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South Asia Economic Integration: Challenges and Opportunities

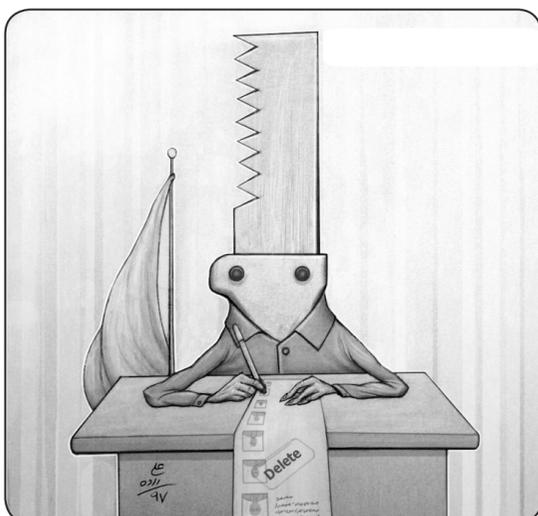
A review of economic history will show that Asia has been an open region fully involved in the world economic system as far back as pre-modern times. Even when China and Japan, during the 15th and 17th centuries, respectively, ostensibly closed their borders to outsiders and external trade, evidence shows that the closure was not complete. It is clear that, over time, Asia had an instrumental role in the global division of labor and its conduct in the world economy was open and outreaching. Recent global trends have been characterized by an increasing tendency to trade on preferential basis in a bilateral or regional grouping rather than on an MFN basis. Realizing the importance of intra-regional trade, the South Asian region has also embarked upon various processes of regional economic integration. This is evident from their increased economic engagements, bilaterally and regionally both with countries within the region and outside. However, the South Asian regional integration process is fraught with difficulties.

Main challenges

The first is Political instability and war; The second is how to build regional blocs that go beyond trade to include industrial policy, a shared agricultural policy, macroeconomic coordination, and technology sharing. The third is how to ensure that building complementarity among economies does not reproduce the old, unequal division of labor between stronger and weaker economies. The fourth is how to promote a development process that does not reproduce social inequalities at the regional and national levels in the name of capital accumulation. The fifth is how to promote a development process that is sustainable, that is, one that is built on ecologically benign technologies and is not based on ever-rising material consumption per capita, though of course the spreading of material wealth via income redistribution is necessary to bring people out of poverty. The sixth is how to avoid a technocrat-led process and promote instead the democratization of decision-making in all areas of the economy. The seventh, related to the previous point, is how to move away from a statist process and institutionalize civil society participation in all key areas of economic decision making. Civil society must not only provide a check to both the state and the market, but it must be the leading force in the new economics. Finally, these are compounded by some of the structural economic weaknesses within the region. In order to augment the level and scope of South Asian economic cooperation, all these need to be approached in an objective manner. Ultimately, such an exercise would help articulating adequate policy-responses to address these different levels of difficulties.

Main Opportunities

On the other hand the South Asian regional integration process has unique opportunities. The first is strengthened position for negotiating with other trading blocs; -The second is gradual liberalization' through a slow increase in levels of competition that allows domestic sectors to adjust and build some comparative advantage before facing global competition; The third is ease in addressing difficult issues within a small group of countries compared to a multilateral setting. The fourth is proponents of "regionalism" propose creating "circles of free trade that expand until they finally converge" Overall, the potentials of regional integration in South Asia are still largely untapped, despite the rapid developments in the last ten years. Leveraging these exchanges to promote economic diversification should feature as one of the strategic priorities for Asian governments, particularly in the context of a fragile global recovery.



Do Afghan Women have Meaningful Participation in Peace Negotiations?

By: Neela Hassan

The recent developments and peace talks to end the war in Afghanistan have made Afghans optimistic about the future. After years of failure in gathering all sides of the conflicts around one table, Moscow talks is considered a significant improvement towards peace. But the fact that this process has been male dominant, where women are only given a symbolic role, is a major concern for women and human rights activists.

Afghan women had been victims of political choices of different politicians and regimes throughout the history. They were used as a weapon during wars or were treated as subordinate human beings, who were unable to decide for themselves. Every political group and movement had their own definition of women's rights and their role in the society, but the roots of all these definitions were based on the notion of patriarchy. Afghan women certainly suffered in different forms during last four decades of domestic conflicts in the country. With the inception of Taliban regime in 1996, however, the already unstable situation of Afghan women entered a new era, where women were increasingly treated more barbarously and inhumanly. The five years of Taliban regime in Afghanistan left unpleasant memories in every Afghan women's mind. From being completely confined to home, now women were entirely excluded from the society and were not allowed to leave the house without a male companion. With the intervention of international community and the administration of the new interim government, many important actions have been taken to ensure humane and quality life for Afghan women. Nevertheless, even after 18 years of advocacy and implementation of projects worth millions, Afghanistan is still among the worst places for women. But this does not mean there were no improvements in women's status in the country. In fact, women are unprecedentedly more involved in the society and government than any other period in the history.

The beginning of peace talks in the country has raised concerns that the freedom of women will be bargained in the process of peace negotiations with the Taliban as the whole process is male dominant and women have been sidelined. While, women are one of the main topics of the negotiation, they didn't have voice in the negotiations that took place in Moscow. Women, a group that makes half of the population demographic, have the right to be engaged in any process that involves issues regarding Afghanistan, and participation in peace process is the legal right of women even if they were not victims of the Taliban regime. The symbolic participation of only two women in Moscow peace talks with more than 40 males is not only negation of women rights but questioning the transparency and inclusiveness of the whole process.

