

Did Russia come out looking stronger from the Biden-Putin meeting?

The meeting carried symbolic weight, portraying Moscow as a global power that has gained enough leverage to stand up to Washington on several issues.

The US has been critical of Russia for various reasons, ranging from Moscow's problematic human rights record to cyberattacks against Western institutions and backing strongmen in countries like Syria and Belarus, an Eastern European state. Washington has also held Moscow responsible for escalating tensions in the Ukrainian conflict.

But during the meeting, the two leaders seemed to have brushed aside the shrill rhetoric of the past — with Biden once calling Putin a “killer” in an interview — to turn a new page with each other.

For many foreign policy experts, Russia came out looking stronger in the meeting, successfully defending its political positions across the world from Ukraine to Syria and Belarus against the US.

“There is a general feeling that Biden has become the leader, who could not take what he wanted from Putin. Immediately after the meeting, not Putin but Biden appears to be the leader, being more anxious and nervous,” says Esref Yalinkilicli, a Moscow-based political analyst.

“This perception has been strengthened when Biden clashed with a CNN reporter during a post-summit press conference,” Yalinkilicli tells TRT World.

Kaitlan Collins, the CNN journalist, asked Biden why he is confident that Putin's behaviour would change. Biden raised his finger and said, “If you don't understand that, you're in the wrong business.” After the incident, Biden apologised to the reporter.

On the other hand, Putin appeared to be confident about how the meeting went, speaking like a philosopher. “There's no happiness in life. There's only a mirage on the horizon, so we'll cherish that,” Putin said after the meeting. But he also said that both leaders were still hopeful about the future. Both leaders praised each other's experiences, describing the meeting as “constructive” and “concrete”.

The summit has also produced the restoration of bilateral diplomacy as respective ambassadors to the US and Russia will return their jobs. In March, following Biden's “killer” remark, Russia recalled its ambassador to the US and Washington reacted in kind.

What Russians wanted

For Putin, whose country's troublesome acts have been mentioned more than 50 times in the recent NATO communique, the Geneva summit was a good opportunity to tell both Biden and the global community that Russia's growing influence across the world should be recognised by everyone. Without making any serious counter argument regarding Russian interventions in Ukraine and Syria, Biden appears to have no problem with Putin's vision.

"We could say that Russia appears to be the winning side at the summit. Russia needed a high platform to explain its political stances and the Geneva meeting gave that opportunity to Putin," Yalinkilicli says. Putin wanted to articulate Russian stances in front of the world audience, using the Geneva summit, and he has successfully done it, according to Yalinkilicli.

Geneva is also a meaningful location for both Russia and the US. Nearly forty years ago, another high-level summit between the US and former Soviet leaders, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, was held in Switzerland's Geneva.

Switzerland stayed as a neutral country during and after the Cold War. As a result, Putin was also able to send its political message from a buffer zone, reminding the world that Russia is still a superpower, says Yalinkilicli.

Another interesting fact is that not Moscow but Washington wanted to have an audience with Putin, which also appears to confirm that both the American and Russian leaders have an equal political status like the days of the Cold War.

"In the Soviet and of course the Russian tradition, a summit with the US president pretty much trumps everything else," said Leon Aron, Russia director at the American Enterprise Institute. Aron has previously argued that the summit would work in favour of Putin's leadership, giving him a better international standing.

"For them, the meeting proves they are respected and feared," Aron said.

No to a new Cold War

Despite Geneva's historical aura of the Cold War era, both sides say they have no desire to resurrect a new one. Statements from both sides have shown that the US and Russia do not want to have a new arms race and another dangerous competition on nuclear armament, says Yalinkilicli. "They don't want to fall into a new security dilemma," the analyst says.

As a result, they agreed to develop a new security framework for arms control, which was also a starting point for the two old super powers to reduce military tensions back in the days of the Cold War.

"This could be more advantageous to Russia than the US," says the Moscow-based analyst.

Except for New START, Russia and the US left various agreements concerning arms reduction. As a result, Moscow has sought a new security arrangement on a global scale

with Washington “not to put itself in a Cold War-like situation, where its weakened economy cannot compete with the US for another arms race,” Yalinkilicli says.

Despite highly modernising its army and weapons infrastructure, in the face of instability of energy prices during the pandemic, Russia, a gas-rich country, does not want to be the target of Washington, aiming to ease tensions with both the US and the West, according to the analyst.

While both countries do not want to restore the old Cold War status, the Russian press has seen one of the summit’s critical results as the revitalisation of “controlled tensions” status between the two countries, Yalinkilicli says.

