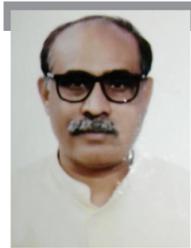


THE CUTTING EDGE

# Modi plays hardball in shifting Af dynamics



Satish Kumar

Now, the Trump Administration is sending up to 5,000 more troops to Afghanistan in addition to the 8,400 Americans who are already there... This change of strategy in the US policy-making has not been made without active lobbying of Indian leadership

The city of Kabul is looking like a city of ghosts, says a photo journalist. One after another blasts have created desperation among the common people of Afghanistan. The Taliban insurgency and a growing Islamic State (ISIS) presence have spanned further. The United States spent almost \$700 billion in the first 13 years of the war in Afghanistan. Still, Afghan forces lack the manpower, equipment and training needed to take back large areas of territory from Taliban control. Attacks like massive bombing in Kabul a fortnight ago are increasingly aimed at demoralising Afghan security forces and reducing their will to fight. The attacks are more due to change of guard in Afghanistan. The frequency of attack could be seen as an act of desperation on the part of ISIS terrorists. There were five major attacks in the capital in the past one year.

The current condition proved the fact that security environment in Afghanistan is precarious. The ascending order of violence from 2015 to 2016 and more in the first half of 2017 made it clear that the Taliban are gaining ground against the Government. There is a recent survey conducted by the United Nations under which more than 40 per cent land of Afghanistan is out of Government control. The southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan are under the control of Taliban. Afghanistan faces the brunt of its proximity with Pakistan. Af-Pak has been the motherboard of all kinds of terrorism. The security environment in rural areas is deteriorating while the urban areas and their lines of communication remain secure despite a growing Taliban threat.

According to the UN, with more than 11,000 civilians killed, the terrorist groups started manoeuvring once it was declared that the US would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Several extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda, Taliban and ISIS, have a presence in Afghanistan. ISIS and other groups — Tehreek-e-Taliban, Lashkar-e-Tayyeba, and Jamaat-ul-Ahrara — have increased their presence in Afghanistan. The Taliban are the largest of these groups and continues to wage war against the Afghan Government.

From 2014 to 2015, an attempt had been made to realign the external forces with China-Pak synergy in the driving seat. India was intentionally blocked by the new group. Pakistan was using its network and arsenals accumulated on the name of Afghanistan against India. Since India was getting affected by Afghanistan issue, there has been fundamental tilt from 2015 to 2017 on the line of Indian thinking towards Afghanistan. India has been planning to develop human resources in Afghanistan. It has designed peaceful initiatives to combat Taliban spreading its wings in Afghanistan, especially in Eastern and Southern parts.

There is fundamental change in the power structure of the world which led to building new alliances. According to Russia, Taliban are no longer Russia's enemy in Afghanistan but have become a proxy, and Pakistan is no longer an adversarial power threatening the security of Central Asia but a collaborator. The symptom of new great game has resurfaced in Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi played a very important role in changing the dynamics of Afghanistan and the US mindset under the India-America strategic rubric.

Now, the Trump Administration is sending up to 5,000 more troops to Afghanistan in addition to the 8,400 Americans who are already there. India-America is not willing to provide any political space to Taliban. After the West Asia imbroglio, the Afghan issue has been put on the back burner with the world powers paying less attention. The Obama Administration had declared withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan. This idea has been changed with the change of leadership in the US. Trump is keen to send more forces to Afghanistan. This change of strategy in the US policy-making has not been made without active lobbying of Indian leadership. Now America does not talk of leaving Afghanistan in hands of Pakistan and China. The strategic ties between India and the US have realigned the external powers in Afghanistan.

Second, India organised Heart of Asia Summit in Amritsar last year. The Amritsar Conference squarely blamed Pakistan for vitiating the political decorum in Afghanistan through its nefarious design of terror outfits. That is how the major declarations of Amritsar moved around on Pakistan's undeclared war against India and Afghanistan. The Summit identified Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayyeba, Jaish-e-Muhammad and Haqqani network as main culprits. India and Afghanistan launched a stinging attack on a virtually isolated Islamabad for sponsoring and supporting terrorism. Modi also asked the international community to demonstrate strong collective will to defeat terror networks that cause bloodshed and spread fear as silence and inaction against terrorism in Afghanistan and in the region will only embolden terrorists and their masters.

