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Preface

After the grim situation between Pakistan and Afghanistan for several months, Raheel Sharif, Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, once again, visited Kabul. The main reason behind his visit was following the promises which were given to President Ashraf Ghani in the Heart of Asia Conference in Islamabad.

During Raheel Sahrif's visit to Kabul, it was decided that a quadrilateral meeting between Afghanistan, Pakistan, America and China would be held in January. However, the Afghan government is criticized for trusting Pakistan's promises, but is yet to receive specific result. You will read the analysis about the messages about the recent visit of Raheel Sharif and the initiation of the quadrilateral meeting.

You will read about the recent contacts of the Taliban with Russia in the second part of the Analysis. A few days ago, Zameer Kabulov, the special envoy of Russia to Afghanistan, said that they have contacted the Taliban in order the ISIS threats is prevented; however, the Taliban denied having such contacts with Russia regarding struggle against ISIS. Although, the Afghan Foreign Ministry has not expressed any reaction in this regard, but the Wolesi Jirga (the Lower House of the Parliament) has showed harsh reaction on this issue.

Meanwhile, some news about the meeting between Russian President, Vladimir Putin and the Taliban Leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour is also been broadcasted. The Taliban and Russian officials have not confirmed these reports yet. Moscow has various concerns about Afghanistan and due to this; it tries to become involved in the issue of Afghanistan. The question is why Russia struggles to establish ties with Afghan Taliban? And, what would be its impacts on Kabul-Moscow ties?

In this issue of Weekly Analysis, you are reading the analysis and researches of the Weekly Analysis' Board of Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS).

From Raheel Sharif's visit to Kabul to quadrilateral peace talks



On Sunday, December 27 General Raheel Sharif, Pakistan's chief of army staff, came to Kabul for one-day trip and met with Afghan officials. His trip is taking place at a times when Indian PM Narendra Modi has recently visited to Kabul to inaugurate newly build Afghan Parliament with Indian assistance.

Pakistanis are always sensitive to Indian officials' visits to Afghan capital.

Raheel Sharif's visit to Kabul was supposed before the Heart of Asia Conference; however, the visit was postponed due to tensions between the two countries.

Before Raheel Sharif's visit to Kabul, Pakistani officials reported about quadrilateral peace talks between the United States of America, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan that may start in Kabul or Islamabad in the near future, which would discuss the issue of peace in Afghanistan.

Return to peace talks

The Pak-Afghan meetings at the sidelines of Heart of Asia Conference in Islamabad were considered as a new impetus to Pak-Afghan bilateral relations and once again raised hopes regarding Peace process. After the Shah Shaheed explosions, Ashraf Ghani repeatedly criticized Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan, but it seems that Pakistanis have considered these protests as periodical and weatherly like before and due to Afghanistan's problems, they believed that Afghanistan's needs would not allow it to have a long-term tensions with Islamabad and thus Islamabad was waiting for a favorable opportunity to appease Ghani.

The opportunity was provided in the Heart of Asia Conference in Pakistan and Pakistani officials once again give a warm welcome to Ashraf Ghani and showed its readiness to reinstate peace talks with Taliban with the mediation of Pakistan.

Ashraf Ghani's trip to Islamabad and his speech in the Heart of Asia Conference, prompted protests among afghan politicians and even the resignation of national security chief Rahmatullah Nabil was also connected with the issue, however, tensions between Nabil and Hanif Atmar has long been heard.

Pakistani newspapers considered the resignation of Nabil from National Security Directorate as resignation of one of the opponents of Pakistan from afghan government and welcomed it.

Has Pakistan's Afghan policy changed?

Pakistan follows a complex policy regarding Afghanistan and in the most cases deep differences between its officials is clear, and this has impacted relations between the two countries to experience warm and cold periods in the last fourteen years. If we look at the dynamics of the relations between two countries during the years following American attacks on Afghanistan, now and then the warm relations is followed by tensions and cold relations.

The fact that relations between two countries has never been on a continuous basis in a good or bad way, we have to conclude that, this was a long-term policy of Islamabad and based on its strategy towards Afghanistan. Such a policy we may call as “waiting” policy in which Pakistan needs the element of “time” to access its desired future. Based on this policy, whenever Pakistan comes under pressure to accept obligation for Afghanistan, does something that forces Afghanistan to oppose and thus Pakistan uses time to its benefit and also responsibility of coldness of relations between the two countries lies on Afghanistan. In this regard Pakistan acts so subtly that even firing rockets and cannons from that country to the border regions of Afghanistan is considered as an act against terrorism by the United States of America and in this regard Afghanistan’s protests is ignored.

