**Report**

***India's Northwest: Geopolitics, Geo-economics and Connectivity***

Asia in Global Affairs had the privilege of hosting a webinar entitled “India’s North West: Geopolitics, Geo-economics and Connectivity” on 3rd June, 2021 where the distinguished speakers were Professor Raghav Sharma, who is the Director of Centre for Afghan Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs, at OP Jindal Global University, Dr Dhrubajyoti Bhattacharjee, who is a Research Fellow, at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi and Dr Deepika Saraswat, another Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi and Senior Adjunct Fellow, at Asia in Global Affairs, Kolkata. The following is a brief account of the principle arguments as presented by the respective discussants in the order of their speaking.

**Dr. Raghav Sharma** commenced the enriching discussion by analyzing the broad facets of geo-politics, geo-economics and connectivity through the prism of Afghanistan – the “gateway” to Central Asia. Sharma posited that the geographically unique position of Afghanistan, had left a deep imprint on the socio-cultural and political fabric of the country. Exploring the historical context of the nation, he believed, was seminal, in meaningfully situating the current position and future prospects for the country.

In this regard, Sharma opined that the British Raj and its geopolitical dynamic on the north-west had a profound influence in the making of the modern Afghan state, other than remolding the security mindset and policy orientation of Rawalpindi in the years to come. In a similar vein, the Great Game involving the Russian empire, culminating in the delimitation of the frontiers of Afghan territory sans Afghan representation, shaped the way in which the country would be dealing with its neighbors. Even cartographical decisions like the Durand Line, slicing through the Pashtun heartland, remained a festering sore, giving birth to reactionary Islamist forces. Interestingly, the Muslim League did not have any political base regarding what would constitute the North-West-Frontier-Province of Pakistan – a region with a predominant Muslim population. However, it was the electoral results of the 1937 and later 1947 provincial elections, with a resounding victory for Indian National Congress in conjunction with the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement, that largely shaped the nature of the relationship between Pakistan and the Pashtuns in NWFP, especially after the end of the British Raj.

Through much of the 1990s, Sharma observed that, India’s foothold was simply confined to the north-eastern parts of Afghanistan, controlled by the “legitimate” Afghans, enjoying a special rapport with the proponents of the Harakat-e-Shamal movement. However, it was only following the U.S. invasion in 2000,that India went out of its way, to consciously and proactively engage with Afghanistan, eventually emerging as the country’s largest regional and fifth largest international donor. Returning to the present, Sharma carefully scrutinized that the current context of American withdrawal from Afghanistan has amplified New Delhi’s struggle to engage with Taliban, amidst a changing political landscape in Kabul. The waning of the Afghan government, ethno-political fault-lines, ruptures within the political elites, issues pertaining to foreign aid, and role of Pakistan as a sanctuary for Taliban, has brought India’s Afghan policy at crossroads.

Sharma adroitly noted how the ground realities in Afghanistan had radically altered between 2010 and 2020. In this regard, he mentioned the “strategic defeat” of the well-intentioned stake-holders in the Doha agreement, perceived as buttressing the legitimacy of the Taliban – which was persistent in its endorsement of wanton violence and incapacitating the elected government in Kabul. With Afghanistan bracing itself for a politico-military transition, Sharma believes that, India would be accosted with a reconfigured geopolitical and social setting. Sharma categorically delineated the key areas of concern for New Delhi with respect to it Afghan policy, prominent among them being the issue of security for its “continuous neighbor”. India avowedly proclaimed that the terrorism in question did not stem from Afghanistan, but from Pakistan, with any sustainable Afghan peace, “contingent on the ending of terror sanctuaries and safe havens operating across Durand Line.” Moreover, the fact that Taliban had shown little appetite in cutting off ties from Al Qaeda or Haqqani Network, can offer little solace to New Delhi, affirmed Sharma. Finally, the growing notoriety of the Islamic State of Khorasan, attracting disenchanted commanders from Taliban, requires greater attention for redressal.

