

Issue no.14
August 2021

VIF Expert Groups Reports



Edited by Naval Jagota



Vivekananda
International
Foundation

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Published in 2021 by

Vivekananda International Foundation

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Editor's Note

In August 2021 eminent speakers, expert groups and bilateral discussions were organised by the Vivekananda International Foundation through webinar on events and topics affecting India's interests worldwide. The diversity of the expertise of each of the members of the expert groups brought rich flavor and knowledge on the topic through their varied professional backgrounds (military, diplomacy and academia). This issue contains reports of the Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, West Asia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Vietnam group discussions and talks.

In the neighbourhood series of interactions, the first was a talk by Prof Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, author and Senior Advisor on security and geopolitics, Sri Lanka, on "China in Rajapakse 2.0: Ports and Geo-Political Challenges in Sri Lanka". The talk and questions centered on China-Sri Lanka relations and the concerns in India about the scope of that relationship. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's enhanced presence in the South Asian region and a lack of understanding of its relationships as well lack of knowledge on the data and policies were highlighted and discussed. The next interaction in the series was amidst the rising tensions at India's northern border, does India's engagement with Nepal and Bhutan meet

its strategic requirements, and what else can India do more? To discuss these questions, a webinar was organised on “India’s Engagement with Nepal and Bhutan: What can India do more?”

The West Asia experts’ group discussions was focused on India-Turkey Relations as well as Turkey’s Foreign Policy and its Regional role. The report is an abridged version due to privacy concerns of the participants, however key aspects have been highlighted. In the view of the fast paced developments in Afghanistan, the Pakistan Study Group (PSG) held meetings via video conferencing on 18th August and 26th August 2021. The agenda’s main items were: Collapse of the Islamic Republic/Fall of Kabul, lack of ANDSF performance, possibility/potential of resistance, role and reaction in Pakistan, military hardware, equipment and weapons coming into Pakistan, Chinese, Russian perspectives, and Indian Priorities/Options/Role.

Continuing with Afghanistan, the chaos that has ensued raises several questions regarding the future stability of Afghanistan and how the international community reacts to it. It is clear that any turmoil in the landlocked country carries repercussions both at the regional and global scale. To deliberate on these various aspects, the VIF in collaboration with the Heritage Foundation of the US organised a closed-door brainstorming session on the “Aftermath of the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Regional and Global Implications”.

One of the key players in Afghanistan post the change in political situation is going to be China. In order to understand the layers at which the Chinese relationship will touch the new actors in the country as well as alter the geopolitical balance in the region, various facets were discussed during the China expert group meeting.

In the ASEAN group H.E. Mr. Phan Sanh Chau, Ambassador of Vietnam to New Delhi and VIF interacted on how global politics is revamping in Asia, because of shift in the global center of gravity to Asia and the concept of Indo-Pacific as well as China's rise, and its impact. In this context the meeting took a stock of the India-Vietnam bilateral relations, means to strengthen it and understand respective policies in the Indo-Pacific.

The coordinators and researchers associated with these Expert Groups have put unfaltering efforts to coordinate the meetings and collate the notes for the reports in this issue.

Naval Jagota

New Delhi

September 2021

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China in Rajapakse 2.0: Ports and Geo-Political Challenges in Sri Lanka

Compiled by Cchavi Vasisht

On 02 August 2021, the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) organised a talk by Prof Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, author and Senior Advisor on Security and Geopolitics, Sri Lanka, on “China in Rajapakse 2.0: Ports and Geo-Political Challenges in Sri Lanka”. Dr Arvind Gupta, Director VIF, welcomed Prof Asanga Abeyagoonasekera and delivered the opening remarks. He stated that China–Sri Lanka relations are closely observed by India, as there are concerns in India about the scope of that relationship. With its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has enhanced its presence in the South Asian region. However, there is a lack of understanding of the relationship, and there is a lack of knowledge on the data and policies.

Prof Abeyagoonasekera started his talk by stating that the ports and geopolitical challenges have shaped the China-Sri Lanka relationship. He outlined the island nation’s challenges since President Sirisena’s regime (2015-Easter Sunday bombing) which saw recalibration of Sri Lanka’s foreign policy. He compared President Mahinda Rajapakse (R.1) and President Gotabaya Rajapakse (R.2) regime. He re-emphasised China’s infrastructure diplomacy, especially in the maritime sphere. Finally, he elaborated on Sri Lanka’s conundrum it is facing.

Both president's periods started with chaos, multiple economic, environmental and healthcare crises. Both have used an ultra-nationalist political posture to come out of these crises. There is quick weaponisation to satisfy the majoritarian Sinhalese Buddhist sentiments. President Mahinda Rajapakse period (2005-15) "the 1.0 era" is articulated as the "Mahinda Chinthanaya" era. He based his foreign policy on the non-aligned principles and thereby, a balanced foreign policy. Even President Gotabaya Rajapakse adopted a neutral and equidistant foreign policy.

