



Role of Central Asian Republics in Afghan Peace Process: The Need for Regional Approach for Lasting Peace in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The war in Afghanistan is multi-dimensional and rooted back to the Soviet invasion in 1979, and later America intervenes after 9/11 in 2001. To bring peace in Afghanistan it is worth mentioning that the American efforts not enough alone to bring the Taliban and Afghan governments to the table for peace talks. Therefore, a regional approach to attain peace is much needed this time. To apply the inter-governmental cooperation paradigm, it is concluded that the regional cooperation on the state level in terms of enduring lasting peace in Afghanistan after the American withdrawal is inevitable. However, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are not considered as major actors but these states have much to offer in supporting any possibility of new openings in the Afghan peace process by the means of accommodating diplomatic conferences, provision of their political support, reassuring cross border trade and cultural cooperation with war-torn Afghanistan. The Central Asian Republics can build further stable and prosperous Afghanistan independently and cooperatively while helping as a land bridge between land-locked Afghanistan and the inhabited, economically stable states in the region. The greater regional



connectivity with Afghanistan may provide the chance to attain the desired objectives of the current peace process, which will solicit Afghanistan as a trade and sharing-based cultural partner instead of the threat and source of un-stability in the region. The Afghan stability is necessary to all in the region whether they are directly or indirectly linked with the Afghan reconciliation process. The data used in this study included both primary and secondary sources.

Key Words: Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan, Peace Process, Taliban, Peace Talks, Terrorism, Regional integration.

Central Asian Republics & Afghanistan: A Link to Regional Integration

The contemporary situation of Afghan conflict initiated from the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979, and also has key events of the civil war including the formation of the Islamic State of Afghanistan by Taliban via Peshawar accord, though Taliban reinforcing as new regional power hub in southern Afghanistan during the 1990s. After the 9/11 attacks, United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and starting the fight with the Taliban along with NATO and Afghan forces. After the forty years of continuous war in Afghanistan neighboring states are so much concerned about the situation in Afghanistan. Because instability in Afghanistan created radicalized groups, drug trafficking across the borders which are sufficient part of afghan's economy. Afghanistan occupies a special position in the world map and has a geostrategic location as well and connects Eurasia with the Middle Eastern, South & East Asian regions. Central Asian Republics shares common in bordering area, religion, culture, and ethnicity residing in the northern part of Afghanistan (Rais, 1993). Many ethnic communities living in Central Asian states also share the population in Afghanistan such as Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks & Hazara (Khan, 1998). The five Central Asian Republics got freedom in an unstable region under the siege of the Soviet Union, when the USSR (Union of Socialist Soviet Republic) disintegrated in 1991. The three Central Asian Republics directly shared theirs around 2370 Km long border with Afghanistan. Central Asia is located at the center of the Eurasian continent and started from the Caspian Sea region in the West and to Tianshan Mountain in the Eastern part of the Hindukush mountain series in the south. Central Asian Republics are non-coastal and their shielded area is four million square Km (Bhatti, 1997). The major reasons for CARs importance in the region are geostrategic and excess in natural resources. Which attracts global attraction as Halford Mackinder stated: "who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island", the world heartland is referred to as the central area and the core of Eurasia (Rosenberg, 2018). The major point of conflict



in Central Asia and Afghanistan is energy resources like Oil and Gas which both are untouched wealth as well. Afghanistan's geopolitical and geostrategic significance is the key to Central Asian Republics through which the penetration can be possible in Afghanistan. In such a scenario, the non-state actors may also cross the border to join the ongoing resistance against foreign occupation between the Taliban and the United States. A politically stable and prosperous Afghanistan would turn extraordinary prospects of regional integration and development among the neighboring republics. The five Central Asian States, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan & Turkmenistan can contribute in the field of political settlement of Afghan issues and economically share their interests in support of well-build Afghanistan again. Even after the United States' desire towards a peaceful settlement, many Central Asian States' governments have shown keen interest to seek coordination on the Afghan peace process. The CARs want to prevent Afghanistan's problems like militancy and restlessness shifting transversely the region and had steadily evaluated into greater integration based on the analysis that further dynamic role in trying to resolve the Afghan issue. The said assessment of long-term strategy is better than seeking isolation itself from persisting problems in Afghanistan. An organized pattern of American policy towards Afghanistan and Central Asia might be managing advantageous situations for American military withdrawal from Afghanistan and move into an ordinary long-term relationship with the region.