“Russians wanted to have a summer with reduced tensions with the US and its allies. That expectation was also met at the Geneva summit.”

In the long-term, like Americans, Russians know that serious disagreements continue to exist, Yalinkilicli says. “They [Russians] are cautiously waiting for what will happen next,” the analyst says.

Source: TRT World

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Afghanistan — where lies Pakistan's interest?

By **Inam Ul Haque**

The Afghan debate is marred by misinformation, disinformation and manipulated analyses. On the one hand is the 'noisier group' — comprising members of CIA, Pentagon, the contractor community and at least 12 American lawmakers having financial stakes linked with contractors, and heavy weights like Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice. This group asks for an "inclusive political settlement", where "distrustful" Taliban should share power expansively with Ashraf Ghani and his cabal. Their Pakistani interlocutors hide behind cliches like "Afghan-owned, Afghan-led solution" etc.

They overplay the Taliban threat to the Afghan Constitution, Afghan women and minorities, citing the dreadful rollback of the freedoms, won by women/minorities under the US/western influence. Hardly a day goes by without an article/news in the mainstream US/western media, citing urbanite, mostly non-Pashtun Kabuli womenfolk, lamenting the potential loss of freedoms after foreign forces leave. They want the occupiers' protection against their countrymen... feeling no shame in occupation.

There is a perceptible shift in Pakistan's Afghan policy, urging the Taliban to reconcile "on international terms" for ceasefire, peace and inclusivity. This policy recalibration appears hasty and perhaps "forced". However, the consequent appeasement drive seems to have died its expected death, after Ghani, Amrullah Saleh and Hamdullah Mohib, et al kept sticking to their poisonous guns against Pakistan, targeting the movers and shakers of this change of heart.

Certain reinforcing developments include appointment of a US national, Dr Moeed Yusuf as Pakistan's NSA and the Senate testimony by David F Helvey (Assistant Secretary of Defence for Indo-Pacific Affairs), about Pakistan's willingness to offer overflight rights and land access to (any) residual US forces inside Afghanistan after September 2021. The last time, air/ground lines of communications (A/GLOCs) were offered in 2001, Pakistan did so after under UN Resolution and international support. The Taliban, naturally took exception to this offering, terming basing and support hostile activities. One hopes Islamabad and Rawalpindi are on the "same page" even if in different "paragraphs".

The other (less noisy) group of stakeholders comprises realists with deep insight in the region especially Afghan demography, political anthropology and social economy. These realists argue Afghanistan needs to be nudged towards a "practically possible solution" in the short-term, as its traditional conflict resolution mechanism (CRM) stands badly mauled by extensive social breakdown of traditional authority and institutions. They,

however, realise that future Afghan political dispensation should and would be dictated by ground realities, particularly the military situation. This group favours pragmatic policy rationalism over wishful thinking and non-sustainable goals. They consider ending violence and protecting life/property more important than trivialities like Constitution, women right and minorities etc.

Realists cite "humanization" of the Taliban by the US after decades of demonisation and the consequent Doha peace deal as indications of US pragmatism. They see President Joe Biden's decision to stick to withdrawal, despite extensive and continuing noise by the first group, as realistic. Biden had called the Taliban an "indigenous political force" as early as 2009.

Without getting into the "what and how" debate about the Afghan predicament, some broad conclusions need to be re-stated. Washington Papers had extensively covered (as commented upon by this scribe) the US strategic policy misdirection, futility of its nation-building, nurturing corruption in Afghanistan, the sorry state of Afghan security forces and drug trafficking etc.

The US had pursued contradictory goals of reconciliation, defeating the Taliban and establishing a strong central government. Reconciliation was/is not possible without Taliban, representing a crucial rural Pashtun constituency. Likewise, Afghans have resisted a strong Centre and the new state (if any) is "foreign to many Afghans" as it tries to displace and replace local, traditional institutions. Centralisation also leads to corruption, where elites are able to buy access and favour through elections... which produce imperfect solutions for most societies.

The second issue is of an Afghan Constitution that "reimagined the Afghan state, once decentralised but stable for generations, into a super-centralised presidency meant to rule every corner of Afghanistan directly from Kabul." Again historically, culturally and traditionally, Afghanistan was a confederation of tribes under Ahmadzai/Muhammadzai monarchy; where the king — an equal among equals — drew strength from the Pashtun tribes and not the other way round.

