



Assessing Istanbul Process as Regional Initiative on Afghanistan & Way Forward

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Afghanistan is yet to achieve peace and stability. International involvement in the form of major powers' direct and indirect engagements have made limited achievements despite years of military presence and spending billions of dollars. It seems that the reconstruction and development by the involved military powers in Afghanistan has found little acceptability among the populace. The major reasons could be in their approach in identifying and executing the projects. They are mostly security-centric and externally guided. On the other hand, projects which are Afghan-owned but supported by regional countries, for example by India, have received wider acceptance among the common Afghan people. This has provided necessary impetus to the regional stakeholders to launch various Afghan-oriented initiatives.

The regional initiative in the form of 'Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process' (HoA-IP) has assumed greater significance in the wake of crucial political, security and economic developments inside Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. HoA-IP brings the region together to discuss and attempt to address challenges pertinent to the broader region having a focus on integrating Afghanistan into regional economic processes. The objective of HoA-IP is to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and increase the pace of its reconstruction by enhanced investment.

So far, under this initiative, six ministerial conferences, which is the highest decision-making forum of the process, have been held. The Sixth Conference was held at Amritsar, India, on 4 December 2016. This paper assesses HoA-IP as a regional initiative on Afghanistan and

identifies the new determinants agreed in the last conference to further boost the Istanbul Process. It also suggests certain possible areas to increase political and economic interactions among HoA-IP member countries (see Annexure-A).

‘Heart of Asia’ Initiative

Afghanistan has been suffering due to geopolitical considerations of colonial powers in 19th and 20th centuries and the power bloc politics during the Cold War period. The country was adversely exposed to the divergent political and ideological forces that aggravated the domestic situation leading to persisting political, security and economic instability. For Afghanistan, the 21st Century began with another war. The 9/11 attacks led the US to launch military offensive against Taliban in September 2001, who were in power in Afghanistan.

Though the military intervention by the foreign forces ended the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, but it could not resolve the Afghan crisis. Years of war and fighting in Afghanistan lost the popular support in the intervening countries and also strained their economic resources. The turmoil in Afghanistan was directly felt by neighbouring countries and the entire region. It was felt prudent to launch regional-led political and economic initiatives to explore a viable and lasting solution, placing Afghanistan at its ‘heart’. These initiatives include Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA), Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) and recent six-party talk in Moscow. The RECCA focuses on economic aspects while QCG and the six-party talk focus on political reconciliation, whereas the HoA-IP takes a holistic view of the Afghan problem.

The idea of ‘Heart of Asia’ has been taken from the sub-continent’s legendary poet Mohammad Iqbal’s concept of the centrality of Afghanistan in Asia, who said: “Asia is a body of water and soil, where the Afghan nation is the heart; its prosperity brings prosperity to Asia, and its decay brings decay to Asia”.¹

Since its inception, the HoA-IP has been led by two co-chairs: Afghanistan as a permanent co-chair, and one of the Heart of Asia member countries hosting the annual ministerial meeting as another co-chair. As permanent co-chair of this regional process, Afghanistan has been recognized as the main focal point of the HoA-IP. The HoA-IP has the following three main components as policy measures to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan with the cooperation of neighbouring countries:

- a) Political consultations at Foreign Minister level involving Afghanistan and its near and extended neighbours;
- b) A sustained incremental approach to implementation of the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) identified in the Istanbul Process document; and
- c) Seeking to contribute and bring greater coherence to the work of various regional processes and organizations, particularly relating to Afghanistan.

The Ministerial Conference is at the apex of the three-tier HoA-IP. The other two tiers are Senior Officials Meeting (SOMs) and Ambassadorial Meeting. The Ministerial Conference process has established various CBMs along with the lead and participating countries (see Annexure-B). Six CBMs are the most important operational element of the HoA-IP, which provides practical means for building trust and resolving outstanding issues through coordination and cooperation. India leads the CBM on Trade, Commerce and Investment, and along with Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, it is a member of all CBMs.