Third, Modi has exposed Pakistan's in-depth policy on Afghanistan. The Haqqani network, in nexus with the Taliban's al-Qaeda and ISIS, has a sanctuary in Afghanistan. The Taliban and the Haqqani network have benefitted from a sanctuary in Pakistan where their leaders reside and from where they receive some aid from Pakistan. The group has presence in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan provinces as Helmand, Kandhar, Zabul, Paktika, Ghazni and Nuristan.

Fourth, India has been supplier of technical resources in Afghanistan. It was actively engaged in helping Afghanistan stand on its own feet and move forward. It was also promoter of soft power but never thought of providing military support to Afghanistan. Modi has changed the image of India. Now it is willing to be hard power. Successive Indian Governments have encouraged the United States to steadfastly prosecute the military campaign in Afghanistan. The US has agreed and given green signal for military role of India in Afghanistan. This will change the image of India which has been soft-peddling Afghanistan. That will target the groups which are stationed in Pakistan.

Fifth, India has also exposed the Pakistan-China strategy and redesigned new dynamics of external powers in favour of India. China stepped up its engagement with Afghanistan in 2011 based on a perception that the US was likely to leave the country before its situation was stabilised. Nonetheless, China's interests in Afghanistan remain a relatively low priority and are focused mainly on mitigating the risk to stability in western China and to its Belt and Road initiative. China's off hand approach in Afghanistan is visible.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani organised an international conference on peace talks after the deadly blast in Kabul. In the talks, he said, "We are fighting 20 transnational terrorist groups." He blamed western countries for attempting to negotiate with the Taliban on their own. "There are too many players running too many parallel tracks with too little clarity on who they are and what they represent," Ghani said. "We also ask that you respect the integrity of an Afghan-owned and led consolidated process and not set up separate tracks of your own," he added. Under the new mantra of peace, the Afghan President endorsed Modi's doctrine.

Despite China's low priority in Afghanistan, its volumes of investment are four times larger than India. New Delhi cannot afford to replace America in running the show. India cannot sustain a massive presence in Afghanistan. Pakistan is seen as the regional problem as the country's military is accused of aiding the Taliban but the growing presence of the so-called ISIS in Afghanistan seems to be a game changer as it gives Pakistan the opportunity to rally its neighbours around its own line. The best bet for India in Afghanistan is America-India-Afghanistan trajectory, working in tandem with external and internal forces. It is good to hear that Ghani talks in the same language as the Indian PM.

They categorically agreed that Pakistan is the source of all problems. Taliban is backed by Pakistan. Pakistan's double game has been exposed by Modi. Now China's hands off approach are also visible. India-US ties are gaining new space in Afghanistan. India's military role would be new twists in the region. This will not merely control Pakistan's in-depth strategy in Afghanistan but also weaken its funding from outside. The truth is that this dynamic is dependent on the changing dynamics of world politics. India has to get the support of the US and other powers, including Iran, to be a dominant power in Afghanistan.

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# Astana Summit: Geopolitics of SCO

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit — which took place in Kazakhstan's Astana on June 8-9 — is going to have a major impact on geopolitical structure of Eurasia and Asia. The summit took place against the background of extension of full membership to both India and Pakistan. Second, a month back, China unveiled its "much-hyped" geo-political doctrine: One Belt One Road (OBOR), through which it intends to bring SCO member states under its ambit. Third, Afghanistan, which is enjoying a status of observer in the august body, is facing a growing threat to its security from Pakistan's notorious ISI as alleged by top Afghan officials. Only last fortnight, Kabul experienced a series of explosions which shook the capital city. Fourth, the Summit meeting demonstrated that Russia is not going to shed its "sphere of influence" to China in the Eurasian space (can be inferred from President Putin's speech in Astana) as the former is trying to expand its sphere of influence through its own Silk Road Project known as Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Finally, the Astana Summit provided an opportunity to assess its own role in the Eurasian region since its inception as SCO grouping.