The third misconception is the role of women in future Afghanistan. Women do exercise immense power in the traditional Afghan/Pakhtun sociology. She is revered as a mother (adeke mor), adored as a wife (janan/sanamjan), nurtured as a daughter (gulalai) and respected as a sister (khorjan)... and protected with life in all cases. The 21st century Taliban leadership — compared to their older folks — read the situation differently, given their social media exposure and their stated dependence on continued US/western financials, and intelligence/military support (against ISIS) etc.

That brings us to the revealed US behaviour of "leaving but not leaving Afghanistan." If media reports are to be believed, the US plans to leave behind an army of paid contractors to outsource the war inside Afghanistan after September 2021. Reportedly, a private security company (Triple Canopy with Constellis as its parent company. Constellis owns

Academi, the new name for Blackwater) is hiring armed guards for Afghanistan deployment. The withdrawal also does not include "some" special forces.

US, France and Germany are already cultivating Ahmed Massoud, 32, the Sandhurst educated son of late Ahmed Shah Massoud, for intelligence-gathering... much like they cultivated his father, the fabled lion of Panjshir.

The US is also contacting regional countries for bases (possibly Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) and logistics (Pakistan) to retain the ability to respond inside Afghanistan. This is ostensibly aimed at bolstering Ghani, hedging against Taliban take-over, pressurising Pakistan, keeping cost-effective presence in the region to watch China and Russia, and placate the noisy group.

For Pakistan, this situation offers certain lessons and pointers. First, any local or foreign grouping to coax/challenge Taliban would be at best a time-sensitive irritation akin to the dying pangs of a failed order. Aligning with it (directly or indirectly) is bad strategy and reinforcing failure.

Second, only Afghan Taliban can keep Afghanistan under order, united and peaceful. The US/West is hedging just to see their efficacy. Taliban challengers (ISIS, RAW, NDS, US-backed strongmen) do not have any chance, just like the 50-nation alliance in the 20 long years.

Third, the Taliban enjoy the strength of their cause (national liberation); have the will to fight and die for it and; are "their own men". Being rational, they take advice "as needed", according to recent social media interview of their spokesman, Sohail Shaheen. Leverages have changed with altered military balance. Withdrawing our support at this critical time (if so) would go in their long historic memory as another betrayal.

Fourth, re-orienting a long-held policy midway (if so) is poor strategy and recipe for disaster. Alienating the Taliban and their consequent alliance with TTP is never in our interest. India would be the ultimate beneficiary.

Fifth, a sharia-complaint future political order in Afghanistan under Taliban should not be our concern, as we have all along supported an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" solution. Some U-turns are tricky and consequential.

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Breaking the stereotype

Women are not fragile

By **Sana Ahmed**

Usually, we have seen the term written on glass items "Fragile handle it with care." The same is the case in our societies. We started to believe that the women around us are weak, fragile, and incompetent to be in the top leadership. Women from all backgrounds or professions are considered vulnerable and less suited to top positions no matter how hard they fight against societal stereotypes. But they received compliments of less competence and emotional vulnerability.

It doesn't matter whether you are a woman of the West, like Hillary Clinton, who received the compliments from a male competitor (Trump) for having less stamina to be US President. Or you are a Daughter of East, Benazir Bhutto, against whom the slogan was arose that a woman as a ruler was not acceptable. Years later, this mentality still dominates our societal mindset. Up to this time, women are perceived as weak, fragile, and not brave enough to make bold decisions, which severely damages the impression of women as leaders.

Pakistan has a complicated history regarding women and gender, where people fail to recognize that feminism is not an alien or anti-Islamic concept. Mostly, in Pakistan people misinterpreted the word feminism. People made this concept so controversial and mixed up with vulgarity, totally forgetting that Islam is much more conscious about women's status in society and considered women an integral part of the community.

Islam repudiates this understanding that women are fragile and less competent to compete with men. Moving forward, Islam had the example of Hazrat Khadija, who was the wealthiest woman of Makkah who ran her business all alone from Damascus to Hijaz very successfully, which shows that gender does not determine your capability or capacity to do something.

Feminism only demands equal rights for women from the floor of the legislature to the domestic sphere.

The feminist approach develops on several phenomena. The main focus is exclusion of women from public and world politics. The practical manifestation is The Prince and The Leviathan in which war is defined only by the male perspective.

The reality depicts something entirely different. The question raised by the feminist school of thought In war the female is going to be affected the most. For instance, if a male dies in war he left behind women who are going to suffer after his death. Moreover, rape has been used as a strategy of war; which countries use to show their powerful muscle, hurts women the most. According to UNSC 1370, the conflicts of Afghanistan and Syria must

be resolved through the perspective of women. The absence of women decision-makers in male-dominant societies has created so many problems for women. So, equal representation is viable for women in conflict to indulge them in world politics. This is ultimately what women empowerment means.

