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Preface

In response to the utilization of chemical weapons by Bashar-al Assad's regime, the US fired dozens of missiles on an airbase in this country. According to the US Secretary of States, the attack has destroyed 20% of the Syrian aircraft. Following these attacks, tensions between Russia and the US escalated and the US President Donald Trump, during a press conference, used threatening rhetoric addressing Russia.

On the one hand, some Afghans are fighting in Syria and, on the other hand, both the US and Russia are involved in Afghanistan. The impacts of the new phase of the Syrian crisis on Afghanistan and some other related questions are the issues that you would read in the first part of the analysis.

In the second part of the analysis, you would read about the Afghan President's visit to Indonesia and bilateral relations between the two countries. During this trip, besides meeting Indonesian officials, the Afghan President signed several agreements of bilateral cooperation. Indonesia is a country that, after several decades of war, has now developed in various areas and, therefore, the Afghan government is trying to attract this country's help. The background of bilateral relations between the two countries, and the place of Indonesia in Afghan foreign policy are the issues that are analyzed in the second part of the Weekly Analysis.

The Impacts of the Syrian crisis on Afghanistan



Since the past Friday, the situation in Syria is dramatically changing. The Syrian government used Sarin chemical weapon in Khan Sheikhoun area of Adlib city which left 89 dead including 33 children. The attack sparked reactions internationally. The US, in response to this attack, launched 59 missiles on the Syrian airbase Shayrat. Many countries supported the US strikes but Russia and Iran fiercely reacted against it.

In the meanwhile, the US Secretary of States Rex Tillerson traveled to Moscow, the first visit by a high-ranking official of the Trump administration to Russia. However, during this trip, Russian President did not meet Tillerson, and hence it is the first time after the World War II that such a thing has occurred.

Before his trip to Russia, Rex Tillerson said in a meeting of G-7 countries that Russia must decide whether it stands beside the US against the Syrian regime or continues to support the Syrian regime, Iran, and Hezbollah.

How did the crisis in Syria emerged? How is Afghanistan linked to it? And how will the new predicament in Syria affect Afghanistan? These are the questions that are looked into in this issue of Weekly Analysis.

Arab Spring and Syrian Crisis

In 2011, democratic uprisings arose against the authoritarian and imposed governments in the Middle East, which in political dictionaries and the media was referred to as the “Arab Spring”. These uprisings removed the Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and then the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak from power one after another. Economic factors, tyrant and imposed governments, lack of freedom and some other reasons were behind these uprisings.

In March 2011, these uprisings spread to Syria as well. However, Bashar-al Assad ferociously suppressed these uprisings, and hence many people were killed in the process. Later-on, some soldiers split up from Assad’s military and started a war against him. In the meanwhile, some other groups such as Al-Qaeda (primarily Hezb-an Nusra), ISIL, Kurdish forces and some other groups began their activities against Assad.

The groups mentioned above are not the only parties engaged in the Syrian crisis, but some foreign countries are also involved. Russia, Iran and China back Bashar-al-Assad and Turkey, the US, Saudi Arabia and some Arab and European countries support anti-Assad groups.

Approximately 465 thousand Syrians have lost their lives, and one million other Syrians are wounded, and nearly half of the Syrian population (12 million) are displaced since the beginning of the Syrian crisis six years ago, making it the bloodiest war in 21st century.

Afghanistan and Syrian crisis

Afghanistan is influenced by Syrian crisis even from the beginning. When Islamist uprisings arose in Syria and then were subdued by Bashar-al Assad, some Islamists in the country (Afghanistan) reacted in favor of Syrian uprisings and against Assad and not only through social media but also through conducting demonstrations.

However, due to his oppositions with the US, the then Afghan President Hamid Karzai congratulated President Assad for being selected as the Syrian President following the presidential elections in Syria.