Nevertheless, in reality, they do not practice a balance or a neutral foreign policy. This duality is visible, as it promises a neutral posture; but in practice, have adopted a China tilted policy, which has raised questions among big powers. He stated that President Gotabaya is closer to China than President Mahinda policy. Starting from August 2020, a dramatic shift in the regime, especially with the pandemic and China's vaccine diplomacy.

He further stated that China's economic intentions are clearly stated; however, its political dimensions are not visible. The Rajapakse's political party, SLPP and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) declared their close cooperation on their centenary. Multiple workshops were also conducted at think-tank levels, China's China Reform Foundation (CRF) signed MoUs with Pathfinder Foundation, Sri Lanka. During a telephonic conversation between the two presidents, President Gotabaya expressed the willingness to adopt the development model of CCP is adopted especially in the rural areas. Due to this duality, sovereignty concerns, national security concerns, internal political interference, human rights, media freedom and trust deficit issues are rising. There has been rising incidences of securitisation and surveillance state, for instance, appointment of 28 military officers to senior positions. He compared this new model of development to the existing models in Pakistan and Myanmar. In the new model, majoritarian China has adopted an 'aggressive wolf warrior' approach.

Looking at the foreign policy, Prof Abeyagoonasekera highlighted the appointment of Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary Admiral Jayanth Colombage, who mentioned that Sri Lanka would follow India's first policy and Sri Lanka will not do anything harmful to Indian strategic security interest. However, in 2021 August, he stated that there was no evidence of genocide in China's Xinjiang area. This shows the amount of China's influence on Sri Lanka's foreign policy. The recent visit of the Chinese Minister of Defence clearly expressed his appreciation of Sri Lanka's position in China and China's Taiwan, Hong Kong, and administrative region. And, this in turn, supports Sri Lanka's human rights concerns. The infrastructure layer, for example, leasing of Hambantota port, which was taken for 99 years, is the fastest acquisition ever done in the Sri Lankan in 30 days. However, when there were protests against India's East container terminal, the project was stopped. Whereas, there was no protest when Hambantota was leased out to the Chinese.

He stated that the Sri Lankan side is missing the strategic depth. He compared the formation of the special economic zone at Djibouti and later made a military base. The same contract is made with Sri Lanka. The conundrum of the Island is to balance its foreign policies, the triple spheres - Delhi-Beijing-DC. Sri Lanka, however, is not able to balance its foreign policies. Sri Lanka needs to show sensitivity to India's security interests. There was no High Commissioner for two years in New Delhi, and the former HC Austin Fernando returned in January 2020. The growing trust deficit is evident because of multiple projects that have been suspended. China's triangular power projection surrounding India - Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Djibouti, are causing concern for India. A new roadmap is to be established. However, a new road map is not necessary, if a balanced foreign policy is followed. There is a popular perception that the Dragon cannot be investigated.

He also questioned an article written by Deborah Brautigam and Meg Rithmire, who stated that the Chinese 'Debt Trap' is a myth. Prof Abeyagoonasekera suggests that the debt trap is not a myth and it is quite visible. China's involvement in domestic politics is visible, constitutional coups, political funding and CCP and SLPP strategies are in place. As per the quantitative analyses, and based on the central bank records, the scale of the Chinese funding is not so much and therefore, fails to gauge the strategic depth of the Chinese funding. Prof Abeyagoonasekera assessment is that the economic quantitative projection fails to capture the strategic depth of these projects. The Chinese projects have a long-term strategic design that could easily bring the 'hybrid model' of civil-military activity. This could be a security concern for Sri Lanka and the region.

Prof Abeyagoonasekera suggested immediate measures to recalibrate the Sri Lankan foreign policy from China-tilted to a balanced foreign policy. A 20-point foreign policy, which is currently not available to the scholarly community and the Parliament, should be made available. If the Chinese projects are transformative, then they must be gone ahead. For example, the future government can amend certain clauses of the 99-year leases or the port city. Further, commitment to rules-based order is important, and it is essential to introduce democratic rooms and address human rights concerns, especially minority concerns. The Indo-Lanka's relationship is the key, and the new roadmap should ensure Sri Lanka's commitment to a rule-based order.

The talk was followed by discussion in important issues, such as, what was the larger public opinion in Sri Lanka on these developments, what was reflected in mainstream media, revisiting of Chinese agreements, voices of democracy in Sri Lanka, national security concerns, and implications over India's southern region, and many more. Prof Abeyagoonasekera responded to all the questions.

Dr Gupta delivered the closing remarks. He reiterated the need to recalibrate Sri Lanka's foreign policy in the wake of the developments in Sri Lanka and particularly the loss of balance in Sri Lanka's policy. There is a strategic angle to China's relationship, where there is a lack of transparency and also China's new approach of the "wolf warrior" diplomacy. Their bold and aggressive moves are visible in their interactions with the political parties with individual leaders and getting the entire Colombo project cleared in 30 days. On the other hand, India and Sri Lanka are geographically close and have a long history of relations, despite the ups and downs. For India, the task is to give a fresh look to India's neighbourhood first policy and consider factors mentioned in the talk.

