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Preface

In 2015 and 2016, Afghanistan's neighboring and regional countries were witnessing a series of geopolitical changes. The US-India relations were improving and coincide with that, tensions in China-India and India-Pakistan relations were rising. The US and India signed a military agreement last week but on the other hand, once again the South Sea issue put negative impacts on the US-China relations. In the first part of the analysis you would read about these geopolitical changes and the future scenario.

In the second part of the analysis you will read about Kabul-Tehran ties and the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs Salahuddin Rabbani's travel to Iran. Since the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan the two countries enjoyed relatively better relations. The Chabahar Port Deal was signed between Iran, Afghanistan and India; Iranian and Afghan senior officials paid visits to each other's countries but besides that there are factors that challenge these bilateral relations; the question is what are the opportunities and challenges in Iran-Afghanistan bilateral relations?

In this issue of Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies you would read analysis about these issues.

The US-India closing ties and its impacts on the region



The US Secretary of Defense and Indian Defense Minister signed the “Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)” last week. Coincide with that, the US Secretary of State John Kerry also visited India and met some Indian Senior Officials.

The signature of LEMOA and the US Secretary of States’ visit to India occur at a time when the tensions in India-China and India-Pakistan relations are rising further.

The geopolitical changes in the region in 2016, the direction of US-India relations and the impacts of recently signed LEMOA between the US and India on the region are the issues that are analyzed here.

Recent regional geopolitical changes

Since 2015, significant changes have occurred in our region and neighborhood; for instance Iran came to an agreement with the P5+1 group of world powers over its nuclear program; based on this agreement Iran would stop its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of the economic sanctions imposed on it. The deal put positive impacts upon Iranian economy and not only did the country gain access to its \$115 billion frozen assets; but also the way was paved for other countries to collaborate in economic and trading fields and invest in Iran.

In the meanwhile, the Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a visit to Pakistan and inaugurated the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China would invest \$46 billion in transport, transit and energy sections in the CPEC. Since this economic zone passes through parts of “Kashmir”, India is thus opposing it.

After lifting of economic sanctions imposed on Iran, Afghanistan, Iran and India signed the Chabahar port deal which will provide an alternative way for Afghanistan and India instead of Pakistani route and thus would bypass Pakistan. Besides, India will be connected to Central Asia through Afghanistan.

In April 2016, China blocked India’s bid to ban Jaish-i-Mohammad’s chief Masood Azhar and put him on a United Nations terror list. In the meanwhile, in July 2016, despite the active diplomacy, India failed to gain the membership of Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). India blame China for not getting NSG membership but China argues that according to the regulations of NSG any country who has not signed the “Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)” cannot be a member of the group, therefore, India must first sign the treaty. Later-on, due to the above two factors, India openly opposed the two Chinese projects (one belt, one road and China-Pakistan economic zone).

On the other hand, since the past three months, the India-Pakistan and India-China relations are getting tenuous. In July 2016, Burhan Wani was killed in Indian Kashmir which besides deteriorating the security situation in Kashmir resulted in the escalation of tensions in Delhi-Islamabad relations (after the death of Burhan

Wani, Curfew was imposed in Kashmir, the leaders of All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) were arrested and around 70 people were killed and thousands were injured in various demonstrations). In response to the death of Wani, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said that he was 'shocked' and called Wani a "martyr". Additionally, Pakistan raised the issue of killing Burahan Wani in the United Nations. In response, Indian Foreign Ministry accused Pakistan of "glorifying" the "terrorists". Besides, speaking at the ceremony to celebrate India's Independence Day, Modi raised the Baluchistan issue and thus hit Pakistan where it hurts them the most.

US-India closing relations

The US President Barrack Obama announced the "Rebalance to Asia" policy in 2014 and some Chinese scholars interpret it policy as encirclement of China; because according to them the Rebalance to Asia means the rise of India, Japan and some other countries against them. Based on the recent agreement between the US and India, along with the other aspects, the trade and defense relations will also be strengthened.

On the other hand, after Narendra Modi seized power in India the US-India ties entered a new stage. Since 2014, Modi has traveled to the US four times (twice to attend international conferences and twice as a state visits). In January 2016, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited US President Barack Obama to attend India's Republic Day ceremony; and hence by doing so Obama became the first US President that traveled twice to India during his eight year tenure and attended India's Republic Day parade.

