

Weekly Newsletter

US in favor of asserting influence in Pacific against China:



The United States of America has been opposing the China's expansionist behavior and territorial claims in South China Sea for a long time. In order to contain the influence and expansion of China in Pacific, the USA sends warships via strategic waterway almost frequently. These exercises and objecting the claims of China by the USA has upset Chinese authorities. China believes that it has restrained the relationships and also undermining the stability in the region. South China Sea is a part of Pacific Ocean and China claims ninth-tenth of South China Sea. About \$3 trillion worth of trade takes place in South China Sea every year. Along with China, Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam hold

the competing claims.

In August 2020, a US Navy aircraft carrier carried out an exercise in the disputed South China Sea. A strike group, led by the USS Ronald Reagan, conducted flight operations and high-end maritime stability operations and exercises. This drill took place amid the heightened tensions between China and USA. USA has accused China of taking advantage of pandemic to enforce claims over South China Sea and elsewhere. On August 28th, The United States Department of Defense said that China launches tests of four ballistic missiles during military exercise around the Paracel Islands in the disputed territory of South China Sea which is a clear threat to peace and security in the region. The Pentagon claimed that such exercises by China violated her commitment under 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea that would complicate the relations and escalate tensions. It is said that over the past few decades China has built up military installations on several disputed reefs and outcrops in the South China Sea to assert its claim over much of the area. Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Indonesia also have maritime claims to the sea. China claims that USA is grossly interfering in her internal affairs and that China will take firm measures to uphold the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies and individuals.

Recently in December 2020, the USA has warned China that her warships will be more assertive if China violated International Law and expansionist policies in South China Sea. Pentagon has claimed that "several countries, notably Russia and China are contesting the balance of power in key regions and seeking to undermine the existing world order". Pentagon further added that US Navy will be more present and visible in the Pacific to detect and document any breach of

International Law. China responded that US is involved in rousing up the conflict in the region.

After Years of Considering Them a Foe, US Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Meet Taliban:



On Tuesday, General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff met Taliban officials in Doha, Qatar and senior leaders of Afghan Taliban on Wednesday in Kabul. General Milley for prolonged time considered Taliban as the formidable foe that would not fade away in dust easily. The Associated Press has reported that Milley met with Taliban officials

earlier this year in June, but the meeting was kept a secret. Milley met with senior US officials and the President Ashraf Ghani. The officials discussed the contemporary security environment in Afghanistan in which they emphasized specifically on the immediate reduction of violence. If the violence continues and the attacks increase, it will put the progress of Peace talks and agreements at risk. The Taliban led violence is creating a burden on the Afghan security forces, for which the innocent civilians suffer. Taliban have been deliberately destroying the roads, infrastructure and bridges of the country in order to halt the deployment of Afghan troops. According to the military spokeswoman, Commander Sarah Flaherty the meeting was a part of the military channel established as a part of deal in February between US-Taliban. The deal called for the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan in spring and Taliban to initiate negotiations with the Afghan government. As a part of deal, Taliban are to cut off all ties with Al-Qaeda and not allow the land of Afghanistan to be used as terrorist's safe haven. But US did not withdraw the troops, as it claims that the withdrawal of forces depends upon the on-ground condition in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Taliban still maintain contact with Al-Qaeda and have been involved in violent attacks that target Afghan security forces and civilians. Flaherty further added, "The Chairman discussed the need for an immediate reduction of violence and accelerate progress towards a negotiated political solution which contributes to regional stability and safeguards U.S. national interests." The agenda of such meetings is to achieve credibility and trust in Afghanistan and that the US is fully committed to bringing peace and stability in the country. However, Biden's policy on the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan remains unclear and has not publicly declared if he will continue with the February agreements or not. If the US troops withdraw, some of the military equipment will be taken back to America, some will be handed over to Afghan security forces while remaining will be destroyed.

Smoke Box in South Asia:



Analysts call air pollution as a “Silent Killer” and the SMOG will be increased yearly in plain lands of South Asia. Rice farmers traditionally use combine harvesters to cut their rice in October, leaving behind about four inches of stubble. With less than two weeks before they have to ready their fields to sow wheat, burning is the fastest way to clear the land without any cost and without any effort. In Pakistan, rice is grown on an area of about two million hectares, mainly in the Punjab and Sindh provinces. Most of the fields are cleared by burning every year. Farmers say the new farm equipment can help combat smog, but note that crop burning produces only a small share of the province’s pollution.

These cities are the most populated cities around the globe and the air pollution index is getting higher every year

because of factories and massive use of automobiles and lastly at the end of year burning of field make it more badly. Now the Governments are providing Machines to the farmers for shredding the field waste rather than burning it, farmers have been using the rice stubble shredder and Happy Seeder for the past few years technology will facilitate farmers and government in their own ways technology could cut greenhouse gas emissions by 78 percent. Efforts to curb air pollution will benefit South Asia in the future and this will have a positive impact on people's life and most importantly hospitals will be less burdened.