India's Engagement with Nepal and Bhutan: What can India do more?

Compiled by Rishi Gupta

Amidst rising tensions at India's northern border, does India's engagement with Nepal and Bhutan meet its strategic requirements, and what else can India do more? To discuss these questions, a webinar was organised on "India's Engagement with Nepal and Bhutan: What can India do more?" on 03 August 2021. The discussion is a part of ongoing discussions on India's Neighbourhood Policy and other specific policies at the Vivekananda International Foundation. Dr Arvind Gupta, Director General of the Vivekananda International Foundation, welcomed the guests. The discussants included Amb. Ranjeet Rae, Amb Manjeev Puri, Amb P Haran, Prof Rajesh S Khara, and Dr Smruti Patnaik. The session was moderated by Dr Sreeradha Datta.

Nepal

For centuries, India and Nepal have shared deep-rooted socio-cultural and civilisational ties. In the past few decades, the two countries have shared very comprehensive relations by giving importance to each other. However, despite a great enthusiasm in relations, there are occasions when relations are affected by political developments in Nepal. These political developments, coupled with the trust deficit between the two countries, has led to problems. For instance, in the past two years, ties between

India and Nepal went a lot low amidst border disputes raised by Nepal. Meanwhile, with a new government in place, a lot of optimism has been placed in relations reflected from the exchange of tweets between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba.

However, unpredictability in Nepalese politics requires India to engage with all the leading actors in Nepal, including civil society, political actors and political parties, as India's goodwill and national interest in Nepal continue to be the same irrespective of the political party and person in power. Also, the demographic changes in Nepal, especially after the advent of globalisation in 1990, have infused greater aspirations in the people and the State in terms of their global outreach and connectivity. Therefore, India has to meet the changing needs and requirements of a new democratic Nepal.

As India evolves, changing demographics in Nepal, Chinese manoeuvrings in Nepal continue to grow day by day. The recent high-handedness of China in the political affairs of Nepal has exposed its strategic and expansionist intentions in the Himalayan country. Under the fancies of the Belt and Road Initiative, Trans-Himalayan Railway network, and China-South Asian Countries Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Center, China ensures its presence in Nepal and the region. However, the viability of such ambition remains to be seen.

Bhutan

From 1949 onwards, India has shared friendly relations with Bhutan. However, in 2013, India's withdrawal of fuel subsidies to Bhutan disrupted the ties for some time. However, in a new Government in 2014 under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, bilateral relations received a much-needed reboot. Prime Minister Modi travelled to Bhutan for his first state visit since taking office. In the follow-up, India's strong defence to Bhutan

from China in the Dhoklam region strengthened bilateral ties.

With its development agenda in place, India needs to cut down interest rates levied on loans borrowed to develop hydropower in Bhutan. Also, a younger Bhutan looks towards India for educational opportunities, which can be met by increasing the number of scholarships provided to Bhutanese students each year in higher education. India can also become a gateway for Bhutan to find regional markets like Bangladesh to export its electricity. It will be mutually beneficial cooperation where India will work as a bridge between Bhutan and Bangladesh.

While India's relations with Bhutan are a matter of integrity, Bhutan understands the Chinese double standers. For the last 70 years, Bhutan has rejected the Chinese proposal to establish diplomatic ties for obvious reasons. One, China does not seek a friend in Bhutan rather a strategic depth. Second, it does not want to be challenged by India as it illegally constructs illegal tents and villages on the Bhutanese territories. At the same time, the chances of Bhutan opening up to China are concerning. With an ominous Chinese presence in the region, its entry into Bhutan is bound to happen today or tomorrow. However, Bhutan continues to rely on India for its market, development, assistance, safety and security.

Takeaways

In his concluding remarks, Dr Arvind Gupta pointed out that the ongoing developments in Nepal and Bhutan are disturbing and concerning to India and require immediate actions. Instances like establishing the China-South Asian Poverty Alleviation Center in China are a matter of great worry. Somewhere the line, India needs emergency revival to sustain its presence and interests in Nepal and Bhutan, including the larger South Asian region. But the question remains, how closely is India observing these developments? Whatever the case be, India has to prepare for the

immediate and long term challenges by engaging with the people and government. To do so, capacities within the Ministry of External Affairs and onsite need to be strengthened. Above all, public and government level awareness is extremely important for India in Bhutan and Nepal. Also, unless India does not dedicate enough time to discuss China with its neighbours openly and observe independently, cooperation with neighbours will not be holistic. India's proactive and positive approach is the need of the hour.

