

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



June 11, 2018

China Hosts SCO Summit to Contribute to Regional Security and Trade

The 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit has been attended by world leaders on Saturday in Chinese Qingdao City, Shandong province. The two-day summit, June 9-10, is of great significance for the state members and the region as the SCO has played key role in maintaining regional peace and counterinsurgency since its establishment in 2001.

With the emergence of border disputes and security threat following the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1990s, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan held a series of talks over border disputes and reached agreements, laying the cornerstone of the "Shanghai Five" mechanism which was later changed into the SCO to resolve regional issues through dialogue. Started with the restricted aim of resolving border disputes, SCO has been extended to a highly effective international organization with eight full members, four observers and six dialogue partners.

The SCO was established on 15 June 2001 in Chinese city of Shanghai by the founders of "Shanghai Five" plus Uzbekistan reaching to six members. It has been expanded with inclusion of India and Pakistan as full members in the 17th SCO summit held in Astana last year. The SCO observers are comprised of Iran, Afghanistan, Mongolia and Belarus and the dialogue partners consist of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia.

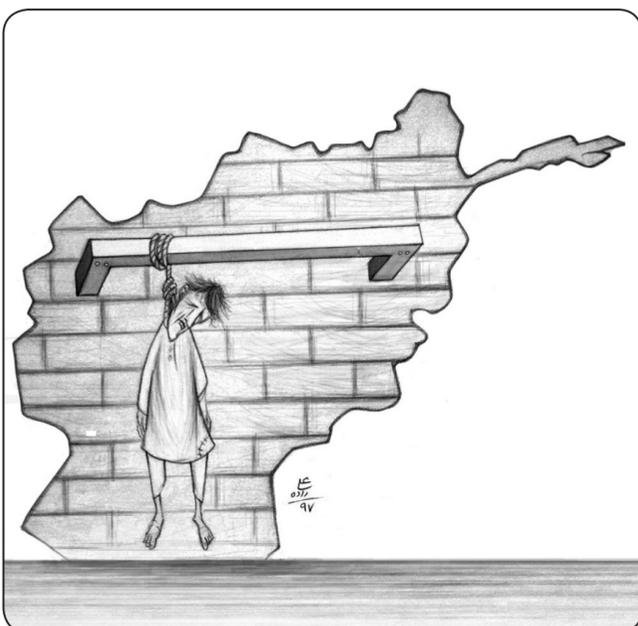
The SCO makes up 42 percent of the world's population and covers a quarter of its surface area. The SCO also works with many international organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Association of South-East Asian Nation (ASEAN).

Proceeding from the "Shanghai Spirit", the SCO pursues its internal policy based on the principles of "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and a desire for common development" which is stated in the SCO Charter. Its external policy is conducted in accordance with the principles of "non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force" and not seeking "unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas". Shanghai Spirit is believed to be the lifeblood of the SCO based on which the room for mutual trust, friendship and good-neighborliness will be extended and the states will strengthen their economic, political and diplomatic ties.

Fighting the "three evil forces" namely terrorism, extremism and separatism is the mainstay of the SCO and strongly related to regional peace and stability. In combating terrorism and extremism, the Tashkent-based Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which has reportedly foiled more than 600 terror plots and captured 2,000 members of international terrorist groups from 2013 to 2017, plays a highly essential role. The RATS is a permanent body of the SCO which is seeking to fight terrorism with strong force. Afghanistan received observer status at the SCO summit in Beijing, China on 6 June 2012. The ongoing SCO summit will be also of great importance for Afghanistan as Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani also attended the two-day summit in Qingdao City. It is self-evident that Afghanistan is beset by two challenging issues namely terrorism and drug trafficking. In this summit, combating terrorism and drug trafficking will be an essential topic to be discussed and the world leaders will pledge to join forces to fight these two issues. Hence, partnering Afghanistan in counterinsurgency and anti-drug campaign will be a game-changer for the country. Based on the principle of "good neighborliness", Kabul government expects all its neighbors in general and Pakistan and China in particular to support the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process so as to persuade the Taliban to resolve the issues through holding peace talks, if they are ever persuaded.

So far, China has played its role with strong commitment to minimize the mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad and cement a trilateral tie among Afghanistan, Pakistan and China so that the three countries could overcome the issue of terrorism, enhance trilateral trade, and contribute to regional security and connectivity. With the commitment of SCO members in fighting terrorism and drug trafficking, besides addressing many other regional issues, Afghanistan is hoped to be one of the large beneficiaries.

Meanwhile, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also one of the main factors in regional connectivity, mutual trust and trade and transit which will be referred to in the SCO summit. Signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with China in 2016, Afghanistan is an active contributor and beneficiary of the BRI and will do its best to support this initiative. Hence, the commitment of the SCO members in supporting the BRI will also benefit Afghanistan. In the meantime, Afghanistan will pledge to continue its contribution to the BRI and its fight against terrorism and drug trafficking. It is hoped that the SCO members give bigger space to Afghanistan in this organization through granting it a full membership, as it did to India and Pakistan last year, in the near future.



