

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



March 28, 2018

Regional Unity Can Support Peace in Afghanistan

The conference on peace in Afghanistan that was held in Tashkent on Tuesday, March 27, made some serious promises to support peace process with Taliban that should be led and owned by Afghanistan. At the end of the conference, representatives of about 23 countries, including all central Asian countries, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, the United States and European Union with Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, adopted a declaration that promised regional cooperation on fighting terrorism, eradicating drug production and smuggling and ensuring all security assistance to Afghanistan be provided through the Afghan government only. All the participating nations pledged to support Afghanistan's peace process and agreed that a political settlement, led by Afghanistan, but supported by close regional counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics cooperation were key to peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. At the same time, the representatives also concurred to value sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan and the efforts of its people and government for establishing peace and development in the country.

It is really threatening to see amassing of terrorism within Afghanistan with each passing day. It is the time in Afghanistan when the scenario should be going through improvements and efforts should be made to stabilize the situation. The coming few years are really very important and will decide the future of the country. The real transition is going on; there are great changes expected and if Afghanistan's socio-political scenario is not grounded on stable footings, expectation for a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan would be just a wool-gathering. There has been increase in the last few months in the different forms of insurgency; and people from different factions have been targeted. The number of attacks on both the Afghan forces and civilian have been alarming; and there are different indications in the form of conservative and violating practices throughout the country that show that Talibanization is on the rise and will keep on rising unless somber efforts are made to control the drift. At the same time, the rise and growth of Daesh in different parts of the country is another threat. The support of the regional countries stands paramount in this regard.

The declaration that was agreed proclaimed that the involved countries would support Central Asian states' efforts to advance the peace process and socio-economic development in Afghanistan, and agreed to call on the Taliban "to recognize their share of responsibility for bringing peace and security to Afghanistan," in a mutually agreed format. It also noted that a political settlement between government and the Taliban would be a "victory for all parties and a defeat for none."

At the same time, it highlighted that this move should guarantee the inclusion of the Taliban in the political process "as a legitimate political actor." And went on to state however that in turn, the Taliban needs to denounce all violence and cut ties with international terrorist groups including al-Qaeda, Daesh and other transnational terrorist organizations. In addition, the rights of women were noted and the need for full and meaningful participation by women in all aspects of Afghanistan's society, including the peace process, was stressed.

It is of utmost importance that the countries that have made promises must pursue them with honesty and determination. Because with the deterioration of peace and tranquility in Afghanistan there are dangers that terrorism may continue and it will ultimately influence all the regional countries. More importantly, the terrorism has to be rooted out because of the fact that it has been influencing the lives of the common people of Afghanistan to a great extent. Innocent civilians have paid a very heavy price for the prevailing conditions. They are basically the ones who have been suffering and may suffer to a further extent if instability and terrorism prevail in the country. It is really pathetic to see the civilians losing their lives when they have nothing to do with the war. As wars and clashes for decades have torn certain parts of the country and incapacitated the infra-structure in Afghanistan, people have not only suffered the hardships of the poor and miserable lives but also the horrors of war.

One of the reasons of the consistent wave of terrorism is the rise of Daesh along with Taliban in the recent few years. And the peace process, instead of pointing towards improvement, seems to be going the other way. In fact, the overall peace process does not seem to be working well. The process should have been comprehensive enough to include within its folds the overall political and economic stability and better life opportunities for all the Afghan people.

Nevertheless, there should be efforts both from the regional countries and the international community as per their promises to change the circumstance in Afghanistan in true sense. Eradication of terrorism stands as the top priority matter and the real peace process should make the country move towards a terrorism free country, and make efforts for better governance, justice and rule of law.



Natural gas: An underrated driver of Saudi hostility towards Iran and Qatar

By James M. Dorsey

Debilitating hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran is about lots of things, not least who will have the upper hand in a swath of land stretching from Central Asia to the Atlantic coast of Africa. While attention is focused on ensuring that continued containment of Iran ensures that Saudi Arabia has a leg up, geopolitics is but one side of the equation. Natural gas is the other.

With signatories to the Paris climate accord moving towards bans on petrol and diesel-driven vehicles within a matter of decades and renewable energy technology advancing in strides, natural gas takes on added significance.