Sharma pragmatically noted that mitigating these challenges would be difficult for New Delhi, especially given how the Indian pivot to Afghanistan may be countered by Moscow and Tehran, both of which have swiftly embraced Taliban. With an air of optimism, Sharma noted that India needed to position itself as a credible partner on the developmental front, as essential prerequisite for any Afghan dispensation, following an American retreat. India must channelize its resources to mobilize growth and generate consensus among the Afghan populace. New Delhi must also strive to work closely with those constituencies in Afghanistan, that have mirrored massive social changes owing to two decades of U.S. intervention, and are desperately craving for socio-political order. On the military front, India needed to add teeth to their Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan, recommended Sharma, if it is to be considered as a steadfast consequential partner. In addition, it should strengthen the Afghan security forces at different levels, marking a departure from a perfunctory one-off sharing, of defense equipment. On the political front, India needed to cast its net far and wide, suggested Sharma, in a bid to engage with the moderate elements within the Taliban. Such an exercise would offer enough room for India to maneuver diplomatically.

Sharma argued that on the geo-economic front, though India faced a perpetual constraint of “lack of geographical continuity”, yet it had tried to mitigate the same through the INSTC, Air Corridors to boost trade, and the inking of the Chahbahar Port. However, even these projects are not exempt from caveats. While, the Air Corridors cannot simply account for a flourishing degree of trade on their own, the recent Balakot Airstrikes have exposed their vulnerabilities towards the Indo-Pak regional dynamic. The Chahbahar Project has been severely weighed down, in the wake of intensive sanctions on Iran by the Americans. There has been a mounting pressure on India to reduce the magnitude of its oil trade with Iran, and focus on a more expensive Saudi Arabian option. Similarly, India has not displayed much interest in implanting the Connect Central Asia Policy, which was launched in 2012.

In conclusion, Sharma broached that India would have to come out with trailblazing mechanisms, and do a lot more that provide traction and meaning, as far as its geo-economic interests in the North-West are concerned.

**Dr. Dhrubajyoti Bhattacharjee** adroitly captured how the domestic forces in Pakistan, especially the centers of power, were characterized by short-lived-short-term reactionary policy processes, that had been one of the fundamental reasons for where the nation stands today. Pakistan could easily have transitioned into a regional stabilizer, had it effectively harnessed its population and strong military capacities. However, a blend of policy paralysis and visible predilections of successive dispensations since its genesis, have culminated in Pakistan having one of the lowest socio-economic and human developmental indicators of the world.

While addressing, the larger question of geo-politics and connectivity, Bhattacharjee affirmed how the former, had constituted the very crux of the foreign policy stratagem in Pakistan, since its very birth, with the latter witnessing a surge, only in the last decade and a half. Interestingly, the other aspect, namely geo-economics, had been a more recent phenomenon , given the traditional tendency of Pakistan to adopt a “borrow-beg” policy from the IMF, United States, China, or its Arab brothers.

Bhattacharjee minced no words, while arguing how a poisonous cocktail of dysfunctional governance and corrupt military rule, had adversely affected the near and long-term growth prospects for the country. Notwithstanding its geo-strategic location, Pakistan failed to position itself as a trade and transit hub, connecting resources from Central Asia, to an energy starved South Asia, amidst relieving its own internal energy constraints, and proving its strategic footing in the process.

Bhattacharjee posited how the plummeting financial growth for the country, had been further aggravated by the deterioration of its security situation since 2006, along with a crippling energy shortage. Moreover, the structural and endemic factors, namely Pakistan’s abysmally low savings, eroding export competitiveness, and failure to ink connectivity projects without external support, have conspired to stymie any affirmative roadmap for the country ahead. The state of affairs with regard to digital connectivity, Bhattacharjee noted, was equally discouraging, with Pakistan ranking 75 out of the 79 countries in the Global Connectivity Index.

Though lately, the senior army officials and army chiefs of Pakistan, have turned greater foreign policy attention to geo-economics, premised on a vision of greater regional integration and a collective pursuit for a peaceful environment, Bhattacharjee believes, that it would be easier said than done. Pakistan would find it hard, to escape the geopolitical dynamics of its region, which remains afflicted with conflict and not connectivity. The situation would be further complicated by a host of factors - emerging Chinese projects and an installation of a U.S. military base in the Baloch province, rising hostility of the local insurgent groups in and around its territory, and finally, no steady improvement in its ties with India.

As, the U.S. China Cold War shows no sign of abetting even in the Biden era, Bhattacharjee reasonably predicts that Pakistan might be dragged into the same, given its dependence on China for military hardware to deter New Delhi. The United States, he avers, has been perceiving Pakistan as a satellite state of China, which might shape the decision of U.S. Congress over the question of financial assistance to Pakistan. Bhattacharjee strongly asserts that policy reforms to revitalize its geo-economic trajectory, remains beyond Pakistan’s grasp. He adduces the instance of how bureaucratic, military and political corruption in the country, had stalled the pace of certain developmental projects under the CPEC, rankling the Chinese to a great extent. The Imran Khan government has been equally inept in arousing any interest for developing the SEZs, which could have potentially served as the income generators for the region.

