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Preface

China is Afghanistan's powerful neighbor that has increased its cooperation with Afghanistan in different fields in recent years and is seeking for play effective role in Afghanistan.

A few days ago, Afghanistan's NSA, Hanif Atmar, was in China for a 3-day official visit where he met Chinese Vice-President, Wang Qishan, Foreign Affairs' Minister, Wang Yi, Chief of Staff, Li Zuocheng, National Security Advisor and other senior officials. Besides other issues, he asked China to cooperate in the Afghan peace process by putting pressure on Pakistan to have practical cooperation in this process. This visit takes place in the time when efforts on reconstructing ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan have started and the Pakistan premier had also visited Kabul for this purpose. These issues are discussed in the first part of the Weekly Analysis.

You would read about the upcoming Parliamentary Elections in the second part of the Analysis. After three years of delay, it is scheduled for the Parliamentary and District Councils Elections to be held in Afghanistan, according to the members of the Independent Election Commission, in the atmosphere which is not suitable for standard elections. Therefore, it is about two weeks from beginning voter registration process, but the people's participation is sharply low due to several reasons. The problems and challenges encountered by the upcoming elections are analyzed here.

Sino-Afghan Strategic Friendship and its Impacts on the Region



By **Hekmatullah Zaland** / CSRS

China is the country in the region that has not got imperialistic goals in other country and hence, generally, it has maintained friendly ties with the regional countries. Since last several years and especially after 2014 as a large portion of the foreign forces withdrew Afghanistan, China has increased its attention toward Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Afghanistan has also granted a special space to China in its foreign policy.

The exchange of visits between senior officials of both countries have increased in last three years; in this series, last week, National Security Advisor (NSA) to Afghan President, Mohammad Hanif Atmar was on an official visit to China which took place as a result of the Chinese Vice-President's invitation where he met senior Chinese political and military officials there.

Hanif Atmar's visit to China, alongside other issues, is important when it comes to eliminating the present mistrusts between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and having Pakistan's honest cooperation regarding peace and stability in Afghanistan.

The course of Kabul-Beijing ties, the impact of Afghan-Sino friendship on Kabul-Islamabad relations and other similar issues are discussed here.

Kabul-Beijing Broadening Ties

Both countries, however, have a long history of ancient relations, but the diplomatic relations started only 63 years ago, that have been remained friendly until this moment, and China has never had destructive position against Afghanistan. Therefore, Afghans have positive view and opinion regarding China.

Afghan-Sino ties are the only relations that have not exercised instability in last one and a half decade of Afghanistan's bilateral relations with other countries. These ties became closer during Hamid Karzai's era, especially in his second term where the Kabul-Washington relations were deteriorated; however, these ties entered a new phase after the formation of National Unity Government (NUG).

China increased its engagement in Afghan issues during last 3-year of NUG. Besides senior Chinese officials' visits to Afghanistan, they participated in quadrilateral talks on Afghan peace process, initiated ministerial-level trilateral meeting for the purpose of reconstructing Afghan-Pak ties and increased its military assistance to Kabul as well.¹

On October 2017, the Afghan and China strategic friendship witnessed a new development in the 19th Congress of Chinese Communist Party and thus, this friendship counted to be entered a new phase where China makes effort to have Afghanistan turned into a center of regional and global economic cooperation and so the One Belt One Road project has a special importance in this regard.²

Afghan and Chinese Presidents have met three times in last three years and besides that, the exchange of ideas and visits have been unprecedentedly increased in this period of time. China, not only kept its ties with Afghan government great, but it has also paved the way for strengthening ties of People to People and Civil Society Organizations (CSO), and so, China tries to increase its Soft Power in Afghanistan.

¹ CSRS, The "Afghanistan in the past one and a half-decade" research report, Published in 2017, Page 112.

² CSRS, The Report of the Seminar on "Sino-Afghan Bilateral Ties", January 21, 2017, see online: [http://csrskabul.com/en/blog/the-report-of-the-seminar-on-sino-afghan-bilateral-ties /](http://csrskabul.com/en/blog/the-report-of-the-seminar-on-sino-afghan-bilateral-ties/)

On the other side, China is a country that has got extensive economic presence in Afghanistan. We can mention the grant of contracts to China regarding mining of Aynak Copper Mine and extraction of oil from Amu Darya Basin, extensive economic assistance and broad presence in the business field. In this regard, the trade level between both countries went beyond USD 1 Billion in 2015.³

China's Cumulative Enthusiasm

From 2001, Afghanistan and China's bilateral ties were normal till one decade; however, Afghanistan and china upgraded their bilateral relations to strategic partnership.⁴ If we have a glance to last few years, China's role and engagement has increased in the peace and stability efforts of Afghanistan which evince China's enthusiasm and attention toward Afghanistan and the most important reasons behind this can be withdrawal of a large portion of foreign troops from Afghanistan and transition of insecurities to the North of Afghanistan.