These global energy trends are hastening in an era in which oil will significantly diminish in importance and natural gas, according to energy scholar Sergei Paltsev, will fill gaps in the provision of renewable energy that await technological advances.

Saudi Arabia's problem is that Iran and Qatar have the gas reserves it does not. That is one reason why renewables figure prominently in Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform program, not only to prepare Saudi Arabia economically for a post-oil future but also to secure its continued geopolitical significance.

Prince Mohammed, like his counterpart in the United Arab Emirates, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, hopes that the kingdom will have an advantage in the generation of solar energy given that the sun hovers higher over his country than over Europe and other parts of the world and that it has less interference from clouds.

As a result, natural gas is a factor in mounting tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and say some analysts, a driver of the Saudi-UAE-led, ten-month-old diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar.

In what could constitute a serious escalation of hostilities, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen threatened this week to retaliate against Iran in response to missile attacks on the kingdom by Iranian-backed Houthis rebels.

"Perhaps, the Saudi elite knows all too well that the basis of its power is hollowing out rapidly as a result of the global climate response and anticipated dwindling of conventional oil. The stakes could never have been higher," said international relations scholar David Crieckmans in a recently published volume on the geopolitics of renewables. Contributing to the same volume, Thijs van de Graaf, another international relations scholar, suggested that of all the Middle Eastern oil producers, Saudi Arabia may have the most to lose.

Ironically, crippling sanctions that severely hampered Iran's oil production and only began to be lifted following the 2015 international agreement that curbed the country's nuclear program coupled with US threats to withdraw from the accord and potentially reimpose sanctions may work in Iran's favour in the transition to a post-oil world.

"Iran... has a lot of advantages. It has a much broader economic base, a longer tradition of trading, and lower fertility rates... The country's oil production is much under its potential due to years of sanctions. This might in the long run turn out to be an advantage as these economies prepare themselves for a post-oil age," Mr. Van der Graaf said. Add to that the fact that it is likely to be gas supplies from Iran and

Turkmenistan, two Caspian Sea states, rather than Saudi oil that will determine which way the future Eurasian energy architecture tilts: China, the world's third largest LNG importer, or Europe.

"Iran, within five years, will likely have 24.6 billion cubic metres of natural gas available for annual piped gas exports beyond its current supply commitments. Not enough to supply all major markets, Tehran will face a crucial geopolitical choice for the destination of its piped exports. Iran will be able to export piped gas to two of the following three markets: European Union (EU)/ Turkey via the Southern Gas Corridor centring on the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), India via an Iran-Oman-India pipeline, or China via either Turkmenistan or Pakistan. The degree to which the system of energy relationships in Eurasia will be more oriented toward the European Union or China will depend on the extent to which each secures Caspian piped gas exports through pipeline infrastructure directed to its respective markets," energy scholar Michaël Tanchum argued.

In other words, the existential threat Iran poses to Saudi Arabia goes far beyond the fact that the Islamic republic challenges Saudi monarchical rule by offering an alternative, albeit flawed, form of Islamic governance that incorporates a degree of popular sovereignty. It involves competition in which Iran can leverage assets Saudi Arabia does not have, leaving the kingdom dependent on containment that at best postpones issues rather than accommodates solutions. It also means that the antagonists' regional proxy wars in Yemen and elsewhere are unlikely to remove the fundamental issues that drive the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and translate into destabilizing short-term policies.

Hardliners, including US President Donald J. Trump's newly appointed national security advisor, John Bolton, and nominee for the post of secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, may be proponents of regime change in Iran, yet, the question remains whether that would truly alleviate Saudi fears that are shared by Israel. If successful, it would eliminate the Islamic governance challenge, but do nothing to alter the reality of a changing energy landscape.

Barbara Slavin, an Iran expert at the Washington-based Atlantic Council, cautions that a possible US withdrawal next month from the nuclear agreement with Iran does not necessarily mean either the demise of the accord or a re-imposition of a crippling sanctions regime.

"Twenty years ago, Congress passed similar secondary sanctions—the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act—threatening penalties against foreign companies investing in Iran's oil and gas sector. Europe cried foul and the sanctions were never implemented. That could well be the outcome in May" when Mr. Trump has to decide whether the United States remains a party to the accord, Ms. Slavin noted.