In 2019, there is a statement from Rula Ghani, that in the Afghan peace process, women must be given an equal part because decades-long war inflicted damage on women in the life of the common women of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, there is no defined rule for the women in Pakistan which defines what security problems they are facing, or what decisions are taken by men on their behalf. FORMANCE

As far as an Eastern girl is concerned, it is acceptable to slaughter her in the name of honour, but it is not tolerable if she goes against the culture in which she was born. Literature has evidence that "Nero played the fiddle while Rome burned," here in Pakistan, and under the patriarchal system, many of us watch this Rome burning every day, every hour, silently with the ashes of billions of dreams of women in their fist. It is a fact that womanhood in Pakistan is suffering and being watched supinely. Moreover, in a recent report of the World Health organization, seven out of ten leading-edge workers in the health sector are women, but society still accused women of being fragile and unable to fight on the frontlines.

According to the report Understanding domestic violence in India during Covid-19, domestic violence in India increased due to lack of economic performance, social problems, and psychological issues men faced. The women peace and security index illustrates that Pakistan is on 164 of 167 countries, while Yemen and Syria is on 165 and 166, which are war torn areas.

In the Subcontinent, colonial powers and their capitalist system leave a dark impact on women and their societal status. In pre-colonial times women had a prestigious role in society, just like men. But the circumstances in the Subcontinent changed after the arrival of the East India Company and of British rule. Unlike many other things, the British decree brings a drastic change in their custom and tradition. In Europe, the status of men was high. But in the Subcontinent, before the arrival of British, men and women had equal status and responsibilities in society.

In the pre-colonial system, women play a vital role in social matters. They were custodians of the teaching traditions, culture, fishing, and hunting, and due to this reason, they were not financially dependent on their men. Many of them were judges, which are free to give their opinion on different matters. At that time, the concept of a male-dominant judiciary did not exist; the women's voice had as much credibility as men's. Following that, pre-colonial societies were matrilineal, which means wealth and power were transferred through women to the new generation. Women were honored and respected for the unique roles they were playing in society. Before colonialization, women were part of the Women Councils, in which, just like male chiefs, they made influential decisions on critical

matters. Women at that time were part of the decision-making bodies because they were wise, they nurtured families and knew what was best for the whole village and society. After the arrival of colonial powers they ignored the role of women completely and insisted on negotiating with men on important matters. After the implementation of this, women eventually disappeared from the mainstream role and British defined their specific rule under which they had to live, which dramatically changed the roles, rights, and privileges of women in society.

In the scenario in Pakistan it is believed that "Feminist are those who dare to breaking the silence of discrimination, oppression, and violence." From the time of independence women have been facing various types of discrimination and treated as second-class citizens of the country just because of their gender.

Women are battling against the exploitative treatment of their male counterparts to gain equality in the economic and political sphere of their lives. It is a fact that gender-based discrimination exists beyond doubt and it is hard for women to speak up against this suffering. The main issue is that often girls underestimate their own strength and boys overestimate theirs. People insist that women cannot handle the basic framework of responsibilities, just like the idea that they are less mentally and emotionally stable as compared to men to hold the responsibilities, insisting that women are fundamentally weak in nature.

This is a common narrative that people taught them that they are weak; and they started to act as if it was correct. Most females in Pakistan internalize their suffering due to fear of society and lack of education. In addition to this, people usually set limits for their daughters by saying, "You are a girl and girls can't do this," in our society, people from the very beginning set certain limits for their daughters by legitimizing everything for their sons. Thus women internalize about male strength and female weakness, totally forgetting the fact girls can hit a puck as high as boys can. Certainly, when all power appears the sole domain of men, women started to question their competence, capabilities and then accepted society's distress narratives. This all happens as a result of lack of education and literacy, and women are unaware they are living in democratic country in which the Constitution has given the right to speak against injustice and discrimination. For women it is not too late to discover what they can really do. To stand up, women need to refuse to bow down.

Any woman is not independent unless she is educated and has her own identity. Women should gather their inner strength and not allow their fears to bring them down, because predators always gain strength from fear.

"With the pen of bravery women need to rewrite their stories."

Quantum Reality — does mass exist?

Ever since the 1960s Double Slit Experiment, reality has not been the same

By **Aneela Shahzad**

Ever since the 1960s Double Slit Experiment (DSE), reality has not been the same. The fact that single electrons shot through a setting of two slits, accumulatively made a wave-pattern on the screen, but when a beam of detector light was put across the slits, the wave function of the electrons collapsed and they behaved as particles again — has led to two conclusions, one that particles have a dual particle/wave behaviour, and the other that electrons or quantum particles change their behaviour when they find an observer/detector in their settings.

