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Preface

The Afghan-Russian relations are full of distrust since the past three years. Since the past two years, Russia is concerned about the presence of ISIL in Afghanistan, and due to international issues, the confrontation between Russia and the US in Afghanistan has increased as well.

Russian officials have, for several times, made remarks about Russian relations with the Taliban and the Afghan and American officials criticize Russia for it. Last week, for the first time, the Afghan President accused Russia of supporting the Taliban, but the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs rejected these accusations. In this regard, you would read in the first part of the analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS).

In the second part of the Analysis, you would read about the recent trip of the Afghan President to New Delhi. Since the past one month, the Afghan President is the third senior Afghan official that travels to India.

The Kabul-New Delhi ties are directly related to Kabul-Islamabad relations. Although the tenuous relations between Kabul and Islamabad have brought Kabul and New Delhi close, the new US strategy towards South Asia and Afghanistan has brought the two countries even closer. These relations have multiplied the recent pressures on Pakistan. In the second part of the analysis, we have analyzed the future of the Kabul-New Delhi-Islamabad ties.

The growing distrust in Afghan-Russian ties



During his speech in Paktia province, the Afghan President for the first time officially accused Russia of supporting the Taliban and said that “The Taliban are receiving assistance from those who have spilled the blood of one and half million Afghans.” Although President Ghani did not mention any country, but it was obvious that he was indicating Russia.

President Ghani made these remarks during the death ceremony of the victims of the Taliban’s recent attack on the police headquarter of Paktia province which left 60 killed and about 236 injured.

Although before this the Afghan and American officials including Rex Tillerson had accused Russia of providing military aid to the Taliban, it is the first time that a senior Afghan official is accusing Russia of backing the Taliban.

Releasing a statement, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has stated that Moscow regarded Afghanistan as a partner country and that such rhetoric from the President of this country was not “acceptable” for them.¹

Here we have analyzed the Kabul-Moscow relations, these ties after the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan, and the recent tensions in these relations.

Kabul-Moscow relations

In the 19th century, Afghanistan became the rivalry ground for the “Great Game” between Britain and Russia. In the 20th century, Russia was one of the major military and financial contributors for Afghanistan. Between 1954 and 1978, Russia provided military and financial aids worth \$1bn to Afghanistan. At this time, once again, Afghanistan was the competition ground for the superpowers of the world, but this rivalry was between Russia and the US this time.

Until 1991, Russians helped their ally and partner governments in Afghanistan. However, when they were defeated in Afghanistan, they changed their strategy towards this country and in November this year, the representative of four out of seven Mujahidin groups met the Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Moscow and agreed to release the Russian captives if Moscow pulled back its advisors from Kabul and stopped assisting the government of Dr. Najeebullah.

Despite the Russian cooperation with Mujahidin officials after the collapse of Dr. Najeebullah’s regime, civil war burst in Afghanistan, and in August 1992, the Russian Embassy in Kabul was closed. However, Russians kept their diplomatic relations with the Mujahidin through their consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif until its closure in 1997. After that, Russia was one of the main supporters of the “Northern coalition”, one of the strongest oppositions of the Taliban.²

¹ Ufuq News, «روسیه: اظهارات رییس جمهور غنی مبنی بر حمایت مسکو از طالبان قابل قبول نیست» [Russia: President Ghani’s remarks regarding Moscow’s support of the Taliban are not acceptable.], October 24, 2017:

<http://www.ufuqnews.com/archives/67197>

² Richard Weitz, Moscow’s endgame in Afghanistan, Conflict Quarterly, Winter: 1992.

After the 9/11 attacks, Moscow not only supported the anti-Taliban policies of Washington but also agreed to provide various cooperation for the US including a transit way for American soldiers, intelligence sharing, and other political cooperation.

After 2001 until the second term of Hamid Karzai's Presidency, relations between the two countries were warm; nonetheless, in the second term of Hamid Karzai, due to the tensions in Afghan-American ties, the Kabul-Moscow ties improved, and the Afghan and Russian officials traveled to each other's country repeatedly.

The NUG and relations with Russia

After the formation of the NUG, Kabul made efforts to form a regional consensus in the fight against extremism and "terrorism". In order to achieve this end, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and the Afghan National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar traveled to Russia for several times and the Russians also promised to help.

The Afghan government was convinced that insecurities in the Northern Afghanistan and the beginning of the activities of "ISIL" in Afghanistan would urge Russia to increase its military aids for Afghanistan; however, quite, on the contrary, Moscow became suspicious of the Afghan government's fight against "ISIL," and due to the close relations of the Russians with the Taliban, the Kabul-Moscow relations began to deteriorate.

