

Ghani Again the President

On December 22, 2009, the Independent Election Commission (IEC), Afghanistan announced the results of the recently held elections after the repeated delays in both, the holding of elections and now the result announcement. Not a new happening of its kind, especially in Afghanistan. Ever since becoming a modern democratic country under the close watch of the US, such kinds of delays have been witnessed owing to many reasons. The observers for the elections need to understand that Afghanistan is low connectivity mechanism holding country with few good roads and rest dirt roads. No major railway network exists in the country. Population is spread over entire width and breadth of the country from snow clad, rugged mountains and vast desert stretches. So, the collection of polled ballot papers from all over the country is the major reason for delay besides the mechanism. Yet the delay was extraordinary therefore it attracted serious criticism.

Finally, the result was announced with Ghani being declared winner for the second term grabbing 50.64% and Abdullah Abdullah getting 39.5%. The result again attracted allegation of rigging from the arch rival Abdullah Abdullah as not legitimate and many others, which indicates the political immaturity and manipulation in election process. Another matter of concern was, the low turnout at the polling. Only 2 million voted out of the 9 million registered voters. One the major reason cited is the uncertainty. People were not sure whether the polls will happen or otherwise, due to consist delays in date of elections, ongoing peace talks between Taliban and the US, and the infighting or the insecurity.

Having said about the conduct of elections and the outcome, the point of discussion is will Afghan again have the power sharing formula like previous time or Ghani will hold office as clear winner. Indications are that Ghani will be declared

as the successful and hold office for another five-year term. In his previous term the government failed to deliver in all realms. It was tug of war between the two top office holders for the posts of ministers, governors and even the decisions at national levels. The unity government was a failure in true sense as it failed to perform and above all Unity Government was beyond constitutional arrangements.

Time is difficult for President Ghani, talks with Taliban are yet to yield results, though Taliban have agreed for short ceasefire of 7-10 days, according to media reports, before signing of the agreement with the US. After the agreement the next step is intra-Afghan dialogue. Some of the questions about this dialogue is that who will hold and initiate. Taliban do not recognize Afghan government same is for the Government, who consider Taliban as non-entity. Pakistan is friend of Taliban, so the Afghan government will not support Pakistan's role as initiator. Iran is stuck in internal cum external matters and is not probably acceptable to both (Taliban and the Afghan government) and especially the US will never let Iran take lead or any role in the process. China and Russia are also competitors to the US, so they taking lead is also doubtful. KSA and Qatar are the two left overs who may be acceptable to all parties. The bottom line is that Ghani is in hard waters in context to outcome of the recent peace process.

Ashraf Ghani recent win is also debatable in the context of transparency of the polls and his opponents are not happy with the outcome. Though the US is outrightly supporting Ghani yet the ground resistance will emerge from within as his political popularity is at decline. Ghani government is facing serious challenges like insecurity, peace deal with Taliban, political rivalry in context to election outcome and declining national economy. To overcome the stated issues, Ghani will have to obtain further support from the US and other donor countries in economic domains. In the realms of internal security, things are not conducive as Taliban are not softening on their

demand of US exit and time frame/ roadmap. Besides ceasefire Taliban are also to be persuaded for intra-Afghan dialogue. Will Ghani be able to deliver this time, is a question, keeping in view his previous term performance?

“Overstretch Quagmire”

Pakistan is and may be one of the very uncommon countries in the world to have militarily active kinetic energy borders. At both fronts i.e. east and west, where mild to bold skirmishes takes place with the Indian army, the Afghan army and the Taliban at almost regularity. When Pakistan manages one side of the front, the other gets hot and when at both ends adversarial armies are not in engaging mood, Taliban's strike. So, overall, it's an overstretch quagmire from which Pakistan must pull out by near future or its security forces may rubber out and that may be the bigger design of the adversary.

Pakistan has an extremely fluid international border with Afghanistan, running almost 2200 KM, from where Afghan army and then the Taliban are always in a mode of radiating energy. Pakistan army and its paramilitary Frontier Corp (F.C) troops are deployed all along the border for the watch out. Almost two years ago, Islamabad decided to fence this border. Since that day till the present running time, skirmishes with Afghan army and at times with the Taliban have spiked to unprecedented levels at different hotspots from Chitral district down till Chaghi district over the zero line. These

brief encounters happen either over the subject of construction of bunkers or fencing.

In the just one month, October 2019, Afghan and Pakistan army exchanged a good ratio of heavy fire at Narai district / Kunar province – Arundu area / Chitral district axis. Plea for Afghan army to open up was that Pakistan army has constructed few bunkers over their side of the border and that was insupportable to them. Although, at the flag meetings, it was well contended and plumped to amicably solve the matter, but the trigger-happy attitude of Afghan army spoiled the party.

