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Preface

About one year ago, the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai had called for a Loya Jirga to resolve the current problems in the country. Before him, some members of the parliament and some Jihadi leaders had also made similar demands. However, now efforts are being made for the convention of such a Loya Jirga on behalf of circles outside the government.

The issue of calling for a Loya Jirga is raised again by the former President Hamid Karzai. According to Karzai the only way to get out of the current problems is to hold a Loya Jirga. What are the motives behind such a demand? Will this Jirga really resolve the problems of the country? These are the questions that are analyzed in the first part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS).

In the second part of the analysis, you would read about the Seventh RECCA held in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. Although many regional and international conferences were held on Afghanistan in the past one and half decade, RECCA is a major conference of its kind, where dozens of representatives of the countries and organizations in the region and the worlds take part.

The process of RECCA conferences is continuing since 2005, and its seventh Conference was held last Tuesday and Wednesday in Turkmenistan. The agreement of the Lapis Lazuli Road was also signed on its second day. How much are the promises made in this series of conferences delivered? What are the achievements of this process? And what happened in the recent session of this conference? These are questions that are answered in the second part of the analysis.

Will convening a Loya Jirga solve the current problems?



About one month ago, the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai raised the issue of organizing a Loya Jirga. Karzai said that he had shared the demand with the Afghan government leaders sending a letter.

According to Karzai, we (the country) want partnership with both the US and the other countries in the region, but the US's new strategy would turn Afghanistan into the rivalry zone of the world superpowers.

Although the Afghan government did not show any direct reactions against this demand of Karzai, speaking in a press conference, the spokesperson of the Afghan president termed the recently announced US strategy as beneficial and in accordance with the situation in the region and said that the government respected the opinions of the former President. He said that the government welcomed any positive opinion that could contribute in the peace and stability in the country.

After one month, when the issue of convening a Loya Jirga has become warmer, releasing a statement on 15 Nov 2017, the Presidential Palace expressed its opposition with the convention of a Loya Jirga. "Recently some individuals and

circles have raised the issue of organizing a Loya Jirga and have sent their representatives in some of the province of the country. These people are not the government representatives and the public is not obliged to attend their meetings and talk with them,” said the statement.

The statement of the Presidential Palace further states that this process is not in accordance with the Afghan laws and the government officials are instructed not to participate this process.

The question is will such a Jirga be convened? And will this Jirga resolve the existing problems in the country?

What kind of a Loya Jirga?

Currently, the National Unity Government (NUG) can organize neither the constitutional Loya Jirga nor the traditional one because, currently, holding the constitutional Loya Jirga is not feasible. The Loya Jirga which is mentioned in the constitution is formed of the members of the Parliament, and heads of the provincial and district councils and until now even the district council elections are not held. Besides that, the parliamentary elections are also important because the official and legal tenure of the current parliament is expired and despite the several announcements of the dates of the elections, these elections are yet to be held.

On the other hand, given this legal vacuum, some circles are calling for the emergency traditional Loya Jirga to bring the country out of the current crisis. Such a Loya Jirga can be convened with the decree of the President, as the Article 65 of the constitution allows the President to call for referendums about national, political, social, and economic affairs, but the President is not obliged to accept the decisions of the emergency and consulting Loya Jirgas. Considering the current circumstances, the Afghan government will never call for such a Loya Jirga that aims at overthrowing, criticizing, and discrediting the government and calling for an interim government.

Hamid Karzai and the call for Loya Jirga

If one studies the previous US policies towards Afghanistan, one will find out that the Afghan government and particularly the former Afghan President has continually criticized the US policies towards Pakistan because according to the former President the main war against “terrorism” must be fought in Pakistan because the Afghan government’s armed opposition comes from that side of the border.

In the past, the US did not pay attention to such criticism. However, after Trump’s coming to power in the US, the US policy exactly shifted the way Karzai wanted during his terms as President. Except in 2001 and 2002, it is the first time that Pakistan comes under the US pressures.

Another surprising issue is that the formers President have a history of not accepting the consult of such Loya Jirga in the past, but now he believes the convention of Loya Jirga as the only way for the salvation of Afghanistan?!

Will Loya Jirga change the current situation?

On the one hand, currently, the NUG’s stance is not to convene any Loya Jirga except for the Loya Jirga promised between the two leaders of the NUG and, on the other hand, with the announcement of the new US strategy which was what the NUG wanted, the NUG does not even dream of raising an issue that can increase public mistrust because it is likely that some circles may use this meeting as a political tool against the government and discredit the government and, thus, give the collar of public will to their own agendas.

However, in order to settle the current challenges, if Loya Jirga was held, will it guarantee changing the current situation and leading to the right direction, particularly when the government itself will decide what will be its agenda and who will be its participants.

On the other hand, with the support of the former President, the convention of such a Loya Jirga is probable. And if such a Jirga was held, it would be looked as an effort to discredit the government and will be opposed by the NUG because it has already termed it as against the Law.

The RECCA Conference; the major economic session in the region



Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan, hosted the seventh Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan. In this conference, held on Tuesday and Wednesday (14 and 15 November 2017), the representative of 44 regional countries and 38 international organizations had taken part.

At the head of government delegation, the Second Afghan Vice President Sarwar Danish attended this two-day conference and discussed the issue of investment, trade, and transport of Afghanistan's neighboring countries and other countries in the region with the officials of the countries and organizations.

One of the main events in this conference was the signature of the "Lapis Lazuli Road" agreement between Afghanistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Here you would read about the process of RECCA, the impacts of its previous conferences on Afghanistan particularly the recent one, and the "Lapis Lazuli" agreement.

RECCA

Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan was an initiative of the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2005 and its first meeting was held on 5 December 2005 in Kabul.