As a follow up to the Sixth Amritsar Ministerial Conference, the HoA-IP Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) was held on 17th March, 2017, in Baku, Azerbaijan.² The meeting reviewed the progress made on the implementation of the six CBMs. Internal and regional security situation and political challenges were also discussed in the meeting.

HoA-IP Ministerial Conferences

The First Ministerial Conference of HoA-IP was held in 2011 at Istanbul, Turkey. Subsequently, next four conferences were held in Kabul (Afghanistan), Almaty (Kazakhstan), Beijing (China) and Islamabad (Pakistan) in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively. The Sixth HoA-IP Ministerial Conference was held at Amritsar, India in December 2016 (see Annexure-C).

The First HoA-IP Ministerial Conference adopted the resolution of Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a secure and stable Afghanistan.³ It provided a new agenda for regional cooperation.⁴ The countries collectively expressed readiness to engage in sincere and result-oriented cooperation at all levels, not just to help Afghanistan but also to ensure security and prosperity in the region.

In the subsequent four Ministerial Conferences political and security cooperation, economic engagement, fight against terrorism and organised crimes, measures against narcotics and drug trafficking, refugee rehabilitation, setting up of structured regional educational exchange programme etc. were identified as key areas of cooperation. These issues encompass not

only Afghanistan, but also other HoA member countries. However, in these conferences, Afghan specific initiatives were also adopted to help better integration of the country with regional and global trade and economic processes. These include, capacity building of Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and skill development of Afghan youth as well as infrastructure development within the country.

The Ministerial Conferences also recognise Afghanistan's role as a land bridge in the 'Heart of Asia', connecting South, Central, Eurasia and Middle East.⁵ After the launch of the HoA-IP various connectivity projects are at different levels of implementation. President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani and his counterpart, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov officially inaugurated the first section of the TAT railway that connects Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan in November 2016.⁶ Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, another important regional integration project, was inaugurated in December 2015. This is a project of immense economic and financial benefit for Afghanistan as the transit fee is projected to be US \$ 1 billion annually, besides creating thousands of jobs for Afghan youth.⁷ These projects are in line with the aspirations of Afghan leadership to once again make the country a regional connectivity 'roundabout'.⁸

What is New at Sixth HoA-IP Conference

The venue of the Sixth HoA-IP Ministerial Conference was Amritsar, which is an important gateway for India's connectivity to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Amritsar is on the Grand Trunk Road and the city 'reinforces the value of restoring connectivity which is so crucial for the overall growth, stability and economic prosperity of Afghanistan'.⁹ The Amritsar Conference was a significant chapter of the HoA-IP multilateral process on Afghanistan. It added multiple dimensions to the ongoing regional efforts intended to bring peace and stability in the war-torn country.

The Amritsar Conference was important from the domestic political perspective of Afghanistan, particularly in the wake of the peace deal signed between National Unity Government (NUG) of Afghanistan and Hizb-e Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The Amritsar Conference was also the first major international meeting following the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan in October 2016.

The Amritsar Conference outcome can contribute significantly to develop a consensus in the region's fight against terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation. Terrorism has been a bane for Afghanistan for several decades which has affected all spheres of Afghan people's life;

economy, polity, security and culture. The Amritsar Conference for the first time not only identifies the terror groups active in the region but clearly mentions the names of terror groups: Daesh and its affiliates, the Haqqani Network, Al Qaida, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Jundullah and other foreign terrorist fighters.

It is considered as the first step at the regional level towards building a concerted effort to deal with the growing menace of terrorism in Afghanistan and the region. Since the drawdown of foreign forces from Afghanistan and handing over of the security responsibility to the ANDSF, the Taliban has upped the ante and launched attacks across the country. This has also provided an opportunity for terror groups to expand their network in a coordinated manner.¹⁰ It has necessitated common approach to address this persisting problem.

So far, there was a lack consensus among HoA-IP member countries to identify and mark the terror groups in the official document. The Amritsar Conference addresses the anomaly that had eluded evolving a common and comprehensive approach in dealing with the scourge. The incorporation of names is a marked departure from the previous Ministerial Declarations of the HoA-IP and it shows an emerging regional consensus to deal with the menace of terrorism not only in Afghanistan but also the region and beyond.

