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Preface

Afghanistan is located at a part of the world that has always been at the center of super powers' attention and now, once again, it seems that another Cold War in the region and the world is about to start and Afghanistan seems to be the first country to get affected from it. Hence, there are concerns that Afghanistan will change to the battlefield of international rivalries and this country may not have any specific strategy to get out of this situation.

Currently, those powerful countries that are the important players of the regional and international rivalries are, in one way or another, engaged in the Afghan issue. What are the recent geopolitical developments in the region? How Afghanistan has dealt with it until now? These are questions that are analyzed 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 a detailed report about a conference, held by CSRS, on the Afghan-Sino bilateral relations and the recent geopolitical developments in the region. In this conference both Afghan and Chinese experts delivered their speech about the issues under discussion. In addition to that, a book, recently published by CSRS, on bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan was also introduced.

The Regional Geopolitical Developments and Afghanistan



Since the past several years, the geopolitical situation of the region is changing and once again the countries in the region are being divided into two blocs, the same as during the Cold War. Hence, among the great powers of the world, war and rivalry is continuing in our region.

Afghanistan is directly impacted by this situation because on the one hand, the US, which is a key player of the New Cold War, is present in Afghanistan and on the other hand, due to its geopolitical location, Afghanistan is altered to a ground for the rivalries of the world super powers.

To which direction are the regional geopolitics headed? What is Afghanistan's stance in the middle of all these changes? What should Afghanistan do under the current circumstances? These are the questions that are answered here.

The geopolitical situation in the region

China and Russia are the two countries that supported the US presence in Afghanistan in 2001; however, now Russia is doubtful of the US presence in this country and compared to 2001-2009 years, its relations with the US is deteriorated. Both countries are engaged at an unannounced war with each other in Syria, Ukraine, and now in Afghanistan. In the meanwhile, the US opposes China's stance regarding the South China Sea and has established close relations with China's rivals in the region; Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, etc.

China, which is currently an economic and military power, is afraid of instability and insecurity in Afghanistan. This fear is due to the possible expansion of insecurities to its Xinjiang province and its economic projects in the region. That is why, China wants to be involved in the Afghan issue.

After the emergence of ISIL in the region, Russia and Iran are the countries that have begun to criticize the US presence in Afghanistan. According to these countries, the US presence in Afghanistan has not only not suppressed "terrorism" but has rather increased instability in the region.

On the other hand, in 2014, the former US president Barack Obama announced the strategy of rebalancing Asia, which the Chinese believe to be a policy to encircle China because according to Chinese, rebalancing Asia means strengthening India, Japan and some other countries against China. In light of this strategy, the trade and defense ties between the US and India is increasing on a daily basis.

Close ties between India and the US in recent years, particularly the military-logistic exchange agreement between the two countries last year and several trips of the US officials to India were at a time that the China-India and India-Pakistan relations in the region were deteriorating.

All these occur at a time that in its defense strategy, the US clarified last week that after this their focus will not be on the war against terrorism but rather on straggle against the great powers of the world.

The tenuous relations between Pakistan and the US is not due to the security instability and providing sanctuary to the armed oppositions of the Afghan government but rather due to the current geopolitical situation where Pakistan is China's strategic partner and is increasingly getting close to Russia.

Afghanistan's stance

If one studies the geopolitics of the region, one will find out that currently, the region is divided into two blocs; the US-India-Afghanistan on the one side and Russia-China-Pakistan on the other. However, China has good relations with Afghanistan and tries to prevent the deterioration of its relations with US because China's strategy is rather economic-centered. That is why, supporting the US, China held some steps against North Korea in the past several months.

When in 2009, relations between the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the US deteriorated, Afghanistan got closer to China and Russia. Nevertheless, after the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG), the US and Afghanistan efforts began to improve once again and within the first 24 hours of the NUG's formation, the Bilateral Security Agreement was signed Between Kabul and Washington.