Map Source: Peter Hermes Furian/Shutterstock



The Shared Interests of CARs in Afghanistan

By the vision of international cooperation, the Central Asian Republics gain significance for Afghanistan in the following areas:

- The alternate transportation route of NATO and US military supplies is NDN (Northern Distribution Network) through Pakistan has been recognized as unsafe by NATO and allies.
- The investment in the infrastructure sector in Central Asian Republics such as energy pipelines for transportation of oil and gas could allow and boosts the regional economy by the reconstruction of transit routes in the region. This also shows the American interests in the New Silk Road initiative as discussed with Afghanistan's neighboring countries and also provides the support to TAPI (Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India Gas pipeline) which aim to meet the needs in the energy sector of concerned states.
- The political consideration, which is still not much explored and CARs engagements are so far yet with non-Pashtuns community and other political groups in Afghanistan. The CARs are united in the time being in five sectors of life as far as their major concerns regarding the long-lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan (UNRCCA, 2020).
- There is no military solution to the Afghan conflict and the current strategy of the coalition armed forces to stipulate Afghanistan did not conclude the desired results. According to CARs point of view, the more use of intelligence rather than the use of force, a political solution must be sought through the peace process nationally.
- The much superiority should be given to the peace through the economic integration among the CARs and Afghanistan and as the means to attain security benefits via regional cooperation, and for encouragements to tackle unemployment, poverty, and the quality of Afghan citizen's lives to minimize the threats of uncertainty and radicalization in the region (News Central Asia, 2011).
- Any possible solution to the Afghan conflict must show full respect for the local cultures, customs and values, and the beliefs of Islam of the Afghan citizens. The peace talks should be Afghan-centric with the inclusion of all concerned actors. It means that the peace talks should not encompass only the Taliban but also stakeholders of the Northern Alliance and the reconciliation process should be on a power-sharing basis among the various ethnicities.
- The CARs stresses that the United Nations and its dedicated agencies should involve with the peace process more enthusiastically. The Turkmen head of state Berdymuhamedov stated that "The way out of this crisis is only through negotiations, through UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) and UNRCCA (United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia) (News Central Asia, 2011).



Afghanistan epitomizes both threats and options for regional progress for CARs because the continuous instability can be a significant source of extremism and militancy as well as the smuggling of arms and drug trafficking. Meanwhile, stabilization and reconstruction of the economy could lead to regionalism which provides the opportunity for cooperation in electricity, oil & gas, technological advancements, agriculture, and education.

The Collaboration between CARs and Afghanistan as Risk Prevention

Two Central Asian Republics, remarkably Uzbekistan & Kazakhstan, have treaded up in current years to sustenance the ongoing peace process and they have remained important economic allies. In 2018, Uzbekistan carried the 21 countries, the UN, and the EU to sustenance the peace process at the Tashkent Discussion, which reiterated robust provision for intra-Afghan dialogs with the Taliban deprived of prerequisites (United Nations, 2018). Afghanistan is before now a top 10 trading partner of Uzbekistan, renowned Vakhobov, Uzbekistan's diplomat to the United States (Afridi, 2020). Uzbekistan is also intensifying its supply of energy to Afghanistan with developments that will not only upsurge manufacturing volume but generate innovative opportunities for Afghans. Kazakhstan's leading **Bolashak** Education Program has skilled thousand plus Afghan students in Kazakh's universities, said Erzhan Kazykhanov, Kazakhstan's diplomat to the United States (Sagintayeva & Jumakulov, 2015). In 2018, Kazakhstan accommodated a regional discussion on authorizing women in Afghanistan. Amongst other enterprises, it is also worth mentioning that Kazakhstan providing more than \$80 million of aid to Afghanistan concluded its foreign aid agency KazAID (Abilgazina, 2020). The great segment of Kazakh's foreign aid low-priced to date has departed to Afghanistan, where KazAID emphasizes its consideration on the substructure, charitable aid, and gender equality inventiveness.