In additions, some Afghans went to Syria to fight against Assad and some other to fight alongside with pro-Assad forces. Most of the Afghans who fought for Assad

were Shiite Afghans and those Afghans who fought against him were Sunni. Although it is hard to state the exact number of Afghans fighting in Syria but according to various media outlets, approximately 20 thousand Afghan Shiites are fighting in Syria. It is also said that an Afghan militia group “Liwa Fatemiyoun” is formed in Syria which has 10 to 14 thousand members. About the Afghan Sunnite fighters, however, there exist neither any statistic nor any estimation.

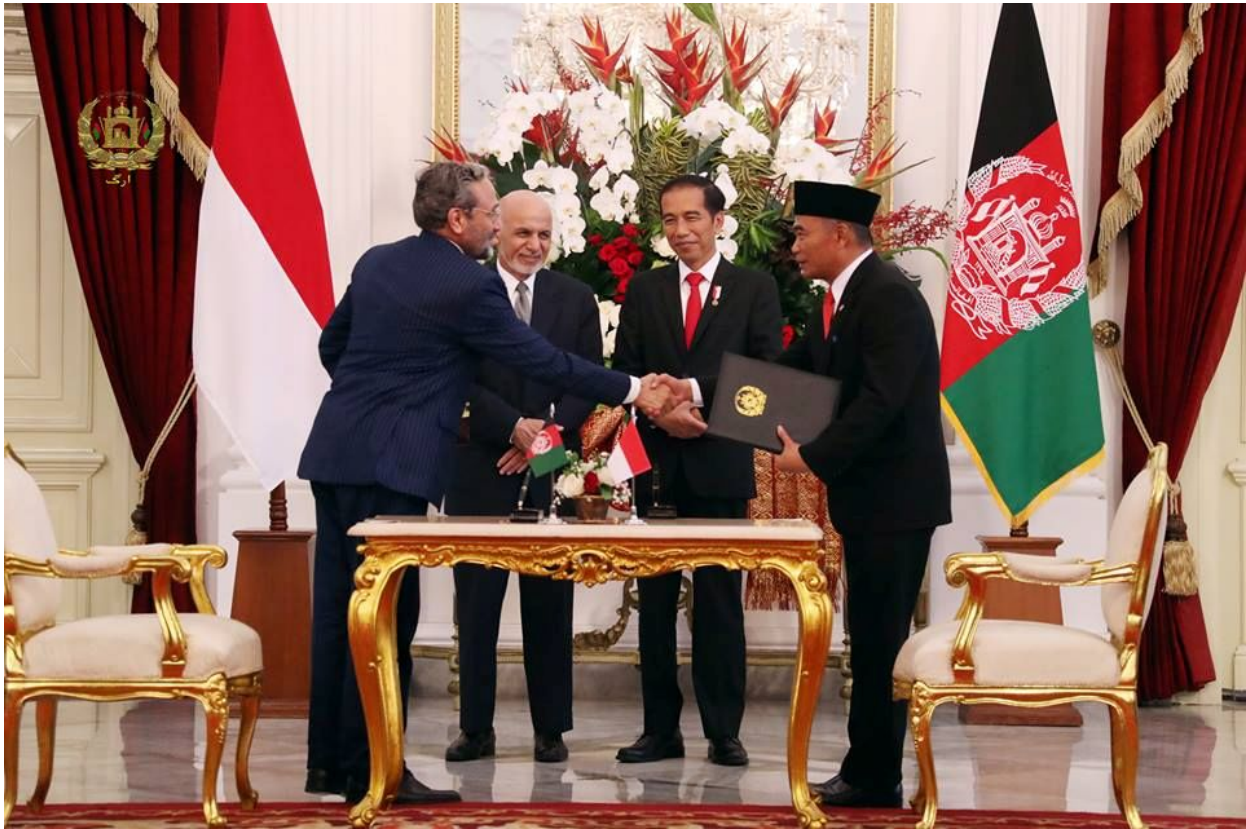
The new crisis in Syria and its impacts on Afghanistan

Notwithstanding the fact that it is not the first US strike on Syrian soil, before this the US has carried out many airstrikes on ISIL-controlled areas as well as some hospitals of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), it is the first time US attack on Assad’s forces. After these attacks, relations between the US and Russia reached an all-time low. Russia immediately suspended the 2015 memorandum of understanding on the air operations, an agreement to minimize the risk of in-flight incidents between US and Russia aircraft operating over Syria. Russia said that this step by Washington was causing significant damage to Russian-American relations and that the current situation was in a deplorable state. The US, on the other hand, said that Russia’s support of Assad was concerning and demanded from Russia to either stand alongside the US or Bashar-al Assad.