India-Turkey Relations

Compiled by HIRAK JYOTI DAS

The West Asia Experts Group Meeting was virtually held on 4 August 2021 by the Vivekananda International Foundation, the discussion was focussed on India-Turkey Relations as well as Turkey's Foreign Policy and its Regional role. The experts in attendance were Mr Abhinav Pandya, CEO, USANAS Foundation, Amb Anil Trigunayat (Coordinator); Dr Arvind Gupta, Director, VIF; Lt Gen Ravi Sawhney (Retd); Lt Gen Ata Hasnain (Retd); Amb Satish Chandra; Amb Anil Wadhwa; Amb Sanjay Singh and Prof Kingshuk Chatterjee.

India enjoys warm bilateral relations with Turkey. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the G20 Summit held in Antalya on 15-16 November 2015 on the margins of the Summit. Prime Minister held bilateral talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Prime Minister Modi and President Erdogan held talks in Hangzhou on 5 September 2016 on the side-lines of the G20 Summit. The two leaders interacted with each other on the 20 in Osaka on 29 July 2019. President Erdogan paid a state visit to India on 30 April -1 May, 2017.

Foreign Office Consultations (FOCs) at Secretary-level was institutionalized through a Protocol signed in April 2000 and the last

round of consultations was held on 8 May 2019 in New Delhi. The 4th meeting of the Joint Working Group on Counter-terrorism was held in Ankara on 4 July 2019. A new bilateral mechanism 'India-Turkey Policy Planning Dialogue' was institutionalized between the two Foreign Ministries with the first round held virtually on 22 October 2020.

Turkey on regional level has established itself as an economic and military powerhouse. It has managed to capitalise its relations with the US and the European states to maximise its geopolitical role. Turkey's stand on Chinese treatment of Xinjiang issue has emerged as major irritant and engagement levels have scaled down in the recent period. Turkey enjoys firm tactical relationship with Russia.

On regional level, Turkey has preserved its military bases in north-western areas to hinder actions by Syrian forces against rebel held areas and control the inflow of refugees and north-eastern Syria to contain Kurdish groups. Turkey has supported the Tripoli based Government of National Accord and played a critical role to thwart KhalifaHaftar's forces. Turkey's supported Azerbaijan's efforts to make territorial gains in Nagorno-Karabakh. In terms of allies, it enjoys firm relations with Qatar, Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Malaysia.

The COVID-19 pandemic has induced a major health crisis in Turkey and severely affected the economy. The share of tourism that contributes a significant chunk in Turkey's economy has severely gone down. Turkey is keen to intensify economic engagement with India that could rehabilitate the economic situation.

Afghanistan and Pakistan-Old wine in a new bottle

Compiled by Aakriti Vinayak

In the view of the fast paced developments in Afghanistan, the Pakistan Study Group (PSG) held meetings via video conferencing on 18th August and 26th August 2021. The agenda's main items were: Collapse of the Islamic Republic/Fall of Kabul, Lack of ANDSF Performance, Possibility/Potential of resistance, Role and reaction in Pakistan, Military hardware, equipment and weapons coming into Pakistan, Chinese, Russian perspectives, Indian Priorities/Options/Role. The Meeting was attended by the following: Dr Arvind Gupta, Amb Satish Chandra, Ms Shalini Charola, Shri Rana Banerjee, Shri CD Sahay, Shri Sushant Sareen, Amb DP Srivastava, Amb Amar Sinha, Amb G Parthasarathy, Amb TCA Raghavan, Lt Gen Ravi Sawhney (Retd), Lt Gen Ranbir Singh (Retd), Shri Tilak Devasher, and Gp Capt Naval Jagota.

Collapse of the Islamic Republic/Fall of Kabul and Lack of ANDSF Performance

On 15 August 2021 the Taliban captured Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. It was the culmination of a military offensive that began in May 2021 against the Afghan government. The capture took place hours after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country. Most of the provincial capitals of Afghanistan had fallen one after the other amid a U.S. troop withdrawal to

be completed by 31 August. The collapse of the Islamic republic unfolded quicker than anticipated; it came as complete shock. There seem to be several reasons for the failure of the 300,000 ANDSF to put up even a token resistance, except in places like Herat, Lashkargah and Taloqan. Some of these were lack of leadership, low morale, attrition and the fact that the US in twenty years did not develop a national army capable of defending territory with adequate mobility, artillery, logistics, intelligence etc. Instead, the focus was only on developing a CT force. Without an offensive doctrine and due to the lack of air support the Afghan Army just melted away leaving behind a huge quantity of equipment, weapons and ammunition that has fallen into Taliban hands and would find its way to Pakistan.

Taliban Government formation and Implications

Taliban is building a narrative of a “moderate Taliban” to gain recognition from International community. The messaging is focused on amnesty, community reconciliation, stability and reconstruction. Taliban spokespersons have made a number of statements indicating formation of an “inclusive,” administration. However, what such an inclusive administration would be is not known at the moment. It appears that it could well be a façade to get international recognition.

The return of the Taliban will give a huge fillip to Islamic radicalism including regional and international extremist Islamist groups. It will embolden Islamist terror organisations and there is likely to be a resurgence of AQ, ISKP in Afghanistan and the relocation of LeT, JeM there.

