

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

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Political Wheeling and Dealing

Reports unfold an escalation in insurgency triggered by warring factions, mainly the Taliban splinter group, across the country. The blood of scores of Afghan soldiers and civilians were spilled in 2015 and political turbulence continues unabated. The Taliban's spring offensive wrecked serious havoc and imposed heavy casualties on the country. Additionally, the emergence of the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) compounds security challenges. Rumors say that the ISIL group - that slays people on the grounds of their race, color, beliefs, etc. - will usher in strong militancy in coming spring - it would be the ISIL's spring offensive, if not tackled beforehand.

Similarly, the Taliban elements seek to spread warped ideology in Afghanistan via founding seminaries. With a new wave of privately run seminaries/madrasahs being opened across the country, there is a growing feeling among women's rights groups that these freedoms are again under threat. Reportedly, there are now 1,300 unregistered madrasahs in Afghanistan, where children are given only religious teaching. This is increasing fears among those involved in mainstream education. Arguably the most controversial of these madrasahs is Ashraf-ul Madares in Kunduz, founded by two local senior clerics, where 6,000 girls study full time.

The worsening security situation in Afghanistan has caused the US commander, John Campbell to retain the earlier US troops in Afghanistan throughout 2016 to help the struggling Afghan troops in the region. He also intends to seek additional US troops to support them. He has stated in comments to maintain the current force of 9,800 US troops to train Afghan forces and help counter terrorist attacks. He added to revoke the initial idea of retracting 4,300 troops by January 2017.

News from Afghanistan in 2015 has been gloomy, when American troops ended their daily combat mission after 14 years. Taliban rebels overran the northern provincial capital of Kunduz in October and were pushed out after fierce fighting that included an unintended attack by a US warplane on hospital that caused the life of 42 civilians.

In the south, Taliban insurgents captured Sangin District in Helmand province while an al-Qaeda training camp was also discovered there and destroyed. Islamic State fighters have set up outposts in the east. Recently, six US airmen were also killed by a suicide bomber outside Bagram Air Base. On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his concern of heightened militancy across the border. Russia being one of the countries that shares the border, recently at a Commonwealth of Independent States summit, Putin asked member states to create a joint task force to patrol the dangerous borders. After the US entered Afghanistan there were many Taliban fighters who fled to bordering nations, especially countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is a militant organization that is growing rapidly along the border, battles are being waged in Zabul, Baghlan, Kunduz, Badakhshan, Takhar, Faryab, Jawzjan and Badghis; the last six of these provinces border Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

It is said that there is a vast number of fighters from these countries fighting for ISIL or Taliban; it goes to show how radicalization is happening across the border, due to a lapse in border security in the northern part of Afghanistan.

Now, it is emerging that the Northern provinces of Afghanistan are slowly becoming a safe haven for terrorists to train and radicalize Central Asia. The threat is so high that Turkmenistan deployed almost 70 percent of its military along the Afghan border.

In the midst of this heightened militancy along the Afghan border, there is a power struggle between Russia and America, the dominant country of Central Asia is Russia but other countries are seeking help from the United States. This is worrisome for Moscow as they are the most powerful country in the bloc and want to take the lead in this fight for a safer battle. Recently Russian officials have hinted at sending back their forces to the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border, where they last patrolled in 2005. Some countries are showing tendency towards the US for help in this issue, case in point a delegation led by Turkmenistan Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov went to Washington to discuss economic and security issues. Following which it was confirmed that Turkmenistan would receive increased US military aid. Anyhow, the national unity government has been beleaguered and under pressure from all sides. The growing violence of the conflict, slow progress on forming a government, emerging political rivalries and a sinking economy - all make a quick peace deal attractive. However, seeking a quick fix may ruin the chance of getting a real peace process going. The most essential element of a peace process is building trust among the warring parties. An external force intimidating one party into coming to the table can be no substitute for genuine interest in seeking a negotiated end to the conflict.

Analysts are of the view that military deal would be an effective mechanism to tackle the issue and the government will have to intensify counter-insurgency and reinforce the Afghan soldiers. After all, there should be no room available for ISIL to incubate in the country and spew forth its venom. In addition, the seminaries should be registered and under government surveillance so as not to change into hotbed of radicalization. The world, mainly the neighboring countries, should join force against militancy carried out by any terrorist networks.

