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Trump must look at regional security in South Asia

By KADAYAM SUBRAMANIAN
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US President Donald Trump has been so preoccupied with his country's relations with Russia (and to a lesser extent Japan and China) that he has found no time to look at regional security in South Asia ('the most dangerous place on earth' as stated by former US President Bill Clinton), where two nuclear-armed neighbors reside cheek by jowl in a tense relationship ready to explode into war at any moment. The conflict in Kashmir is getting serious again. And Mikhail Gorbachev, former leader of the Soviet Union, was recently quoted in Time magazine as saying: "It all looks as if the world is preparing for war."

In this context, the debate on South Asian regional security initiated at a conference organized by The Hindu newspaper in Bengaluru on February 13-15 assumes significance.

The Vice President of India, Hamid Ansari, inaugurating the conclave, stated increasing economic inequality worldwide has had serious social and political consequences.

Growing insularity, intolerance and discrimination, he said, cannot be accepted. The gap between the rich and the poor has not shown any sign of reduction. The 'business as usual' model of development would not do. New conceptual models of development need to be developed.

Ansari noted the World Economic Forum, in its Global Risk Report 2017, has pointed to the dangers of failing to bridge income inequalities.

In India, for example, the richest 1% of the population held 50% of the total wealth and the bottom 50% has control of only 2%. Rising inequality has led to the rise of authoritarian leaders, often with a divisive agenda promoting conflicts and threatening the security of states. The Occupy movement in the West, Arab Spring in the Middle East and the Maoist violence in Central India, are examples.

Hamid Karzai, former President of Afghanistan, in a keynote speech called upon India to play a more positive role in regional peace building. The new regime of US President Donald Trump is sending confused signals.

Karzai noted the need to create a strategic arc in South Asia running from Iran to Russia and China, with India playing the role of a pivot.

He noted that the US' effort to improve relations with Russia would benefit Afghanistan. He urged the US to dissuade Pakistan from providing safe havens to terrorist groups near the Afghan border. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif wanted peace with India.

Karzai said the statement of John Nicholson Commander of the US and other international security forces in Afghanistan, at a Senate Committee meeting in Washington calling for the US to take "holistic review" of policies on Pakistan. This meant the US would adopt a tougher stance towards Pakistan.

Karzai noted US forces had remained in Afghanistan following the defeat of the Taliban forces in 2001 to keep peace and security in the region. He suggested Russia and China should now take over the task from the US.

As immediate neighbors of Afghanistan, Russia and China must get involved in the "strategic arc" and help resolve bilateral conflicts in the region, Karzai said.

He said India should join China's One Belt-One Road (OBOR) project and merge it with the India-Afghanistan-Iran trilateral project on the Chabahar port in Afghanistan.

India was resisting Beijing's proposal to create a 10,000 km highway across Asia. India is also opposing the China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor (CPEC), which intersects with Pakistan-occupied Kashmir in Gilgit-Baltistan claimed by India as its integral parts. This should change.

Pakistan has denied India access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, through its territory. By joining China's OBOR project India could combine it with the Chabahar project in Afghanistan, which would benefit India.

Significantly, Russia has invited India to participate in a meeting in Moscow to consider the future of Afghanistan along with China, Pakistan and Iran (Haidar, February, 15).

The meeting would examine the report of the Sanctions Committee of the UN Security Council on the Islamic State (IS) recruiting fighters from the restive Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

The invitation to India was preceded by a protest by the Indian Foreign Secretary on the exclusion of India from such strategic meetings vital to its interests in Afghanistan.

Recent Russian overtures to Pakistan on defense matters may not have been to the liking of India. In January 2017, Russia refrained from joining the US, UK and France in sponsoring a resolution against the Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar at the UN Sanctions Committee at the instance of China, which supports Pakistan. India was unhappy on this matter.

Officials feel that Moscow's invitation to India to join the discussions on Afghanistan may not be enough to mollify India.

Russia has softened its line on the Taliban as a counter to the growing pro-Islamic State (IS) sentiments in Afghanistan. Further, Russia and China seem to be coordinating their moves in demanding a delisting of senior Taliban leaders who are designated as terrorists by the UN Sanctions Committee.

There are many trilateral and multilateral meetings on Afghanistan including one that brings together India, the US and Afghanistan. There is also the Russia-China-US-Pakistan Quadrilateral Coordination Group, which was to start talks with the rebel Taliban militants.

India, Pakistan and Afghanistan are together only in the Russia- initiated talks on February 15. However, they are together in larger Heart of Asia Conference as well as the Bonn Conference focused on Afghanistan due in the future.

India and Pakistan will likely be together in any future groupings on Afghanistan despite Pakistan's opposition to Indian participation in discussions on Afghanistan.

The recent and abrupt resignation by President Trump's controversial National Security Adviser (NSA), General Michael Flynn, may further delay the Trump administration's engagement with security issues in South Asia.

The continued tensions between India and Pakistan are aggravated by India's increasing closeness to the US. It affects India's traditional friendly ties with Russia as well.

Hamid Karzai's views at the Bengaluru conclave on India's important role in peace building in South Asia needs to be addressed by Indian policy makers.

The Narendra Modi government in New Delhi which came to power in May 2014 has inexplicably ignored the promising four-point formula for settling the Kashmir dispute evolved by former prime ministers Atal Behari Vajpayee (1999-2004) and Manmohan Singh (2004-14) of India and President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan.

War between India and Pakistan would have deadly consequences.

On India's border dispute with China there also has been inflexibility and lack of progress. Dorothy Woodman, a geographer who scrutinized the maps published by India and

China noted innumerable discrepancies in them and said: “Any settlement on the Sino-Indian border involves compromise” (Gupta, 1974:53).

Former national security adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said: “The current [Narendra Modi] government is open to the charge of strategic incoherence, of having a vision deficit, and forwarding a policy marked by much activity and energetic projection without an overarching conceptual framework” (Menon, 2017).

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