Regional politics witnessed a new geopolitical change when Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar went to the US and met his American counterpart Ashton B. Carter. Since 2016, it is the second visit of Indian Defense Minister to the US and his sixth meeting with the US Secretary of Defense. In his recent visit, India and the US signed the controversial LEOMA which many Indians were also against it (Congress Party). Based on the agreement the two countries may use

each other's land, air and naval bases when its need occurs. In response to the anti-LEMOA voices in India and some regional countries, the US Secretary of States pointed out in a joint press conference with the Indian Defense Minister, that "the agreement would not provide the means to have military bases on each other's soils".

On the other hand, the US Secretary of States John Kerry paid his forth visit to India and met the Prime Minister, National Security Advisor and Minister of External Affairs of the country. Four significant discussions occurred in these meetings:

Frist; the US-India bilateral ties would be strengthened. According to the US Secretary of States the two countries will boost bilateral trade fivefold and increases it to \$500bn and the US would make efforts to include India in NSG in upcoming year.

Second; the US refused to distinguish between good and bad terrorists, "terrorism is terrorism!" said Kerry. (He pointed out Pakistan to take tough actions against Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Afghan Taliban.)

Third; both 'emphasized the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation, freedom of over flight and unimpeded lawful commerce throughout the region, including in the South China Sea'.

Forth; reinitiating the trilateral Afghanistan-the US-India talks on Afghanistan.

Afghanistan and The future Scenario in the region

China and Pakistan would have observed the events in the last week because John Kerry's expressions during his visit to India were in a large part about Pakistan. On the other hand, China would be deeply concerned about the signature of LEOMA between the US and India, because it occurs at a time when the US-China ties are tenuous over the South Sea issue.

The timing of signing of LEOMA and John Kerry's visit to India is coincident to Delhi-Islamabad and Delhi-Beijing's downturn ties. . The last one year's events show that India is rapidly approaching to the US and if it is continued so in the future, then India would, for the first time, turn its back to its traditional policy.

On the other hand, Afghanistan needs Indian aids and military support. Afghanistan can neither cut nor limit its ties with India only because of another country's concerns; but in the current regional game, if the purpose of the events is the alliance of the US and India against China and Pakistan, then Afghanistan must pursue its traditional policy (neutrality) and should not take part in such coalitions.

The NUG and Afghan-Iran ties



The Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs Salahuddin Rabbani went to Iran on a two day official trip. During his visit to Iran, Rabbani met Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chairman of the Parliament, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Advisor, and some other officials and discussed various political, security, economic issues and expansion of bilateral relations between the two countries.

The NUG foreign policy have been different than that of Karzai's 13 years rule, the beginning of NUG's relations with Iran, the background of bilateral ties between the two countries, Kabul-Tehran relations in the two years of the NUG and its challenges are the issues that are analyzed here.

The background of Kabul-Tehran ties

Sharing 950 km border, Iran and Afghanistan have religious, cultural and language commonalities and have maintained longstanding historical and relatively good relations.

During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of the 1970s, Iran was one of the first countries to condemn the invasion and termed it as explicit violations of Afghan national sovereignty and the principals of international law and in the meanwhile opened its borders towards Afghan refugees.

During the five years of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, Iran backed the United Frond (Northern Alliance) and coincides with the military presence of the US and NATO in Afghanistan in 2001, the two countries maintained normal relations and their senior officials began to pay visits to each other's countries.

Kabul-Tehran Ties since NUG

Despite the differences in the views of the NUG's two leaders regarding relations with Iran, the NUG have succeeded to maintain the necessary balance in its foreign policy with Iran and its (Iran) regional and international rivals.

Eventual deterioration of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the distrust between the security and political officials of the two countries have resulted in reduction of trade turnover between Pakistan and Afghanistan which has contrarily increased the trade turnover between Iran and Afghanistan; that is why the senior officials of both countries have paid visits to each other's countries.

Three months earlier the Chabahar Port deal was signed between Afghanistan, Iran and India which was one of the most significant steps toward promotion of joint economic and regional collaborations between the three countries.

More than two million Afghan refugees in Iran is another controversial issue that has always been the subject of discussions between the two countries, but in the past two years it seems that Iran is seeking to either legalize the presence of Afghan refugees or pave the way for their voluntary return to Afghanistan.

Afghan Foreign Minister's visit to Iran

The Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs Salahuddin Rabbani visited Iran on August 28, 2016. The purpose of the visit is said to be discussions about bilateral relations in various areas particularly drug smuggling, which has always been an issue of concern, and promotion of political and economic cooperation between the two countries.

In his meeting with Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rabbani said that Iran has a particular place in the Afghan foreign policy and that there is serious determination among the Afghan leadership to enhance political, security and economic ties with Iran.