The Tensions in Iran-Saudi Relations

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

As tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are escalating, the Afghan government issued a statement on Friday, asking the two countries to resolve their differences through talks. The statement said that the Afghan government is deeply concerned over the recent diplomatic tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The statement on Afghanistan's stance over the diplomatic crisis between the two Muslim powers is coming while many Muslim nations have chosen to back one of the sides of the dispute. The diplomatic crisis emerged after Saudi Arabia executed a Shia cleric and, in response to the execution, Iranian protesters stormed Saudi's embassy and general consulate in Tehran and Mashhad respectively. Since the two incidents, the developments have been too quick and risky for the Muslim world. In response to the breach of Saudi diplomatic premises, the Saudi kingdom along with many of its allies have cut or degraded ties with Iran, while many other countries have objected to Iran's failure to protect Saudi Arabia's embassy and consulate. Iran in turn has accused Saudi Arabia-led coalition engaged in the Yemen bombings of striking the vicinity of Iran's embassy in the capital Sana. Some other countries like Afghanistan have reacted to the crisis cautiously, avoiding explicitly taking one of the sides. Anxious over the impacts of the tensions over regional crises such as the wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the Western powers have urged both countries to avoid escalation of the tensions.

The ongoing tensions are a result of a long-running rivalry between Iran on one side and Saudi Arabia and its regional allies on other side to dominate the region. The long-lasting rivalry between the two major powers of the Sunni and Shia blocks has roots in the historic rivalry between the Persians and the Arabs. The emergence of Iran's Islamic revolution brought the rivalry into a new phase as the Western powers and the Arab nations were trying to curb Iranian revolution and the country's ambitions in the region. As the bitter rivalry continued, the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan further helped Iran to have its enemies eliminated and extend its influence in the region particularly the Arab world. However, the start of the wave of the so-called Arab spring and development of civil wars in some Arab countries both helped Iran to extend its influence in Arab world. The civil wars in Yemen and Syria have pushed the two countries' rivalry to the verge of a nearly military confrontation. Relying mainly on the US to counter Iran's influence, Saudi Arabia gradually became disillusioned with the US leadership of the West-Arab block.

In recent years, the Saudis have taken more aggressive approach in countering Iran's influence in countries such as Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Since the recent storming of Saudi's diplomatic premises by Iranian protesters, the Saudi Arabia is trying to further isolate Iran through cutting diplomatic ties between Tehran and many of the Muslim countries. Iran's government under moderate leader Hassan

Rouhani, who had chosen to improve relations with the Arab world, is attempting to ease the burden of the tensions over its diplomacy machine. Iranian government has found it stuck in one of its worst diplomatic tensions with the outside world since European countries mass cutting of ties with Iran.

Except the repercussions of the tensions for Tehran and Riyadh, the simmering tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia is feared to have extensive impacts over other crises in the region and the Muslim world as a whole. There have been efforts going on between major world and regional powers in the global stage to resolve the Syrian crisis and end the bloodshed in the country. The United Nations have set an ambitious roadmap for holding elections in the country and bringing a new government. The rising tensions between Iran and Saudi are now threatening the international efforts for resolving the bloodiest civil war going on for the time being.

While many Arab countries have severed or degraded ties with Iran, some powerful Muslim nations have avoided taking sides in the dispute. Despite having their own differences with Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt have avoided joining the joint action of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. As Saudi Arabia is backed by some Arab nations in the dispute, some of Iran's regional allies, including the civil-war battered Syrian government have backed Iran. The rising tensions between the two blocks have developed a complete stalemate in a region embroiling with numerous crises and bloodiest conflicts.

Afghanistan's move of requesting for talks between Tehran and Riyadh and expressing concerns over the rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran is coming as an expedient move aimed at avoiding taking side or affecting relations with one of the two powerful countries. Despite Afghanistan's previous stance of backing the Saudi Arabia over the country's stance in the Yemen conflict, the recent statement from the Afghan government was largely expected. It was obvious beforehand that the Afghan government would not be able to sustain its leanings towards Saudi Arabia in event of more severe circumstances in the politics of the Muslim world.

Given the most recent developments, it would be prudent of the Afghan government to maintain close relations with all neighboring and regional Muslim countries, including the two rival Iran and Saudi Arabia.

There is the potential for the Middle Eastern crises to further deteriorate and develop more precarious not only for the Muslim states but for the whole world. It would be in the best interests of Afghanistan to not only maintain but to further promote friendly relations with the neighboring countries and regional and Muslim powers. A sustainable policy of positive approach to external developments in a region replete with crises would best serve Afghanistan's long-term interests, and would help resolving the country's own crisis.

