



June 25, 2016

SCO – A Hope for Afghanistan

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Tashkent gives Afghanistan some confidence in its fight against terrorism, as the regional countries consider the security situation in Afghanistan as one of the most important issues. They have also shown their consent that they will support Afghanistan in the war against terrorism.

Chinese President Xi Jinping said in a statement on Friday June 24, 2016 that SCO can play a constructive role to help Afghans in their quest to restore peace and stability in the country.

Tajikistan's President Imam Ali Rahman, also, laid strong emphasis on the establishment of longstanding peace and stability in Afghanistan and said that stability in Afghanistan was in the interests of the entire region and the world.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev also pledged his country's support to Afghanistan and said that they would undertake the renovation of Afghan forces' helicopters.

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov invited Ghani to visit Turkmenistan in the near future so that the countries besides inaugurating the Aqina railway link also sign the Lajaward transit route agreement.

There is no doubt in the fact that SCO can support Afghanistan in multiple ways particularly in facing security challenges. Currently, there has been an upsurge in insecurity in different parts of the country and there are fears that Afghan security forces would face a Herculean task to guarantee security. The enemy forces have multiplied since the rise of Daesh in some of the provinces. The previously peaceful parts of the country have turned into battle fields and there does not seem to be any clear indications of restoration of peace or peace talks with Taliban. Afghanistan at this stance requires sincere support from the regional countries but particularly from China.

Chinese support to Afghanistan has come in different forms. There are various assistance and support projects sponsored by China that are going on in Afghanistan. They are related to different sectors; like economic, infra-structure development, education and security. However, China would have to continue their support or even enhance that as Afghanistan is trying to stand on its own. The most important sector would be security. Since most of the international forces have withdrawn from Afghanistan and Afghan security forces are shouldering the security responsibilities themselves, they would require tremendous support from China.

One of the most important support regarding security would be initiation of peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban. Whether that happens under the platform of Quadrilateral Cooperation Group (QCG) or SCO, a serious negotiation between both the parties is really crucial. China can play its role in further streamlining the QCG process and eliminate the differences between Afghanistan and Pakistan so that they are able to cooperate more closely for making negotiations possible.

China can also play its dominating role in SCO to start a formal process for a lasting peace in Afghanistan. It can involve the regional countries in this regard so that they collectively design a comprehensive support strategy to deal with the threats of terrorism in Afghanistan. Apart from assisting Afghan security forces to face the enemies they can also support Afghanistan in governance and development sectors so that they are able to pursue long-term strategies for establishing peace and tranquility. Support in the form of assistance for strengthening the weak political and social institutions in Afghanistan would also prove to be vital for solidifying Afghan government and its nascent democracy and make them capable enough to stand strong.

SCO, thus, requires to keep on its spirit and dedication for resolving the regional issues. It can best function if it follows the Chinese President Xi Jinping's five-point proposal in the times to come. These points suggest that SCO should remain open and transparent without targeting any third party, engage all like-minded international partners in wide-ranging cooperation and act as a constructive force for the healthy development of the international order. Secondly, the SCO should continue to prioritize security and cement this foundation of the SCO development and it needs to beef up the institutional construction for cooperation on combating terrorism and drug trafficking. Thirdly, SCO should expand practical cooperation and find greater space for SCO development and there are hopes that the organization will play an active role in aligning the Belt and Road Initiative and the other members' development strategies. Fourthly, the SCO also needs to enhance culture and people-to-people foundation as the bridge for future development, and China is willing to support other member states in restoring historical sites and archaeology studies, as well as communication and cooperation in such fields as youth, health care and environmental protection. Last but not the least, the SCO should continue to uphold openness and inclusiveness and get more parties on board for SCO cooperation. He also proposed that the member states take the process of accepting India and Pakistan as new members to enhance institutional building of the SCO and expand and deepen cooperation in various fields.



Hope for Peace Talks?