Strong Functional Mechanism of Electoral Complaint Commission Can Ensure Transparent & Fair Elections

By Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

The voter registration process started on 14 April 2018 at thousands of registration centers spread across the country. Till now as of 5th June 2018, almost 5.25 million voters have been registered, including approx one hundred thousand Kuchis and few hundreds minority Sikhs. Out of these, 67% of men and 33% of women. In Kabul city, a city of more than 5 million population, voters registered are around 1.2 million. Voter registration has been extended till 07th June. Afghanistan population is estimated to be around 30 million. If 60% of population is considered as eligible voters then 18 million total voters and registration of only 29% shows that we are not able to include a large section of people in the process. Around 17% of population resides in Kabul city but Kabul voters would represent 23% of the full country voters.

In the year 2010 parliament election, registered voters were 10 million and 4.2 million voted, but this year, registered voters are almost half and the cast voters may reduce further. In spite of continued efforts on gender mainstreaming, this year voter registration could not match the gender parity of 2010. This year, women registration is less than half of men which is far below of the year 2010, when 56% voters were men and 44% women. Most of the voters are Kabul centered. Number of Parliament seats from Kabul are 33 and so 1.2 million voters would be voting for 33 parliamentarians. Outside parliament seats are 216 and 77% of voters will vote for them. Out of Kabul, seats are more than 6 times but registered voters are 4 times. Number of registered voters and participation of women both have reduced drastically and it may be one of the relevant concern of the process and its dynamics. Drop in voter registration is attributed to insecurity but it is not the only reason. In Kabul and major town centers which are considered to be safe, voter registration is only 40 percent of voters residing. There are other factors, especially prevailing pessimism, lack of trust in the process and alienation of people from the system of governance including the Independent Election Commission (IEC). Less participation and asymmetry of participation in democracy may have their own pitfalls.

The candidates have already started aligning themselves with their own campaigns and calculations to get votes in their favor. But, at the same time, the news of 'Machine to print fake ID cards brought to Baghlan', 'Fake ID cards with voter stickers being sold', 'fake ID cards brought from Pakistan', 'concerns as fake ID cards on the increase', 'bribes to get ID cards fast', 'ALP commander detained over ID cards collection', 'strongmen meddling in electoral affairs' 'forced to submit ID cards', 'three arrested with fake ID cards in Parwan' and similar more issues keep surfacing. There are reports that influential leaders have been motivating and mobilizing their supporters to get them registered. There are allegations that ID cards (tazkiras) are being bought by influential people and those are registered in block through impersonations and unholy nexus with the IEC officials.

The dwindling number of voters in each parliamentary constituency may become a fertile battleground of power dynamics of candidates engaging them in intimidation, manipulations and influence. With an ongoing conflict and insurgency in the country, the people are losing interests in election process, the founding pillar of democracy and so to restore interest, affirmative efforts are to be undertaken to reach to people. Political leadership and the government should abandon their four walls and change their approach

reaching to people at their door steps. If the IEC would have created mobile registration teams visiting house to house in each locality, then registration would have been more, at least in safer areas and towns and also the number of women would have been increased enormously. Recommendation for creating Mobile Voters' Registration Teams or MVRTs was published in one of the newspapers on 23 April 2018 under the title 'IEC Should Form MVRTs' to this effect. On the day when the registration started, President Ghani stressed transparency in elections, asking all people, including Taliban to participate in the democratic exercise. Rightly, he gave a call for a fair election to make democracy a success. But the calls of the President are not heeded by a large section of Afghans and more so by Taliban. Moreover, Taliban went ahead with extra counter mile and attacked the registration centers killing innocent police personnel, election officials and people. There are few dozens of attacks on polling centers, UNAMA verified 23 election related security incidents till 10 May 2018. Of the 23 incidents, 10 of them involved threats, harassments and intimidation by anti government elements. Surprisingly, on the allegation of voter registration malpractices reported in media, the IEC did not comment and did not bring the investigation reports in public. It seems that news, reports and complaints are neither gathered and nor addressed systematically and timely. A very slow process of voter registration in the beginning put IEC on tenterhooks and so, it focused more on mobilizing voters through various campaigns including calling the political parties to motivate voters overlooking the reported allegations. Recently, on 02nd June, IEC launched an information bank to help control corruption in the process of candidates' registration. It is too late and too little. The voter registration process is almost over without almost no oversight and very few leads were pursued.