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Migrants trapped in quagmire: Neglected by their own country, mistreated by the host country

By Shobha Shukla

This pretty well sums up the pathetic situation in which many migrants find themselves today. And while immigration refers to people who legally relocate to another country, the word migration can also be used in the context of birds and animals. In the case of human beings, migration is not a choice for most migrants. It is a condition forced upon them by their country of origin, as a result of weak economic conditions, poor social structures, conflict situations, and even environmental disasters.

"One major issue is that the migrants' home country treats them as export commodities. But we are talking about people and not about products. Yet the only difference seems to be that unlike commodities, migrants can be exported over and over again," said Aaron Ceradov, of the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, in an exclusive interview given to CNS (Citizen News Service) on the side lines of the Asia Pacific People's Forum on Sustainable Development held in Bangkok, Thailand, on the theme of 'Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies in Asia and the Pacific'. People's Forum is being jointly organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), Asia Pacific Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (AP-RCSEM), UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

The second challenge that Aaron highlighted is the problems faced by the migrants in the host country, especially by those who are semi or unskilled workers. Most of them are employed in the service sector as domestic help, caregivers, plumbers, construction workers etc. These sectors are plagued with low wages, job insecurity and, at times, vulnerability to violence. Yet these and other abuses largely go unnoticed and unreported, as the migrants keep them to themselves for fear of losing their jobs. Countries have policies to safeguard their businesses but do not address the problem of workers who form the backbone of those businesses. Also as migrants go to another country to work temporarily, they have very bleak chances of permanent residence, or to become part of that society. All this makes them even more vulnerable to endure violations of labour rights, social exclusion, discrimination and violence just to keep their jobs going. The systems in place do not encourage treatment of migrants with dignity.

The status of migration is very immigration based and not labour based or human rights based. Their rights are dictated by their immigration status, and not by the fact that they are part of the labour force and covered by international human rights conventions. Countries always cite the issue of security, in order to further constrict immigration rules and thus further restrict the rights of the migrant workers. And this when the economies of many countries thrive on migrant labour, says Aaron.

Instead of solving the systemic issues that force people to not have a

choice, but to go to other countries to work, the current development model is promoting the concept of migration for development. While there is a formal recognition of the drivers of migration, countries are propagating the false belief that migration is actually positive and resolves the drivers of migration. But how can that be? When migration results because of underdevelopment then how can it be a driver of development, wonders Aaron. Citing the example of his own country, Aaron says that Philippines has been exporting people since the 70's, but that has not improved the living conditions for the common people. No country can say that their development came through exporting their people.

Then again, countries and international bodies are also celebrating the migrants as being resilient. In this way they are trying to justify the large scale privatisation of public services that is underway in the region, which is resulting in still more migration. But what is being lauded as resilience is actually forced endurance which comes at huge costs. Aaron concedes that at the international level there are human rights agreements and conventions to safeguard the interests of migrant workers. The UN Convention for protection of the rights of migrant workers and the ILO Convention on Domestic Work, which includes foreign workers, are positive developments. These agreements have come about through the intensive and extensive work done on the ground by some sections of migrant workers who, with help from their support groups, have managed to successfully push for policy changes that are beneficial to them. But the actual implementation of these global agreements is poor at the ground level. And in countries where there is no organised section of migrants, the conditions are much worse.

In the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, adopted in September 2016, the UN General Assembly decided to develop a Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration. This global compact for migration is the first, intergovernmentally negotiated agreement, prepared under the auspices of the United Nations, and is expected to be adopted later this year (in 2018) with a view to protect the safety, dignity and human rights and fundamental freedoms of all migrants, regardless of their migratory status, and strengthen global governance of migration for safe, orderly and regular migration. However, Aaron has his reservations about it. "While the global compact is long on migrants' issues, it is short on the facilities/solutions that would really resolve those issues. Moreover, it does not give concrete steps on how to make countries accountable to policies and practices that are in contravention to the Global Compact. So it might end up like just another document that is nicely worded but does not create any worthwhile impact on the ground", Aaron said.

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