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In News

ARF and Pakistan Asia

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Pakistan has ultimately been invited into Asean Regional Forum (ARF) as its dialogue partner. This is a significant development that needs to be seen in the changed security and political scenario after the end of the cold war and specifically in the aftermath of the 9/11 events in the United States of America.

ARF in fact is not an organisation as such; rather it is a forum for discussion and dialogue between those countries that are relevant to the overall security of the Asia Pacific region. The Foreign ministers of the member states sit together and discuss issues that could disturb regional peace and security. Nor is ARF a mechanism for Collective Security.

In the Cold War era, there were different security mechanisms for South East Asia; USA and USSR being busy in constituting their own spheres of influence. In the process, the region came to be characterised by perpetual conflicts, sometimes armed and at others diplomatic. The wars in Korea and Vietnam in that era are the examples of that.

The end of the Cold War called for new approaches to international and regional peace and security. Russia and USA were no longer adversaries, notwithstanding occasional difference of approaches vis-a-vis regional and international peace and security.

This phenomenon of transformation from Cold War outright block system, one led by the USSR and the other led by USA that was characterised by conflicts; to the one in which there were no blocks and no outright confrontations and conflicts, and at the same time the relevant countries still desirous of safeguarding their interests in the Asia Pacific Region, necessitated a forum where the leaders of the relevant

countries could sit together and discuss regional and international peace and security issues in a friendly atmosphere. Hence the birth of ARF in 1994 with the ASEAN countries as its members and Australia, Canada, China, European Union, United States, Russia, India etc as its dialogue partners. The foreign ministers of these countries sit together annually and discuss matters of regional and international peace and Security.

Since the inception of the Forum, Pakistan had been interested in joining it, but mainly because of India's opposition, it was denied membership. Why did Pakistan want to join the forum? This is a question that needs to be looked into, because the inclusion of Pakistan as a dialogue partner means that Pakistan's point of view since the last ten years proved to be right, that means that refusal of membership to Pakistan was based on erroneous assumptions.

Pakistan was of the opinion that given the fact of its geography that makes it strategically very important by way of its being gateway to Central Asia, it should not be left out from a forum that was supposed to work for regional and international stability because the attempts to that end i.e. to ensure regional and international peace and stability, might not be as fruitful as it would be if Pakistan was also included.

Secondly, given the situation in Afghanistan at the inception of the ARF in 1994, that was one of turmoil and civil war, and Afghanistan being in Pakistan's immediate neighborhood, it was shortsighted on the part of those who opposed Pakistan's inclusion into ARF and not being able to foresee the impacts of instability in Afghanistan on regional and international peace and stability, and Pakistan's ability to influence things in Afghanistan. Subsequently, we see the implications of turmoil in Afghanistan being given a cold shoulder, by way of Pakistan being

ignored as an important country for international peace and stability and by way of not realising its potential to influence the course of events in Afghanistan.

Thirdly, the watertight compartmentalisation of various regions and countries vis-a-vis security and international peace considerations in this 21st century is unrealistic. Events in one part of the world have implications for the other parts of the world. The case of Afghanistan is ample example and proof of this assumption. The neglect of Afghanistan by the international community after the Soviet withdrawal from there led to the rise of the Taliban. The rest is recent history and everybody can see what instability and civil war in Afghanistan has caused to international peace, stability and security.

Moreover, Pakistan has a long-standing dispute with India over Kashmir. Pakistan and India are important countries of South Asia both possessing nuclear weapons. India's one reservation apart from others about Pakistan's inclusion into the ARF was that Pakistan was not an Asia Pacific country geographically. This approach in fact proved counterproductive and narrow, because by the mere factor of geography, keeping an important Asian country out of a forum that was supposed to discuss peace and security in Asia is an approach that defies logic and the realities of today's international relations. Kashmir is a dispute that is very much of concern to regional and international peace and security. The prospects of a confrontation between two rival nuclear powers must be of concern to those who are interested in international peace and stability. Therefore, Pakistan becoming a dialogue partner in ARF was called for since long.

As is said that better done later than not done at all, Pakistan has ul-

timately been invited to become the dialogue partner in the ARF. This is of course the triumph of logic and the realities of international politics. This move is hopefully going to making ARF as a more fruitful forum. This move shall contribute to the ultimate dream of international peace and security in Asia and the world at large.

Reportedly, Pakistan has promised not to bring Kashmir dispute to ARF. Why did Pakistan make such a promise? Because India and its supporters pressed for it. Whatever the reason, let it be made clear that keeping Kashmir dispute out of a forum for regional stability is unrealistic. Anybody hoping the establishment of genuine and durable peace and stability in Asia without the resolution of Kashmir dispute is, to my understanding, illogical and unrealistic. Therefore, the influential members of the forum need to ponder over this point and make sure that Kashmir issue is discussed on ARF forum and eventually resolved for the realisation of a genuine and durable peace in Asia and in the world at large.

In conclusion, one can say that inclusion of Pakistan in ARF is a move in the right direction. This proves the fact that a realisation is there among the major world powers that Pakistan's engagement is necessary for regional and international peace because of it being a moderate and progressive country among the Muslim world, it being strategically important vis-a-vis the war on international terrorism and vis-a-vis it being a gateway to energy resource rich Central Asia, it being a nuclear power and it having a serious dispute with India over Kashmir that has serious ramifications for international peace and security.

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