In the current situation, while Bashar-al-Assad is fighting with his own people, the presence of a large number of Afghan Shiites in Syria could, to a greater extent, damage Afghanistan’s soft power in Arabian countries and would also decrease relations between the nations of these countries. On the other hand, it is said that if these Afghan fighters returned from Syria back to Afghanistan, they would create a security challenge for the Afghan government and would pave the way for a newly erupting sectarian war.

Coordination between the US and Russia is another issue that could be affected by the widening tensions between the two countries in Syria, which can be a significant challenge to the Afghan government. Currently, Afghanistan is the only place where Russia could pressurize the US. All these come at a time when Russia has established good relations with the Taliban and its military and political ties with Pakistan is strengthening as well.

Indonesia in the Afghan foreign policy



After a three-day trip to Australia, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visited Jakarta, the Indonesian capital. In this two-day trip, Ghani met Indonesian President, Vice President, Speaker of Indonesia's Regional Representative Council (Senate), the people in charge of Islamic centers and some of the Indonesian traders and discussed the strengthening of the relations between the two countries.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo declared that his respective country was ready to offer any help to maintain peace in Afghanistan and said that he would shortly send an Indonesian delegation to share their views and experiences with Afghan officials. The Indonesian President also promised to put the foundation of a great center of Islamic Educations in Afghanistan so that, through this center, the scholars of the two countries could remain in contact.

Afghanistan has 62 years of friendly relations with Indonesia, and religious commonalities play an important part in these relations. Indonesia is the world's

most populous Muslim-majority country, and 99% of the Afghan population are Muslim as well.

Here you would read about the Afghan-Indonesian relations, Jakarta's place in the Afghan foreign policy and President Ghani's recent visit to this country.

The background of bilateral relations

Afghanistan was one of the first countries that recognized Indonesia in 1949 after the revolution ended in this country. In 1954, diplomatic relations between the two countries were established and in the same year, the Afghan Embassy opened in Jakarta.

The first friendship agreement between the two countries was signed on 24 April 1955. The then Indonesian President Sukarno visited Afghanistan in 1955, making himself the first Indonesian President to visit Afghanistan.

During the cold war, Afghanistan had better relations with Indonesia, and the main reason behind that was the start of the Non-aligned Movement. Both Afghanistan and Indonesia were not willing to enter neither the capitalist nor the communist block and therefore, alongside with India, Egypt, and China began the Non-aligned Movement. However, Afghanistan did not become prominent in the list of the founders of the movement.

When in 1979-1989, Russia occupied Afghanistan, Indonesia, as a sign of opposition, did not participate in 1980 Olympic Games held in Russia. Moreover, Indonesian Muslims assisted the Afghan Mujahedin as well. However, after the Afghan Jihad, when civil war erupted in the country, relations between the two nations weakened and was at a low point.

After 2001

After the collapse of the Taliban regime, Indonesia supported the Afghan government and people in various fields and hence bilateral relations between the two countries improved. In 2012, the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai visited Indonesia to strengthen relations with this country. In this trip, in addition to participating in the fifth session of the Bali Democracy Forum, Karzai signed a

new cooperation agreement with Indonesian authorities in areas of politics, trade, and culture and Indonesia pledged to support Afghanistan in the fields of technic, capacity building, strengthening of institutions, agriculture and enabling women.

In President Karzai trip to Indonesia, the agreements were signed for visa-free travels with political passports and exchange of services and bilateral consulting between the two countries. Besides that, Indonesia vowed to train Afghan teacher and provide scholarships for Afghan students. Up to date, 358 Afghan students are graduated from Indonesian universities, but trade between the two countries is only \$16m annually.

