

## Summary

### South Asia Centre Meeting, 25 June 2020

On June 25, 2020, South Asia Centre, MP-IDSA, held their weekly meeting through video conference. The issues discussed are: upcoming elections in Sri Lanka, developments in Bangladesh, PoK and Pakistan, and the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan.

### Pakistan

**India-Pakistan Diplomatic Show-down:** On June 23, 2020, India asked Pakistan to reduce its staff strength to half (50%) in protest to the harassment faced by the Indian employees at the Indian High Commission in Pakistan. Pakistan agreed to reciprocate and asked the Indian mission in Pakistan to reduce its staff by half too.

After this development in a series of tweets Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Foreign Minister of Pakistan, warned India: "This country would respond with full force to any misadventure".

Most of the English dailies, including few vernacular media have carried editorials on the issue and highlighted that an effort is being made by the Indian establishment to demonstrate India's strength by conducting a false-flag operation against Pakistan. It is being written in Pak media that India is cooking up alibi through allegations of spying and reduction in the number of staff in the mission to launch an offensive against Pakistan.

The commentators in Pakistan say that India is losing the battle with the pandemic, as well as facing embarrassment at the border in Ladakh with China. On top of it, the Modi government is under pressure from the ultra-nationalists to do the hard talk vis-à-vis China, which he is avoiding. Therefore, his government is trying to divert the attention by creating a crisis with Pakistan.

**Fawad Leaks:** Fawad Chaudhary's interview to VOA Urdu on June 22, has caused a stir in the mainstream as well as social media. Although in the interview, he does not directly blame Imran Khan, he does enlist a number of reasons for the failure of the PTI government; first, the government is being run by bureaucrats and non-elected members who do not adhere to the vision and the idea of the PTI while the elected ones are ignored. Second, the personal rivalries between senior leaders (Asad Umar, Jahangir Tareen, and Shah Mehmood Qureshi) have badly impacted the party. He also pointed

out that the PTI government has six more months to perform after which it will be difficult for PTI to regain popular Confidence. Some of the media reports argue that the reason for going public with such views at this juncture could be personal, because he is not in the core team of the PM, and he might have a hidden agenda. In the cabinet meeting of the PTI, there was reportedly a heated debate about the interview and the PM is said to have informed the members that the internal issues of the party should not be discussed in the media as it sends out a negative message to the people.

Most media reports suggest that the carefully crafted image of Imran Khan as the savior against corruption has started crumbling now. The popular emotion being displayed on the streets is one of anger and frustration. Two years after the election, people are now questioning their choice. There is also a view that given his links with the deep state Fawad's comments may reflect the views of the powerful establishment. There are rumours in Islamabad that Imran may be replaced by somebody else as a PM.

### **Gilgit Baltistan**

**Caretaker CM sworn in:** Mir Afzal Khan has been sworn in as caretaker CM Gilgit Baltistan and was given oath by Governor Raja Jalal at Governor's House. Afzal, a retired DIG police, was one of the three candidates interviewed by federal minister for G-B and Kashmir affairs Ali Amin Gandapur in Islamabad for this position.

According to the notification, the caretaker chief minister was appointed after consultation with the incumbent G-B CM and leader of Opposition in the outgoing G-B Legislative Assembly. This, however, evoked sharp reaction from the opposition leader, Shafi Khan, who denied that he was consulted at all. In a late-night video message, the outgoing opposition leader said he was 'condemning and rejecting' the notification because it bypassed the law. He also threatened to launch a protest against the decision.

### **Afghanistan**

According to the local media, the Taliban attacks against ANA and police have gone up even amid reports of the release of detainees by the government and the Taliban. There were no major attacks reported against the US forces, which suggests that the Taliban are picking out their targets very carefully and hitting only government forces and known detractors of the Taliban. During and after and Gen Bajwa's Afghan visit, it seems the Western countries are now more tilting towards Pakistan while preparing for their endgame in Afghanistan.

## **Sri Lanka**

**Covid 19 situation:** Number of positive cases rose to 2001 and 11 deaths as of June 24, 2020. 1562 patients have fully recovered.

**Economy:** According to the Sri Lanka Customs Provisional statistics, merchandise export has recovered in the month of May 2020 compared to April 2020. It was US\$ 602 million whereas in the month of April it was US\$277 million. Nonetheless, year on year comparison, based on figures during January -May, there is 28.7 % decline in the export. The total export during January-May 2020 was US\$ 3.456 billion whereas the figure in 2019 during the corresponding period was 4.845 billion. The top export destinations during January-May 2020 were US, UK, India, Germany and Italy.

**Political Developments:** Following the Supreme Court's rejection of petitions, which demanded reconvening of the dissolved parliament, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka has set August 5, 2020 as the new date for Parliamentary elections. In the meantime, there is a serious concern in the country that without a functional parliament, the office of Executive Presidency will consolidate its power with the aid of newly appointed Presidential Task Forces.

**India-China Skirmishes:** From the comments in the Lankan media, it is clear that most commentators viewed the Galwan skirmishes as with concern particularly because it would sour relations between India and China compelling smaller neighbours like Sri Lanka to make difficult foreign policy choices. They would urge their government to watch the evolving security situation in the region and adopt a cautious approach vis-à-vis India and China.

## **Bangladesh**

**China wooing Sri Lanka through tariff exemptions:** China has announced tariff exemption for 97 per cent of Bangladeshi products effective from July 1. With this announcement, a total of 8,256 Bangladeshi products will be exempted from tariff, a jump from 3095 products which currently enjoy zero-tariff under Asia Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA). This is likely to provide some relief to Bangladesh government in its fight against COVID-19.

However, the Chinese concession to Bangladesh drew some criticism from India. Reacting to such criticism, Bangladesh foreign minister, A.K. Abdul Momen, said on June 23, that Bangladesh did not want to interfere in resolving the issues between India and China, but he expressed his distaste for the usage of the

word *Khoirat* which means charity in a news published in the Bengali daily *Anandabazar Patrika*, which held that China Bangladesh zero-tariff bilateral agreement was unacceptable. However, he welcomed the paper's apology.

The numbers of Covid-19 infected are increasing rapidly with the total number of infected people now standing at 126606 and the death toll at 1621. Approximately 3 per cent of the Bangladeshi population has suffered from unemployment due to Covid-19, as per a survey of Bangladeshi Institute of Development Studies (BIDS).

One Bangladeshi was killed in Lalmanirhat by the BSF. His name was Mijanur Rehman and he went with six others to Bangladesh Cooch Behar border with their cattle.

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**The following members were present:**

Dr Smruti S Pattanaik

Ms Sumita Kumar

Dr Anand Kumar

Dr Priyank Singh

Dr Nazir Ahmad Mir

Dr YaqoobUI Hassan

Dr Zainab Akhter

Dr Muhammad Eisa

Dr Ashok Behuria