South Asia took over China and other countries of the world and become the hub of the most polluted cities in the world. In 2020, twenty-one of the world's 30 worst polluted cities were in India, the Pakistani city of Lahore and Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, also made the top 10, making South Asia a particularly toxic region. Air pollution is a longstanding problem in Pakistan, India & Bangladesh in every October and November, contaminates in the air in Punjab province shoot up as farmers burn rice stalks left behind after harvesting to clear their fields to plant wheat. South Asia failed to meet WHO PM 2.5 targets. PM 2.5 is fine particulate matter that is good to inhale and not harmful to the human body. It is a health emergency the air quality monitors in South Asia routinely show hazardous levels in November and December. An estimated 1.2 million people have died because of India's dirty air in 2017.

Dividends to Pakistan's Economy from Afghan Peace – Challenges and Opportunities

The Afghan Peace Process has welcoming prospects for Pakistan, which is an immediate neighbor of Afghanistan. The two neighboring countries have shared tortuous relations in the past, but the peace talks are expected to have a positive impact on their relations. The peace talks provide Pakistan an opportunity to strengthen its presence in the regional politics. The Afghan Peace Process will help Pakistan suppress the antagonistic actors in Afghanistan from prospering. The initiation of peace process was the extensive diplomatic effort by Pakistan that made the process to follow the path ahead smoothly for which Pakistan was appreciated by USA. Pakistan is ambitious to project herself as a peace loving State and also that the prosperity of the region is closely linked to having peace in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan has been making sure since the beginning that the peace process is completely Afghan owned and no external factors gain access to any kind of interference.

To encourage and improve the trade and investment relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, National Assembly Pakistan has organized a two-day seminar titled “Pakistan and Afghanistan Investment and Trade Forum” on Monday 28th, 2020. Prime Minister Imran Khan addressed to the seminar as chief guest. 17-member Afghan parliamentary delegation, led by Speaker of Wolsey Jirga Mr Rahmani are also a part of this seminar. The USAID Pakistan has extended a supportive hand for the sake of regional connectivity and integration initiative. While addressing to the seminar, Prime Minister Imran Khan along with NA Speaker Asad Qaiser and Speaker of Afghan Wolesi Jirga (Afghanistan's parliament) Mir Rahman Rahmani insisted on boosting the trade and investment between Pakistan and

Afghanistan to generate more wealth and to encourage the industrialization. They also emphasized that the normalization of traffic between states will improve the condition of trade that has been damaged further by the pandemic.

Prime Minister Imran Khan said that the connection between Pakistan and Afghanistan is quite old and no foreign interference has ever succeeded in Afghanistan. He further explained that Afghani people have always taken their own decisions and Pakistan will be happy to work with any government that Afghani nation will choose. Prime Minister sympathetically said that the 40 years of tragedy in Afghanistan is unfortunate and it has been effecting Pakistan for past 18 years as well. He also suggested that dwelling in past has only causes mistrust but we, as nations, need to look beyond it to reassure transit trade and future investments. Following are the economic peace dividends for Pakistan and Afghanistan if the Peace Process materializes:

The first and the most significant dividend of the Peace Process is the Afghan-Pakistan trade. Both countries will be able to continue trade without the irritant of smuggling of timber, mineral resources and other goods. Afghan Peace Process will pave the way for traders to do open and legal trade which will eradicate the illicit trade in form of smuggling. This will

encourage the small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in both countries to enhance legal trade of goods and products. The second dividend, also economic in nature, relates to creation of regional energy corridor. The end of instability, and war offers Afghanistan and Pakistan a safe corridor into Central Asia. This would create a regional energy corridor from Sixth, Central Asia into South Asia. The economy of Afghanistan can flourish if it can earn revenues by levying the TAPI Pipeline. Afghanistan will be able to extract royalties from these projects and also meet her energy requirements. Moreover, peace in Afghanistan, the "Heart of

Asia," will allow Pakistan and other South Asian countries to connect with Central Asia, which offers a great opportunity at developing Central Asia-South Asia (CASA) electricity transmission line.

Thirdly, it is significant for Pakistan's national interest to have a peaceful border at the western end. The success of the Afghan Peace talks can guarantee peace within Pakistan. If the Afghan government, Taliban and the US find common grounds as a result of negotiations, it will be advantageous in helping curb the terrorism that has caused immense damage to both nations. This will be vital for safeguarding Pakistan's security interests along the Pakistan-Afghan border. Peace and stability in Afghanistan is in the utmost interest of Pakistan.

