

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



December 04, 2016

The Sixth Heart of Asia Conference

The sixth Ministerial Meeting of Heart of Asia Conference is going on in Amritsar, India. The Conference being attended by more than 40 countries and leading international institutions and groups like the European Union and the Process is reported to be deliberating on different challenges that Afghanistan is facing, including revival of peace process. The Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process was launched in Istanbul, Turkey in 2011 and the participating countries include Pakistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates. The main objective of initiation of the Conference was to encourage security, political and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbors. Besides the participating countries there are many countries from the international community that support the Process and they are Australia, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, France, Finland, Germany, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Britain and the U.S. On Saturday, December 03, senior officials of all 14 participating countries and representatives of supporting nations deliberated on a wide range of issues pertaining to the region particularly the complex security scenario and dealing with threat of terrorism, radicalization and extremism. Moreover, in a separate meeting of senior officials, the trade issues particularly the ones relating to the connecting Afghanistan to the South and Central Asian countries so as to boost trade ties were also discussed and it finalized the text for today's Ministerial Conference. The Conference is underway at a time when the ties between India and Pakistan, two important countries for Afghanistan, are at their worst.

Afghanistan at the moment is in a position where it can see a very challenging future ahead of it. The prospects do not seem without serious challenges and the hopes that the country would be able to stand strong against the threats of insecurity and stability are scanty to a certain extent. It would require a definite support both from international community and regional countries. Though there have been very promising commitments in this regard recently, the scenario does not seem to be favoring a very encouraging outcome of all these commitments. After all, the political objectives are not what are basically promised in the conferences and agreements. They are in the interests of the countries that enter into them. There cannot be unconditional and indefinite support for Afghanistan both from the region and the international community and Afghanistan needs to realize this fact. At the moment it has to consider one very important fact and that is the strengthening of the regional ties by keeping the international community happy, which is no doubt a very difficult task as the interests differ to a great extent. Even without involving the international community, it can be observed that the regional countries have differences in their interests, which even clash at the present time. However, it is possible for the region to get together (in the real sense of the term) on certain of the issues that are very common to them. Duality in the diplomatic attitude and dealings will not benefit the region at all. True efforts are needed at this juncture as the possibilities are very real that the instability and insecurity in a single country can harm the neighboring countries. And, even after a cursory look at the scenario, it can be concluded that the issues like insecurity and economic instability are threatening the region to a great extent. Therefore, starting from these very basic issues, the involved countries can make future cooperation possible and a regional integrity achievable.

Afghanistan is a country, where both the issues of insecurity and economic instability are top priority matters. In the contemporary national scenario, regional countries will have to play a key role. Realizing the importance of the regional countries in these matters, President Ashraf Ghani has always emphasized for the full cooperation of the region.

Though recently, there have been many promises and commitments made to improve the situation in Afghanistan both by national and international countries and organizations, yet the facts and figures suggest that it would be very difficult for Afghanistan to tackle the situation in the times to come. There are many unresolved issues in the country that may give rise to instability and chaos if immediate solutions are not pursued. History has been the witness that Afghanistan has been used as a playground by international and regional countries to practice the games of politics and conflicts.

The neighboring countries, in this regard can be blamed to a large extent. They have never tried to see Afghanistan as a nation that is worth having development and better living standards.

The time has come when they have to be more responsible. Along with promises, they have to carry out practical measures and play the role of true and honest neighbors. Moreover, the national efforts made are also to be blamed for not achieving what they could have achieved. The ill-governance, corruption and the greed for authority have made Afghan government and administration unable to offer and trust. National Unity Government must, therefore, play constructive and responsible role in that regard as well.

Heart of Asia Conference

By Muhammad Zahir Akbari

The Heart of Asia Conference (HoA) was formed in Istanbul, Turkey, on November 02, 2011, providing a platform for regional cooperation in the heart of Asia by placing Afghanistan in its centre. This platform engages HoA countries in sincere and result-oriented cooperation for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan besides ensuring security and prosperity in the whole region. The HoA was formed to provide a platform for regional cooperation by placing Afghanistan in its centre. This platform engages HoA countries in sincere and result-oriented cooperation for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan besides ensuring security and prosperity in the whole region.

The Heart of Asia Conference is to provide a platform to discuss regional issues, particularly encouraging security, political, and economic cooperation among Afghanistan and its neighbors.

The united state and over 20 other nations and organizations serves as "supporting nation" to the process. The last (5th) Heart of Asia - Istanbul Ministerial Process was held in Islamabad, Pakistan on December 9, 2015. It was co-chaired by Mr. Salahuddin Rabbani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan and Mr. Sartaj Aziz, Advisor to the Prime Minister of Pakistan on Foreign Affairs.

In continue the process, on Saturday December 03, 2016, the senior officials of all 14 countries, including India, China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, and representatives of 17 supporting nations were deliberating on a vast range of issues facing the region including its complex security scenario and dealing with threat of terrorism, radicalization and extremism. However, Afghanistan will be on top of the agenda provides an appropriate platform for regional countries to discuss the regional problems, insecurity and terrorism.

Issues like enhancing Afghanistan's connectivity with South and Central Asian countries to boost trade is being discussed at the senior officials' meeting which was co-chaired by India's Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar and Deputy Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Hikmat Khaleel Karzai. The meeting finalized the text for yesterday's Ministerial Conference and is also deliberating on its Declaration which will have substantial portion on terrorism. Being attended by nearly 40 countries in the conference it is expected to increase security in and around the Afghan region.