In the recent visit of Raheel Sharif to Kabul, Pakistani-side not only promised to help the peace process in Afghanistan, but stressed that those who oppose the peace process will be suppressed. This may has led the afghan government to get closer to Pakistan once again.

A Big Concern: Kabul's relationship with India

O In the past fourteen years, Pakistan has become weaker against its main rival “India” because of economic, political and security problems. India over these years, with its dynamic economy has added to its reputation as one of Asia’s major economies, while Pakistan at the same time has not only displayed the image of a country which is involved in violence but also deemed to be the source to export violence to other countries.

India has made major contributions to Afghanistan during the past fourteen years, and has allocated the face of a good and honest friend not only among government officials but also among the general population of Afghanistan.

Coincided with the trip of Indian Prime Minister, some Pakistani media has once again noted the existence of more than a dozen Indian consulates in Afghanistan, and alleged them with intelligence activities against Pakistan, including the Indian consulate in Kandahar is said to be helping Baloch separatists against Pakistan.

It seems that the main problem of Pakistan in Afghanistan is Indian role in the country; but recently the efforts to improve relations between India-Pakistan are also going on that would also positively impact situations in Afghanistan.

The central issue at the Heart of Asia Conference was to reduce the tensions between India and Pakistan, and it seems that some progress has been made in this regard. After Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kabul, he in an unexpected manner traveled from Kabul to Lahore to have a meeting with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif. The meeting was so unexpected that many senior officials in Pakistan, even international affairs advisor to Pakistani Prime Minister Sartaj Aziz was not aware of it and therefore had not been able to participate at a reception which was arranged by Nawaz Sharif in honor of Indian prime minister.

Before the trip, the start of gas pipeline "TAPI" which is supposed to bring Turkmenistan's gas through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India, have provided the way to a good cooperation between the two rival countries in the region. These are all good signs of reducing tensions in the region that could affect the security situations in Afghanistan.

The Quadrilateral meeting

Before Raheel Sharif's visit to Kabul, the international affairs advisor to Pakistani Prime Minister Sartaj Aziz told the media that quadrilateral meeting between Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States of America and China will be held in Islamabad. He said that in this quadrilateral meeting a committee will be formed to oversee and provide solutions for peace talks of Afghanistan.

Sartaj Aziz's remarks attract the mind to an important point, while afghan government has always claimed that the government of Afghanistan should have the first and decisive role in peace talks, then why afghan authorities has never spoken about the possibility of convening a quadrilateral conference about Afghanistan? This could be, due to the ignorance of Afghanistan from decisions

made about Afghanistan among other countries, and Afghanistan is to be made aware after others and even after Pakistan.

But Afghans have once felt the bitter taste of such quadrilateral meetings. On the eve of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the quadrilateral conference in Geneva was organized among the countries of America, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union in order to secure peace in Afghanistan, and marked an ominous future for Afghanistan. At the Geneva conference no representative of Mujahideen participated, in fact Pakistan represented them.

Afghanistan is once again on the eve of another quadrilateral conference which will be organized with the past failed experience; the only difference is now that the former Soviet Union is replaced with China.

These four countries, in the absence of Taliban are supposed to decide about peace talks of Afghan government with armed oppositions and approve solutions for peace in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the United Nations applicable sanctions on the Taliban once again extended for another year.

Taliban while condemning this action of the United Nations, called it an obstacle in the way of peace in Afghanistan. Part of these sanctions has blacklisted the names of some Taliban leaders.

On the other hand, a question rises which group of Taliban does Pakistan bring to the negotiation table? If those who were brought to table on behalf of Taliban did not represent war fronts of the Taliban, what benefit will such negotiations have?

In such an environment full of contradictions and ambiguities, can we have hope for the negotiation with the outcome of peace for the war-torn country?

The recent Taliban-Russia contacts and its impacts on Kabul-Moscow ties



In the last two weeks, the Taliban and Russian recent contacts were seriously looked down in the domestic and international media. This issue came after Zameer Kabulov, the former Russian ambassador to Afghanistan and currently the special Russian envoy to Afghanistan, said in an interview with Interfax news agency that he is in contact with the Taliban against ISIS.

