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Preface

Islamabad hosted the ECO summit last week at a time when border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan is closed since two weeks.

Although the Afghan government is a member of ECO, but no senior Afghan official from Kabul participated in this conference and only the Afghan Ambassador in Pakistan Omar Zakhilwal represented Afghanistan in the ECO summit. In this meeting, the Afghan Ambassador criticized the closure of borders between Afghanistan and Pakistan by Pakistani government. You would read about this in the first part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS).

In the second part of the analysis you would read about the 20th conference of International Contact Group (ICG) hosted by OIC and the Afghan government. Representatives of 50 countries had participated in this conference and discussed the issues of security and stability in Afghanistan.

In this conference, the plan for organizing an International Conference of Muslim Ulema was also announced, which is expected to be hosted by Saudi Arabia. What happened in the recent conference of ICG? What will the impacts of the International Conference of Muslim Ulema be on peace and war in Afghanistan? These and other similar questions are answered in the second part of the analysis.

The 13th ECO Conference and Pak-Afghan relations



Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) held its 13th summit in Islamabad on Feb 28, 2017, where along with Pakistani Prime Minister eight heads of states/governments participated in it. Neither the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani nor the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs participated in this conference and instead the Afghan Ambassador in Pakistan and the Afghan Presidents special representative Omar Zakhilwal represented Afghanistan in this conference.

The conference is kicked off at a time when tensions in Pak-Afghan relations have risen after the explosion in Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine in the Southern Sindh province, Pakistan. The incident has also resulted in closure of border crossings between the two countries.

The background of ECO, the recent conference's impacts on regional integration and the current relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan are issues that are analyzed here.

The Background of ECO

Economic Cooperation Organization was established in 1985 by Turkey, Iran and Pakistan generally for the purpose of promoting economic technical and cultural cooperation between the member states.

Specifically the objectives of ECO are: sustainable economic development of member states, progressive removal of trade barriers, development of transport and communications infrastructures among the member states, economic liberalization and privatization, effective utilization of industrial and agricultural potential of ECO region, regional cooperation for drug abuse control and environmental protection and promotion of historical and cultural relations between the member states.¹

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, new states were created in Central Asia and thus the member states of ECO rose from 3 to 10. The new member states were: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

Although Afghanistan gained ECO membership in 1992 but, until 2001, this country did not play an active role in this organization. It was only in the post-2001 that Afghanistan begin to play an active role in this organization and the organization has also funded some projects in Afghanistan².

ECO Conference and regional Integration?

The 13th ECO summit is kicked off in Islamabad after five years, while Pakistan was somehow presumed to be isolated in the region as, in late 2016, five out of eight members of SAARC refused to participate in the 18th summit of SAARC in Islamabad, which resulted in postponing the summit. For the same reason, when Azerbaijani President Elham Alive, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Kyrgyzstani Prime Minister Sooronbay

¹ For further info see the link bellow:

<http://www.ecosecretariat.org/in2.htm>

² See the official website of the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

<http://mfa.gov.af/en/page/6546/6565/6569>

Jeenbekov and Tajikistani President Imam Ali Rahman came to Islamabad to participate in the ECO conference, they were presented 21 gun-salute on their arrival.

In recent ECO conference, as in previous conferences, the renewed promises for economic and trade developments were made and the summit also adopted the new ECO vision 2025. Due to projects like China-Pakistan Economic Corridor(CPEC) and “One Belt, One Road”, China was also invited as special guest. On the one hand, ECO members supported these major economic projects particularly CPEC and, on the other hand, China stressed on the significance of the role played by this organization in economic development of the world.

Although it became 32 years since the creation of ECO, but it had very few achievements. For instance, growth of trade between the ECO member states is one of the fundamental objectives of this organization, while there is a little amount of trade between the member states. If one studies trade statistics one will find out that from 2002 to 2012, the value of trade between the member states has increased 3.6%. In 2002, trade between the member states of ECO formed only 5.3% of their overall trade and in 2012 it rose to 8.9%, while estimations showed that until 2015, trade between the member countries would form the 20% of their overall trade.

On the other hand, political disagreements between Afghanistan and Pakistan, rivalry between Iran and Turkey, sanctions imposed on Iran due to its nuclear programs (which were lifted in 2015), lack of transport and transit infrastructures and other countries’ involvement in this region are other factors that have reduced cooperation and trade between the countries in the region.

The Pak-Afghan relations at the sidelines of ECO Conference

Afghanistan did not send any high-ranking senior officials in ECO Conference in Islamabad, which signifies suspicions and tensions in the relations between Kabul and Islamabad. In this month a blast hit Pakistan’s Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine, the responsibility for which, according to the media, was claimed by ISIL and the

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. Pakistan undertook five actions in response to this explosion.

First, Pakistan closed border crossings with Afghanistan, which is still closed after two weeks;

Second, Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Pakistan's Military summoned Afghan diplomats.

Third, Pakistan submitted a list of 76 peoples' name, whom they said is in Afghanistan and asked Kabul to hand them over;

Fourth, once again, Pakistan started firing rocket shells on Afghanistan and according to Afghan Media Pakistani helicopters have also crossed the border line.

Fifth, Pakistani army launched the "Operation Radd-ul-Fassad".

New changes from the closure of border crossings to firing rocket shells on Afghanistan soil and Pashtuns being targeted in Punjab Province of Pakistan has increased hatred between the people of the two countries.