The final declaration also proposes sharing of experiences on de-radicalization and counter-radicalization measures taken by HoA-IP member countries and stakeholders. This will add to the ongoing efforts against terrorism and dissuade youth from being allured by radical groups in Afghanistan and the region. Afghan is a young nation and these measures will help tapping the energy of youth for building a prosperous and dynamic Afghan society. The declaration emphasises the need to engage political leaders, religious figures, youth, civil society and mass media to effectively deal with extremism.

The Amritsar Conference also identified the significance of cultural heritage that can be revived to bring socio-economic development in Afghanistan. It can work as a catalyst for socio-economic change.¹¹ For centuries Afghanistan has been the hub of civilizational exchanges and cultural intermingling. The silk route that passed through Afghanistan was not only a conduit for trade but a link for exchange of different ideas, cultures, traditions and philosophies. Afghanistan still contains the flavour of these heritage linkages which can be effectively and beneficially channelized to boost the economy. Greater movement of people from different regions nearing

Afghanistan will automatically increase tourism and trade. It will not only generate employment for the Afghan youth, but also revive the local art and craft.

In spite of diverse cultural and architectural heritage, cultural diplomacy is under-explored in Afghanistan's regional integration mechanisms. The country's rich and varied past and its spiritual experiences can once again emerge as a thread linking neighbouring societies in a common network. The Amritsar Conference successfully highlighted the significance of culture and heritage. A mechanism can be devised to facilitate regular cultural exchanges under Heart of Asia Cultural Exchange Programme (HACEP).

The Sixth Ministerial Conference also acknowledged the influx of refugees returning to Afghanistan. The recent years has seen increased number of Afghans returning or forced to return from Pakistan, Iran and European countries. According to UNHCR, the magnitude of refugees returning from Pakistan is 'accelerating to an unprecedented rate'.¹² It says that by 20 October 2016, almost 270,000 refugees had returned to Afghanistan, primarily from Pakistan.¹³ Repatriation and reintegration of refugees in any society is a sensitive matter, it creates challenges for both the returnees and the host community. Therefore, careful planning is required. The Amritsar Conference agreed to a sustainable repatriation of refugees and their reintegration into the Afghan society. It urges the members and international community for targeted assistance for the refugees.

Despite the achievements made by the HoA-IP, this regional initiative continues to face multiple challenges. State power politics in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan has also been responsible for slow progress on reconstruction of the country. The HoA member countries are at various stages of economic development which leads to differences in priorities affecting their level of commitment in Afghanistan. Result-oriented cooperation by Heart of Asia member countries in Afghanistan is crucial to define the future course of Afghanistan's development.

India and Heart of Asia

India has been the most constructively engaged country in the reconstruction and rebuilding process of Afghanistan. The key areas of India's engagement have been infrastructure development, socio-economic growth and capacity building. Some of the major projects successfully undertaken by India include: construction of Indo-Afghan Friendship Dam, Parliament building, Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health (IGICH); capacity building programme which includes imparting training to security and administrative personnel, and

several scholarships to Afghan students; projects in critical areas of health, nutrition, education, rural infrastructure etc, including Small Development Projects (SDPs).

India has already built a significant connectivity corridor known as Zaranj-Delaram road. This road is a boon for the local people. India along with Iran and Afghanistan are developing a direct connectivity between Afghanistan and Indian Ocean through the Chabahar port of Iran. This route not only connects Afghanistan to South Asia, but also links South Asia to Central Asian countries making Afghanistan a land-bridge.

Conclusion

The Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process has been a significant and useful regional multilateral process. It is directed to bring peace and stability in the entire region by providing lasting solution to the crisis faced by Afghanistan. So far, six ministerial conferences have been held and the initiatives launched in the form of CBMs have emerged as effective tools in devising sector-based methodologies to integrate Afghanistan socially, politically, culturally and economically with the region and the world. Though, some CBMs are yet to take off, many of them have been quite effective in their implementation.