China has got concerns about its domestic security as a result of insecurities in the North of Afghanistan as well as about regional security as result of its grand economic projects in the region. Therefore, China plays two-sided role in Afghanistan's security and stability; for one side through its influence on Pakistan and from other side through increased its military assistance with Afghanistan. Thus, it support a military base in Badakhshan⁵ and also, Hanif Atmar, Afghan NSA, in his recent visit to Beijing, asked China to equip the Mountain Brigade in Badakhshan.⁶

³ Khalil, Ahmad Bilal, Afghanistan and China; the Bilateral Relations 1955-2015, CSRS, page 147.

⁴ China Daily, >China, Afghanistan in strategic partnership<, June 8 2012, see online: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-06/08/content_15489241.htm

⁵ The Diplomat, >China's Military Base in Afghanistan<, January 18, 2018, see online: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-military-base-in-afghanistan/>

⁶ Tolonews, >NSA Asks China To Help Establish A 'Mountain Brigade'<, 21 April 2018, see online: <https://www.tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan/nsa-asks-china-help-establish-%E2%80%98mountain-brigade%E2%80%99>

On the other hand, China, due to its cumulative enthusiasm in Afghanistan, wants to play a role in the Afghan peace process and inter-Afghan dialogue. So, China hosted the Urumqi meeting in 2015 where Afghan government and Taliban negotiated and also played as an overseer in the Islamabad's Murree talks; however, it increased its role in the quadrilateral talks. For this purpose, China has a relative understanding with Taliban. Taliban senior delegations have visited China several times and both of them treat each other softly.

China's Impact on Afghan-Pak Relations

Afghanistan-China-Pakistan trilateral talks initiated in 2012⁷, and the main agenda, from the very beginning, had evinced China's concerns about the security situation in the region and implementation of two Chinese grand projects of One Belt One Road and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).⁸

The Chinese mediation between Afghanistan and Pakistan and ministerial-level trilateral meeting started for the first time in 2017. However, Afghan and Chinese presidents agreed upon these trilateral meetings in the sidelines of the meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2017. Eventually, the trilateral meeting took place in Beijing in late December.

On one hand, China officially declared its readiness for mediation in the Afghan peace process and facilitating inter-Afghan understating⁹, and on the other hand, Afghan government thinks that the honest cooperation of Pakistan in the Afghan peace process is needed. China is the only country that can put pressure on Pakistan because it has got profound strategic ties especially when it comes to Beijing-Islamabad economic ties. Only in 2015, 51 contracts became signed during the Chinese President's visit to Pakistan whose projects value USD 46 Billion.¹⁰

⁷ China Chairs the First Trilateral Dialogue of China-Afghanistan-Pakistan, 2012/02/29, see it online: <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t910391.htm>

⁸ CSRS, The "Afghanistan in the past one and a half-decade" research report, Published in 2017, Page 109.

⁹ BBC Pashto, See online: <http://www.bbc.com/pashto/afghanistan-40241050>

¹⁰ CSRS, The Impacts of Chinese President's Visit to Pakistan, April 26, 2015, see online: <http://csrskabul.com/en/blog/the-impacts-of-chinese-presidents-visit-to-pakistan/>

Nevertheless, at the moment, it seems that the policies of both strategic friends are in quarrel to some extent. Because China does not carry out the interventionist and conflicts policies in other countries, but wants to expand its power through economic policies, that has invested USD 57 Billion only in Pakistan. Due to this, in 2017, for the first time, China raised its voice against Pakistan. On September 2017, the declaration of BRICS, where China is an important member of it, condemned activities of armed groups in Pakistan.¹¹

It was agreed upon in the visit of Pakistani Premier, Khaqan Abbasi to Kabul that Foreign Affairs Ministers and National Security Advisors of both countries will work of finalization of the Action Plan of Two Countries. Consequently, the aim of Afghan NSA's visit to China, to a large extent, was to have Pakistan accept its demands by being pressured through China. Also, it is planned that the trilateral meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs will be held in Kabul in near future.