After the Zameer Kabulov's statement, the Western media broadcasted some news about Russian President Vladimir Putin's meeting with the Taliban Leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour in the last September in Tajikistan as well.

The past and present of Taliban-Russia relations and the impacts of recent Taliban-Russia contacts on the Kabul-Moscow ties are analyzed here.

Taliban-Russia Relations during the Taliban Regime

After the fall of Dr. Najeeb, the Russians' strategy in Afghanistan became changed and for the first time, it started cooperation with Mujahedeen and with the emergence of the Taliban, the ties between Mujahedeen especially those from the Northern Coalition and Russians became warmer.

During the Taliban regime, talks between the Russian and Taliban representatives initiated in Islamabad and after that, according to the head of Russia-Table in the Afghan Foreign Ministry, Russians, for several times, wished to establish ties with the Taliban. In 1997, Russians, in Islamabad, suggested that Taliban should do negotiations with their opponents and the most important thing in this contact was to respect Russia's territorial integrity after the representative of Chechnya was visiting Kabul.¹

In 1998, two days after America's missile attack on Afghanistan, the Afghan Embassy in United Arab Emirates (UAE) as well as Afghan Embassy in Pakistan sent a report to Kabul that Russians wishes to send an envoy heading by Alexander Obelov to Kabul in order to reopen Russian Embassy in Kabul; however, this trip did not take place due to Taliban's rejection.²

At that time, the Russian concerns were about the drug-trafficking, extremist groups in Central Asia, official recognition of Chechnya by the Taliban and etc. Therefore, they wanted to establish ties with the Taliban.

At all, the ties between the Taliban and Russia were unfriendly; however, both had contacts with each other; but, with the official recognition of Chechnya these contacts were cut off then.

¹ For further information read: Muzhdah, Waheed, Afghanistan: in the five year of the Taliban government, Tehran, 2003.

² Ibid

Taliban-Russia Relations: (2001-2014)

After the 9/11, the U.S.A and NATO started Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Russia not only welcomed United Nations Security Council sanctions on the Taliban but it also welcomed American attacks on Afghanistan. Russians reopened their embassy in Kabul on 28 December, 2001, and started military cooperation with the Afghan government and Gen. Qaseem Fahim and Mohammad Younus Qanoni who were Defense and Interior ministers at the times visited to Moscow between 2001 and 2003.³

In the second term of Hamid Karzai, the foreign policy of Afghanistan became changed compared to 2002-2009, and so the Afghan-Russia relations became better in the second term of Hamid Karzai as compared to his first term.

In Hamid Karzai's second term, Afghanistan due to Pashtunistan Issue and bad relations with America supported Russian position in Ukraine. The Bilateral trade also increased in this era and reached up to \$1B in 2013.⁴

After the fall of the Taliban, there were some contacts between Taliban and Russians in 2006 and 2007. The motive behind these contacts was seeking cooperation in controlling drug-trafficking into Central Asia.

After a Russian pilot was taken hostage by the Taliban in 2013, Zameer Kabulov, on the behalf of Russian, started negotiations with the Taliban and almost after a year, the Taliban released the Russian pilot, then⁵; the relations between the Taliban and Russia, however, were not good and close at that time at all and sometimes, Russians were contacting the Taliban for some issues.

³ See online: <http://csrskabul.com/pa/blog/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%87%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%DB%B1%DB%B1%DB%B8-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%DB%B2%DB%B6-%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%DB%B2-%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%B2/>

⁴ Thomas Ruttig, From Point Zero to 'New Warmth': Russian-Afghan relations since 1989, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2014.

⁵ See online: <http://csrskabul.com/pa/blog/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%87%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%DB%B1%DB%B4%DB%B2-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%DB%B2%DB%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%DB%B3%DB%B0-%D8%B9%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A8/>

ISIS: the common threat

With the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Russian interests in Middle East were faced with threats; therefore, Moscow started to support Basahar Al Asad's regime in Syria and for a while, it has also initiated air assault on ISIS in that country.