The ECO Conference was supposed to be an opportunity for repairing relations between the two countries, but, given the low level participation of the Afghan government in this conference, this opportunity was not provided neither did Pakistan, in such an economic conference which is aimed at regional economic and trading connectivity, announce the opening of borders. Even worse is that the spokesman for Pakistani military called Afghanistan to devise its Pakistan policies through "Afghan lens" and don't see to Islamabad from "anti-Pakistani lens" (he was indicating the deteriorated economic and security situation of Afghanistan). Besides that, about reopening the border, he said that before reopening borders there were things that Afghanistan had to do.³

This situation in the bilateral relations is worth paying attention and it cannot be resolved by accusing one another and there is need for undertaking trust building measures especially acts such as reopening borders in order to improve relations between the two countries.

³ For further info see the link bellow:
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1317556>

From the meeting of ICG to the International Conference of Muslim Ulema



Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) hosted a meeting of International Contact Group (ICG) on Afghanistan in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on Feb 28, 2017, where representative of 50 countries and international organizations had participated. The main issue discussed in the meeting was security and stability in Afghanistan.

An Afghan delegation headed by the Afghan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Political Affairs Hekmat Khalil Karzai also participated in this meeting. In his speech, Karzai said that the Afghan government had undertaken some reforms which could help achieve peace in Afghanistan. Moreover, in this conference it was announced that the International Conference of Muslim Ulema on peace and stability in Afghanistan will also be held in a near future and will be hosted by Saudi Arabia.

In this part of the analysis, besides introduction of International Contact Group, you will read about the outcomes of its recent meeting on Afghanistan and the scheme of holding International Conference of Muslim Ulema and its efficiency for peace and war in Afghanistan.

International Contact Group (ICG)

ICG was formed in 2008 under auspices of Germany and based on the suggestion of Richard Holbrooke, the former envoy of the US for Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are more than 50 countries in this group and the special representatives of the presidents of countries that help Afghanistan are present ICG and its meeting are organized by the foreign ministries of member states.

The group holds three to four meetings annually and its fundamental aim is to facilitate coordination between the special representatives of the countries for Afghanistan, in order to discuss important issues on Afghanistan. In the ICG meetings, they usually discuss the achievements of Afghanistan and international community in various fields and the participants do not make direct promises of financial aids.

The 20th Conference of ICG

OIC and Afghanistan jointly hosted the 20th meeting of ICG in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Representatives of High Peace Council (HPC) and National Security Council (NSC) of Afghanistan had also taken part in the meeting.

Generally, the conference discussed the political, security and economic situation of Afghanistan but rather focused on the peace process. The General Secretariat of OIC announced in this conference that a meeting of Muslim Ulema will be held in the upcoming months to discuss the issue of Peace and stability in Afghanistan. It is a meeting that Afghanistan expects would announce the war against the Afghan government as illegal and encourage the Taliban to join the peace process.

Unlike the past, the Afghan delegations' rhetoric statements regarding negotiations with the armed oppositions was different. The Afghan delegation called the armed opposition as the "cruel" enemies of the Afghan men, women and children and emphasized that they would protect Afghans against these groups.

In addition, in this conference, the participants stressed on the joint strategy between the countries in the region to fight against "terrorism", because

improvement in the security situation in Afghanistan would result in the growth of economy, trade and transit in the region which is in the best interests of all countries of the region.

Efforts by the government to hold the International Conference of Muslim Ulema

The Afghan government rejects the Taliban's religious call on Afghans to fight against "foreigners' occupation" of the country, but in the meanwhile has realized the importance of religious fatwas and, therefore, has always strived to organize a conference of Muslim Ulema in order to religiously denounce the current war in Afghanistan.

During Karzai's Presidency, with the help of Islamic countries particularly Saudi Arabia, the Afghan government made efforts to organize an International Conference of Muslim Ulema but these efforts did not meet the desired outcomes.

After the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan, this government also followed these efforts. Ghani traveled to Saudi Arabia thrice and also released a statement in support of Saudi Arabia in Yemen war and joined the anti "terrorism" coalition under the leadership of Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs officially demanded from the Secretary General of OIC Iyad bin Amin Madani to hold this conference.

The Afghan Chief Executive also raised the issue of organizing a conference of Muslim Ulema in his visit to Saudi Arabia in October 2016.

Finally, in the recent conference of ICG it was announced that the International Conference of Muslim Ulema would be held in the upcoming month and Saudi Arabia will host it. Although it is still unclear whether this conference will be held or not, because there was also news of organizing such a conference in the past, but it is said that due to serious reactions and opposition of the Taliban it was delayed and was not convened until now.

Efficiency of the International Conference of Muslim Ulema

Utilizing its improved relations with Saudi Arabia, the Afghan government is making efforts to hold such a conference in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia as the most important Islamic country on the one hand, and OIC an important Islamic organization on the other hand are important in achieving outcomes that the Afghan government expects from such conference.

Although the exact date of the International Conference of Muslim Ulema is not announced and it is not clear whether or not this conference will be held, but the question is, if such a conference was held, to what extent will it be efficient in the Afghan case? In this regard few points are noteworthy:

First, who will be the participants of this conference? Will the participants be people whose opinions are acceptable for the Taliban? Five years ago, the Afghan government had made efforts to convene a conference of Ulema in Kabul but the Ulema of some of the countries especially Pakistan did not participate in that conference.

If the participants of this conference are the pro-Afghan-government and Ulema that have an influence on the Taliban do not participate, such a conference would not influence the Taliban's current war against the Afghan government. But if the participants of the conference are people whose opinions are valued by the Taliban and if they announce the current war in Afghanistan as illegitimate, it may, to some extent, influence some of the people in the Taliban ranks but it will never put an end to the war in Afghanistan.

The end

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