By same month account, Afghan army once again argued and this time it was over the construction of fencing by Pakistan, passing by Zazi Aryub district / Paktia Province – Kurram tribal district axis. A possible exchange of fire was ably forestalled by Pakistan with an apt flag meeting and readjustments were done immediately. There are many more hotspots over the zero line which can erupt at any given time till the time fencing and construction of bunkers is not finalized, once and for all.

So, the riddle to solve here is, that if a mechanism is in place to contemplate over such matters at the flag meetings and settle them affably then why resort to exchange of fire. A well thought out mastery would be that the novice attitudes of the Afghan army is to kill the essence of such peaceful measures. The hate has morphed in the adrenaline of their rank and file so much that they resort to open fire rather than talking. While not realizing from the past experiences, that it's the talking that has always resolved disputes. Prime examples are the heavy exchanges at construction of gate by Pakistan at Torkham border crossing, exchanges over the construction of bunkers at Kurram tribal district – Zazi Maidan district / Khost province, fencing at Killi Luqman at Qilla Abdullah district axis and list goes on. At all these bloody exchanges, talks were held, and issues were settled.

The world has seen that from past two years that there is a completely new policy in place by Pakistan for Afghanistan and that is to further the hand of friendship and bridge gaps. The fulcrum of this policy included water tightening the Pakistan – Afghanistan border by fencing it. The second prime column of this policy was that all high profiles from Pakistan visit Kabul and assure the Afghans about the genuine efforts being put in place to mend fences. However, these visits were never reciprocated, except for Ashraf Ghanni paying a visit at last when as per his consideration he saw Pakistan taking concrete measures.

At large, the fresh start sooner materialized to produce dividends and that forced Ashraf Ghanni to pay a fertile visit to Islamabad. But this bridging gap does not auger well within certain neighborhoods and power centers within the government which looks at it with soring eyes. So, they take a jab at opportune time and try at length to create a fiasco. These cunning bites have now attained cemented basis to the tune that be it border scuffles, media campaigns or discussions at the parliament and senate of Afghanistan, mocking Pakistan has become a norm.

Recently new episodes of teasing Pakistan's embassy staff at Kabul have begun. From their strolls at Kabul, to driving around, unidentified vehicles and men tormenter them to the fullest. It has spiked to such levels that Pakistan embassy reciprocated and eventually decided to shut her operations till Afghan government investigates the matter.

It's obvious from the fact that such measures are adopted, although being very few, to keep Kabul's dagger drawn with Islamabad. Under these circumstances the government of Pakistan must stay level headed by acting mature and reading these designs well and carry forward the policy of appeasement without being deterred. In case Pakistan falter's and starts to react to these measures, then what would be the difference from being a state with standing institutions to the one with

a weak central auditory having ample chaos. With this in mind, foreign secretary of Pakistan and DG-ISI dashed to Kabul and sat down with Afghan high ups to resolve the issue of diplomatic harassment. This act of maturity is surely coming from a country which has indeed the upper hand at calling the shots but wants to tone down and formulate a way out peacefully.

For the future times, the way ahead for Pakistan and Afghanistan falls in the peaceful working mechanisms that have already been worked out between the two capitals.

Afghan Election and Peace Talks

Afghan presidential election amid threats from Taliban did take place with no serious security incident. The turnout was below the expectations and comparing the precious polls. Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, both are claiming victory and even Gulbadin is expecting a win. The official results will be announced during November though during last week of October we may get the unofficial outcome.

The second round is far sure as no one is likely to have gained over 50% votes, the constitutional requirement. Ghani is likely to retain the office for another term keeping in view the ground realities and global geo-politics. The American influence and desires are in tilt towards Ghani. Though Abdullah Abdullah must have assured his submission to the U.S yet the balance is likely to remain in Ghani's favor owing to the track records.

The gray matter in the election is the turnout which has

raised the question of validity along with public response to the presidential aspirants. The tenure of Unity Government can not be termed or considered as success. The security remained a serious issue, negotiated settlement and talks were not an option as both Afghan government and the U.S were trying resolve through fighting, the economy remained nose down due to obvious reasons. So, the bottom line is that the masses have probably rejected the team and to some extent the election also.

The democracy, however is the continuation of election process irrespective of the polling turnouts, outcomes and the malpractices. This has been the popular slogan about the previous elections and remains for the recent one. Keeping in view the security, economic and political situation of Afghanistan, holding of regular elections is an achievement.

The impact of these polls on the peace efforts is another consideration as to how will the outcome effect the peace. The new incumbent will be going for intra Afghan dialogue, if materialized, which is one of the prime objectives of peace talks. Both Ghani and Abdullah are well conversant with the ongoing process and will be in a position to react, however Abdullah will be a better negotiator. He holds better sway against Ghani at masses level.