By Hujjatullah Zia

Holding out against peace negotiation, militancy continues unabated in Afghanistan which undermines the burgeoning democracy and curtails individual and collective freedoms. Peace has remained a dream that never comes true for Afghan nation. There is a sense of fear and mistrust in the air and the gleam of hope for peace talks has disappeared. The Taliban fighters are wounded by the death of Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was killed in US drone strike in the Dalbandin area of Balochistan on May 21, and, therefore, intensify their attacks. The negotiation of peace between Afghanistan and the Taliban had reached deadlock several times within the last decade. The prominent stalemates in this process are Mullah Omar's death, which was revealed on late July 2015, and his successor Mullah Mansour. Omar's death prompted the Taliban outfit to stage "Operation Omari" against the U.S. and Afghan soldiers with stronger determination than before. To put it succinctly, the sudden demise of the Taliban's Emir-ul-Mumineen (Commander of faith) was an irreparable loss for the Taliban which triggered a rift between his fighters. Subsequently, a number of the Taliban militants pledged allegiance to the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to fill the vacuum of their spiritual leader by Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi - the ISIL's Caliph.

On the other hand, Mansour claimed to fill Omar's vacuum. However, his succession led to splinter group and widened the gap between the Taliban elements. Splits also emerged between Mansour and those who challenged his appointment, including the late leader's son Yaqub and his brother, Mullah Abdul Manan, and also Mullah Mansour Dadullah.

Loyal to Akhtar Mansour killed Mullah Mansour Dadullah, his brother and dozens of his fighters, for not pledging allegiance to Omar's successor, in Zabul province - which enraged Omar's family. Dadullah, who was leading a Taliban's faction, was of the view that Omar's sons should lead the Taliban. Finally, religious scholars close to the Taliban brokered a ceasefire between Mansour and the rival faction under Mullah Mohammad Rasool.

After all, Omar's successor staged heavy attacks against Afghanistan to consolidate his position. Although his death was a blow to peace process, he did not carry much weight among the Taliban. Contrary to public belief, the Taliban announced Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada as Mansour's successor without disagreement. Following all the interminable ebbs and flows, now the peace process is moribund. There is lack of trust not only between the negotiators but also among the members of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), mainly after Mansour's death. In late May, a fifth round of four-nation talks

aimed at laying the ground for a negotiated end to the Afghan war began in Islamabad, but hopes faded away for bringing the Taliban insurgents to the table quickly.

However, there are still sporadic calls for peace. As a result, U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Olson said, "Taliban should not keep away from talks, hoping that the U.S. is going to abandon Afghanistan." The militant outfit should not suspect the genuineness of America's support for the Afghan-led peace talks that the U.S. continued to support, he told an audience at the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based think-tank. He further added that Washington expected the QCG to use their leverage to drive the Taliban to the negotiating table. According to him, Pakistan would not have a "bright future" unless it took action against terror groups like the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network and commended Pakistan's counter-terrorism operations in the tribal region of Waziristan.

Despite the complicated issue of peace, the recent call for talks by a hegemonic member of QCG bespeaks of the open door of negotiation for the Taliban's newly appointed leader Mawlawi Haibatullah. On the surface, Mansour's death seemed to facilitate the peace talks as he was deemed an "obstacle" before the peace process. But the appointment of Haibatullah, who is known for his radical decrees, caused a disappointment. Since Haibatullah did not opine regarding peace talks and his stance seems unclear, he is called to fill the empty seat of his predecessor around the negotiating table.