Since 2005, seven conference of this series are convened. The second conference was held in 2006 in New Delhi, Indian Capital; the third was held in 2009 in Islamabad, Pakistan; the fourth was held in 2010 in Istanbul, Turkey; the fifth was held in 2012 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan; the sixth was held in 2015 in Kabul, Afghanistan; and finally the seventh (the most recent) was held in 2017 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

RECCA was established to strengthen regional economic cooperation, establish regional coordination for the implementation of significant infrastructural projects and plans focusing on Afghanistan and finally to ensure the interests of all members.

After 12 years, RECCA has now evolved into an efficient economic gathering and is one of the major economic conference in the region and is held with the participation of the representatives of more than 70 countries and organizations in the region and discusses the infrastructural projects. Given the high presence of the senior officials of the countries, this conference great importance is attached to this conference and considering the link of common interests, this conference is a reducer of political, security, and economic challenges.

How much are the commitments of RECCA fulfilled?

In the past six conferences of RECCA, many commitments and agreements are made including attention on agriculture, expansion of agricultural industry, trade, and transit transport, urging foreign investment in the region and particularly in Afghanistan, common utilization of waters, struggle against narcotics, developing short-term economic projects, effort to eliminate mistrusts between the regional countries to provide the way for economic cooperation, cooperation of the regional countries with Afghanistan to transform this country as the center of energy in the region, the repatriation of Afghan migrants and construction of

refugee camps for them, construction of regional roads and railways, extraction of mines, etc.

The Istanbul Process (Heart of Asia), the beginning of TAPI gas project, CASA-1000, the inauguration of Atamurad-Aqina railway, the Khwaf-Herat railway, the Chabahar port agreement, the Lapis Lazuli Road agreement and some others are the achievements of Afghanistan from this conference.

However, despite the importance of this conference, most of the promised projects and pledges made in this conference have remained on the paper and, except for some of them, less has been than to implement them. If the commitments and vows made in RECCA are implemented properly, on the one hand, the infrastructures of Afghanistan will be constructed and, on the other hand, Afghanistan will be transformed into the center of regional transit, trade, and energy in the region. Therefore, there is a need for the existence of a *secretariat* in Kabul for the proper execution of the commitments made in this conference. However, one of the reasons for the non-implementation of the commitments of this conference is the existing oppositions between the member countries of RECCA for instance, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

The Seventh RECCA

In the seventh RECCA, the participants discussed the progresses made on the commitments made in the sixth RECCA, strengthening of cooperation between traders and investors in the region, recognition of challenges and obstacles, assessment of the financial needs and investment opportunities in relation with the regional projects, facilitating trade and transit, energy projects, communications, transport, and women empowerment projects.

In the first day of the conference, one of the important meetings was on regional trade and another important event which was termed a new event in the history of RECCA was the meeting that aimed at empowering women in areas of trade.

Rula Ghani, the First Lady of Afghanistan also delivered her speech and in her speech termed RECCA as an efficient framework for the establishment of regional cooperation and integration and said that the Afghan women's role in trade was

then more evident and that by working shoulder to shoulder with women, they would strengthen the bases of the Afghans households and finally community and the region.

In the second day of the conference, the Lapis Lazuli Agreement was signed between Afghanistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. After signing the agreement, the Afghan acting Minister of Foreign Affairs said that the signature of this agreement was a result of joint efforts made by the countries in the region and the world to strengthen the regional solidarity and expand trade through investment on infrastructures, and improvement of cooperation and coordination.

Overall, all members of RECCA were focused on major economic projects and security concerns in the region and the discussion on the implementation of major regional projects including TAPI, CASA-1000, Lapis Lazuli, and some other projects was the main goal of this conference.

The Lapis Lazuli Road and its significance for the region

Based on the studies of Independent resources, this way, which goes back 2000 years ago, was one of the main roads of the Silk Road. At that time, the Afghan precious stones including Badakhshan's lapis lazuli were being transported to Europe, Balkan, and the Mediterranean countries through this road and that is why its name was the "Lapis Lazuli Road".

The scheme of Lapis Lazuli Road was an Afghan initiative in 2014, which was welcomed by the stakeholder countries. The Lapis Lazuli Road starts from Afghanistan and passes Turkmenbashi port of Turkmenistan, Baku city of Azerbaijan, and then Tiflis in Georgia, then the Black Sea and then Turkey and this way connects Afghanistan with the international waters and the Europe.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country and needs to find water ways for its trade and transit. The security and other challenges in the Indian Ocean rout urged this country to look for alternative ways for trade and transit purposes.

The Lapis Lazuli Road is one of the priority projects of RECCA and its signature is one of the significant achievements of RECCA. The following points are important about this project:

First, the Lapis Lazuli road is a cheaper, closer, and safer route for Afghanistan to get connected with Europe, because from Afghanistan to Turkbashi port and from Baku to Turkey, there exists railways.

Second, China's \$40bn investment is also a good opportunity for the implementation of this scheme.

Third, this route is much economized compared to the transition of goods through Pakistan.

Fourth, it can connect the Central Asia Countries with China and European countries through Afghanistan.

Fifth, it will reduce Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan and Iran for the transition of its goods.

Sixth, the Lapis Lazuli Road is also a good opportunity for Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia because their engagement with Europe decreased their dependence on Russia.

Nevertheless, lack of security and stability in Afghanistan, doubts about the cooperation of Iran and Russia in the implementation of this scheme, and unlikelihood of the transition of goods and other services in the countries that want to use this scheme are the main challenges on the way of this project.

The End

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Note: Please let us know your feedback and suggestions for the improvement of Weekly analysis.