Pakistani Prime Minister's Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz is representing Pakistan at the Ministerial conference which will be jointly inaugurated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani. The annual conference is taking place amid heightened tension between India and Pakistan and there was no clarity on an Indo-Pak bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the conclave.

Ahead of the conference, both India and Afghanistan had called terror emanating from certain country as the "greatest threat" to regional peace and stability, and both the countries are set to press hard for adopting the counter-terror frame-

work at today's deliberations. India had emphasized that they would never accept continuing cross-border terrorism as the "new normal" in bilateral ties with Pakistan while making it clear that talks cannot take place in an atmosphere of "continued terror". At the senior officials' meeting, Afghanistan, which has also been facing increased attacks from terror groups, pushed for a regional counter-terror framework.

India and Pakistan held a formal bilateral dialogue in the last Heart of Asia conference and decided to take the momentum forward in subsequent summits. However, tension has escalated between the two from the start of this year after the Pathankot attack and ceasefire violations in July. The Uri attack and hundreds of ceasefire violations along the Line of Control have left the two neighbors on the edge. None of the parties have asked for a bilateral dialogue at the summit while the conference has already started.

It is said that President Ghani is supposed to hold discussions with the Indian prime minister and these discussions will be focused on joint cooperation which will cover all spheres. Also there are other opportunities for Afghanistan to hunt but considering the past summits, no significant impact has been witnessed yet.

Prior to the conference, Beijing has just raised the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by linking Afghanistan, the gateway to Central Asia, to the corridor. Quetta and Peshawar, two major cities would be linked to Kandahar and Jalalabad through railways in the first phase. The railway track would connect Kabul in the second phase. According to official sources the proposal was made by the Chinese Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Kong Xuanyou in a meeting with President Ashraf Ghani.

The Chinese deputy minister stressed on importance of Afghanistan to China's "One Road, One Belt" initiative. He suggested that Kabul, Beijing and Islamabad should engage in constructive talks about the proposed new trade corridors through building of railroads. The Afghan president reiterated that his country wants to have friendly relations with all neighboring countries. Earlier media reports suggested that Pakistan with support of China would build a railway track from Peshawar to Jalalabad. The Afghan government has decided in May 2015 to launch survey of the Jalalabad-Peshawar railway track. Ministry of Public Works will work with a private company to complete the survey of 75 kilometer track. The railroad is 150 km long but only 75 km pass through Nangarhar province. PKR 60 million has been allocated for the survey which will take eight months. Pakistan is financing the project. Emphasizing on importance of the railway track project, Deputy Minister of Commerce and Industries Muzamil Shinwari said at that time that the two countries should complete the project on time. On the other hand, most of Afghan economists are of the view that the proposed railway links between Afghanistan and Project would benefit Beijing and Islamabad more than Kabul.

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Training for Gender Equality

By Arib Ali Al-Mandhari

For centuries, women around the world have struggled for even the most basic rights. The fight for equality has been an uphill climb - one that is far from over. This is certainly the case in the Middle East, where the challenges women face are typically rooted in social norms, cultural systems, and religious doctrine, and can be enshrined in law.

In some Middle Eastern countries, women may not travel, work, or register to vote without permission from a man in her family. Even if it is not explicitly prohibited, joining the workforce is often very difficult for women, not least because of widespread resistance among the men who dominate these societies. Any woman who has sought to apply for a job knows just how vehement that opposition can be. The result of these norms and structures is that women in the Middle East are often subject to discrimination, isolation, and frustration. They are unable to participate freely in their societies or contribute to their countries' economic development.

But the world is changing fast. At a time of ever-deepening interconnectedness, people are more aware than ever of what is possible, and more motivated than ever to seek reforms - whether educational, economic, or political - that improve their lives. So which reforms are needed to advance gender equality?

A central area of focus must be education. First and foremost, schools give girls the knowledge they need to fulfill their potential in the future. But it is also vital to instill in both girls and boys an understanding of the need for social and economic equality, to reflect the fundamental equality of opportunity that all deserve.

Advancing gender equality also requires changes to policies and regulations. Beyond ensuring equal rights under the law, countries should work to boost the representation of women in politics and government. Women need to know that they can reach positions of genuine authority, even in domains from which they have historically been excluded - and they need encouragement to get there.

The same is true for the economy. Women need opportuni-

ties and support to develop and run their own businesses, to innovate, and to become financially independent. This would benefit not only women, but also their families, communities, and the economy as a whole. Even women who do not own or run businesses would have much to offer, if given the chance to enter the workforce and earn their own living.

To this end, training is crucial. Women need access to guidance, workshops, and longer-term training programs that prepare them to participate in the labor market, while ensuring that they know - and can defend - their rights.

An important initiative that could provide a useful model for such efforts is the Springboard Women's Development Programme, developed by the British Council. The program aims to give women the confidence and capabilities they need to make a better life for themselves, both professionally and personally; to expand their role and influence in public life; and to help support open, stable, and inclusive societies across the Middle East and North Africa.

The key to the program's success is its focus on empowering women to fulfill their potential. It helps participants explore and develop their abilities, and then apply them in practical settings, such as acquiring funding to start or expand their own businesses.

It also prepares women to confront - and overcome - the obstacles they will inevitably face as they gain independence and influence.

Delivered by a network of licensed trainers, the Springboard Women's Development Programme has already been used by over 230,000 women in more than 40 countries. In just four years, the program has trained more than 700 women in my country, Oman, through the Ministry of Education. And many more women are clamoring to participate. Achieving gender equality in the Middle East will be a long process, requiring fundamental educational, social, and economic reforms. But giving women the right training now can kick-start the process, enabling half the population finally to reach their potential - to the benefit of all. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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