The Russia-Afghanistan ties deteriorated when Moscow expressed concern about the emergence of ISIL in Afghanistan and claimed that the present foreign forces in Afghanistan had helped ISIL's rise in this country. That is why under the pretext of restricting ISIL threat in Afghanistan, Russia made remarks about its relations with the Taliban. After a bloody explosion in Paktika, speaking at a gathering the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani made remarks about Russia's ties with the Taliban and with this tensions between the two countries increased.

On the other hand, after the formation of the NUG, Kabul approached to Islamabad and undertook such measures that distanced it from India for several months; however, these warm relations with Pakistan did not last for long and at the end of the year, the two countries went on from making accusations against each other to rhetoric and military confrontations. Currently, the Kabul-Islamabad ties are more tenuous than ever in the past and the US pressures towards

Pakistan is assumed to be a positive development for Afghanistan. On the other hand, Afghanistan's relations with India is increasing on a daily basis.

In the meanwhile, Kabul failed to maintain balance in its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. The NUG supported the Saudi led coalition in Yemen against the Iran backed Houthi armed groups.

Therefore, considering the past several years, Afghanistan has not maintained its traditional impartiality in the region and the world nor has it been able to manage the current regional rivalry to its own benefit.

What should Afghanistan do?

Although the Afghan government sees the new US policy towards Afghanistan and South Asia and the extension of the foreign troops' presence in Afghanistan as a success, emphasizing on the war and neglecting peace are issues in the new strategy that circles out of the government criticize and is interpreted as the continuation of the Afghan war.

Although currently Afghanistan depends on the US aids and believes that without the financial and military aids of the US it cannot survive, it pays a heavy price for these aids and is slowly moving towards changing into the battleground of the super powers.

The Afghan foreign policy is not balanced, particularly its policies towards the US, China, and Russia and at a time that some analysis suggest that the US wants the continuation of war in the region, which raises Russia and China's concern, the current problems may further expand and deepen.

Afghanistan has to avoid the negative impacts of regional and international rivalries through a balanced foreign policy. Therefore, at the current circumstances, Afghanistan should manage the current situation to its own benefit and undertake a clear and balanced foreign policy.

The Report of the Seminar on “Sino-Afghan Bilateral Ties”



The bilateral relations between Afghanistan and China and China’s role in the regional geopolitical changes were discussed in a seminar, held by the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS) in Kabul.

In this conference, held on Saturday 20 January 2018, some Afghan and Chinese experts and researchers, political figures, the former and current government officials, the representatives of the media and hundreds of other people had participated.

The General Director of CSRS Dr. Abdul Baqi Amin, the Deputy Ambassador of China to Afghanistan Mr. Zhang Zhixin, the former Afghan Minister and the former President’s Chief of Staff Abdul Karim Khoram, and the former Afghan Ambassador to China Sultan Ahmad Baheen delivered their speech in the conference.

Besides the remarks of the Afghan and Chinese academics, a book about the Sino-Afghan relations, authored by the CSRS’s analyst Ahmad Bilal Khalil and published by CSRS, was also introduced.

Dr. Abdul Baqi Amin

Opening the event by his speech, the General Director of CSRS Dr. Abdul Baqi Amin pointed out the importance of the bilateral relations between Kabul and Beijing and said: “Both countries need each other; however, Afghanistan has more needs than China.”



Mr. Amin said that a country’s geopolitical importance becomes apparent when the powerful countries of the world seek to achieve their goals and interests through the political geography of that particular country and that since Afghanistan had a geopolitical importance and location, the super powers of the world had always paid attention to Afghanistan throughout the history.

“Unfortunately, the history gives testimony that this geopolitical location has not produced any gain for Afghanistan because Afghans have failed to use the politics of the super powers in their own interests. Therefore, this geopolitical importance and location will be beneficial for Afghanistan only when the interests of the great countries of the world are in line with the national interests of Afghanistan,” added Mr. Amin.

