**Regional Connectivity**

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The Fifth China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ dialogue hosted by Pakistan on May 6, 2023, was a comprehensive and all-inclusive addressal of the regional issues emanating from Afghanistan’s political and economic turmoil, which bears an imprint on Pak-Afghan relations and raises security concerns for China. The much-needed dialogue followed the UN conference in Doha on Afghanistan earlier in the same week, which excluded the participation of the interim Afghan government. Whereas, Afghanistan’s interim foreign minister was granted a special travel ban exemption by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to participate in this dialogue. The fifth trilateral framework focused on advancing political engagement, counterterrorism cooperation, and enhancing trade and investments between the three countries to strengthen regional connectivity.

The trilateral forum was set in the first round of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Practical Cooperation Dialogue held in Beijing on May 27, 2017. Since then, annual meetings have been held consecutively in Kabul and through online platforms to address the revolving issues pertaining to trilateral situational dynamics over the years. These meetings proved to be the breeding ground of the idea to extend China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) to Afghanistan, along with trilateral cooperation in politics, economy, and security. China-Pakistan relations strengthened through CPEC, and the idea is that similar ties can be constructed with Afghanistan, which can be a win-win situation for the three countries.

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Thereby, the focal point of the discussion remained Afghanistan’s potential as a hub for regional connectivity. The joint statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China noted that projects such as CASA-1000, Trans-Afghan Railways, and TAPI, among others, would ensure regional connectivity and economic uplift of the people. However, progress in that direction remains hindered given Afghanistan’s current international status and Pak-Afghan border security situation. This potential can only be unlocked through the reconstruction of the country and amiable Pak-Afghan relations.

Against this background, the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan collectively pointed out the need for relevant countries and organizations to lift their unilateral sanctions against Afghanistan and release the overseas assets of the state to secure regional peace and development. On the security front, they emphasised the necessity of addressing security issues that have an immediate impact on the peace and development of the entire region. In this prospect, the dialogue stressed the need to curb the activities of any individual or group, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which can threaten regional peace and security.

Economic uplift of the region is essential for sustained regional peace, herein, on the economic front, the conversation centred on the ways to explore trilateral investment opportunities for strengthening the industrial base and subsequent job creation. These investments are mainly meant to take place in areas such as energy, agriculture, trade, and border management. In line with the earlier China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Practical Cooperation Projects, an increase in the pace of existing projects, such as exchange and training programmes were agreed upon by the three sides. However, for now, the implementation mechanism of such programmes remains vague.

Moreover, the ministers discussed Afghanistan’s worsening economic and humanitarian situation, and exclusively raised concerns about the state’s dependence on narcotics as the sole source of trade revenue and hence called on the international community to assist Afghanistan in developing alternative crops. To ensure Afghanistan’s sustainable development, the trilateral platform reiterated its stance on the value of extending CPEC to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a landlocked nation that primarily depends on Pakistan’s ports for foreign trade. The extension of CPEC to Afghanistan will benefit the country in future cross-border trade and as well as inject some stability into the region.

The trilateral dialogue came at a crucial time. It took place after Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Foreign Ministers’ meeting in India which also honed in on the need for stability in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the dialogue aligns with China’s Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Development Initiative (GDI) unveiled earlier in 2023, which aims at acquiring world peace, security, and development, especially in developing countries.

Afghanistan and Pakistan both demonstrate a readiness to adopt GSI and GDI in order to address security and development concerns. China has already published an eleven-point paper on the Afghan issue and reiterated its unwavering support for the nation’s rehabilitation. Provided that the current momentum of these developments is sustained, the wilfulness in the regional diplomatic arena is only conducive to establishing and enhancing regional trade and ties, which are needed for regional stability and prosperity.

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