After the American-led coalition invaded Afghanistan in 2001 when the "Global War on Terror" was started, the CARs quickly agreed to contribute to American and NATO-led ISAF operations in Afghanistan to fight extremism and radicalization (Nichol, 2013). As the 2246 Km long border with Afghanistan also a major concern for the militant border crossing, narcotics trafficking, and smuggling to the central Asian region. The movement of Taliban from the North to the West to secure their occupation near to CARs borders. The bordering region with Tajikistan considering more strategic but the instability in Afghanistan is also a focal point. The region is exposed to terrorism by providing the linkages among the criminal trade. For these factors, the CARs are more concerned with the stability in Afghanistan.



Formally the CARs cooperation with Afghanistan is motivated by the observations about new opportunities. The economy is the most important factor, the republics emphasize poverty alleviation as the basis for the sustainability, security, and strategic stability for their states. Offering the same strategy for Afghanistan epitomizes a way to avoid commendation for the military solution which is pursued by the foreign forces whereas trying to shape a role for their participation. Similarly, they are supporting the prospects of Afghanistan becoming a trade-transit route among Central Asia and South Asia by given its geostrategic location. They are enthusiastically ready to take a part in regional economic coordination which will help to locked alternate southern points for their exports and energy transportation and by enhancing their autonomy vis-a-vis the Russian federation (Linn, 2005).

All these objectives are compatible with the project of the New Silk Road which is American-sponsored for greater regional integration especially around Afghanistan. The Asian Development Bank has helped to launch the CAREC program (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation) with the addition of sponsorship by the RECCA program (Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan and the “Heart of Asia” conference platform. The significant investment in transport infrastructure along with CAREC, corridor three which is connecting Afghanistan and CARs. The bank-backed and the cross-bordering transportation agreement signed among Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan & Afghanistan which have speed up the inter-regional economic and trade relations in one of the lowermost economically integrated regions in the world (CAREC, 2020). Eklil Hakimi and the Afghan minister for finance declared in January 2018, that as the para of new transit & trade agreement among the Afghanistan & Uzbekistan, through which Uzbekistan will reduce transit fees for transit of Afghan goods by fifty percent per container which will travel through Uzbekistan (Tolo News, 2018). Tajikistan & Turkmenistan have also pressured in sense of broader regional influence to Afghanistan and host the two RECCA conferences in 2012 and 2017 held at Dushanbe & Ashgabat respectively. These conferences have focused on cooperation in regional energy.

Stability in Afghanistan & CARs Perspectives

The Central Asian Republics express their views for an ongoing peace process, conflict resolution, and political stabilization of Afghanistan with some variances consequently from ethnic harmony. The CARs experts mostly explain prolonged armed clashes in Afghanistan having by the combination of factors including:

- The Failure of Political Centralization
 - The Process of State-Building
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- The Ethnic, Tribal & Religious Differences
- Struggle for Power
- The Meddling of Foreign Actors
- Criminalization