While, Pakistan has always punched above its weight, it never seems to learn from its past follies, a case in point, how it has lately aligned with Turkey, aspiring for a greater role for itself in the Islamic world, but ultimately annoying its Arab brothers. Though, the Chinese have offered to provide substantial financial assistance to Pakistan, the latter has been demanded to take a bold stand on its Washington policy, in return. Bhattacharjee maintains that such a hardline position, might remain difficult for Pakistan, given its record of succumbing to the pressures of various state and non-state actors, even within its territory.

In closing, Bhattacharjee notes that Pakistan currently faces the geo-political challenge of balancing between China and the U.S. and choosing between Turkey and the Arab world, while plagued by a host of internal fault-lines amidst a highly radicalized society. Such an environment reduces the prospects of the country to take any strong and decisive policy, in the time to come.

**Dr. Deepika Saraswat** conceptualized connectivity as a strategic investment entailing a comprehensive confluence of politics and economics. She proceeded to outline some of the path-breaking moments in the world history, through which the different waves of connectivity in India’s north-western contours in general, and Iran in particular, could be discerned.

The first of them was the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, leading to the emergence of newly independent countries in Central Asia. Saraswat posited how Iran had missed the bus at that point in time, despite its favorable geo-strategic location, primarily due to the devastation from a protracted 8-year long war, depleted resource base, and its limited capacities as a global pariah, stemming from a containment policy by the U.S. It was a period, marked by a growth of an East-West axis of connectivity, dominated by the United States and the European Union, driven by the geopolitical logic of minimizing the influence of antagonistic regional actors, such as Iran or Russia. Even India, she observed, was largely reticent in engaging with its extended north-western neighborhood till the 1990s, given the sensitivities of its Cold War ally Soviet Union, which had considered the region, as its own strategic backyard. It was not until the conceptualization of the International North-South Transport Corridor in 2002, that the North-South axis of Eurasian connectivity gathered some steam.

Saraswat asserted that the removal of the Taliban, was the second momentous occasion, useful in tracing the trajectory of Eurasian connectivity. Although such a development, induced India to engage pro-actively with Iran and Afghanistan, Saraswat maintained that, the larger geo-political picture of intensive sanctions on the former, hindered any such exercise. Even after Iran being accorded an observer status at the 2007 SAARC meet, it is disappointing to note that progress continued at a glacial pace on the INSTC front.

Saraswat averred that it was only with the launching of the Belt and Road Initiative by Xi Jinping in 2013, that Iran could finally locate a window of opportunity to realize its pivotal position in the emerging European connectivity architecture. This was followed by the all-important Chahbahar trilateral agreement involving India, Iran and Afghanistan, inked in 2016. The agreement, Saraswat argues, was as seen by India, as a part of its larger outreach to Central Asia, with popular ministerial opinion in favor of incorporating, it within the broader ambit of the INSTC, after including countries like Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan under its fold. On the other hand, Iran viewed Chahbahar in much wider terms, especially in the wake of the “maximum pressure” campaign undertaken by the U.S. The agreement remained an integral aspect of its much-touted “resistance economy”, premised on the belief that important strategic sanctions cannot be left to the fate of the sanctions foisted on Iran.

Returning to the question of BRI, Saraswat opined how there had been a visible shift in the Iranian approach towards China. It is worth noting, that as a pre-eminent power, China had made enormous economic engagements in Iran, often to its own advantage, over the last decade and a half. Notwithstanding the asymmetrical pattern of the relation, greater attention must be devoted to Iran’s burgeoning partnership with China. Even if Iran managed to successfully address the fissures pertaining to their nuclear policy, normalize its position at the global stage, or effectively strike a balance between the East and the West, its ties with China has been firmly consolidated, especially after the inking of the 25-year agreement. In ultimate analysis, Saraswat stated that in the shifting sands of geo-politics, Iran’s politico-diplomatic calculus, would witness a shift from an even-handed approach to a much closer alignment with the greater powers.

The discussion was followed by a vibrant question answer session.

**Report prepared by**

**Ratnadeep Maitra**

**Intern, Asia in Global Affairs.**