Possibility/Potential of resistance

First vice president in the Ashraf Ghani administration Amrullah Saleh and Ahmed Massoud, the son of Ahmed Shah Massoud, along with

personnel of the disbanded Afghan armed forces, have joined hands with some local militias to resist Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The resistance is based out of Panjshir valley which is located northwest of Kabul. Taliban has taken the resistance seriously. However, it is likely to be a long haul and to be effective would require international support.

Military hardware, equipment and weapons coming into Pakistan

Availability of military hardware is a worrisome factor as the Pakistan Army and terrorist groups supported by it will get huge supplies of these weapons that have been left behind by the US and that the Afghan Army surrendered. The weapons looted by the Taliban include small arms and artillery. Pakistan could get control of parts of the arsenal that includes 2,000 armoured vehicles, including Humvees, 40 aircraft including the UH-60 Black Hawks, attack helicopters and ScanEagle small drones.

Role and reaction in Pakistan

A sense of triumphalism prevails in Pakistan especially on the three levels political, religious and military. Islamabad always desired a pro-Pakistan regime in Afghanistan to cater to its strategic objectives. For the religious groups it's the victory of radical ideology. JUI-F chief Fazlur Rehman congratulated the Taliban for their 20 long years Jihad against the foreign troops. On the other hand Pakistan military has achieved its cherished goal of 'strategic depth'. However Taliban's victory will impact Pakistan on the internal front, as with fallout of extremist ideology there will be resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP). Pakistan is concerned about the resurgence and is expecting that Taliban will take action against TTP.

There is growing backlash against China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the attacks on projects continue. On August 21, 2021, a suicide

bomber attacked a convoy of Chinese nationals in the restive Balochistan Province in which two children were killed and a Chinese national was among several others who sustained injuries. China has asked Pakistan to upgrade its safety measures and overhaul the security mechanism. Though on the high tables the dialogue continues between China and Pakistan. There is growing anger especially amongst the fishermen and local workers.

China, Russia, Iran perspectives

Though Russia maintains ground level contact with Taliban, however, it is well aware of its limitations. It doesn't have much leverage over the Taliban. Russia is concerned about spread of extremist philosophy from Afghanistan to Central Asia. This has resulted in Russia taking preemptive measures holding a joint military exercise with Uzbekistan close to Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan. Russia and Uzbekistan have held a military exercise with Tajikistan. China is concerned about links of the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) with Taliban and China is hopeful that Taliban will crack down on ETIM. A new great game in Eurasia is beginning after the US withdrawal; as China and Russia are aiming to work together to secure the region around Afghanistan. Iran has welcomed American departure from the region. Iran has further agreed to Taliban's request to resume fuel exports to Afghanistan. However Iran's flirtation with Taliban is purely a tactical exercise.

Indian Priorities/Options/Role

- India will need to wait and watch the situation before taking long-term decisions.
- India should expect a rise in terrorism and radicalism and prepare accordingly. Entry of sophisticated weapons from the Afghan

theatre should be anticipated.

- After the priority task of emergency repatriation of Indians and other groups from Afghanistan, India should focus on the small things- engagement on the education and medical front, reassuring the Afghan students in India etc.
- India should be mindful of the Taliban pretense of developing a moderate narrative by closely monitoring the human rights violations and especially gender issues.
- India needs to get its act together as far as e-visas and granting entry to Afghans is concerned to ensure that good will built over decades is not dented on this issue.

Overall, India should wait and watch the situation before taking any major decisions but streamline its visa policy with a human touch.

Implications of the Taliban takeover

Compiled by Dr. Himani Pant

Within days of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban managed to take control in the country. The pace at which the events have unfolded since August has met with an element of surprise. The chaos that has ensued raises several questions regarding the future stability of Afghanistan and how the international community reacts to it. It is clear that any turmoil in the landlocked country carries repercussions both at the regional and global scale. To deliberate on these various aspects, the Vivekananda International Foundation, in collaboration with the Heritage Foundation of the US organised a closed-door brainstorming session on the «Aftermath of the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Regional and Global Implications» on 17 August. The participants in the meeting included Dr Arvind Gupta, Lt Gen R. K. Sawhney (Retd), Amb Arun Kumar Singh, Amb Satish Chandra, Lt Gen Ranbir Singh (Retd), Amb Gautam Mukhopadhyay, Brig Vinod Anand (Retd), Amb G Parthasarathy and Amb P.S. Raghavan, Mr James Carafano, Mr Jeff M Smith among others.

Geopolitical Implications of the Developing Situation in Afghanistan

There are three main geopolitical implications of the unfolding situation in Afghanistan.

First, with takeover of Taliban, the 2001 balance or alignment of power which entailed a democratic Afghanistan endorsed by western democracies and India has overturned. Taliban, which is backed by Pakistan also has some sort of an understanding with Russia, Iran and even the US. This has led to a complete toppling of alignment and balance of power. This evolving situation remains unfavourable to democratic Afghanistan, the West as well as India.