The peace talks, Doha process got stalled or was stopped on orders from the U.S president Trump on the pretext of killing an American soldier in Kabul. A rational to him but highly irresponsible and irrational decision at such a culminating stage to the peace process. The U.S, is a human rights champion therefore, should not have shelved the on-going talks, which were about to deliver positive, and when dozens of Afghan civilians were killed week before, then the killing of a Sargent. Surely the issue is not of humanity, its U.S interests and priorities that get precedence over the human lives.

One of the probable causes for sudden walkout from talks was the upcoming election and the legality of the Afghan leadership. Ashraf Ghani continuation in the president office is extra constitutional arrangements which was even objected by the co-sharer Abdullah Abdullah, beside many others. To make Ghani legitimized head of the state, and to allow the intra Afghan dialogue with rightfulness, Doha process was made to stand still. Another reason cited by few is the venue of the meeting, which was to take place in Camp David and the timings; the September and the 9/11 remembrance. Calling Taliban for probably finalizing the peace agreement along with Afghan leadership to the U.S, coinciding with the World Trade Center attacks, could have invited criticism by the anti-Trump segment of the society.

Afghans are of the view that the outcome of the Doha talks was positive and the agreement was finalized waiting the formal launch. Gathering of Taliban, Afghan government and the American at Camp David was in the same context but the refusal or shelving of the talks was to cater for the American rather Trump's interest. As stated earlier the venue and the timings. The U.S did not take into consideration Afghans miseries and sufferings and preferred own objectives over the peace in Afghanistan.

Where are these talks heading to? Will it recommence? If not, how the U.S exit will take place and how the intra Afghan talks can become a reality?

Pakistan is again trying earnestly to make peace a reality in Afghanistan. The recent talks between Taliban and Khalilzad in Islamabad are indicative of the sincerity and eagerness towards peace in the region. The question remains, how can Pakistan contribute? Pakistan according to many is having good influence over Taliban and for others having control. The reality is that Pakistan does enjoy influence but has no control, Taliban can never be controlled by anybody less themselves. Still Pakistan can make them realize the

importance of peace in their homeland.

Pakistan is now enjoying a little better relationship with the U.S and in the wake of recent developments, may be able to make headway in negotiating terms of peace and settlements. Making Taliban agree to go for intra-Afghan dialogue and asking the U.S to announce the exit plans. Pakistan's stakes in today's Afghanistan are high in context to terrorism and in post U.S Afghanistan will be of even more concerns, as she cannot afford another post-Soviet vacuum like situation. Therefore, Pakistan will have to run an extra mile to reach the good ending.

Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement: Implications and failures

The APTTA (Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement) is a joint trade agreement which was signed in 2010 by both Afghanistan and Pakistan for the movement of goods between the States. APTTA exchange began in 2008 and after seven rounds of dealings by Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Economic Commission, the last report was marked on 28 July 2010, completely operationalized from 12 June 2011 after approval by cabinets, planned to facilitate the progression of trade between two States.

Pakistan conceded transit facility to Afghanistan in accordance with its promise to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (1958) which makes uncommon arrangements for giving landlocked nations access to oceans. This new agreement licensed the utilization of more ports including Afghan trucks and expands the quantity of border crossing focuses. The agreement additionally envisioned the utilization of Afghan region for transit among Pakistan and Central Asian nations. APTTA does not permit land access to India for sending out merchandise to Afghanistan. The agreement has a five years term after which settled upon arrangements can be added or erased to it. APTTA has ejected Afghanistan from the 'negative list, enables Afghan trucks to convey to Pakistani ports and up to Wagah frontier which were not permitted previously.

The expansion of trade bringing more players from the area into the overlap ought to be a success win for everyone. Incorporation of more markets is in Pakistan's greatest enthusiasm since it can build up the immature regions and feed into the general strategy is answer for Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The content of the agreement approved various courses by which Afghan products could travel through Pakistan to India or other global markets. But it should be noticed that this agreement only concerns trade through Pakistan and Afghanistan, not between the two States. These courses start and end at the accompanying ports and border intersections:

Peshawar-Torkham, Chaman-Spin Boldak, Ghulam Khan, Sost-Tash kuram, Port Qasim-Karachi, Gwadar Port.

In specific products like tea, Afghanistan with a populace of generally 31.0 million, the tea imports (dark and green) was US\$161.0 million out of 2014 while for Pakistan with a populace base of generally 182.0 million the absolute tea imports were US\$328.0 million. On account of tires for transports, Pakistan imported US\$190 million worth of tires with an announced unit cost of US\$84.0 per tire, Afghanistan imported US\$5.6 million worth of transport tires at US\$14.5 per tire.