Further, it can be deduced that the HoA-IP and regional cooperation under its umbrella has started bearing fruits not only for Afghanistan but for the Central Asia and South Asia as well. Many ongoing projects, including Chabahar, CASA-1000, TUTAP, Five-Nation Railway etc. will play a central role in promoting regional cooperation and speed up Afghanistan's march towards a peaceful and stable future.

The Sixth Conference was another effort by the HoA countries to concertededly work and bring stability in Afghanistan. The Conference has added certain new dimensions to the ongoing processes, measures and initiatives with regard to Afghanistan. It can help increase cooperation in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, help de-radicalisation by sharing of experiences, enhance cooperation in rehabilitation of returning refugees and facilitate economic engagement among different regions.

The challenges faced by HoA-IP are significant but none of them are insurmountable. Greater cooperation and regular proactive interaction among member countries can help tackle such challenges.

The concept of HoA-IP has been useful in providing solutions to Afghanistan through the mechanism of consensus building and contribution of regional countries. It will be prudent to

take the initiative to the next level of engagement through regional cooperation benefitting cross sections of societies in all countries. The HoA-IP member countries are already engaged at different levels of trade, investment and connectivity programmes, it is time that they also explore the possibility of establishing Heart of Asia Free Trade Area (HAFTA). It will also give a real boost to regional economic integration.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of authors and do not reflect the views of the Council.

ENDNOTES

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Annexure-A
Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process: Participating Countries

No.	Heart of Asia		
	Member countries	Supporting countries	Regional and International Organizations
1.	Afghanistan	Australia	United Nations
2.	Azerbaijan	Canada	AKDN
3.	China	Denmark	CAREC/ ADB
4.	India	Egypt	CICA
5.	Iran	European Union	CSTO
6.	Kazakhstan	France	ECO
7.	Kyrgyz Republic	Finland	NATO
8.	Pakistan	Germany	OIC
9.	Russia	Iraq	OSCE
10.	Saudi Arabia	Italy	SAARC
11.	Tajikistan	Japan	SCO
12.	Turkey	Norway	
13.	Turkmenistan	Poland	
14.	United Arab Emirates	Spain	
15.		Sweden	
16.		UK	
17.		USA	

Annexure-B

Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process CBMs on Afghanistan¹³

The HoA-IP process member countries have been assigned different Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) regarding Afghanistan.

CBMs	Participating countries	Lead countries
Disaster Management	Afghanistan, China, India , Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Turkey	Pakistan and Kazakhstan
Counter Terrorism	Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India , Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan , Turkey, and United Arab Emirates	Afghanistan, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates
Counter Narcotics	Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India , Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan , Turkey, and United Arab Emirates	Russia and Azerbaijan
Trade, Commerce and Investment	Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India , Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, UAE and Turkmenistan	India *
Regional Infrastructure	Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India , Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan
Education	Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India , Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan	Iran

*India leads the CBM on Trade, Commerce and Investment.

*Afghanistan, India, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey are members of all six CBMs.

Annexure-C

Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process: Ministerial Conferences

Ministerial Conferences	Date and Year	Venue	Main Recommendations
1 st	02 November 2011	Istanbul, Turkey	i. Fighting terrorism. ii. Refugees iii. Connectivity
2 nd	14 June 2012	Kabul, Afghanistan	i. Political, Security and Economic Cooperation
3 rd	26 April 2013	Almaty, Kazakhstan	i. Political cooperation ii. Security and fight against terrorism iii. Narcotics and organised crime iv. Refugees v. Infrastructure
4 th	31 October 2014	Beijing, China	i. Terrorism and extremism ii. Issues of Afghan refugees iii. Economic development iv. Capacity building and support to the ANSF
5 th	09 December 2015	Islamabad, Pakistan	i. Terrorism and violent extremism ii. Promoting economic connectivity iii. Afghan refugees
6 th	4 December 2016	Amritsar, India	i. Identification of terror groups ii. Rehabilitation of Afghan refugees iii. Sharing of counter-radicalization experiences iv. Role of cultural heritage in socio-economic development

¹³ <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/education-cbm/>