In addition, it was expected that the two female delegations, who were participating on behalf of Afghan women, would talk and advocate not only for Afghan women but for the whole nation rather than just listening and then reporting the talks to media. This type of participation itself is underestimation of women's role and such symbolic movements do not really imply involvement of women in the process.

The United Nation's Peace Security Council resolution (1325) formally has acknowledged that civilians, especially women continue being excluded from security and peace negotiations, while they are the ones impacted the most by armed conflicts. The resolution affirms that peace and security negotiations tend to be more successful and last longer when women are included in the process. On the other hand, the United States Institute of Peace report reveals that Afghan women have successfully managed negotiation with the local Taliban leaders. There have been stories where local women in provinces as Kandahar, Baghlan and Paktia negotiated girl's education and release of hostages in their community, which is indicating that local women know how to negotiate. Inclusion of local women's voice and their suggestions in current peace talks will not only support and strengthen the negotiations from civilians' side, but it will also give the sense of ownership to women, that they were able to decide for themselves and their future.

Therefore, women's participation in peace negotiations should go beyond quotas and representation. What matters the most is their meaningful and active participation in the process. Meaningful participation means that women are present during negotiations and their experiences, concerns and suggestions are being considered for the resolution of the conflict. By one account, representation of women which is for the sake of numerical presence can be a good gesture towards women but it by all mean is not meaningful and empowered representation. That is to say, Afghan women's presence in the current peace talks is more of quota-based representation rather than a meaningful representation, where women could bring their own voices and the voices of those who they are representing.

Even so, the majority of Afghan society believe that politics, issues of security and conflict resolution are 'men-related' topics and need higher level of analysis and understanding, which women lack. However, there is this famous saying that "rights are taken, not given"; if not all women, at least those that are involved in peace process, should use the opportunity and make their participation meaningful and bring women's voice to the table.

Neela Hassan, Communication and Development MA student at Ohio university in the U.S

Inclusive Talks Will Resolve US-DPRK's Issues

By: Hujjatullah Zia

The second summit between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump in Hanoi, the Vietnam capital, ended abruptly without making headway. Washington demanded "permanent, irreversible, verifiable" denuclearization but Pyongyang insisted on lifting sanctions.

Since the first meeting, held in June in Singapore, the vaguely-worded agreement signed between the two sides for denuclearization did not bear result despite the statement made in the fact that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in the UN Security Council that "Chairman Kim committed to work towards the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula". It is really surprising to see that the statements of US and North Korea's officials were different or contradictory after both the first and second summits. Following the second summit, Trump claimed that Pyongyang had demanded complete sanctions relief, but North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho refuted the claim saying that his side asked only to lift five of the 11 sanctions under the US Security Council resolutions and had offered a "realistic proposal", including the dismantling of its main nuclear site at Yongbyon.

The two past summits show that US is seeking "disarm and investments will follow", but North Korea demands simultaneous and parallel move.

It seems that a trust deficit lingers between Pyongyang and Washington. On the one hand, the US side seems skeptical of North Korea's seriousness about denuclearization and, on the other hand, Kim doubts the bona fide intention of Trump's administration for pursuing a tit-for-tat deal. But Kim answered to the question of a foreign journalist that if he were not serious, he would not have come to Hanoi. Building mutual trust is believed to be a prerequisite for reaching a fruitful consensus.

It is evident that seeking a package agreement and once-and-for-all denuclearization in one meeting or two is neither reasonable nor possible. It is unlikely to include all the prerequisites and conditions of denuclearization and Pyongyang's demands, such as withdrawal of US troops from the Republic of Korea, the lifting of sanctions and guaranteeing the security of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, in a single package. Thus, a "phased" and "synchronous" approach will be promising.

The negotiating sides had been expected to chart a clear road-

map to delineate the process of denuclearization and lifting of sanctions as well as the demands and responsibilities of each side. But the summit came to an end without tangible result.

Regional stakeholders expected a more positive outcome of the summit and wanted both sides to reach an effective consensus. "For example, for North Korea to agree to international monitors checking and reporting on its nuclear weapons and facilities; and for the US to agree partially lift sanctions," Cheng Xiaohu, a professor of Korean studies at Renmin University, is cited as saying before the summit. He reiterated Beijing's support for the summit.

Overall, in the Hanoi Summit, the two sides made strides in building trust as Trump and Kim sat face-to-face to resolve the insurmountable issue through negotiations despite the harsh rhetoric and Trump's "fire and fury" and the cold war between the two sides. For example, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that Washington remained optimistic about nuclear talks with North Korea and it was closer to reaching an agreement with the Pyongyang than before. Such reconciliatory approach would mitigate regional stability. In other words, although it is unlikely to have all issues in a single package in one meeting or two, the summit was one more step forward to decreasing the cold war mentality.

I believe the summit served as a platform for bringing US and North Korea closer and creating more room for optimism and better relations between the two sides. I emphasize that all the issues will not be finalized overnight and US President and North Korean Chairman have to schedule a next summit for finalization.

To resolve the issue, the two sides have to consider engaging regional stakeholders in the talks. For example, China and Russia played essential role in brokering talks between Seoul and Pyongyang and can continue their role, if they are demanded, to put their weight behind the talks.

An inclusive negotiation with the participation of regional stakeholders will lead to a more sustainable and trustworthy agreement. Moreover, the international community has to push for an inclusive consensus between the US and ROK on the one side and DPRK on the other side and make sure the agreement is practiced by all sides.

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