Although, in the past three years, officials from both countries have for several times visited each other's capitals, the mistrust in relations between these two countries is yet to be resolved. The trilateral meeting between Russia, China, and Pakistan, held on 27 December 2016, without inviting the Afghan government and the recent remarks of the Afghan president are the testimony of suspicions in the Kabul-Moscow relations.

Tensions in Afghan-Russian ties

The NUG was formed in Afghanistan at a time that ISIL's influence had reached its heights in Iraq and Syria, announcing the "Caliphate". At the end of 2014, the Russia President Vladimir Putin expressed concern about ISIL's expansion in Afghanistan, and later the same issue (the emergence of ISIL in Afghanistan) escalated tensions in relations between the two countries. In the past two years, the Russian officials have repeatedly expressed concern about the presence of this group in Afghanistan. The concerns and mistrust of Russia increased when some local officials in the Afghan government and some members of the Afghan Parliament stated that unknown airplanes landed in the areas controlled by ISIL.

Russian officials, particularly the special representative of Russia in Afghanistan, repeatedly criticized the US policies regarding the fight against "terrorism" and overall the policies of the US in the region. Russians also described the new US strategy towards South Asia and Afghanistan as "unfortunate" and said that this strategy was "useless".³

On the other hand, NATO and the US accused Russia of supporting the Taliban, and the Afghan and American officials are concerned about the Taliban-Russia ties. "The Times" have recently reported that Russia sold oil to companies affiliated with the Taliban and that selling this oil, the Taliban gained \$2.5m every month and purchased weaponry and ammunition.⁴

The US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in August this year that Russia was arming the Taliban which was a clear violation of international norms. Nevertheless, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs said that no proof was presented suggesting Russian aid to the Taliban. He accepted that Russia was in contact with the Taliban but only for the security of its citizens in Afghanistan and to urge the Taliban to sit around the negotiation table with the Afghan government.

³ BBC Persian, «روسیه استراتژی امریکا در افغانستان را "خطمشی بیپوده" خواند», 24 August 2017:

<http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-41038325>

⁴ Radio Azadi, «آیا روسیه به طالبان مواد سوخت می‌دهد؟», 16 October 2017:

<https://da.azadiradio.com/a/28797895.html>

The Russian Special Representative in Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov said in July this year that if the US and Afghanistan failed in the fight against ISIL in Afghanistan, Russia would not be indifferent in this regard and would consider military options, something that entails the image of Afghanistan as the battleground for the rivalry between Russia and the US. In response to the comments of this Russian official, the Afghan government stated that having any kind of contact with “terrorist” groups by any country can deteriorate the situation in the region.

Conclusion

The Afghan-Russian relations is deteriorating for the past three years. The issue of ISIL’s presence in Afghanistan has shadowed these relations, and, in the meanwhile, Russia and the US are engaged in a cold war in Afghanistan.

Relations between Russia and the Taliban is a fact outspoken not only by the Afghan and US officials but also by the Taliban and Russia. Nevertheless, the Afghan and American officials intentionally exaggerate about the Russian-Taliban ties and use it as propaganda. The Russian officials have had contradictory remarks about the issue, but overall they deny any kind of military aid to the Taliban and justify their contact with the Taliban by reasons such as the peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue, prevention of the expansion of ISIL in Central Asia and the safety of its diplomats in Afghanistan.

Currently, particularly after the remarks of the Afghan President, it seems that distrust in Kabul-Moscow ties will increase because Russia will not withdraw from engaging in a cold war with the US in Afghanistan, something that would further complicate the situation in Afghanistan.

Kabul-Delhi ties and the increasing pressures on Islamabad



The Afghan President went to India on a one-day trip last week and met the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, the Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj, and some other senior Indian officials.

This trip coincided with the US Secretary of States Rex Tillerson's trip to Kabul, Islamabad, and New Delhi. One day after the Afghan President's trip, the US Secretary of State went to India and besides discussing the Afghan issue, addressed fierce criticisms against Pakistan saying that the US aids with Pakistan will be related to Pakistan's steps against extremists on its soil.

Several Provinces of Afghanistan witnessed several bloody attacks in the past one month which left 150 people killed and more than 300 injured. After such attacks, the Afghan government always points the finger towards Pakistan.

After this trip of the Afghan President, the Pakistani Minister of Foreign Affairs also blamed Afghanistan and India of making efforts to destabilize Pakistan.

Here we have analyzed the Kabul-New Delhi ties after the announcement of the new US strategy towards South Asia and Afghanistan.

The closing Afghan-Indian relations

India has always had good relations with Afghanistan. India and Afghanistan had close ties during the two terms of Hamid Karzai's Presidency. In 2011, the two countries also signed the strategic agreement. However, after the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG), due to President Ghani's approach to Pakistan, these relations deteriorated.