In fact, in 1924, De Broglie postulated that $E=mc^2$, that Einstein had postulated in 1905, actually meant that as energy and mass are interchangeable, meaning that like all particles (with masses) can behave as waves, all waves can behave as particle too. Following that, in the Copenhagen Interpretation (1924-27), Neil Bohr and Heisenberg came up with the conclusion that light is neither a particle nor a wave, rather it is the experimental setting that will force it to behave either as a particle (photon) or a wave, and the DSE on electrons further proved this conclusion. It was also concluded that both the wave or particle properties are present in the substance, in the form of probabilities/possibilities, and only 'one' of them is exhibited, depending upon the 'observer'.

This 'behaviour' of sub-atomic particles and the photons of light, invites us to think if the aspects of matter that are 'observable' and that make the existence of matter 'real' for us — like their being particles, having mass and weight, or being waves carrying some form of energy — are all external properties of the real substance! A simple analogy would be like a person has both possibilities of a good or a bad mood in him/her, but only one of the moods is exhibited uniquely to an observer entering the room, probably because it is the observer who is making the person happy or angry — so is what the observer observes, an intrinsic property of the person or just a superfluous 'behaviour' caused by the presence of the observer?

In other words, is the mass of a subatomic particle, just a form of its 'behaviour' and not a 'real' property? Question arises that if the electron passes through the double slits as a wave, what happens to its mass at that moment! One would think that at a moment when the electron was passing the slits, it had turned massless, or one could say that it simply 'ceased to exist'. Interestingly, in this experiment the electron was made to move with

40% of the speed of the light — though a lot of speed, still it is not enough for the particle to be converted into a wave as predicted by $E=mc^2$. Rather it seems that the electron is at will to keep changing its form from mass to wave and back whenever it deems.

So, if 'mass' is a relative thing, what is the reality of the 'real world'? Perhaps, the urge to ascertain the 'real' has led physicists to come up with the Standard Model, which does not look so much like a chart of subatomic particles, but rather a chart of their observed properties or behaviours. Physicists have often said that 'nobody understands quantum mechanics,' that must be true, because before we could know what it actually means, it has branched into several branches that have made the comprehension of the ideas within it even more cumbersome — as if the more physicists try to find simpler solutions, the more they are entangled deeper in the paradoxical world of the quantum! Nevertheless, the human mind urges to comprehend phenomenon even when empirical evidence is not there.

One can say that many times physics works with reverse-engineering — like, if mass is not an intrinsic property of the subatomic particles, and perhaps if it appears with some sort of interaction with something else, and if that something is as widely distributed as all matter in the universe, then perhaps that something should be a field, spread throughout. That field was mathematically constructed as the Higgs Field, a field of force-carrying waves that should exist throughout space. And somehow when this field interacts with that of the electrons, their wave-function collapses and they come to acquire mass — and all this would be happening in the measure of plank lengths, which is on scale of 10^{-35} of a metre. And the discovery of the Higgs Boson in 2012 stamped on the validity of the theory.

So, a conceptual world that arises from all this, is a world of wave-fields, that are always in motion, because a wave is nothing but a movement of massless energy; and a world of interacting fields, as one field passes through another; and a world of mass-creation wherever the waves collapse due to interaction! Surely, as much as the theory and its math may be complex, it is a long way from explaining all the permanent massive structures in the universe, that seem to be unaffected by fields that may be passing through them all the time.

All this reductionism, which has been the attempt to find reality at its most elementary basis, and which was promising to find the simple 'theory of everything' that would explain everything throughout the sciences — seems to be getting more and more befuddled in its own perplexities — and seems very far from explaining 'reality' that seems to be playing very differently at different levels of experience! The laws of physics are totally different at the astronomical level from what they are at the quantum level, and from how things work at the human-level sizes. They are completely different for the chemical world from what they are for the biological world — and so far, the chemists, the biologists and the physicists have no grounds in common.

The de-substantiation of mass, however, does drag us into the thought that the material world, with all its sensibility, is just a figment of our perception, our imagination! If my mass is there just because all my electrons have to behave that way, because they are being observed by certain observers, and may behave completely differently in other observer-settings, then is this observer-setting the permanent, eventual, 'reality' that scientists are endeavouring to find?