The experts extend their words to characterize the security scenarios in Afghanistan as unbalanced and worsen. Meanwhile, the elections appear to give up hope that worse-case conditions can be avoided. The representatives of the CARs stated that they will accept the decision of Afghan nationals and will adopt it. They also showed their solidarity with the current government and assure their supports by maintaining good relations between them (MoFA, 2012). The officials of Central Asian States speaking their doubts regarding the military aspects of stabilization in Afghanistan at international conferences and often expressed that there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict (New Europe Brussels, 2010). The political factor in Afghanistan's stabilization is also a matter of concern for the CARs. When the question of political debate arises, the Central Asian experts did not bring up the instrument of democracy. The Afghan's view is so traditional in their society and not yet ready to absorb the western style of democracy as in the Middle East. The efforts which are being made to promote democracy have only intensified the elite and ethnic divisions in Afghanistan & weakened the state. The Central Asian States are necessarily keeping the international aspects of stabilization in line under the umbrella of the United Nations.

CARs Initiatives for Afghan Peace Process

The CARs ensure and do have the capacity to cooperate in the stabilization of Afghanistan. Tajikistan & Uzbekistan have traditional, cultural, and political links with Northern Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan & Turkmenistan have managed and organized the international conferences on intra-afghan peace talks. The diplomatic experts of Tajikistan also pointing the all possible outcomes of Tajik peacebuilding efforts and their implications for Afghanistan. The efforts that are being offered by CARs are commendable in every aspect.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a major regional country that has much influence in support of stability in Afghanistan and other parts of the region. The foreign minister of Kazakhstan, Yerzhan Kazykhanov in March 2012, proposed the establishment of the United Nations special center in Almaty for the coordination regarding the multi states projects that includes Afghanistan. He asked the relevant agencies of the UN to share the ideas on the



implementation of said initiatives. Later the President of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev holds a meeting with the Head of the UN Aid Mission in Afghanistan and agreed upon the establishment of the United Nations Center in Almaty to facilitate the process regarding the peace and prosperity of Afghanistan in the region with the collaboration of CARs (Central Asia Online, 2012). Kazakhstan does not have a land boundary with Afghanistan, it is entangled concluded famous transaction routes that still linkage the two countries (Fredholm, 2013). For a long time, Kazakhstan has played a productive part in Afghanistan. As the region's major economy and a secular republic, it has a direct concentration in safeguarding that Afghanistan turns into a stable state (Central Asia Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016).

Kazakhstan has spent its 2-year long tenure as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to concentrate on Afghanistan's state of affairs. For illustration, it prepared an official visit by Security Council members to Afghanistan (Cornell & Starr, 2020). Astana has presented millions of dollars of aid to Afghanistan and has arranged trade contracts with Kabul valued more than hundreds of millions dollars (USAID, 2013). So far, trade among the two republics has improved by 18% equated with last year and it is possible for cumulative this trade commotion smooth supplementary.

In the 3rd Ministerial Conference on the Istanbul process held in Almaty, the president once again reminds participants of these initiatives and lighted their importance as well as their location and presence of many International organizations (Kazakh Embassy in the United States, 2013). The strong point of this initiative is that Kazakhstan has adequate possessions & understanding to make it a reality and that the United Nation center will help to stimulate Kazakhstan's contribution in the international efforts for the stabilization of Afghanistan. Moreover, it is likely to progress the Central Asian collaboration on the Afghanistan conflict and other regional problems. Though, if the initiative is not lacking finished swiftly, other substitute places for such diplomatic centers might appear. The Afghan president Ashraf Ghani visited Tashkent in December 2017, it is the first central Asian state to occupy the non-permanent seat of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and Kazakhstan used its presidency for one month in January 2018 to enlighten the significance of relations in the sphere of economic development & security cooperation among the Afghanistan and CARs.