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The New Geo-Economics

By Joseph E. Stiglitz

Last year was a memorable one for the global economy. Not only was overall performance disappointing, but profound changes - both for better and for worse - occurred in the global economic system.

Most notable was the Paris climate agreement reached last month. By itself, the agreement is far from enough to limit the increase in global warming to the target of 2° Celsius above the pre-industrial level. But it did put everyone on notice: The world is moving, inexorably, toward a green economy. One day not too far off, fossil fuels will be largely a thing of the past. So anyone who invests in coal now does so at his or her peril. With more green investments coming to the fore, those financing them will, we should hope, counterbalance powerful lobbying by the coal industry, which is willing to put the world at risk to advance its shortsighted interests.

Indeed, the move away from a high-carbon economy, where coal, gas, and oil interests often dominate, is just one of several major changes in the global geo-economic order. Many others are inevitable, given China's soaring share of global output and demand. The New Development Bank, established by the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), was launched during the year, becoming the first major international financial institution led by emerging countries. And, despite US President Barack Obama's resistance, the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was established as well, and is to start operation this month.

The US did act with greater wisdom where China's currency was concerned. It did not obstruct the renminbi's admission to the basket of currencies that constitute the International Monetary Fund's reserve asset, Special Drawing Rights (SDRs). In addition, a half-decade after the Obama administration agreed to modest changes in the voting rights of China and other emerging markets at the IMF - a small nod to the new economic realities - the US Congress finally approved the reforms.

The most controversial geo-economic decisions last year concerned trade. Almost unnoticed after years of desultory talks, the World Trade Organization's Doha Development Round - initiated to redress imbalances in previous trade agreements that favored developed countries - was given a quiet burial. America's hypocrisy - advocating free trade but refusing to abandon subsidies on cotton and other agricultural commodities - had posed an insurmountable obstacle to the Doha negotiations. In place of global trade talks, the US and Europe have mounted a divide-and-conquer strategy, based on overlapping trade blocs and agreements.

As a result, what was intended to be a global free-trade regime has given way to a discordant managed-trade regime. Trade for much of the Pacific and Atlantic regions will be governed by agreements, thousands of pages in length and replete with complex rules of origin that contradict basic principles of efficiency and the free flow of goods. The US concluded secret negotiations on what may turn out to

be the worst trade agreement in decades, the so-called Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and now faces an uphill battle for ratification, as all the leading Democratic presidential candidates and many of the Republicans have weighed in against it. The problem is not so much with the agreement's trade provisions, but with the "investment" chapter, which severely constrains environmental, health, and safety regulation, and even financial regulations with significant macroeconomic impacts.

In particular, the chapter gives foreign investors the right to sue governments in private international tribunals when they believe government regulations contravene the TPP's terms (inscribed on more than 6,000 pages). In the past, such tribunals have interpreted the requirement that foreign investors receive "fair and equitable treatment" as grounds for striking down new government regulations - even if they are non-discriminatory and are adopted simply to protect citizens from newly discovered egregious harms.

While the language is complex - inviting costly lawsuits pitting powerful corporations against poorly financed governments - even regulations protecting the planet from greenhouse-gas emissions are vulnerable. The only regulations that appear safe are those involving cigarettes (lawsuits filed against Uruguay and Australia for requiring modest labeling about health hazards had drawn too much negative attention). But there remain a host of questions about the possibility of lawsuits in myriad other areas.

Furthermore, a "most favored nation" provision ensures that corporations can claim the best treatment offered in any of a host country's treaties. That sets up a race to the bottom - exactly the opposite of what US President Barack Obama promised.

Even the way Obama argued for the new trade agreement showed how out of touch with the emerging global economy his administration is. He repeatedly said that the TPP would determine who - America or China - would write the twenty-first century's trade rules. The correct approach is to arrive at such rules collectively, with all voices heard, and in a transparent way. Obama has sought to perpetuate business as usual, whereby the rules governing global trade and investment are written by US corporations for US corporations. This should be unacceptable to anyone committed to democratic principles. Those seeking closer economic integration have a special responsibility to be strong advocates of global governance reforms: If authority over domestic policies is ceded to supranational bodies, then the drafting, implementation, and enforcement of the rules and regulations has to be particularly sensitive to democratic concerns. Unfortunately, that was not always the case in 2015.

In 2016, we should hope for the TPP's defeat and the beginning of a new era of trade agreements that don't reward the powerful and punish the weak. The Paris climate agreement may be a harbinger of the spirit and mindset needed to sustain genuine global cooperation. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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