According to Mr. Amin, this is the responsibility of the Afghan government to, somehow, establish relation between the rivalries of the countries in the region and the national interest of the country and the Afghan government should not allow Afghanistan to turn into the battlefield for the proxy wars of the regional and international players.

“Among the neighbors of Afghanistan, China is currently an economic and military power and Afghans see this country as a partner country because this country has never been involved in a negative practice towards Afghanistan throughout the history,” he said.

Mr. Amin said that China was important for Afghanistan and that Afghanistan needed China in various areas. He stated that China could play a significant role in

Russian-American, Pak-Afghan, and intra-Afghan relations towards bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan. Moreover, he said that Afghanistan needed China in areas of agriculture, industry, and comprehensive development. On the other hand, the security and stability of Afghanistan has a great value for China and, in the meanwhile, the untapped resources of Afghanistan is an opportunity for China to prosper its economy. Therefore, he added that China was important for Afghanistan and Afghanistan was important for China.

Mr. Zhang Zhixin

In his remarks in the conference, the Deputy Ambassador of China to Afghanistan Mr. Zhang Zhixin called Afghanistan and China as two neighbors and partners and said: "Today is the 63 anniversary of Afghan-Chinese relations and, therefore, this is a very particular moment and convening this conference in such a day has a particular importance."



Mr. Zhang Zhixin said that the two countries had had close and historical relations throughout the history starting from the times of Silk Road. He added that in the past two thousand years, the region had witnessed a lot of changes, the only thing unchanged was the strong friendship between Afghans and Chinese.

Mr. Zhang added that in the 19th congress of the Chinese Communist party in Beijing, new changes had been brought regarding the friendship between Afghanistan and China and this friendship entered a new phase.

Mentioning the bilateral relations between the two countries in the past three years, he said: "The Chinese President Chi Jinping and the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani have met thrice. In addition, the Afghan Chief Executive has also had several meetings with several Chinese senior officials, which shows the direction of the bilateral relations."

“In the past several years, the exchange of opinions between Afghans and Chinese and numerous trips of the Afghan senior officials to China was unprecedented. Moreover, the trilateral meeting between the foreign ministers of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China was successfully held in Beijing, which discussed the trilateral relations. China has always supported a peace process led and owned by Afghans and want Afghanistan’s relations with its neighbors to be strengthened. Therefore, based on this mechanism, we continue our cooperation with Afghanistan,” he said.

He also added: “We support Afghanistan’s economic integration in the region and together with other countries, we will try to change Afghanistan to the center of regional cooperation between the countries of the region and the world.”

He expressed hope that the bilateral ties between the two countries would strengthen in the future and that in this regard the “One belt- one road” project was very important.

He also mentioned China’s contributions to Afghanistan and said that besides the areas of economy and science, China wanted to help Afghanistan in areas of military and building military capacity as well so that the region could become secure and stable.

Abdul Karim Khoram

The former Afghan Minister of Culture and Information and the former President’s Chief of Staff Abdul Karim Khuram discussed the Sino-Afghan relations considering the geopolitical situation in the region.

Mr. Khoram said: “In the Western world, the fear of China’s changing into a super power of the world that could alter the politics of the world had existed for very long. Today China is changed to that political and economic power. This country is Afghanistan’s neighbor and until now it has, in no way, inflicted detriment to Afghanistan.”



Pointing out the geopolitical changes in the world, he said: “After the Cold War, the axes of international relations and the center of the political relations have shifted from Europe to Asia, where China and India are the main players.”

“China and India are the most populated countries of the world and their economies are growing very fast. That is why their need for energy has also increased. A great part of China’s development element (energy) is provided by the Middle East, while the Middle East and the ways through which energy comes to China have altered to the center of crisis and Afghanistan is located between China and the Middle East. On the other hand, obstacles are being created on the ways of China’s energy supplies through ocean. Therefore, China is working to find alternative ways such as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Currently, China is the Second Economic power of the world and it will probably become the first very soon, something that can attract the US’s attention.” Khuram said.