Although several months after the formation of the NUG, Indian-Afghan relations, once again, began to improve, after the announcement of the US strategy for South Asia and Afghanistan, these relations further improved.

India wants to play a role in Afghanistan by increasing its soft power in this country that is why it has completed many infrastructural projects in Afghanistan and has, overall, provided \$3bn in aid for Afghanistan in various projects.

Now that Pakistan is under international pressures, India is also trying to marginalize Pakistan. Besides, political isolation, Kabul, and New Delhi are trying to marginalize Pakistan in areas of economy and trade too. In his meeting with the Afghan President, Narendra Modi said that he was happy that now the Kandahar, Herat, and Balkh provinces of Afghanistan was connected with India through an air corridor and reiterated that India was also trying to expand its trade with Afghanistan through the Chabahar port.

In addition speaking at a meeting in India, the Afghan President threatened that if Pakistan prevented Afghanistan's trade with India through the "Wagi" port, Kabul would also block Pakistan's trade with Central Asia through Afghanistan. Issuing a statement, the Afghan President has also banned the entry of Pakistani trucks in Afghanistan. In the Afghan Chief Executive's trip to India, the two sides had

reiterated on improving economic relations between the two countries. India pledged to start 116 projects in 31 provinces of Afghanistan.

Currently, it seems that Afghanistan and India want to work as regional partners and pressurize Pakistan by improving relations between the two countries.

The increasing Indian role in Afghanistan

The US policy towards South Asia and Afghanistan is, to some extent, similar to Obama's policy but in some other aspects, it is very different. Although the new strategy had said that there were sanctuaries for the extremists in Pakistan, it had not pressurized Pakistan to the current scale.

In the new policy, Trump had asked India to increase its role in Afghanistan. That is why a statement by the Afghan Presidential Palace regarding the Afghan President's trip to India states that "Both leaders discussed the emerged opportunity after the announcement of the new US strategy and termed it significant for the stability of the region."

In order to increase Indian role in Afghanistan, both Afghan and American officials repeatedly traveled to New Delhi, and within one month, the Afghan Chief Executive, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and President visited India.

Although India sees the current situation as an opportunity, it is still careful about Pakistan's sensitivity in Afghanistan. During his trip to the US, the Pakistani Prime Minister Khaqan Abbasi strongly opposed India's military presence in Afghanistan. Although during the Afghan Chief Executive's travel to Delhi, the two sides signed agreements in areas of training the Afghan forces and their treatment, currently India does not want to increase its military role in Afghanistan. That is why during a joint conference with the US Secretary of Defense, the Indian Minister of Defense said that "India will never deploy troops in Afghanistan."

The Afghan President's recent trip to India

At the peak of the pressures on Pakistan, the Pakistani Chief of Army traveled to Afghanistan to reduce these pressures, and after that, on the one hand, discussions were raised about the resumption of the quadrilateral talks and President Ghani's traveling to Pakistan.

After this trip, the National Security Advisor to Indian Prime Minister visited Afghanistan and also invited President Ghani to visit India. The Indian National Security Advisor's trip was at a time that the Afghan, Pakistani, Chinese, and American representatives were discussing the Afghan peace process in Oman.

President Ghani's trip to Pakistan happens at a time that there were also reports about a probable trip of Ghani to Pakistan. In his meeting with President Ghani, Narendra Modi said: "The countries in the region must sincerely fight against terrorism and eliminate the sanctuaries of the terrorists."

The Afghan President's travel to India played a role in increasing pressures on Pakistan. That is why speaking in a Parliamentary committee on 26 October, the Pakistani Minister of Foreign Affairs claimed that the Afghan and Indian Intelligence Services were trying to destabilize Pakistan, something that the Afghan Presidential Palace rejected.

New Delhi's card in Afghan-Pak ties

India is a very important element in the Kabul-Islamabad relations. Both Afghanistan and India have tenuous relations with Pakistan. Although Pakistan and India's enmity is so deep that even affects the relations of both countries with Afghanistan, relations between Kabul and Islamabad has always been unstable.

Due to some reasons, Kabul has failed to maintain balance in its relations with India and Pakistan. These relations were not balanced particularly after the formation of the NUG. Kabul distances itself from Indian when it approaches Pakistan and when its relations with Pakistan deteriorates it approaches India. Therefore, the card of New Delhi in Kabul-Islamabad ties and relations between Kabul and Islamabad have always made Pakistan concerned. Due to its strategic depth, Islamabad will never tolerate close Kabul-New Delhi ties.

However, for Kabul, the Kabul-Islamabad relations is related to the implementation of the promises made by Pakistan. Nevertheless, currently, Kabul needs to properly manage its close relations with India considering the sensitivity of Pakistan so that these close ties do not lead to the instability in Afghanistan.

The End

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