Second, since this development comes amidst a rising an assertive China, Beijing's actions and posture with respect to Afghanistan would need closer scrutiny. The former has been positioning itself through economic means in Afghanistan and the surrounding regions. While their military posture remains ambiguous at the moment, their engagement to counter the pressure emanating from the Indo-Pacific initiatives is an important factor. China-Pakistan relations in this context become important.

Third, Pakistan's role in the unfolding situation, including the country's support to the Taliban also reflects its attempts to sever Afghanistan's historical ties and cultural linkages with India. The geoeconomics rationale and economic support from China- all these factors have adverse implications for New Delhi given its own security issues with Beijing and Pakistan.

US Policy on Afghanistan

It is clear that Afghanistan does not fit into the grand strategic picture of the US. The Biden administration has broadly been following up on the Obama administration's policy of disengagement which also saw continuity under the Trump administration. This posture entails that the external geopolitical conflicts can be ameliorated by outsourcing local security strategy. Disengagement would thus also allow for an inward focus by saving heavy economic costs of the presence in Afghanistan and

other regions.

The rapid pace with which the Taliban was able to take control in Afghanistan as well as the Biden administration's response shows that the US does not have a clear strategy for Afghanistan. The vocal defence of the withdrawal by the US president has also created some domestic challenges for him. Since he stands by the decision there are now strategic as well as political challenges ahead for his administration in the coming months. The problem is further compounded by the fact that there is a strategic incoherence in terms of the National Security and Defence strategies.

In terms of external relations, how the US deals with Pakistan is crucial. While Pakistan's support for the Taliban is clear, the country is also important due to its leverage and its crucial geographical location in ensuring US supply lines to the landlocked Afghanistan. These reasons have, in fact, often been cited as reasons to assist Pakistan. However, given the history of Taliban and popular backlash against the entity there is also an increasing demand within the US to hold Pakistan accountable for its role in the chaos that has ensued within Afghanistan. Some congressmen have proposed imposition of sanctions on Pakistan. While it is clear that there is no trust and goodwill in US-Pakistan relations, the manner in which US interacts with Pakistan despite its frustration carries significant implications for the region.

Conclusion

The US pullout from Afghanistan has led to an international trust deficit. While it was clear that the US was withdrawing from the country, the manner in which the entire operation was handled has garnered widespread criticism. The country does not have a coherent policy on Afghanistan. Its short-term focus is maximum evacuation of people. While the long term would ideally be to ensure stability in Afghanistan, the method and extent

of such an endeavour is ambiguous.

The US policy on Afghanistan carries important implications for India. As the US policy on Iran during Obama administration shows, despite the Iran deal there was hardly a diplomatic engagement between the two countries. It is felt that while the US needs to engage with the Taliban in ensuring future stability, the Taliban's attempts to showcase itself as a reformed organisation are a deception and the US shouldn't engage diplomatically with the organisation. An important aspect in the current conflict is the spill over of violence from Afghanistan to other regions, including the US and India. The mushrooming of various radicalistic organisations could also encourage domestic outfits in these countries. Finally, the most challenging aspect is the mushrooming of psychological warfare, information operations, etc. that could pose a significant challenge in the coming years.

It is important to note that the Taliban is not a homogenous organisation and has several fault lines. Given the close relations that the US and India share, the two sides need to have some sort of an understanding with respect to dealing with the Taliban.

China-Afghanistan relations and its regional effect

Compiled by Gp Capt Naval Jagota

The Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) organized a virtual discussion on China-Afghanistan relations in the political, economic and strategic dimension and its regional effect. The discussion was moderated by Shri Ashok Kantha. The attendees were Dr Arvind Gupta Director VIF, Shri Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, Shri Amar Sinha, Dr Srikanth Kondapalli, Shri Jayadeva Ranade, Dr Sanjeev, Shri Ananth Krishnan, Shri Tca Rangachari, Dr Sujit Dutta, Dr. Madhubhalla, Cmde Gopal Suri, Dr Sanjeev Kumar, Lt Gen R K. Sawhney (Retd), Lt Gen Rakesh Sharma (Retd), Lt Gen Ranbir Singh (Retd), Air Marshal Diptendu Choudhury, VAdm Satish Soni (Retd), Lt Gen Anil Abuja (Retd) and Gp Capt Naval Jagota.

Introduction

The withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan while simultaneously the military victory of the Taliban forces in almost the entire country and especially its presence in Kabul with the Ghani government deposed has resulted in changed dynamics in the region. One of the key players in the country post the change political situation is going to be China. In order to understand the layers at which the Chinese relationship will touch the new actors in the country as well as alter the geopolitical balance in the region, various facets were discussed during the group meeting.