The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI) has

blamed Pakistan for not permitting Afghan vehicles and exchange of goods to reach Gwadar port, and affirms that the majority of the Pakistani vehicles are utilized for travel exchange, which, as indicated by them, is against the APTTA. Every year, around 360,000 Pakistani trucks enter Afghanistan as against a yearly section of 8000 Afghan vehicles. Because of this gigantic hole, Afghan agents state they lose millions to Pakistan. As indicated by Article 9 of the APTTA, each party is allowed to choose methods for transport with the end goal of travel of products inside the region of the other party to the agreement. Practically all transit agreement amid the time of most recent eight years had been moved to Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas, which had dove the volume of reciprocal exchange among Pakistan and Afghanistan from US\$2.5 billion to just US\$500 million against the aggressive focus of US\$5 billion of the two nations.

Smuggling among Afghanistan and Pakistan is a long-standing worry on the Pakistan side, a report by Pakistan's Federal Tax Ombudsman noticed that few high-tax merchandise, including vehicles, cigarettes, and electronic things, were being snuck from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Officials gauge that items are sold back to Afghanistan from Pakistan at more expensive rates, driving Afghans to pay custom obligations all alone products. It has been noticed, that Pakistani traders, with the assistance of Afghan merchants, import merchandise under trade, transport them to Afghanistan and after that pirate them over into Pakistan.

Pakistan, in the course of the most recent couple of years, has shut its borders numerous times with Afghanistan, particularly during conciliatory or security choppiness, where it utilizes the barricade as an arm-winding apparatus to get control over political Afghanistan. This influenced the market in Afghanistan significantly to import from different other countries. While the illegitimate economy raises the expense for leading legitimate financial exercises, it additionally debilitates states, compromises improvements, undermines the rule of law and keeps nations caught in a cycle of neediness

and tremor.

Whatever the extent of smuggling over the Afghanistan Pakistan border and whatever techniques are being utilized, its effect on Pakistan's economy is critical. While Pak-Afghan exchange expanded since the beginning of APTTA, Pakistan has been losing the Afghan travel exchange business to Iran. At the one end, there are delays in the freedom of dispatches which builds exchange costs and diminishes intensity in global exchange.

The APTTA without a doubt is seeing a move in power balance; however the probability of India supplanting Pakistan as the nearest trade accomplice appears to be impossible right away. The incongruity may likewise lie in Afghanistan before long pulling the strings singularly in travel recompenses. For instance, in bringing in power from Central Asia later on, Pakistan will be subject to Afghanistan. The briefest and most financially practical path is through Afghanistan, and it could be a dimension playing field of land travel remittances on more commonly pleasing terms.

There are security issues, inability to sign the TIR framework, transporters strikes, insufficient correspondence between the Pakistan and Afghanistan. The two parties need to smooth their trade relations further through crossing over up the hole among hypothesis and practice, and should endeavor to dispose of the hindrances and obstructions. They ought to likewise focus on controlling the pirating of merchandise, which is more (\$2.5 billion) than the smuggling (\$1.5 billion) every year. The unreasonable and unneeded charges and habitual pettiness ought to likewise be kept away from, in light of the fact that it dissolves trust in one another.

Trade is the best answer to settle all issues and encourages amiability and harmony. Legitimate trade directs and successful organization in the two closures will profit both the nations as we are neighbors and we both are not going anyplace. Presently Pakistan has chosen to make barred border with Afghanistan and send back Afghan displaced people back to Afghanistan to counter and end fear based oppression in

Pakistan itself. Border closure of 2017 caused traders on both sides a huge damage and trade rigidities.

Border closure (multiple times from Pakistan) has caused Pakistan trade deterioration with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan diversified its exports and imports with India and Iran via Chabahar port to get out of Pakistan's dependence (backed by India mainly) but this could cost both Pakistan and Afghanistan if tensions do not get resolved timely and reciprocal measures needs to be taken immediately. Pakistan's export to Afghanistan increased a little from US\$ 500 million in 2017 to US\$ 720 million in 2018 including items like plastic products, construction materials, electronics, pharmaceutical, chemicals, rice and vegetables.

Waziristan is now almost secure since restoration and rehabilitation process is going on and it has been declared safe and secure through Pakistani military also. Traders on both sides are begging respective governments to stop mixing trade with politics to promote peace and mutual trust because Karachi and Gwadar are still the most economical routes for trading purpose for Afghanistan.

It is now high time that both States come on terms with each other to serve shared interests to encourage national and regional stability. Redesigning the policy with improved and benefitting terms, also including Central Asia, Russia and India to expand trading circle for Pakistan may help. It does sound like a dream if India and Pakistan both integrate or come on good terms regarding APTTA because of security concerns and negative participation of India in Baluchistan.