the Inter-American Development Bank, is Professor of the Practice of Economic Development at Harvard University, where he is also Director of the Center for International Development.



Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Hussain Yasa

Vice-Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari

Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019

www.outlookafghanistan.net

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.