In January 2018, ambassador Umarov led a visit to Afghanistan of the Security Council to learn about how they could accommodate the peace process on the ground. The UNSC delegation also expressed his views through Umarov's words, "there is a need to view Afghanistan as no threat to the regional security but as a significant partner in the



region”. He further stated, “It is critical to integrate the economies of Afghanistan and neighboring countries, together with the Central Asian States, through enhanced interaction and connectivity, by executing regional infrastructure, trade, investment, transit, and transportation projects” (United Nations, 2018). The delegation also emphasized that the visit reached a “breakthrough” by identifying that “you cannot fence off Afghanistan” and that, on the divergent, “attaining greater regional integration is vital to structuring sustainable peace” (Umarov, 2019). After the visit of the UNSC delegation to Afghanistan, Kazakhstan summoned a special session of UNSC to confirm a new keen level of collaboration in security, economic & political matters among Afghanistan and CARs. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres in his address to the UNSC, he said that: “Regional cooperation offers prospects to address mutual concerns, including counter-terrorist funding, improving border security, encouragement of dialogue with religious institutions and leaders, and countering human trafficking and drug smuggling” (UNSC, 2018).

Kyrgyzstan

The President of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiyev shared his idea to hold an international annual conference on security & stabilization in Central Asia, this idea later called “the Bishkek Initiative”, through this establishing an international center which could monitor the regional situation on peace and security especially on Afghanistan’s question and developing the recommendation based on expert’s analysis. However, this initiative didn’t launch yet due to a lack of financial resources and international support. Another supportive initiative by the Kyrgyz government is the restructuring of its external debt in replacement of aid to Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan is self-sufficient in the construction industry, agricultural products, and hydro-electric power industry to accommodate the Afghan economy and also can organized education development programs for Afghan students in different fields.

Tajikistan

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit was held at Yekaterinburg, Russia in June 2009, in which the president of Tajikistan Imomali Rakhmon expressed his views about quadrilateral cooperation among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Russia with his counterpart in the sphere of security, economics, trade, and cultural exchange (Novosti, 2009). This initiative also called “Dushanbe Four” arranged four high leveled meetings among partner states since its inception. According to Tajik media these talks especially focusing on infrastructure programs for regional connectivity (Vstrecha, 2011).



Tajikistan commenced two major international diplomatic conferences in 2018 that discussed the issues about the Afghanistan and greater region. The first international conference focusing on counter-terrorism and extremism prevention organized in early May at Dushanbe. The conference was attended by about four hundred delegates from forty states and around thirty international organizations as well. With the reference to the first high-level diplomatic talks, the representative of Tajikistan Farhod Salim to the USA reminded the Combined Accomplishment Proposal for central Asia as the first detailed regional framework within the UN's strategy for countering global terrorism (MoFA, 2018). After the first Dushanbe conference, the foreign minister of Kazakhstan Kairat Abdrakhmanov presented the "Code of Conduct Towards Achieving a World Free of Terrorism", this document of conduct contain ten realistically based measures through which states can commit the fight against terrorism, the document signing ceremony was held at United Nations HQ and signed by the foreign ministers and the diplomats of more than seventy countries. The continuous diplomatic conferences in Tajikistan have drawn major regional & global considerations that how can CARs better contribute to the peace-building activities and enhancing the regional integration with Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan arranged a high-level diplomatic conference on confidence-building for Afghanistan. During the 65th session of the UN's general assembly and the Turkmen president stressed that his government willing to support the international efforts in favor of peacebuilding in Afghanistan and powerful institutions in the state. The said initiative under the United Nations sponsorship. Turkmenistan's impartial position presented to it the advantage of such an initiative. Berdymukhamedov also detailed that Turkmenistan was ready to deliberate matters of organizing such a conference with Afghan allies, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Afghanistan, other dedicated UN agencies involved in Afghanistan, and all concerned parties (Berdimuhamedov, 2010). Another positive aspect of the Turkmen initiative is that Turkmenistan previously hosts the UN regional Centre for preventive democracy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) located in Ashgabat and it has also financial resources to support this type of proceedings (UNSC, 2007).