Since spelling out its Charter in 2002, this Eurasian body has covered a long road from an informal organisation to resolve border dispute among the former Soviet states and China to becoming a regional group in addressing multilateral problems. Over the years, this regional grouping tried to play a role in checkmating West's penetration into the former Soviet space though at a rhetorical level. Because of the growing hobnobbing between Russia and China, many western scholars called this body as "NATO of the East". This happened despite the fact that other members of SCO, like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, used one or other pretext in joining the Western alliance on individual capacity. Though America withdrew its bases from Central Asia, Central Asian states, including Turkmenistan, joined the America led P5+1. Similarly, Russia is constantly promoting its own geopolitical agenda through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Even Central Asian states, like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are



members of EEU, and Tajikistan is thinking to join the same. Since there is a conflict of interest among the member-countries with regards to expanding their sphere of influence, a question arises as how far this regional body will be able to address the security issues concerning the SCO countries. Earlier, there was convergence among both China and Russia to quell NATO's expansionism, which forced them to bring together, now with changing realities as well as low oil prices, there is going to be a new kind of geopolitical equation which will shape Russia-China strategic partnership. The unveiling of OBOR initiative by China in which most of the SCO member-states are participating will also influence the functioning of this organisation. The OBOR initiative, though at an official level, aims at promoting economic development of the member-countries but a recent UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) says, as quoted in the newspapers, in the longer-run it may derail the economy of neighbours more particularly the Central Asian states. By giving aid and controlling the natural resources of this region, the Central Asian states are becoming the hostage to Chinese economy. Same is the case of Russia. It has been alleged that the Siberia and Far East is acting as a "resource appendage" to China. This can be inferred from the spate of energy deals Russia signed with China for exploring energy from this region. The UN study has also highlighted that OBOR might accentuate geopolitical rivalry in the region. Despite the existence of geopolitical faultiness as noted above, the SCO Astana Summit brought out a comprehensive declaration which emphasised on "polycentric model

of the world order ... creating an effective global and regional architecture of security and cooperation, and forming a human community linked by a common destiny".

The second issue, which adds gist to the Astana Summit, is the growing radicalisation that is taking place in this region. All most all member-states of SCO are facing the problem of radicalism, cross-border terrorism over the years. Russia's experience in Chechnya, China's Xinjiang region and Central Asian states' fight against terrorism, extremism is well known. During the "Operation Enduring Freedom", Central Asian region acted as a hub for carrying out all kinds of radical forces. One may add here that radical groups like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement of Xinjiang are quite influential in this space. Long back as reported, these radical groups along with Taliban took active steps to form Islamic Movement of Turkistan. One of the primary aims of SCO since its inception is to quell terrorism, extremism and radical fanatics. To institutionalise fight against terrorism, they formed a regional anti-terrorist centre at Tashkent, which conducted anti-terror exercises. One may highlight here that most of the terrorist groups operating in the SCO member-countries are funded, supported and trained by Pakistan and Taliban. Over the years, Pakistan has also become a hub of international terrorist activities and it is showing the symptom of a "failed state". It is quite intriguing that how Pakistan will conduct itself in the SCO grouping as a member when it is playing a key role in aiding and abetting terrorism in Eurasia. Even more surprising is the fact that China, which accused Pakistan of

sheltering Uighur terrorists on number of occasions, has actively supported latter's membership in the SCO body. Russia is also engaging itself with Pakistan in the name of pursuing pragmatic foreign policy despite the fact that Kremlin is aware of Islamabad's role in fostering terrorism. The newly formed radical ISIS is also threatening the security situation of Eurasia. The Summit gave call for "combating terrorism, separatism and extremism, and the spread of related ideology and propaganda, cross-border organised crime". One heartening aspect of SCO Summit of Astana is that India's position on fight against radicalism, terrorism and extremism was adopted at the final Astana Declaration. Adding that "Terrorism is a major threat to humanity", Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Summit meeting called for "coordinated efforts" among the member countries to end the menace of "terrorism".

However, question arises regarding how far China will end its "double stand" on fight against terrorism. Will the member states reprimand Pakistan for its dubious role in providing sanctuary to terrorists? Though Chinese President avoided a direct one-to-one meeting with the Pakistan Prime Minister, this is not enough. If Pakistan continues its policy of supporting terrorism than the SCO body should show the door to Islamabad.

