

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



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Lack of Offensive War Strategy as the Main Cause of Taliban Advance

According to a commentary published on the International Crisis Group on 28 December 2018, the world will witness 10 major conflicts. The main cause of these conflicts has been cited as U.S. leadership of the international order fading. As a result more countries are seeking to bolster their influence by meddling in foreign conflicts. In this new era of limit testing, Crisis Group's President Robert Malley has listed the Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2019. And Afghan conflict is the second conflict mentioned in the list.

According to this report Afghanistan suffered its deadliest fighting. In 2018, by one tally, the war has killed more than 40,000 combatants and civilians. Trump's reported decision in mid-December that half of U.S. forces in Afghanistan would leave brought further unease. In principle, Washington's signal that it is ready to pull out could advance diplomatic efforts to end the war by focusing belligerents' and regional actors' minds. But the ad hoc nature of the decision – seemingly made without looping in top officials – and the specter it raises of the U.S. cutting and running could bode badly for the coming year.

The warm welcome of the Taliban of the US Withdrawal is a cut crystal of this argument; at the same time they have fostered their regional visits and their visit from Iran is the latest move of the terrorist group to further marginalize the Afghan government.

In 2018, the war exacted a higher toll than at any time since the Taliban were ousted from Kabul more than seventeen years ago. A three-day ceasefire in June, which the Taliban and the government enforced and which prompted joyous celebration by fighters and civilians alike, offered a short respite, though fighting resumed immediately afterwards. Taliban fighters now effectively control perhaps half the country, cutting off transport routes and laying siege to cities and towns. A sharp uptick in U.S. airstrikes has not curbed their momentum.

The advance of the Taliban does not mean they are either strong or has the upper hand in the war; the main cause of the advancement of the group has been lack of an offensive War Strategy against the Taliban. As we well remember, Hamid Karzai the Ex Afghan President kept calling them as his "brothers". And this strategy not only did not encourage the group to join to the Afghan Peace Process, but further emboldened them in the war fields and demotivated the Afghan National Security Forces and the ordinary people. The same strategy was pursued at the beginning of the NUG as well. And just recently, the Afghan government decided to change its war policy and nominated some anti-Taliban powerful figures as acting Ministers of MoI and MoD.

In September, Washington appointed the veteran diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad as an envoy for peace talks – a welcome sign that it was prioritizing negotiations to end the war. Taliban leaders appear to be taking the talks seriously, though the process is stuck over their continued insistence that the U.S. commit to a timeline for full withdrawal of international forces as a precondition for a wider peace process involving other Afghan factions, a sequence that would be a win for the Taliban while saddling other Afghans with uncertainty. As it is clear amending the Afghan Constitution is one of the conditions of the Taliban for reaching a peace deal. The current constitution outlines a tolerant, democratic Islamic state under a strong presidency, a two-chamber parliament and an independent judiciary. The text also declares men and women equal before the law – a victory for human rights advocates. Afghans have praised the new constitution, which also recognizes minority languages while giving few powers to provincial authorities, as a chance to pull the country together after nearly half of a century of violence. In a nutshell, this new constitution is the result of many decades of Afghan sacrifices for democracy and living a free life. As it is expected, the Taliban may disagree with many of the provisions of this constitution that ties all the Afghan ethnic and religious groups together. And if clear red lines of negotiations on the constitutions is not identified, and if for any reasons, the constitution is amended according to the will of the Taliban, we will only watch a new round of civil war in the country.

In short, as the era of uncontested U.S. primacy fades, the international order has been thrown into turmoil. Unfortunately, instruments of collective action, such as the UN Security Council, are paralyzed; those of collective accountability, including the International Criminal Court, are ignored and disparaged. As a result, as the list illustrates, that road will be bumpy, and it will be perilous. However, Afghan government its allies can manage the conflict and bring the terrorist groups including the Taliban to the negotiation table if they have an offensive war strategy and active diplomacy for the Afghan Peace Process.



Economic Development & Security Should Top Afghan Government Agenda for the Year 2019

By: Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

Fixing problems of a country that has been churning in grinding intrinsic war since last more than forty years is inherently not a task so easy. The body responsible for and inherited this job is central Government in Kabul. It is accepted norm that any post war set up in a country is inherently entangled with myriad of problems, including corruption and lack of capacity to run Government institutions, but there has been a limit for such acceptance when it comes to time and resources and Afghanistan has exceeded the limit in term of both time and resources. It has been seventeen years in a row that tens of billions of US dollars is being injected in Afghan Government budget – both for civilian and military sectors – every year, but improvement in governance and internal Government efforts to fix institutions and train, discipline, increase capacity and organize manpower towards delivery of good governance and better defense and provision of security to masses is almost non-existing. Though there have been efforts since formation of National Unity Government (NUG) in September 2014 to eradicate corruption and increase capacity in the ranks of officials at various Government departments, these efforts have been confined to official slogans, documents and meetings with donors, and have had no effects on the ground, and the trend continues to survive year in and year out, which has taken immense toll on social, economic, security and geopolitical issues in the country with ramifications to negatively sap donors and development partners' interests and enthusiasm in the process of efforts to stabilize the country.