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Creating a lasting legacy of collaboration across South Asia

By **Mushfiq Mobarak | Maha Rehman | Satchit Balsari**

IN February 2021, Covid-19 numbers started rising again in South Asia with official daily case counts rising beyond 400,000 in India, 6,000 in Pakistan and 7,500 in Bangladesh, straining health systems. The massive surge in India soon spilled over across the border into Nepal, leading to 'apocalyptic' scenes of overwhelmed hospitals.

The deadly surge in 2021 makes a regionally coordinated, evidence-driven strategy even more critical. If we are to move at the speed of the virus, it is necessary to construct multi-stakeholder regional coalitions to devise new solutions and frugal innovations that can be applied across South Asia. Is that possible, given the troubled history South Asian countries share? Today we write a positive, hopeful story about a new consortium we are involved in, with core team members from India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh jointly developing Covid-prevention strategies. The emerging consortium provides an example of how neighbours can work together for mutual benefit, despite political differences.

Every country in South Asia has struggled to ensure consistent mask-wearing to stem the spread of Covid. Beliefs, priorities, traditions and aversions to behaviour change are more similar across South Asia than we care to admit. These commonalities mean that interventions that are successful in changing behaviour in one place are highly likely applicable in other parts of the subcontinent. We have experienced this with the Grameen Bank microcredit model which was an indigenous South Asian innovation that spread rapidly. India's digitised social protection ecosystem with Aadhar IDs and Jan Dhan accounts serves as a model (albeit with cautionary notes) for other countries in the region. E-governance programmes in Pakistan, like eVaccs and Citizen Feedback Model have been replicated and provide strong models ready to be deployed regionally and globally. The new pan-South Asian consortium in response to Covid-19 evolved out of an experiment conducted in Bangladesh, that successfully changes social norms around mask-wearing in rural communities. The four-part NORM intervention was originally examined in a cohort of 350,000 individuals across 600 villages. A combination of free mask distribution, information, reinforcement in public spaces, and role modelling by community leaders led to large, sustained increases in mask usage that persisted beyond the period of active intervention. BRAC is implementing the model to reach 81 million people across Bangladesh.

The team is now partnering with several organisations across Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh to start adapting the model to fit each country's context, and set up partnerships to pilot, implement, tinker and learn. The Self Employed Women's Association quickly implemented the model to reach over 1m members in Gujarat. An additional 1.5m masks were shipped from Bangladesh to support SEWA's outreach to other states. Lahore's commissioner worked with our research team to adapt the NORM model to an urban setting, and devised new creative ideas to improve effectiveness. For example, they have prepared to deliver masks at doorsteps using Pakistan's postal service, and are targeting beneficiaries on the basis of billing information from utility companies. Philanthropists and private corporations are sponsoring the masks. We are re-importing some of these innovations back to Dhaka, inspiring further scale-ups in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Kathmandu.

Effective mask promotion requires visits to thousands of remote villages, and those same visits can be used to prepare for more effective community-based healthcare responses. To that end, a host of physicians, scientists and community-based organisations created the Swasth Community Science Alliance, committing to pragmatic, science-based protocols to manage mild and moderate cases of Covid-19 in rural India, where institutional healthcare access is limited.

NORM implementation teams based in Lahore, Ahmedabad, Peshawar, Hyderabad, Dhaka, Kathmandu and Delhi are learning from each other's successes and failures. The process usually starts with the the original research team sharing evidence-based insights with implementing agencies, as the implementers adapt the design, co-create localised implementation protocols, and are threaded together in a collaborative environment across countries where each implementing team iterates while learning from others' prior iterations, and all our sub-teams are connected in an active learning system that allows us to course-correct in real time. This coalition is poised to change mask-wearing norms amongst hundreds of millions of people across all of South Asia.

The Covid-19 crisis has increased policymakers' appetite for evidence-informed policy measures that can be quickly implemented to stem transmission. This drive for quick action has created some unprecedented opportunities for enhanced cross-country collaborations that are normally hampered by politics and mistrust. We hope that the consortium that first formed around mask-promotion, and now around science-based treatment approaches, and that developed quickly and organically without regard to national boundaries, can serve as a model for a broader and deeper collaborative ecosystem that endures. We need to come together to solve problems that affect us all. Let the lasting legacy of this pandemic be a new era of partnership in social innovations that can benefit all South Asians.

Beseeching President Joe Biden for peace

By **Senator Rehman Malik**

The Afghan nation, from a child to an old man have been suffering for ages. The children born during the beginning of war have now become grandparents themselves. Young children are fearful of a possible eruption of civil war post withdrawal of American forces. I have been giving my point of view through both electronic and printed media on the ground realities in Afghanistan. It is a fact that the suffering of our economy today can be attributed to the war in Afghanistan which has been depleting our resources both directly and indirectly. We are victims of the Afghan-USSR war followed by the growth of the Taliban, Al Qaeda and Daish which have been eroding our system. Hence peace in Afghanistan means peace in Pakistan.