The fourth dividend of the Peace Process relates to the role of Pakistan as a negotiator in the Afghan Peace process. The Peace Talks help Pakistan in building up her pragmatic image globally. During the entire process, Pakistan represents itself as a country that is dedicated to peaceful development in the region. Stability in Afghanistan will bring out the positive and peace loving image of Pakistan to the world, Pakistan will have a peaceful neighborhood. The rigorous efforts as a negotiator have helped Pakistan gather international appreciation. Pakistan holds a significant position in the Afghan Peace Process because as a central player, attaining peace and stability in Afghanistan would not possible without her participation. The Afghan peace talks are not only a golden opportunity for achieving peace in Afghanistan but offer a chance for Pakistan to gain a reputation of "Peace Promoter," at international chessboard of politics.

Fifthly, the efforts of Pakistan demonstrate her clear intentions for Afghanistan. The dedicated efforts on both sides, will help regain the lost trust and push both countries towards mutual cooperation. Reducing the trust deficit is

crucial for building peace in the region.

Sixth, the active participation of Pakistan in ensuring peace in Afghanistan which will subsequently lessen the influence of India in the region and in Afghanistan. This is important because India, an aggressor state, has been taking advantage of the hinges between Pakistan and Afghanistan, both trade wise and as well sentimentally. The Peace Process holds a tantamount position in the relationship of both countries.

Seventh, if Pakistan is able to lessen the influence of adversaries in Afghanistan, it would augment the communication between the leaderships and the people on both sides of the border.

The Peace Process will restart the trade, freedom of movement, economic prosperity and strengthening of defense between Pakistan and Afghanistan which will eventually help the economies to travel towards betterment since Pakistan also provides the shortest access to the sea for landlocked countries. If Pakistan's objective of bringing peace in Afghanistan materializes, great dividends for both countries will just be one arm's length away.

The Process for Peace – Will it Sustain – Afghanistan

Afghan aspiration for peace must be considered a just desire, keeping in view the longevity and suffering. Since the invasion of the Soviets, the Afghan nation is at war with outsiders or within own factions. The Soviets realized the gravity and reality of the unjust invasion and pulled out timely as continuation could have been more costly. Yet the

empire collapsed under its own weight of economic sustenance. The US invasion of Afghanistan on plea or under the garb of terrorism is taking long to overcome the terrorism or achieve the vested interests in the region. It's been over eighteen years for the American and allied forces to achieve the objectives of operation enduring freedom (OEF – October 2001-December 2014) and operation freedom sentential (OFS – January 2015 till date). The presence of US and NATO forces is likely to continue despite the peace agreement and US assurance of leaving Afghanistan.

Encouraging is that the first block for peace building has been cemented by signing the agreement in Doha on 29 Feb 2020. Interesting was when Ghani challenged the viability by stating that releasing of 5000 Taliban poisoners was not part of the deal and the Afghan government was not part of the negotiations. Taliban, on other hand, stated that no intra-Afghan talks can take place without the release of the prisoners. Another uncertainty is the on-going political crisis emerging out of the presidential election results, which has been challenged by Abdullah Abdullah.

The next step in the process is the initiation of intra-Afghan dialogue by 10 March 2020, (the date has already passed) along with the release of prisoners by both sides, and the partial withdrawal of US forces within 135 days. What is intra-Afghan dialogue, who will be organizing, how will it be conducted, who all will take part in the dialogue and what is the time frame? Difficult questions yet need to be answered.

According to para 4 of the agreement, between the US and Taliban, "A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. The participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms, which will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of

Afghanistan”.

The process requires some kind of homework at different levels on behalf of the sitting government, but who is head of the government, is another crisis like situation. Ghani has taken oath under the bullets, as the next elected president. Abdullah Abdullah has also taken oath as the Afghan president. Ghani's win has been challenged by Abdullah. So, the intra-Afghan dialogue faces the first challenge, of whom to talk and who is the President. Yet another catch-22, is that how the process of intra-Afghan will start.

A critical look at the purpose of intra Afghan dialogue, mentioned in the agreement indicates two prime objectives, **one**: discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms and **two**: along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan. Taliban stated that they will engage all the political groups with the objective to reach consensus. But the question is that the first objective of intra Afghan dialogue is a permanent ceasefire, where participation of the sitting government is must. For the second part, however, all political leaders, warlords, and religious clerics have to be engaged to reach a consensus on future political system or setup.

So, the first step of enforcing the permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, would require dialogue between the sitting government and the Taliban. Unfortunately, the political crisis in Kabul is more serious for the peace process as intra Afghan cannot begin without resolution of political crisis. Ghani and Abdullah will have to get to some kind of settlement or the peace process may stall. The US on the other hand, will have to intervene to make the rival leaders agree to forgo their personal gains and goods in the larger interests of the Afghan nation. President Ghani has to rise above self, if he desires peace in Afghanistan.