In the face of ongoing entrenched insurgency, unparalleled corruption, disarray in the ranks of Government departments, lack of a viable economic and war strategy, challenges posed by stakeholders' interests at global and regional levels and lack of Government capacity to manage prevailing situation, it is imperative that Government focus on the most important tasks laid bare before it for the year 2019, which include strengthening capability of defense and security institutions, developing and implementing a viable economic strategy and improving governance at all level and across geographical Afghan land-mass. At the top of these problems stand two most important ones i.e. economic and security issues. Government should exert utmost efforts, allocate time and siphon resources towards developing and implementing a viable economic strategy. The most practical options laid bare before Government to exploit are developing of transit route – both for transfer of energy from Central Asian Countries to South-East Asian nations, including India and Pakistan; and to develop and practically exploit endowments in the country – particularly the extractive industry – which include trillions of dollars of almost untouched mines of minerals and energy resources. The development of economic resources, which lead to economic freedom and development of a strong economy has never been important than any time before for the Government of Afghanistan. In fact, economic freedom and availability of domestic resources will provide space for the Government of Afghanistan to maneuver and freely decide on issues of national importance, and fund projects of long-term strategic importance and development for the country. It goes without saying that projects of national and long-term strategic interests cannot be funded by money – either borrowed or provided in donations. Afghanistan owes her present standing to international partners, including the United States of America, NATO member countries, Japan, India, China and other partners, but support from these partners in developing a stable Afghanistan can only help Afghanistan to acquire enough means and dynamic to develop her own tools for bringing into being a sustainable, stable economy and resources to support her journey towards a stabilized and developed nation.

Afghanistan and Iraq have started their journey towards reconstruction, stabilization and rebuilding a viable, strong economy and security forces almost at the same time in their recent history, but Iraq has galloped towards reaching these goals and Afghanistan lags behind by years. Main reason for this imbalance is economic resources and financial freedom, which Iraq had enjoyed right from the beginning because of her endowment in the form of

natural petroleum resources, but despite availability of opportunities to exploit her natural endowments – as mentioned before – Afghanistan has been trapped in donor-funded economy, which continues to derail this country off the track from a sustainable economic development. Therefore, Afghan Government should immediately embark on pursuing large, global corporations and countries, and offer them attractive packages to develop Afghan extractive industry. Attractive offers shall mean comparative, extra-benefits / advantages to firms which are interested in investment and development of Afghan extractive industry, and the reason for offering attractive packages is the lack of resources, skilled people and money with Afghan Government to build roads, tunnels, bridges to connect transit / transportation of extracted materials, and to provide power and other amenities required at locations of these mines in the heart of mountainous stretches where these mines are buried. In addition, Afghan Government should encourage its partners in development to provide educational and training scholarships to Afghan students in the fields of extractive industry so that by the time requirement of skilled and trained personnel are needed enough of them are available. Donor countries' fatigue has already surfaced due their longest intervention in term of financing, provision of military assistance including men, weapons and equipment in support of stabilization and building of state institutions in Afghanistan. This fatigue has never been more obvious than during last two years when Government of Donald Trump has taken over the White House, and other donor countries including NATO member countries have established benchmarks for Afghan Government leadership to meet certain standards before further monetary support can be sanctioned. These benchmarks comprised steps taken against corruption, delivery of good governance and provision of comparative security for the people and fostering of viable economy in order to retain younger, educated generation inside the country to assist in the process of rebuilding the country.

Security has been the number one issue facing Afghan Government, but it has many dimensions which can exonerate Afghan Government for failure to curtail or totally eradicate it as major sources for insecurity are international terror groups operating in Afghanistan, support provided to terrorists and insurgent groups by Afghanistan neighbors – particularly by Pakistan – and lack of a comprehensive, unified and consistent strategy on the part of stakeholders including US and other NATO member countries to stand firm and voice in unity against the countries who support terrorism and ongoing insurgency inside Afghanistan. In addition, lack of a unified strategy oriented to conditions in Afghanistan among stakeholders / countries involved in stabilizing Afghanistan continues to take immense toll on the efforts, and causes waste of resources, time and human lives. Stakeholder nations' strategies are based on urges emanating from policies devised in their home countries, which are based on priorities constructed out of their national interests – not based on conditions in Afghanistan. This should change in 2019, and stakeholder countries should develop a plan whereby matters related to Afghanistan should be assessed by looking at conditions and progress on the ground inside Afghanistan – not based on different political parties' election campaign promises and so called national priorities of the stakeholders' countries when they come in power. Afghanistan should be looked at as a separate mega project and every decision about it should be taken based on realities in the ground because Afghanistan is already victim of international terrorism, and Afghans are already offering their blood (with consistent death toll of almost two thousands security personnel and civilian casualties per month). This country has come a long way since last seventeen years, and we already have a system in place. Supporting Afghanistan at this critical juncture by her international partners and regional powers will contribute to world security and economic development and money spent, resources utilized will be paid back in many folds by a stable and prosperous Afghanistan in not too distant timeframe.