The question remaining is that, why powerful China's mediation in Pak-Afghan ties yet to achieve the things Afghanistan is seeking for? A truth is that, Pakistan can play vital role in the Afghan peace; however, it, generally, has not got a degree of control that could put pressure on the Taliban to make peace. On the other hand, mistrust in relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan is reached at the level which cannot be normalized that easy.

Regional Policies

The expansion and strengthen of Afghanistan and China ties are welcomed on regional and international level and Pakistan is also content with China's cumulative role in Afghanistan and its strategic friendship with that country because China, as Pakistan thinks, can replace India's increasing role and influence in this country.

¹¹ CSRS, The BRICS declaration and its impacts on the region, September 16, 2017, see online: <http://csrskabul.com/en/blog/brics-declaration-impacts-region/>

China can play a role in understandings between America and Russia on international level as well as in reconstructing ties between Kabul and Islamabad on regional level. However, solely China's pressure on Pakistan will not be enough to eliminate the long-lasting mistrusts between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

China also wants to become engaged in the Afghan issue for the sake of its own long-term interests; however, in general, it has taken steps in the Afghan issue with a great caution.

Challenges against Upcoming Parliamentary Elections



By **Zia ul Islam Shirani** / CSRS

After about three years of delay in holding parliamentary elections, the IEC finally announced the final date of holding elections, and so the Wolesi Jirga and District Councils' elections are scheduled to be held this year (Mizan, 1397).

By announcing the final date for the elections, the voter registration process began on 25 Hamal in the centers of all provinces of the country, which will continue until 23 Sawr, and will later be transferred to the districts and villages. but after passing of about two weeks, the people participation in the voter registration process has been inconspicuous for various reasons, and thus, the [leaders](#) of the national unity government (NUG) have expressed concern over this issue.

The head of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), on the day of the announcement of the election calendar, pledged that he would not allow anyone to fraud, and urged all the people to cooperate with the commission in preventing electoral fraud; but the delay of three years in holding parliamentary elections as well as the widespread fraudulent experience in the past election are the factors that undermine people's belief in the transparency of the process.

In this analysis, the current electoral process, the challenges encountered by the elections as well as their transparency and universality are addressed.

Delay in Holding Parliamentary Elections

According to the second clause of Article 83 of the Constitution of Afghanistan, the Wolesi Jirga's term of office is ended on the first day of Saratan of the fifth year after the announcement of the results of the elections and the new council should be, then, commenced. But the Afghan government was unable to hold elections on a statutory basis and, according to a declaration issued by the Presidential Office on 29 Jawza, 1394, the Wolesi Jirga's term of office was extended until the next election results were announced.

Three years later, due to political disputes in the country, despite the fact that the elections date were announced several times, the government did not succeed in holding elections due to political problems and dissents. On 28 Jadi, 1394, as the previous election commission had announced that the parliamentary elections will be held on [24 Mizan](#), 1395; however, this announcement encountered oppositions. The Chief Executive of the government insisted that the entire work should be done by the "New Commission" and that the electoral system should be reformed before the Parliamentary Elections.

After settlement of the issue of electoral reforms in the second year of the National Unity Government (NUG), elections commissions were finally formed and started to operate. Although the NUG spoke about holding Parliamentary Elections during 1396, the new election commission, on the first day of Saratan of 1396, announced that Parliamentary and District Councils' elections will be held on [16 Saratan](#), 1397.

The mentioned date also became changed, and due to technical, financial and security problems, eventually, [28 Mizan](#), 1397, became announced as the final date for holding the Parliamentary Elections; and with its announcement, the practical work for the aim of its implementation process begun. But, nevertheless, nowadays the mistrust regarding adequacy of the election commissions has increased sharply due to the government's lack of commitment to its obligations, and thus, people are not more likely to believe in the transparency of the upcoming elections.