Now, it is the litmus test for IEC to ensure that elections are free, fair and transparent and we all, including the government, police and security forces, people, political parties, international community and others should join hands empowering it to ensure that elections are held in a transparent and fair manner and no dispute emerges in the post-election era. The free and fair election is the key to bring back trust of people to the democratic process and its institutions, including IEC and the Government.

The IEC may have to go extra positive miles for this and set up strong functional mechanism of Electoral Complaints Commission to address every complaint quickly and efficiently taking measures under the Election Laws and Afghan Penal Code. There should be multi-pronged strategy for initiating prompt action on all election related complaints with suo motu provisions of acknowledging news reports and information received otherwise, as these go to the heart of fairness, transparency and confidence building. Having a prompt and fair investigation is the basic expectation of every complainant and that's why there are laws. Only fair and credible investigation and prompt action can bring credible accountability in the election process. IEC should focus on these vigorously by engaging skilled personnel from the Ministry of Interior, Attorney General Office and others, if necessary engaging UNAMA, to investigate each information and allegation quickly so that unlawful and unethical practices stop without affecting the integrity of the election process and corrective measures are taken to plug loopholes in the process.

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Why "America First" Means "Europe United"

By Guy Verhofstadt

One of the main arguments made in support of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union is that the UK will be able to negotiate better trade deals with other countries - and even with Europe - if it is on its own. According to Brexiteers like British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, because EU member states are too divided and consumed by their own crises to defend the integrity of the European project, "There is only one way to get the change we want - vote to leave the EU." But with less than a year remaining until "Brexit day" - when the UK's EU membership officially ends - it is clear that the British government's hopes of dividing and conquering the EU economy have been dashed. EU member states have remained impressively united throughout the Brexit negotiations. And while Brexit itself is nothing to celebrate, the process has at least shown that Europe is strongest when it is challenged.

In fact, for many Europeans, the EU seems to have returned from the dead. Slowly but surely, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel - the bloc's two most powerful leaders - have shown signs of coming together to pursue long-overdue EU-level reforms.

Moreover, despite the formation of an anti-establishment coalition government in Italy, and the rise of populist parties across Europe, opinion polls suggest that support for the EU is now higher than it has been in decades. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, if a referendum on EU membership were held today, 83% of Europeans would vote to remain in the bloc; and a record-high 60% regard EU membership as a "good thing" for their country.

In other words, while populism can certainly sow political divisions within the EU, there is little evidence that Brexit itself has caused a domino effect. The Brexit ringleader Nigel Farage might like to think that Italy's new populist government represents a success for his brand of go-it-alone nationalism, but it turns out that Europe's populists are of a different breed than those in the UK. Though financial markets have grown skittish at the prospect that Italy's new leaders could drive their country out of the eurozone, polling conducted after the election in March showed that 60-72% of Italians would not support such a move.

Still, recent polling does reveal more ambivalence about the EU's current trajectory. Just 32% of citizens believe that "things are going in the right direction" for the EU, whereas 42% think the bloc is on the wrong path. The question for most Europeans, then, is not whether to destroy the EU, but how to improve it.

Owing to the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent eurozone crisis, the EU has failed to implement necessary reforms. But now it has a window of opportunity to act, because the truth about Europe's dangerous new geopolitical reality is finally hitting home for many in the EU.

After all, the unifying challenge that Brexit has posed to the bloc pales in comparison to that presented by Donald Trump. The US president's disdain for NATO, and the revelations about his campaign's contacts with Kremlin-connected Russians prior to the 2016 election, have made it abundantly clear that Europeans can no longer rely exclusively on the United States for their security.

Moreover, Trump's decision to subject the EU (as well as other US allies such as Canada and Mexico) to import tariffs on steel and aluminum has unified European leaders in outrage and disgust. And his suggestion that German cars should be cleaned from US streets - despite the fact that many "German" cars are actually built in the very US states from which he draws his support - may help Germans realize that they need other Europeans' help to protect their auto industry.

Trump's tariffs have thus provided a perfect opportunity for Germany's grand-coalition government to meet Macron halfway on his ambitious proposals to reform the EU and the eurozone. It is time for Germany to be more open-minded about the needs of Southern European countries.

Trump's "America First" policies represent a misguided return to the naked nationalism and protectionism of a bygone era. They pose a direct threat to the post-war international order that has underpinned prosperity and stability for 73 years. And yet they could also be just what the long-stagnant European integration process needs. Trump revels in the chaos he sows. He regards international relations as a zero-sum game of winners and losers, and, to the extent that his foreign and trade policies make any sense at all, they are transactional. By contrast, the EU's modus operandi is one of collaboration and compromise. And now that these two worldviews are colliding, each is likely to be emboldened.

In addition to Brexit and Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin's revanchism and China's growing assertiveness are upending the global order. But, as we Europeans well know, there is nothing like a crisis to get things moving again. We have avoided tough decisions for decades. Now, we must decide what we want Europe to be in 2050, and beyond.

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