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Taliban: the Main Factor of Stalemate in Afghan Peace Process

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Few days ago, in Abu Dhabi peace talks, the Taliban group refused to attend the negotiation table with representatives of the Afghan government. When the Security Council adviser returned from Dubai, he took a tougher stance against Taliban and its international supporters. However, the Taliban's stance against Afghan government is not new. They repeated emphasized that the Afghan government is the foreigners' puppet, and they always stressed that the Afghanistan's war will not come to an end unless the international Afghan partners leave the country and then a government similar to the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban would be established with a new constitution. In fact, they wish to abrogate the national constitution with all its new values and achievement attained.

In the eve of the Jeddah peace talks, once again they articulate not willing to attend in the peace negotiation table with the Afghan government. The fact is that the peace process, from the day it began until now, has not had any positive results and has not produced the least achievement to satisfy the expectation of Afghan people. It is one of the bitterest and most failed experience that extremely disappointed the whole people. But the fundamental question raises who is the main factor of this failure? Who will be responsible for thousands of civilians may kill as a result of this failure? Both war and peace process have imposed heavy price on the people of Afghanistan, but none has a clear result or achievement yet. However, the high peace council under leadership of Khalili, has played good role in religious awareness of people, especially for those youths who were more likely to be lured by Taliban propagation. Thousands of top ranking Ulema gathered in Kabul and other Islamic countries and then issued their collective fatwa against Taliban war in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, no one has witnessed any positive result yet.

Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that Taliban, who are supported by almost all the countries of the region today and even some of Afghanistan's international partners, is a major factor in the failure of peace process. This group has not shown any practical desire for peace which indicate neither they believe in the peace process and nor their supporters. They are used against innocent people of Afghanistan, and every day sacrifice civilians and defense forces. However, the policy makers our country is also responsible in regard to continuity of conflict in Afghanistan. There were a lot of political and economic opportunities to be used for the best interest of the country. Today, some of the youths are compelled to

join the Taliban or other illegal groups due to unemployment and hunger issue while others have already chosen to leave the country for ever.

The Optimism and appeasement with the cruel enemy and terrorist group like the Taliban have damaged our people morality and have always caused people to lose their trust in national processes. While they officially declare that have no belief in the civil and legal values exist in the current constitution of Afghanistan. With this mentality, how they can come to the negotiation table and talk to their compatriot brothers representing the Afghan government and Afghan people? How it can be justified to negotiate with foreigners but not with your own brothers, with your own Ulema or elders. These show that they have no commitment to national and Islamic values. As a result, the failure to the peace process and the negative result of this game is largely caused by Taliban. From one hand, their lack of belief in peace and on the other hand the distrust of the people towards a national process has led to a kind of inner challenge. Means, the Taliban have not only played a major role in destroying the economic infrastructure of society, but also played a major role in eliminating public trust and national unity.

Therefore, it is very good to ask when the Taliban are not willing to negotiate, who we are going to make peace with. Their arrogant and selfish stance not only insults the people of Afghanistan, but also shows that the Taliban is the main factor of stalemate in the peace process. When the Taliban insists on waging war and killing people and do not want to negotiate with the Afghan government, then who will represent the people of Afghanistan with the Taliban and lead the peace talks. And finally, how long should people wait for the result of our imploring policy? It has been repeatedly emphasized and also experienced in other countries that peace is achieved only through justice and national consensus with the presence and participation of all citizens at the ballot box.

No one in this country opposes to the peace; it is the greatest desire of the people of Afghanistan and their basic need for peace but the people of Afghanistan are not willing to sacrifice all the achievements of past years and endure the peace that is created by the foreigners and the Taliban behind the closed doors in the capital of other countries. It is now clear that the only major factor in Afghanistan's crisis and the main driver for the failure of peace is the Taliban group. When the Taliban are the main driver of the war, the Afghan government must adopt the same policy that has been expressed extensively by the ministry of defense and interior ministry these days. The use of force is the only way to win the war against terrorism and extremism.

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