The question remains, that will the process sustain these challenges? The biggest hurdle at the moment is a political crisis. "One president" is a must to make the process take the next step. The next in line in the response of Ghani to the release of prisoners, which has resulted in a delay for the inter-Afghan dialogue. The fragility of the process is evident as all three parties to the conflict are still contesting their hardened positions. Taliban are waiting for the prisoner's release, the Afghan government is attaching conditions to the release of Taliban detainees, and the US is yet to start the pull out owing to the initiation of intra-Afghan dialogue, so the process is in waiting.

Afghan conflict resolution is not an easy affair in the backdrop of so many stakeholders and spoilers, who are working in parallel. Pakistan, the best loser in the Afghan conflict, along with the Afghan nation is anxiously waiting for the next round and will have to wait as complications are at hype.

Peace Agreement and its Implementation – "Worries"

Peace in Afghanistan, a desire that is being pursued by the Afghans first and others later yet, the warmongers and beneficiaries have been making all-out efforts to keep the battleground alive so as to reap as much as they desire. Those, who have worked tirelessly for the peace must be aspiring to witness the occasion of the peace signing ceremony on February 29, 2020. Let's hope that Afghan's dream comes true and peace prevails.

During September 2019, Afghan Taliban stated that they are ready to negotiate and their doors are open for discussion. Recalling the efforts of last year, hopes were high and expectations were that peace deal would be inked but President Trump's statement of abandoning the talks stalled the process and things went wary for the time being. Sense prevailed and the negotiations were resumed after a break in December 2019. During this uncertainty period, presidential election results were announced and Ashraf Ghani was declared the President.

The ongoing peace negotiations have finally met one of its mile-stone of temporary cease-fire or "Reduction in Violence" as per understanding between the US and Taliban, for one week starting from 22 February till 29 February. Another development or speculation or announcement is the signing of peace deal that is to be held on 29 February 2020. After the seven days, if the outcome is positive, both sides will move to the next phase of inter-Afghan dialogue.

So far, the progress on reduction in violence is encouraging and hopes are high about the signing of a peace deal. The General populace in Kabul are hopeful and happy over the developments. The political uncertainties are making the atmosphere a little tense. Abdullah Abdullah, declaring himself as president and Dostum supporting him with challenging the IEC election announcement, is a hurdle in the proceedings. Inter-Afghan dialogue, which has to kick start after 29 February, after peace agreement signing ceremony will be facing the challenge of who and whom to talk.

The peace process is likely to face: the legitimacy of the president, who will be leading the talks from the government side so, the political uncertainties will be contributing to an uncertain peace process. If the situation of political divide persists where will Kabul be moving to? How will the US react to the crisis? Will we witness another unity government like resolve or sense will prevail, according to some, and Abdullah will set-aside in wake of peace and settlement? The

questions are worth consideration.

If the confrontation between the two presidential rivals continues, the option which looks workable for the US is to install an interim government. A setup that would be broad-based, comprising political cum warlords cum religious leaders, so as to avoid any criticism from Taliban especially. Most interesting would be to include ethnic representation, Pashtun from both sides, the Taliban and Afghan government side will have to form part of the group holding discussions. This way the US will be able to exercise all its options of materializing the perceived peace and settlement.

The hurdles in way are the reaction and response of political leaders like Karzai, Ghani, Abdullah, Dostum, Mohaqiq, Zia Masood and few others. The sitting parliament is likely to react with more hardened stance, as they have been electorally elected through parliamentary elections after delay of years. Taliban would agree to the interim arrangement as that would suit their long-standing mistrust over the sitting government and leadership. However, the groups within Taliban rank and file, though speculated, is also a problem which may cause delay of continuation of unrest.

The general populace response is predictable and that would be wait and see, as they are fed-up with uncertainties and are desperately looking and expecting peace and security. Warlords are the most unpredictable faction, as they will be expecting share in interim and subsequently also. Anything short of their demands will create further instability and may stall the second step of the peace process, the Intra-Afghan Dialogue.

The situation is encouraging, in context to reduction in violence but is serious in context to political developments. Ghani and Abdullah's match over presidential result is adding to difficulties for the US and Zalmay will again be at shuttle diplomacy drive to resolve the ongoing political crisis, this

time not with Taliban and Pakistan but within Afghanistan. Ghani is a US favorite and the US will try to make things go Ghani way, but making Abdullah agree is also not an easy task.

Afghanistan is not as calm as it appears, Taliban response to intra-Afghan is also to be seen in context to recent political developments. The interim set-up arrangements will also attract resistance. Other warring factions like Da'esh may also contribute to insecurity. The spoilers like India, who does not look at Taliban as an option even, may work towards their vested ends. Pakistan is likely to respond in following the US way of handling, as that suits Pakistan's option of peace with broad-based arrangements at Kabul.