Mr. Abdul Karim Khuram said that during the Cold War, Pakistan cooperated with all countries including the US but now Pakistan’s cooperation with the US, which wants war and security instability in Afghanistan, is against the interests of China. The US’s tensions with Pakistan is not due to the insecurities in Afghanistan but rather due to Pakistan’s partnership with China because the main reason behind the US’s presence in Afghanistan is to restrict China, according to Khuram.

Mr. Khuram said that Afghanistan’s stability was in the interest of China and that this country had made some efforts to achieve this end in the past and now as well, as China has recently started to establish a military base in Badakhshan; however, these efforts, the same as quadrilateral meetings, would not led to the desiring outcomes because the US was clearly saying that its main rivals were China and Russia. Khuram added that the Americans had written in their defensive strategy that their main focus would be on struggle against the great powers and, therefore, Afghanistan’s instability because of China was in the interest of the US.

According to Mr. Khuram, the only solution was to redefine Afghanistan’s relations with the US and the US should be hold accountable regarding the fight against terrorism at international level and that a government had to come in

Afghanistan that should decide based on the interest of the country instead of blindly following the US.

Sultan Ahmad Baheen

The former Afghan Ambassador to China Sultan Ahmad Baheen also delivered his speech about China's role in the geopolitical changes in the region and the Afghan-Sino bilateral relations. With the economic and military power that it possess, he said, China wants to determine the world order where all nations would be engaged equally.



Mr. Baheen said: “There exist two economic zone in Asia; the South Asia and the Middle East. Afghanistan is located in the cross point of North and East, which we know as the heart of Asia. Therefore, Afghanistan’s importance is not due to its resources but rather due to its geopolitical location. As we were a cross road for the world conquerors in the past, now we could be a cross road and the path for economic cooperation between the powers of the North and South. If Afghanistan could manage these rivalries and specify the legal interest of the countries, it would be able to use its geopolitical location to its own benefit.”

“Whenever Afghanistan has been impartial, it has been in peace and whenever it has chosen a side, problems have increased in this country. Today, once again, Afghanistan must be able to create a situation where the super powers could cooperate with each other because Afghanistan is the only country that is not included in the regional tensions. Thus, Afghanistan can be transformed into a center of cooperation.” Said Mr. Baheen.

According to Mr. Baheen China is the only power in the region that has never had any problem with Afghanistan. “The Afghan-Sino relations are of great importance. The former Afghan President had attached great importance to China and the current Afghan President started his foreign visits from this country.

Therefore, we have the best strategic relations and we see China as a partner, neighbor, and cooperator country and a country that could maintain the regional and international balance in Afghanistan.” He said

Ahmad Bilal Khalil

CSRS’s researcher and the author of the book “the bilateral relations between Afghanistan and China” Ahmad Bilal Khalil introduced the book through a presentation and talked about research methodology, the importance, and contents of the book.



According to Mr. Khalil, International developments and changes, China’s economic projects in the region, China’s increasing role in Afghanistan, and the need to filling the academic gap in this area were the factors for which he had decided to write this book.

He said that the importance of this book was rather because it had historically evaluated the Afghan-Chinese relations in the past six decades and that this book included a detailed description about the interests and foreign policies of both countries in dealing with each other in the past one and half decade.

He added that in writing the book, he had rather focused on historical and qualitative research methodology and mostly had used the archive documents and some historical books regarding the issue. He also said that he had used the discussions during meetings with Chinese experts, interviews, and analysis of the events.

“In the first chapter of this book, the historical relations between the two countries are discussed, in the second chapter, the bilateral relations between 1955 and 2001 are explored, the third chapter talks about the ties between Kabul

and Beijing between 2001 and 2015. In the fourth chapter, China's interests, concerns, and foreign policy in Afghanistan are analyzed. In the fifth chapter, the Afghan foreign policy towards China and Afghanistan's interest in China is elaborated. And finally in the last chapter, a summary of research, conclusion, and recommendations are included." Explained Mr. Khalil.

The End

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