As of now, the Taliban control 52 percent of the territory of Afghanistan as they have full control over 27 districts. The remaining 297 districts are partly controlled by both the government and Taliban.

The leadership council of the Taliban, known as the Rahbari Shura, makes decisions for all "political and military affairs" of the Emirate. It is currently led by Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada who is a new Amir in place of Mullah Umer. Haibattullah (is supported by his 3 main deputies, currently Mullah Muhammad Yaqoub, Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar; and Sirajuddin Haqqani who is also acting head of the Haqqani Network and supervises the insurgency in Afghanistan; he is the most powerful like his father Mulana Jalaluddin Haqqani.

The Taliban's initiative to include Afghanistan's ethnic minorities in the new coalition emerging in Kabul has been viewed favourably by Tehran and it can be clearly seen that the ice is melting between the two-arch rivals. Moreover, since the beginning of peace talks with the United States, several top Taliban leaders from the negotiating team have been to Tehran for consultations. It is also reported that Iran's special representative on Afghanistan, Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian, has regularly interacted with the Taliban's political leaders, as well as other Afghan political leaders, including Salahuddin Rabbani, the head of Afghanistan's Jamiat-e Islami, and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the chief of the Islamic Dawah organisation and former head of Islami Ittehad (Mujahideen Group).

These groups are all around Kabul and the battle for takeover can be triggered at any time. These factions are within the radius 20 to 25 kilometres and Kabul stands encircled today, creating fearful nights for the general public.

The Taliban assert their authority through checkpoints along key roads across the whole country. The Taliban members stop every passing car and passenger and question them,

searching for people linked to the government and if they find any, they hand them over to their courts which is creating unrest. The Taliban believe victory is theirs and they feel they have won the war against America and are confident that they will have control over the capital within the next few months.

It is worth noticing that since the past year, the Taliban have also stopped attacks on international forces following the signing of the withdrawal agreement with the US, but they are consistently fighting the Afghan government. The question arises as to what mind has America made as the last strategy and it is to be seen which side the Americans will throw their weight behind; the Taliban or Ghani plus the Northern Alliance.

The US does not need any bases in Pakistan or Afghanistan. The US needs bay permission for warships to cover the range for their cruise missiles to any target in Afghanistan which will once again bring Afghanistan under fire. The anti-American group will once again start their terrorist activities and we will be back to square one once again.

Let us presume that Kabul falls in the hands of the Taliban, that too with the consent of the US and other allies, then Pakistan will have to plan its strategy. It is no more a secret that Indian influence has crept in Afghanistan and it is giving \$1 billion annually for its lobbies to help them keep a strong foothold. In addition, senior leaders of the Northern Alliance are regularly visiting India to seek guidance from the Modi government.

As far as Pakistan is concerned, a power-sharing arrangement would be beneficial in Afghanistan for every stakeholder. Pakistan cannot afford to have a pro-Indian, single-faction government.

Pakistan needs to make an effort before the fall of Kabul to avoid the complete control of government in the hands of this faction as the national government can be neutral to bring peace back to Afghanistan and keep better relations with its neighbours. I feel that passing a resolution or any religious approach by any country will be no more effective to convince the factions in Afghanistan for peace.

Pakistan is the most critical regional player when it comes to ending the war in Afghanistan and the role of COAS Gen Qamar Javed Bajawa has been appreciated by all stakeholders including the US. The Taliban will not take any pressure from any stakeholder and their violence will increase in Afghanistan with every passing day.

We need to see how now the US adopts its further policy with reference to Afghanistan. We must be clear in our minds that the US wants to have a strategic presence in this region and it can go to any extent to achieve its policy line. We need to see if the US wants Pakistan as a strategic partner to bring peace or wants to repeat the policy of acquiring logistic support via ground or via sea. According to sources, US warships are already in the gulf near Pakistan since it already has permission from Gen Musharraf to use Pak airspace.

I once again repeat my suggestions with some additions to bring long-term peace after the withdrawal of US forces:

Republican representatives, White House doctor urge Biden to take cognitive test
The US needs to consider ensuring a one-to-one meeting of President Ashraf Ghani and Sirajuddin Haqqani with the pre-agreed future roadmap for the sake Afghan nation. The member states must ask the UN to deploy a peacekeeping mission to enforce peace. The US must consider working to establish an interim government in Afghanistan representing all factions and the present government and others. There should be an undertaking from the Taliban/others that they will not dismantle female schools and there should be a general amnesty. Let the interim government be there for one year and it should be headed by a mutually agreed non-controversial leader equally respected and having a good working relationship with all stakeholders.