The Election Process

In accordance with the Election Law, the election calendar must be determined and announced 120 days prior to the Election Day. So, last week (2 Sawr 1397), the IEC leadership announced the election calendar of Parliamentary and District Councils' elections in a public meeting with the media, representatives of political parties and civil society organizations

According to the announced [calendar](#), the registration and provision of voters' list takes place from 25 Hamal to 23 Sawr in the Provincial Centers and from 25 Sawr to 7 Jawza in districts and from 9 to 22 Jawza in villages, and so the complete list of all voters will be announced on Assad 23 accordingly. Also, the registration of candidates will take place from 5 to 22 Jawza, the election campaign from 6 to 25 Mizan, and finally the preliminary results of the parliamentary elections will be announced on Aqrab 19 and its final results will be announced on Qaws 29, and the preliminary results of the district councils' elections will be announced on Jadi 18 and the final one will be announced on Dalwa 4.

In this election, for the [registration process](#) and submission of voters' list who have reached the age of 18, Tazkira (National ID Card), as the sole authentic national document is used and all of its forms are credible. For those who do not have Tazkira, the Population Registration Department has begun to distribute Tazkira for about 10 million eligible voters, and it is still continuing. Therefore, the use of previous voting cards in the upcoming election was canceled.

Eligible Voters are registered after they attend the registration centers; they will be registered on the basis of the information in their Tazkira, and the certificate will be affixed with the security tag on the back of the Tazkira. Attestation of registration is followed by a unique registered number, the polling station and the code of the polling station; and therefore, one cannot cast vote in the polling station other than the mentioned one.

Challenges to the Elections

- **Security Situation:** Poor security situation in the country is one of the major challenges encountered by the election process; because a successful and comprehensive election requires maintenance of security in the country. According to a report by SIGAR, more than 40% of the districts are under the control of the Taliban, or there is a war on them. On the other hand, increase in the deadly attacks of the armed opposition of the government in the midst of the big cities and towns is another challenge for the Afghan people that challenges the electoral process. Since the beginning of the registration process, several attacks have been carried out on voter registration and Tazkira distribution centers, the bloodiest of which occurred in the sixth district of Kabul on a voter registration center last week, and about 70 people, including women and children were killed and more than 120 wounded.
- **Electoral Mechanism:** According to the mechanism announced by the Independent Election Commission (IEC), Tazkira is the only valid document for voting; however, when a person is registered for a vote, a sticker is installed on his/her Tazkira, making it difficult for some people, due to security threats, to participate in the process and it is a matter of concern for them and therefore, they, then, do not participate in the registration process. last week (Sawr 4, 1397), Ghazni Governor, Abdul Karim Matin, in this regard, said that 80 percent of the people in the province, while attending the voting registration centers, are not ready to have stickers installed on their Tazkira due to security threats.

- **Transparency:** Lack of people's confidence in the transparency of the Parliamentary Elections process is another challenge to this process. During the past 17 years, as there was widespread corruption and fraud in all processes of elections, and even the elections of 2009 and 2014 practically tuned into a crisis in the country and the electoral teams confronted each other, people's confidence in the voting and overall the election process in Afghanistan decreased sharply.

Given the past experiences, most people now believe that people are achieving seats through fraud and forging, and their participation in the Elections does not have any meaning!

While the Independent Election Commission (IEC) ensures transparency in the electoral process, but members of the Afghan Senate [criticize](#) the Tazkira distributing system, saying that a person will receive several Tazkira in different names. For example, a member of the Senate, Gulali Akbari, said at a general meeting of the parliament that one of her bodyguards has taken Tazkira three times in different centers.

Will the Elections be Inclusive and Transparent?

Transparent and all-encompassing elections in a country is directly related to the sovereignty of the state over all of its geography and nation, and it is then possible for that country to have a strong and dominant system and government.

In Afghanistan, lack of sovereignty of the state over all of the country's geography, security situation, the mechanism and procedure for voting registration, concern over corruption and fraud in the electoral process, etc. are the issues that have shadowed the Wolesi Jirga and district councils elections.

Given the challenges, the interest of the people in registering for the voting is also low, and according to the Independent Election Commission (IEC), during the first week of voter registration across Afghanistan, only 230,000 had registered themselves. Given that the election commission has already scheduled the voter registration process for two months, and considering the first week of the process, by the end of this period, only about two million people will become

registered, while according to the election commission, about 13 to 14 million people are eligible to vote. So, if this process goes so as slowly as it is, the legitimacy of this process will be questioned.

Generally, the deteriorating security situation in the country and the Taliban's call on people to boycott the elections, lack of awareness of the people about the election, the existence of corruption and fraud, and the mechanism used for holding elections are factors have challenged the comprehensiveness and transparency of the Wolesi Jirga and District Councils elections.

The End

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