In this meeting the two sides also discussed about trade and transit between the two countries including Khawaf-Herat railway and the challenges of Afghan refugees and students in Iran and both sides emphasized on cooperation in order to address these challenges.¹

In his meeting with the Iranian Chairman of Parliament Ali Larjani, the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs spoke about the expansion of relations and meetings between the officials and Parliament members of both countries with the purpose of improving relations between the two countries, and in this regard both sides agreed.²

Besides that, Rabbani, in his meeting with Iranian Secretary of Supreme National Security Advisor Ali Shamkhani, discussed the security threats and the Iranian side showed preparedness to fight against armed oppositions of the Afghan government.³

¹ The Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, meeting between the Afghan and Iranian Foreign Ministers, Aug29, 2016: <http://mfa.gov.af/fa/news/foreign-ministers-of-iran-and-afghanistan-meet>

² The Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, meeting of the Afghan Foreign Minister with the Chairman of Iranian Parliament, Aug28, 2016: <http://mfa.gov.af/fa/news/foreign-minister-meet-with-speaker-of-iran-islamic-consulatative-assembly>

³ The Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Meeting of the Afghan Foreign minister with the secretary of Supreme National Security Advisor of Iran, Aug 30, 2016: <http://mfa.gov.af/fa/news/foreign-minister-meet-with-iran-head-of-national-security>

Opportunities and challenges in Kabul-Tehran ties

NATO's military presence (particularly the US) in Afghanistan, the warm relations between Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia and publication of the political motives that are against that of Iranians in Iran-Saudi or Shiite-Sunni rivalry, expansion of "ISIS" in Afghanistan and Iran's stance towards the Taliban, cultivation and smuggling narcotics particularly in the South-West of Afghanistan, Iran's intervention in Afghan domestic affairs through supporting some political parties, sending Afghan refugees to Syrian war and execution of Afghan youth who have gone to Iran seeking employment and get executed for crimes that do not require execution, deportation of Afghan refugees in contrast with the bilateral agreements and some other issues are the challenges that sometimes affect the bilateral ties negatively.⁴

In the first months of the NUG when the Saudi Arabia demanded from Islamic countries including Afghanistan to clear their stance on supporting Saudi Arabia in its Yemen war; given some series of expedients, Ghani supported Saudi Arabia in its fight against Houthis in Yemen, but he came under pressure by some Pro-Iran circles.

The expansion of "ISIS" presence in various Afghan provinces which seems hard for the Afghan government to perish them and especially when the peace and reconciliations doors are closed to them and given the ISIS's anti-Shiite political view, ISIS is another factor that can challenge the future ties between the two countries. The expansion of ISIS in Afghanistan has also changed Iran's stance towards the Taliban.

Recruiting Afghan workers to fight in Syria by Iranian Revolutionary Guards, which has recently been reported by international institutions and the pictures which are published on the internet pages and media prove it, it is also one of the challenges that damages strategic Kabul-Tehran relations.

Reports suggest that besides sending other forces in Syria, Iranian Revolutionary Guards encourage the Afghan workers to fight in Syria, and after necessary

⁴ Challenges and opportunities in Iran-Afghanistan relations, International Peace Studies Center (IPSC).

military trainings they send these workers in various Syrian cities and in case of being killed or injured they bring them (the Afghan workers) back to Iran.⁵ According to estimations, about 10 to 12 thousand Afghans fight alongside with Basharul Assad's army in Syria. Iranian officials have said that these Afghan citizens have volunteered to fight in Syria.⁶ Human Rights Watch released a report last year that Iran sends thousands of illegal Afghan refugees to Syrian war. The relevant Afghan organs pursued the issue.⁷

Despite the challenges described above still the two countries poses the opportunity to prevent political mistrust and increase trade turnover between the two countries. The two sides can also pave the way for economic development of their countries particularly through Chabahar port which can connect Afghanistan to the world market.

The end

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

⁵ Inclusion of Afghan refugees in Syrian civil war, VOA:
<http://www.darivoa.com/a/afghanistan-syria-civil-war/1916438.html>

⁶ Iran sends Afghan refugees to fight alongside Assad in Syria, VOA:
<http://www.darivoa.com/a/iran-sends-afghan-refugees-based-in-that-country-to-fight-alongside-asad-regime/3168951.html>

⁷ Syrian war, Afghans that are sent from Iran to fight in Syria, BBC:
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And also read, Afghanistan investigates on the issue of Iran sending Afghans in Syrian war, BBC:
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