The Astana Summit brought out a comprehensive plan for economic cooperation among the member-countries, but this Summit failed to underscore the importance of energy cooperation among the member countries. Although, Modi in his address to the august gathering emphasised on "connectivity" within the SCO member-states to further cooperation and highlighted the importance of International North-South Transport Corridor Project (INSTC) to ensure "sustainability" in economic growth. The SCO Summit meeting would have been an ideal forum for pressurising Pakistan to create a favourable condition for operationalisation of TAPI pipeline route cementing energy cooperation between South and Central Asia. Unfortunately, China's interest to monopolise SCO member countries' energy is one of the major factor hindering development of positive energy cooperation among the member-countries. One may add here that OBOR is an instrument to achieve the Chinese imperial goal of harnessing energy in the neighbour-



Nalin Kumar Mohapatra

Over the years, SCO has become an important regional body in balancing the geopolitics of the Eurasian region. Indian participation in this body will give greater vitality to this regional organisation and at the same time democratise it further

ing SCO countries.

The recent visit of Modi to Russia against the backdrop of the SCO Summit provided an ideal opportunity to discuss some of the issues related to SCO. The participation in SCO will provide India an opportunity to strategise its relationship with the member states. At the same time, New Delhi has also pushed its economic connectivity project in the SCO Summit, which includes operationalisation of the INSTC project. This project is a major developmental corridor linking India with Eurasia through Iran which can bring peace and prosperity to the region. Second, by India's participation, the issues at SCO Summit meeting will be addressed more democratically and it will checkmate growing Chinese clout over this body. Third, the member countries, particularly Central Asian member-states, will be benefited immensely from India's experience of handling extremism and cross-border terrorism, which it is confronting over a number of years. Finally, SCO, to make it more relevant in the Asian and Eurasian region, can broaden its membership to countries like Japan, Vietnam and South Korea. This will add new dynamism to this Eurasian body.

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PERSPECTIVE

# Gauging future of Asia-Pacific economic architecture



Jagannath Panda

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) remains the most attractive free-trade mechanism for regional economic integration after the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). But how exclusive is RCEP to Asia-Pacific economic integration?

Conceding the fact that the prospects of regional economic integration are still in flux, dignitaries and experts in the recently concluded Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity 2017 from May 31 to June 2 in Jeju, South Korea, broadly agreed that the future of Asia-Pacific economic integration is closely dependent on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The RCEP remains the most attractive and comprehensive free-trade mechanism for regional economic integration after the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). But how exclusive is RCEP to Asia-Pacific economic integration? No matter how encouraging the signs are in favour of the RCEP after the US withdrawal from the TPP, the future of Asia-Pacific is still heavily dependent upon the TPP as much as it is on the RCEP.

Given the key Asia-Pacific economies' adherence to both the RCEP and the TPP, the dialogue of Asia-Pacific economic integration

is still open. Speculation is mounting over the successful conclusion of RCEP negotiations. With the end of the 18th round of the RCEP negotiation meeting held in the Philippines in May this year, expectations are high that the negotiations over this trading mechanism, which primarily focuses on market access to trade in goods, services and investments, among other areas, are on the verge of early conclusion.

The RCEP negotiation, which was formally launched in November 2012 after the idea was first mooted in 2011, is expected to intensify cooperation in other areas such as regional economic and technical cooperation, remove barriers to trade and investment by protecting and enforcing intellectual property rights (IPR), promote dispute settlement mechanism, and encourage the promotion of competition and economic transparency.

RCEP finalisation is expected to deepen the process of Asia-Pacific economic integration, accounting for almost 45 per cent of the world population, with strength of over \$21 trillion of gross domestic product (GDP), involving ten ASEAN members and its six dialogue partners, comprising China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

Much, however, depends upon a fair and successful RCEP negotiation, which seems to be difficult at the moment due to a lack of unity among ASEAN and its dialogue members.

