**Heart of Asia conference on peace and development**

[Muhammad Asif Noor](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/muhammad-asif-noor/)

April 10, 2021

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi was in Dushanbe for a two days Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference hosted by Tajikistan. The theme of the conference was “Strengthening Consensus for Peace and Development”. This was the 9th Ministerial Meeting Conference in the regional dialogue series held in order to build regional response to the peace and development. The conference was held at a critical time when the US promise of withdrawing its forces loomed close where the allies are still grappling with the threat that the ‘they might miss the deadline” as acknowledged by the US President. On the other hand Afghan government is grappling with the emerging threat of Taliban and wave of violence unleashing across the country. It is happening at the moment in the history of the region when there is an urgent need for strong reginal consensus for peace and development in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been a lynchpin to the regional peace and stability also considered as the Heart of Asia due to its strategic geopolitical and geo-economics significance on the Silk Road. Before Heart of Asia Conference-Istanbul Process, on March 18, Russian Federation hosted an important discussion on Afghanistan where the talks were held between Afghan government and the Taliban in Moscow. These talks were held in the backdrop of the negotiations between Afghan government and the Taliban that have stalled in Doha while on 16th April, Turkey will be holding a peace conference inviting stakeholders to ceasefire and settling the power sharing agreement in the war torn country. All of these regional initiatives are meant to complement the ongoing intra-Afghan peace negotiators going on in Doha. In Dushanbe, Foreign Minister of Pakistan has made his official statement during the conference where he has highlighted the important role played by Pakistan contributing towards the Afghanistan peace and stability. On the sidelines, he has also met with his counterparts from Tajikistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan and other countries.

It is important to note that the support from the regional and international partners is significant in helping restore peace in Afghanistan especially this ministerial meeting held in Dushanbe is offering a much needed momentum to build a consensus

The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process is a joint initiative by Afghanistan and Turkish government launched in 2011 with the main objective “Istanbul Process on regional security and cooperation for secure and stable Afghanistan”. The major aim of this initiative is to build regional consensus on resolving the regional challenges through increasing economic, political and security cooperation hence building on the connectivity amongst the countries. There are fourteen participating regional countries with 16 supporting countries and 12 regional and international organization supporting and participating this important initiative. The main goal of this process is to strengthen peace, stability, security and development in Afghanistan and beyond. This Conference has become one of the highly active and engaging regional alliance for peacebuilding in Afghanistan. The focused areas of the consultation of this initiative is political dialogue and consultation, implementation of the confidence building measures and building cooperation amongst the regional organizations and initiatives. There is a defecto secretariat has been created for this entire process in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Afghanistan where the Director General of the Regional Cooperation in the Ministry looks after the entire coordination.

There are three main areas of cooperation in Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process. First is the forum is used to have political consultations creating a regional consensus and synergies. These consultations have the potential to foster understanding to bring Afghanistan and its neighborhood in the Heart of Asia region to make work for peace and development. Second important focused areas is to build Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) among the leading countries. There are eight CBMs led by countries at the forum. First is counter terrorism led by Afghanistan, Turkey and UAE, second counter narcotics led by Azerbaijan and Russia, third is disaster management and environment protection led by Kazakhstan and Pakistan, fourth is culture and education led by Iran, fifth is regional infrastructure led by Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, sixth CBM is trade commerce and investment opportunities led by India, seventh agriculture development led by Pakistan and Uzbekistan, eighth is women empowerment. Each CBM has a desk at the responsible Director General office at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan. There is a comprehensive mechanism follow up process ongoing helping to build the momentum and materialize the opportunities. The over process has four main decision making bodies. Highest level is Ministerial Conference, then Senior Officials Meetings, third is Ambassadorial Meetings and Regional Technical Groups. These bodies take the actions in a cohesive manner to take the vision and mission of the entire initiative forward.

Initiatives like Heart of Asia- Istanbul Process are complementing the entire regional support for building lasting peace in the region. In the conference Afghan President proposed a three step process for the making, building and sustaining peace in Afghanistan while also highlighting the importance of Afghan led and owned peace process. During the conference his idea was that the process should be in a phase wise where he anticipated that in the first phase the negotiated political settlement with the Afghan Taliban endorsed by the Loya Jirga- grand traditional assembly of influential Afghans. According to President Ghani, this will also include the much needed ceasefire including the reaching an agreement to form “a government of peacebuilding with the framework of the constitution with a time bound mandate culminating in an internationally supervised and monitored presidential elections”. This phase will lead towards the phase of national reconciliation, reintegration of combatants and refugees, helping the country to define Afghan led and owned new governance, security and development priorities. It is important to note here that the idea of forming a transitional government differs with what the current Afghan constitution emphasis which is unacceptable to Afghan Taliban. The formation of this kind of government also differs with the fact to have elections as the base to transfer power. On the other hand US, one of the important stakeholder in Afghan peace process, put emphasis on forming a “peace government” which is again according to the fact that how the two side would agree but this should be meaningful inclusion of women, ethnic and minority groups in Afghanistan. It is expected that President Ghani will discuss this proposal during the upcoming conference in Turkey.

It is important to note that the support from the regional and international partners is significant in helping restore peace in Afghanistan especially this ministerial meeting held in Dushanbe is offering a much needed momentum to build a consensus. This ministerial meeting has also send a strong message of togetherness and commitment from regional and international stakeholders that there should be Afghan led and Afghan owned end to the conflict. There was a sense of urgency in the entire conversations as the conflict has been nearly three decades long especially as there will be 20 years of anniversary of War on Terror and 9/11 attacks this year. It is also pertinent to note that this 9th meeting has also sent clear message to expect a steady progress on the political settlement and both side’s especially Afghan government and the Taliban should engage with each other through serious and meaningful dialogue. This will not be happening if there will not be any compromises from not only both sides but global community. There is a strong need for all the parties to build peace by not resorting to violence in Afghanistan as only innocent people are the victims of these power games. We are at a juncture where there is a high hopes for peace in Afghanistan after nearly four decades of war, destruction. All of the regional countries in the neighborhood of Afghanistan need to play their constructive and positive role to help Afghan led and Afghan owned peace.

*The writer is Director, Institute of Peace and Diplomatic Studies*