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan can be a new opening for exports & imports through the Termez Cargo Center (rail-road) & Navoi International Airport (NIA). This will safeguard Afghanistan has replacements to southern transportation ways via Pakistan's city Karachi & Gwadar ports & to Chabahar port situated in Iran. This is also sensible in well-lit of the Taliban's



lodging with China-Pakistan and its contract that it won't afford safe harbor or sustenance to victimized Uyghurs from western China, a situation it is improbable to lean to as soon as it takes on a protagonist in Kabul, & an upright motive to undertake it resolve to pursue assistance from these clientele to boost its spot in Afghanistan (Shinkman, 2020).

Uzbekistan has formed a contact group for Afghanistan, the initiative has been proposed by Uzbek President Islam Karimov at NATO's Euro Atlantic Partnership Council conference in Bucharest Romania in April 2008 for a contact group for Afghanistan under the auspice of the United Nations (National News Agency, 2008). The contact group consists of six neighboring states named China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and three major stakes holders Russia, NATO, and the USA. The main goal of this contact group is to maintain international support for Afghanistan's conflict resolution, the arrangement of diplomatic conferences, the revival of the Afghan economy, international efforts regarding drug trafficking, and looking for mutual benefits (Uzbek Embassy in Ukraine, 2008). At the 67th session of the general assembly of United Nations in December 2012, the Uzbek minister for foreign affairs again anticipated contact group initiative by pointing Afghanistan's situation especially he emphasized the worrying situation due to the rise of extremism and financing for militants, postured terrorizations to Afghanistan's security environment and for the region at large.

The hope that brings Uzbekistan to be an active regional peacebuilder is its transformed relationship & credibility in the case of Afghanistan along with great powers likewise USA-Russia. Especially, President Mirziyoyev visited the United States to meet with his counterpart in May-2008 and he much stood successful in seeking good relations with the USA without cutting its ties with China and Russia (Kudrathodjaev, 2018).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study finds that the contribution of Central Asian Republics to facilitate the Afghan peace process as the United States also finds the peaceful settlement of Afghan conflict is very important to consider. The CARs present a new and significant win-win chance for Afghanistan, the region, and the United States. The CARs should work together aligned with major actors in the peace process. Such peace efforts are US-led Doha Peace Talks and Russia-led Peace Talks with the most significant track of Intra-Afghan Peace Talks. Particularly Central Asian State, Uzbekistan has much to do for assisting the Afghan Peace Process by hosting regular diplomatic debates showing continuous political support and drawing strategy of regional peace-building measures along with Afghanistan.



These collective efforts can build long-lasting peace in Afghanistan. The individual states still needs for regional approach, each Central Asian Republic should take a part in peacebuilding efforts through the Afghanistan-Central Asian integration. Further, the recent form of US, Russia, and China might build a consensus on the Afghan conflict by including Pakistan, India & Iran.

With the recommendation of the Afghan government, the United Nation can establish a ministerial forum in Tashkent. For economic development, the growing trade activities through the “Belt Road Initiative” and CAREC should be commenced. Uzbekistan should increase bilateral trade and economy booster projects with Afghanistan. Kazakhstan should exercise to assert its political pressure on central Asia by playing a major role in regional and international diplomatic forums such as the UNO & the SCO and also via their relations with major powers like Russia, China, and United States in favor of build a concrete measure to speed-up the Afghan reconciliation process. Turkmenistan should focus on fast-track completion of TAPI gas pipeline & TAP-500 projects. Afghanistan should use the influence of CARs put on other regional and international powers to support the Afghan peace process as the momentum from the Tashkent conference. Tajikistan as co-chair of the “Heart of Asia” conference in 2019, should maintain its bilateral talks with Afghanistan to boost regional cooperation and integration.

Especially, three major powers United States, Russia, and China put their efforts into the success of the Intra-Afghan dialogue convened in Doha. Further, all contested parties should stop their ongoing armed operations in Afghanistan immediately to start the peace process with true spirit and build its confidence in the region and look after on evil eye until perpetual peace is attained.



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