Of late, the UN secretary-general's special representative Nicholas Haysom said the battlefield in many areas of Afghanistan was in a state of flux, with gains and reversals but with neither side effecting clear dominance. Indeed, Afghan civilians have been suffering the Taliban's unmitigated militancy for more than a decade and it never ends. It is a matter of great concern to see that the high level of violence is having on the civilian population. "There has been no let-up in Ramadan, during which period there have been some reports of disturbing brutality, including attacks on worshippers," Haysom is cited as saying. He said Afghans could meet the challenges confronting them. "It is possible for Afghanistan not only to survive in 2016, but to grow stronger as a result." Perhaps, Haibatullah is still hesitating over participation in peace talks. His deputies Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Omar's son Mullah Yaqoob will have a profound influence on him and might speak the final words. It should be noted that Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is labeled as "specially designated global terrorist" by the U.S. State Department, will be the key player in peace process and will play the role of wolf and fox since he has been a political mastermind behind a number of deadly scenes.

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Conservation Challenges for Endangered Asiatic (Indian) Lions in South Asia

By Saikat Kumar Basu

Gujarat, Western India is rich in biodiversity and one of the historical habitats of the majestic Asiatic lions. It is important to mention that the density of the endangered Asiatic (Indian) lions have increased considerably in the Gir Sanctuary over decades due to excellent conservation efforts by the Gujarat State Forest Department. However, the carrying capacity of the sanctuary and adjoining forested belts have been crossed in the past decade; and there is immediate need of relocating the excess lion populations to suitable habitats. The top predators are not finding enough prey animals in the sanctuary and are often crossing the boundaries due to hunger. The precious animal species are becoming vulnerable and there is no appropriate steps taken by the state government. Several national and international agencies have warned the Gujarat state government about the serious consequences of a future contagious disease that could decimate the local lion populations or any natural disaster that could wipe out the lion populations like massive forest fires or destructive flood. The state government is greedy to retain the label of the only Asiatic (Indian) lion habitat in Asia for tourism purposes and as such is reluctant to identify suitable lion habitats in other adjoining states for relocating excess lions.

The state government has been jealously guarding its lion populations in a questionable manner that in the past even an Indo-Iran agreement of exchanging couple pairs of Asiatic (Iranian) cheetahs for India in exchange for breeding pairs of Asiatic (Indian) lions for Iran were scrapped. The Gujarat government were reluctant to provide breeding pairs of lions for Iran to keep the tag of only lion habitat of Asia! Now the as the water is flowing over the head and some animals are turning into potential man-eater due to prey deficiency; some animals have been caged to sweep the greater issue under the carpet. Unless swift decisions are made and alternate habitats are identified and some of the lion prides are relocated there could be great danger to the lion populations in the future. There has been reports that due to overpopulation and shortage of prey in the

Gir Sanctuary, some of the lion prides here have been pushed towards turning into man eaters making the lion population of lions vulnerable to atrocities by local human settlers in the long term. Hence under all circumstances for successful long term conservation of the Asiatic (Indian) lions alternate habitats are an urgent need.

Gujarat's success with conservation has been mixed with failures in running efficient captive breeding programs; while successfully running biological parks and natural wilderness area where there is dole of tourism money involved. However, in parts where there are fewer footfalls of tourists due to poor arrangements as well as lack infrastructure; the conservation efforts are questionable. Lack of employment opportunity particularly in the backward, rural and tribal belts areas have been pushing local and indigenous communities encroaching deep inside the forest for daily sustenance impacting both the quality of local forests and the wildlife. Forest fragmentation, over exploitation of local natural resources as well as insurgency build up in different forested parts of India has been extending considerable challenges towards conservation of forests and wildlife across India and not just the state of Gujarat.

The challenges of abject poverty in the rural belts needs of India whether it is the case of Gujarat, Rajasthan, UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal or Assam need serious introspection for developing a comprehensive conservation plan for the nation. Aggressive insurgency issues in different forested parts of India have further reduced the presence of state forest officials and staffs for security reasons. Coordination and co-operations between state and central forest and wildlife management units together with local people; as well as local, regional, national and international NGOs and conservation agencies need to work together to protect the last remaining wildlife refuges of India. Economic empowerment of local people will be important for the long term success of the conservation efforts in Gujarat as well other Indian states.

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