Trouble within RCEP

Diversity among the RCEP members, involving both less developed and developed economies, remains the main bottleneck. Even after 18 rounds of negotiations, RCEP members are still unable to build a consensus on negotiating criteria on most issues. Reports suggest that the 17th and 18th rounds of negotiation witnessed China and Japan having serious disagreement over tariff reduction. China aims for an early con-

clusion of RCEP with "low-quality" deals whereas Japan with Australia is pushing for "high-quality" tariff deals focusing on services and investment. The proportion of products supposed to be included in trade in goods is also yet to be completed.

ASEAN's proposal of tariff reduction has not received consent from the dialogue partners, including China and India. The intellectual property rights (IPR) and investment chapters still remain controversial. Opacity and secrecy over negotiation have also been major hurdles.

Beyond the technical negotiations, difficult political relations among the ASEAN members and the continuing political rivalry between the key dialogue partners have not helped the process.

Growth of nationalism, conflicts over the South China Sea and the disputes between China and Japan — the two big economies in RCEP — have also been obstructive.

India's pitch for concurrent negotiation over trade in goods and services has been cold-shouldered by the other RCEP dialogue partners.

Given the China-India strategic complexities, indications are that Beijing might decide to push for RCEP conclusion without India. If this happens, it will truncate the RCEP vision and agenda. The hopes to revive the TPP, especially by Japan and Australia and other Pacific countries, would also further delay the RCEP conclusion.

Seven of the RCEP members — Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and

Brunei — are still part of the TPP. Without the United States, the TPP might appear to be a pale trading bloc at the moment, but a successful economic integration at the pan-Asia-Pacific level is possible only if both the RCEP and the TPP continue to coexist.

Alternative approaches

Canada recently held a meeting in Toronto to discuss the prospects of the TPP within a spirit of 12-1 (without the United States) framework. The meeting signalled that Canada seems to be parting from its biggest trading partner, the United States, where additional factors such as disagreements on NAFTA, dairy sector and softwood lumber have been contributing factors.

Japan is also serious about pushing forward the TPP even without the US. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently stated that Japan is a "flag-bearer of free trade" and would aim for an early realisation of the TPP. To reinvigorate the TPP, six-country ratification is required, accounting for 85 per cent of the total GDP of the original 12 members. South Korea, though still undecided over TPP, is trying to explore if it can still be in both trading mechanisms of the RCEP and the TPP minus the US simultaneously.

What has made regional economic integration more complex and uncertain is, however, an alternative mode of approaches of key economies in Asia-Pacific. Chile and Peru have shown interest in joining the RCEP for some time. Chile and Peru are TPP-bound



South Korean President Moon Jae-in speaks during a meeting of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank on Jeju Island on June 16

economies, where the trading negotiation mechanisms are of a higher standard in this Trans-Pacific networks than in RCEP.

New economies from Asia-Pacific may also be inclined to join the RCEP, either at the conclusion of the current negotiations or in the post-current negotiations. Beijing's attendance at the Chile dialogue, held in March, on "Integration Initiatives in the Asia-Pacific Region" is a serious development in this context. Although Beijing has clarified that attending the Chile meeting was more about Pacific Alliance and Asia-Pacific economic integration rather than about the TPP, there is speculation that Beijing might reconsider joining the TPP.

Not to forget, China didn't earlier choose to join the TPP, viewing the TPP as a part of the US "pivot to Asia" strategy. With the Trump's decision of the US withdrawal from the TPP, it has opened a new range of opportunities for Beijing, both in immediate East Asia as well as in Asia-Pacific context.

Given its not-so-cordial relationship with Beijing, however, Japan may stand between China and the TPP. Tokyo may not agree for renegotiation for Chinese entry into the TPP, since lowering the negotiation criteria of the TPP would not be in Japan's economic interest. But China's Asia-Pacific outreach is still far superior to that of Japan, where Beijing holds enormous influence among the remaining 11 TPP members.

No matter what would be the Chinese approach, both the RCEP and the TPP would continue to evolve from their original character and composition. That clearly opens up the trade architecture in Asia-Pacific.

(The writer is Research Fellow and Head of the East Asia Centre at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. This article is a modified version of the author's speech at the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity 2017 in Jeju, South Korea, where he was an invited speaker)