In the last 12 months, the Russian senior officials have also warned about the ISIS presence, and have made statements in this regards as well⁶. They have considered the aim of ISIS to get closer to the Russian border and threaten the interests of its allies. Russians' concerns about ISIS are due to the following reasons:

First; The presence of Central Asian and Russian fighters in the ranks of ISIS;

Second; the pledging of allegiance by some Central Asian militant groups to ISIS (like, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Unity and the Jamaatul Ansar group);

Third; the ISIS, itself, is a threat to Russian security;

Fourth; the presence of this group (ISIS) threatens Moscow's interests in Central Asia and Middle East;

On the other hand, the Taliban had precarious approach toward ISIS at first, but after some of the Taliban leaders joined this group and armed conflict happened between them. As a result, the Taliban sent an official letter to ISIS leader, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi; however, the ISIS showed harsh reaction in response. Therefore, the disputes between ISIS and the Taliban became wider, and now they did not only argue about the legitimacy of Amir (Supreme Leader), but they are also involved in the bloody fighting in a number of provinces. For the reason, Russians, in order to eliminate the common threat, the have now established contacts with the Taliban.

⁶ See the third footnote.

ISIS and impacts on the political-security landscape of Afghanistan

The security and political scenario of the country has been the same since 2001 to 2014 and even the opponents of America (Russia and Iran) was also supporting the war against the Taliban, but after the emergence of ISIS in Afghanistan, the political and security landscape is not the same as it was in 2001-2014 era.

With the emergence of ISIS, the coalitions and unity among the Afghan armed opposition is also influenced. Hizb-i Islami (Hekmatyar) welcomed ISIS against the Taliban; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan separated itself from the Taliban and pledged its allegiance to ISIS and even some Taliban members (like, Aburrauf Khadem who became appointed as the Deputy Governor of Khurasan, he, however, became killed as a result of a raid in Helmand later) also joined the ranks of ISIS in Afghanistan.

At international level, the ISIS has also changed scenario for Afghanistan, and for the first time, it has motivated Iran and Russia to come closer to the Taliban; because all of them consider ISIS as a common threat.

Taliban-Russia Contacts and its impacts on Kabul-Moscow Ties

Zameer Kaboluv, the Russian special envoy to Afghanistan, for the time has talked about having contacts with the Taliban and said that he has contacted the Taliban in order to get cooperation in the war against ISIS. Although, the Taliban have denied these contacts and relations with Russia specifically to ISIS; but they have not denied contacts with some other countries.⁷

On the other side, the Afghan government is yet to provide official answer to these expressions through its Foreign Ministry and it has not summoned the Russian ambassador, either. However, some PMs in the Wolesi Jirga (the Lower

⁷ In this regard, please read the full statement of the Taliban at: <http://alemara1.org/?p=37360>

House of the Parliament) have criticized these ties and, the spokesperson of the Afghan Defense Ministry has also said that these ties are not acceptable to them.

The Russia and the Taliban contacts have two probabilities. One of its probabilities is that the Russians insist on and the other one is originated from the Russians' past experiences and due to the regional geo-political changes.

First Probability; Hekmat Khalil Karzai, the Political Deputy Foreign Minister met the Russian ambassador in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the statements of Zameer Kabulov and asked him for explanations. The Russian ambassador in response told that the words of Zameer Kabulov are interpreted incorrectly; because the aim of his words was that Russia is interested in coordinating the Taliban in fight against ISIS and for Afghanistan's political solution in order for the government to solve its issue with its armed opposition.⁸

The Taliban stated the same words in its statement and said that they have established contacts with different countries in the region in order to end the "American Invasion".

Now, the Russian interest's is to prevent ISIS and it is likely possible when the ongoing war ends in Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban become ready to have peace with the government and America withdraw from the region.

It is why, Zameer Kabulov, after his first expressions, said that Russia is ready to support the probable decrease of sanction put on the Taliban by UN on the condition if this issue is not against the national interests of Afghanistan. Besides that, it has also supported the peace policy of the Afghan government, also.⁹

Second Probability: Russia would have made contacts with the Taliban due to following reasons:

⁸ See online: <http://mfa.gov.af/fa/news/deputy-foreign-minister-meets-the-ambassador-of-the-russian-federation>

⁹ See online: <http://pa.azadiradio.org/content/article/27456738.html>

First: Russia would be suspicious of the Afghan government that it is not sincerely fighting ISIS, so it would have contacted the Taliban directly in order to decrease the threats to its security.

Second: Russia, considering the regional and international situation, wants to interfere in the Afghan internal affairs directly and threaten the American interests here.

The End

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Note: Please let us know your feedback and suggestions for the improvement of Weekly analysis.