China's Motivation and Actions

In order for China to play a greater role in Afghanistan, Pakistan's role is that of a facilitator needs also to be understood. The notion of geostrategic depth which has been often played by the Pakistanis for their actions is more than a physical dimension but has an economic dimension. China on its own will not be or would not want to invest large sums in the development of Afghanistan unless it has assurances of its own issues with regard to the Xinjiang issue. The landscape in Afghanistan is likely to be utilized in aspects of opening it towards Central Asian countries and further Westwards towards Middle East and Eastern Europe. These approaches would benefit the Chinese both as a strategic play against India in terms of denial of space in as well as steering Afghanistan away from it. The approach of the Chinese would be measured and calibrated and would take Pakistan's assistance while moving forward in the country.

At present the Chinese are not major players in West Asia and the opening by the US withdrawal provides an opportunity to achieve a greater role through connectivity as well as trade. The journey and the players supporting the Taliban government through the prism of anti-Americanism are Russia, Iran, Pakistan and China are the likely nucleus for the cooperation in future..

The Chinese are likely to tread carefully in the economic relationship as there are concerns of the ability of the Taliban to handle these projects on economic terms. The primary source of revenue till date was aid and grants from Western countries but that is likely to dry up. Even the previous mining projects and proposals such as that for copper and iron ore would be in most probability be renegotiated due to change in economic realities. In addition there is likely to be a clash in the culture of conducting business by both the parties. The Chinese are known to bring their own labour as well as their own lifestyle which may be in conflict with the Taliban's view

of conducting business. In the future the Taliban government would look for grants for infrastructure development as well as developments in areas which are favorable to them such as southern Afghanistan but those may not be the best places for its construction or be economically viable from the Chinese point of view. The Taliban unlike most other countries are not a monolithic organization but an amalgamation of the various factions which could pose issues during the course of the Chinese and Afghan relationship.

China over the last decade and more so after 2014 has been in contact with the Taliban both overtly and covertly. The prominence of the relationship is being projected in the current year (2021) prior to departure of the Americans so as to indicate its increased role in the region. The publicity associated the interaction with the Chinese is to provide legitimacy to the role of Pakistan as well as that of the Taliban. The spokesperson for the Chinese MFA (ministry of foreign Affairs) was indicating in his brief the need to “cooperate” with the new Taliban dispensation and also to distance the Taliban’s image by painting it as a new version (Taliban 2.0). The Chinese are not fresh entrant’s to Afghanistan but have trained a good number of Mujahedeen in the period 1979-1989 and have been known to be close to one faction as well as have operated behind the scenes in intelligence activities in the recent past. The people trained by them during the period of 1979-1989 are now in Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

The chief areas of “cooperate” would be the threat posed by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) to the Chinese. The understanding was present with the previous nationalistic government of Ghani but the Chinese understanding is that the Taliban would be able to keep the ETIM in check and ensure that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for them to operate against China. The Chinese have mobilized close to 8000 peace keeping troops according to some reports as well as activating its mobile military facility in Tajikistan towards any contingency from the

Taliban as well as the Northern Alliance. The other motivating factor is to keep India off balance by providing Pakistan the leverage and denying the same to India through trade and connectivity and patronage.

The relationship though with the Taliban might not be smooth sailing because of recent news on the interaction between the Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar and the Foreign minister of China, in which Baradar was rumored to have been denied arrest of a prominent ETIM member in Afghanistan. On the investment side the Chinese in the past have been put in approximately 156 million dollars towards reconstruction compared to the 3000 million dollars by India and most likely their approach would continue to be towards minimal investment in social infrastructure. However trade is likely to increase at the expense of India.

Conclusion

The Chinese may be weighing the options of their approach in Afghanistan but the departure of the Americans and the arrival of the Taliban with Pakistan in the background as a puppeteer can be seen as threat and an opportunity from a Chinese perspective. The threat is that it exposes its underbelly to terrorism and extremism and the opportunity to have a wider canvass to central Asia and Middle East. Some opinion estimates that it provides them an increased maneuvering space against Taiwan due its own assessment of the Americans unwilling to get involved in a conflict. The past history of nations interfering has not had a fruitful outcome in Afghanistan and especially when you have Pakistan as a friend.

Current Developments in the Indo-Pacific and India-Vietnam Relations

Compiled by Amruta Karambelkar

Vivekananda International Foundation hosted H.E. Mr. Phan Sanh Chau, Ambassador of Vietnam to New Delhi on 24 August 2021. The meeting was chaired by Dr Arvind Gupta and participants included General NC Vij (Retd), Vice Adm Shekhar Sinha (Retd), Lt Gen Ravi Sawhney (Retd), Mr Anil Wadhwa, Brig. Vinod Anand (Retd), Dr Do Thanh, Hai, Senior Colonel Pham The Hung, Dr Pankaj Jha and other eminent persons.