President Ghani's recent visit to Jakarta

After the formation of the National Unity Government in Afghanistan, it was Ghani's first trip to Indonesia which was warmly welcomed by the Indonesian President and officials, and 21 artillery shots were fired to salute Ghani. In this trip, six cooperation agreement were signed in areas of education, agriculture, statistics, administrative reforms and civil services, science and technology, and higher education.

In his meeting with Indonesian President, President Ghani, pointing out the successful endeavors of Indonesia in areas of maintaining peace, development and economic growth, said that Indonesian experience in ensuring peace, stability and economic growth could be useful in Afghanistan.

Indonesian President also showed preparedness to any help to maintain peace in Afghanistan and said that, in the near future, he would send an Indonesian delegation to share their opinions and experiences with Afghan authorities. Furthermore, the Indonesian President announced 100 scholarships for Afghan students.

In separate meetings between President Ghani and Indonesian Vice President and the Speaker of Indonesian Senate, the two sides reiterated on bilateral cooperation in various fields between the two countries. The Afghan President

also met with the heads of the main Islamic centers as well as Indonesian investors and traders.

The importance of Kabul-Jakarta relations

In his electoral charter, Ghani writes: “The circle of Islamic countries is one of the important circles that could impact the situation in Afghanistan either positively or negatively; because our views, thoughts and deeds and behaviors are all on the basis of Islamic teachings and there is no part of our existence where Islam is not dominant.” Among the five circles of the Afghan President’s foreign policy, Islamic countries stand in the second circle, therefore, being an important Islamic country, Indonesia has a significant place in the Afghan foreign policy.

Indonesia has previously experienced the situation that Afghanistan is currently in. About 40 years earlier, Indonesia was one of the poorest Asian countries but, within 20 years, Indonesia succeeded to come out of misery and become one of the developed countries of Asia. Hence, Indonesia’s cooperation with Afghanistan is assumed beneficial for the maintenance of peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan needs Indonesia’s cooperation and experience regarding the resolution of conflict and talks with opposition groups of the government, fight against corruption, agricultural development, education and some other aspects, and proper utilization of this cooperation and experience could lead to desiring outcomes. After returning from Jakarta, during a press conference, President Ghani said, “Indonesia could help Afghanistan in areas of conflict resolution, maintenance of peace, democracy, and economic growth.”

Indonesia is not the first country that Afghanistan is attracting its commitment for cooperation, but the Afghan government is constantly trying to have the world countries’ commitments with Afghanistan in various areas, something that the Afghan government has been, to some extent, splendid at. However, most of such commitments did not have desiring outcomes which are linked to paving the way for the implementation of these commitments inside the country. The Afghan government is faced with challenges in this area, which are the continuation of the war in the country, corruption, internal difference, etc.

Another issue in the bilateral relations between the two nations is Afghan refugees in Indonesia. Annually, thousands of Afghans are trying to make their way to Australia through Indonesia, hundreds of whom have lost their lives in Indonesian waters. In the past, Indonesian path was a calm route for the Afghan refugees, but when Australia tightened its migration policies, and after the sea routes had been blocked, Afghans faced worst situations. Currently, there are thousands of Afghan refugees in refugee camps in Indonesia waiting and hoping to reach Australia and other countries. Most of the Afghan refugees have to wait for years in Indonesian camps and prisons in order to get residence in a third country. Indonesia is not a member of the International Migration Convention and, therefore, based on the laws of this country, migrants are not allowed to work in Indonesia.

The Afghan refugees are confronted with many problems in Indonesian camps, and with a small move (for instance food strike) they are beaten and end up in prison. Based on the reports, until the end of 2014, about 3000 Afghans were imprisoned in Indonesian prisons while the Afghan government has held no step in this regard. Therefore, now it is expected that the new wave of relations between Kabul and Jakarta would also heal the wounds of Afghan refugees and prisoners in Indonesia.

The end

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