Global politics is revamping in Asia, because of shift in the global centre of gravity to Asia. Covid-19 has led to emergence of a new world order. The world is more vulnerable because of geo-political dynamics and revival of great power rivalry. The concept of Indo-Pacific is taking shape and serious questions emerge about China's rise, and its impact. In this context the meeting took a stock of the bilateral relations, means to strengthen it and understand respective policies in the Indo-Pacific.

Time-tested relationship

2022 marks 50th year of bilateral relations, however, the people-to-people and cultural contacts go back to ancient times. India and Vietnam relations have stood the test of time.

India and Vietnam have experienced developments as individual countries. A reflection of this is seen in the bilateral relations that have developed into comprehensive strategic relationship over the years. Both countries also interact through ASEAN mechanisms and multilateral fora. The 'India-Vietnam Vision for Peace and Prosperity' was issued during the virtual summit between leaders in December 2020, and it is a significant development for the bilateral cooperation in the post-Covid era.

Defence and security coupon is one of the five pillars of comprehensive bilateral relationship. A successful area, it reflects the level of trust between the two countries. Both the countries have agreed to engage defence relationship through capacity building and training across the three services. India and Vietnam work closely in the UNSC.

India is one of the three countries that enjoy a comprehensive strategic partnership with Vietnam. Vietnam accords high priority to India. India is a source of a stable bilateral partnership during uncertain dynamics between great powers.

Economic potential

ONGC has invested in Vietnam for 40 years. Essar too, has invested, and is considering upscaling. Vietnam is an emerging economy, and an attractive investment destination. It has been successful in attracting companies that have moved based out of China. India-Vietnam trade was aimed to reach USD 15 billion but the pandemic interrupted it. The potential for bilateral trade is high, since new economic opportunities have emerged as a result of the pandemic. During the pandemic, supply chains are disrupted and when wheel of global economy has been slowed down, but commerce between India and Vietnam registered a rise of 30 per cent in the first half of 2022, contrary to elsewhere.

India and Vietnam supported each other during the second wave of COVID-19. Both countries supported each other in supplying oxygen. Current pandemic has unprecedented consequences. After initial success in battling COVID, situation has begun to worsen at present, rate of infection and mortality is 10 times higher than previous year. Vietnam needs more vaccines and drugs like Remdesivir. These drugs are being supplied from India; India is the only country that can help Vietnam with Remdesivir. India is seen as a saviour in Vietnamese media.

The pandemic has opened new opportunities and has shown potential for Indian investment in Vietnam in the pharmaceuticals and medical sector. Setting up an India 'Pharmacy' is under consideration, so is another industry park to manufacture medical devices in Vietnam. Further, there is potential in vaccine manufacturing, civil-nuclear opportunities, digital economy, and start-up development. Vietnam is taking efforts to attract high-tech Indian companies like Dr. Reddy's and Biocon.

South China Sea

China's aggression is matter of mutual concern. The leaders have called for peace, stability, freedom of navigation and over flight in the SCS and peaceful resolution of disputes, and adherence to international law.

The South China Sea is not about militarisation alone, but also has implication in the UNSC. Many countries of the Indo-Pacific and in Europe have issued note verbal against China's nine-dash line. India also needs to issue such note verbal in support of regional stability.

Southeast Asia does not desire any violent military conflict, and Vietnam expects India to be vocal against use of force in the South China Sea, and uphold ASEAN centrality.

The Code of Conduct is still underway but it is imperative that it should be based on the UNCLOS. It should be substantive, effective and binding. There is no clarity about the geographical scope of the proposed CoC, or the treatment of the nine-dash line in the negotiations. Navigation rights of non-ASEAN countries such as India should be respected in the CoC. India should assert its position on the illegality of the nine-dash line. India needs to take a cue from Australia and New Zealand, Japan and US and converge on abolishing historical claims in the UN.

Vietnam and Indo-Pacific geopolitics

Vietnam believes that India deserves a greater space as a future global player. Vietnam welcomes current Indian govt's policy of making India the real contributor to maintain global peace and stability. India's role cannot be ignored and underestimated.

European interest in the Indo-Pacific is growing-UK, Germany, France are sending their naval ships in the South China Sea and beyond to ensure freedom of navigation. Such actions are welcomed in so far as it is aimed at maintaining international law and freedom of navigation. But such actions should not be taken unilaterally and against any country.

There is similarity between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. Both ASEAN and India articulate respect for international law, peaceful settlement of disputes. Vietnam does not support use of force or threat of use of force. Likewise, Vietnam will not join any military alliance, or any grouping against another country, nor will it allow its territory to be used to this end.

Hanoi wants to maintain friendly relations with all the countries, and welcomes exploration within its continental shelf. Vietnam-US economic relations are improving with bilateral trade worth USD 72 billion. US

is also setting up ASEAN disease prevention centre in Vietnam. Hanoi has been successful in cultivating economic and cultural ties with Taiwan whilst maintaining One China Policy.

With respect to QUAD or any such grouping, if any economic initiative emerges, Vietnam will be happy to join, but such initiatives should be consistent with international law and should not bring harm to third countries.

About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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