India must be kept away from this withdrawal strategy to avoid its negative role. Pakistan, China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia may be taken on board as observers of peace. Sufficient rehabilitation funding should be announced for the rebuilding of basic infrastructure and educational institutions that have been destroyed in years of violence and war. The UN must pass a resolution prohibiting certain actions by the Taliban-led coalition government such as bombing, harassment, ethnic killing and violence against women etc.

My final advice for the American administration is to withdraw from Afghanistan but work out a withdrawal plan to block the internal tribal war before actually leaving Afghanistan. I firmly believe that a common strategy adopted by the US and Pakistan can bring long term peace. Crushing the Afghan Taliban will bring destruction and this will not save the capital. It is likely that the US will continue to ask Pakistan to do more again while keeping India as its preferred nation. The US needs to show more sincerity towards Pakistan in view of the past sacrifices of Pakistan in this war of terror. I hope President Joe Biden will hear the cries of Afghan children for peace.

The views expressed are solely mine and do not necessarily represent the views of my party.

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‘America is back’

By **Atle Hetland**

It is said that ‘all politics is local’. The phrase is accredited to the former top American politician Tip O’Neill. He said that politicians must listen to the people in their constituencies and help improve their conditions concretely. Politics should not be abstract and intangible, but about real issues of concern to people. President Joe Biden has said that ‘America is back’, yet, in a world that remains unequal, certainly so militarily. When the leaders of the world’s seven richest countries, the G7 Group, and a number of observers from other countries and multilateral organisations met in Cornwall, England, last week, chaired by UK’s PM Boris Johnson, they discussed international issues, but probably with a local flavour, indeed taking up issues of importance to their home countries and constituencies. Many issues are local, regional and international at the same time as international, such as banning of electricity generated by coal, reduction of the use of oil, and the vast number of other climate and environmental issues. The G7 Summit endorsed the aim of carbon neutrality by 2050, but didn’t present many details about how to reach it. Attention was given to economic growth, free trade, job creation and building back better after the corona pandemic. Health issues and gender equality were given due priority. Improved global responsibility was mentioned, with better regulated and improved roles of the multinationals.

All the G7 leaders, plus 23 more, went on to another meeting, notably the 2021 NATO Summit last Monday June 14, 2021 in Brussels, Belgium. NATO is a military alliance to secure local and international interests, notably defence, in its 30 member countries, having the policy of ‘one for all, all for one’ in case of attack from outside. In recent decades, NATO has also had operations outside its territory, such as in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and has been criticised for that as it basically falls outside its mandate. Recently, it has also increased presence in the South China Sea.

In the future, NATO should continue to focus on prevention of various forms of terrorism and unrest. Many countries must improve migration and integration policies. NATO must be in the forefront with regards to prevention of new types of conflicts, such as cyber war, political infiltration and more. As we know too well, NATO was not prepared to be the defence organisation one had expected when the corona pandemic struck. In the future, pandemics and other ‘unknown’ attacks should be part of NATO’s priority areas. Less focus should be given to military and other conventional defence—in spite of the organisation’s largest state, the US, depending on weapons and industrial export for its development. Most NATO members are also EU members.

The final communiqué from the 2021 NATO Summit mentions Russia as a hostile country no less than sixty times. Almost eight years after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, that issue is still a top issue blocking positive talks in the relations and the NATO-Russia cooperation

body, which has not met in the last two years. Even conservative Western politicians believe the Crimea issues must be put aside in spite of it being controversial to do so, and Russia's defence interest realised. Peaceful solutions to the unrest in eastern parts of Ukraine must be found.

If there had been good cooperation initiated by NATO and the West after the fall of the Soviet Union from 1989/90, the relations between the 'blocs' today could have been much better, even good. The current crisis in Belarus might not have risen, and it might not have become the symbol of Russia's geopolitical sphere of interest towards the West, that it now is, as also Ukraine is.

It is sad to witness the current situation, which has gone from bad to worse at a time when Russia needs economic and political modernisation and development—and when the West and the world as a whole should work towards reduced military expenses, not the rearmament which is currently led by NATO although in a time of the West's relative economic decline as compared to China's impressive growth and development, with 'systematic challenges'—and indeed potentials.

The Norwegian PM, Erna Solberg, has pointed out that NATO should not be too expansionist; she has also underlined the importance of good trade and other relations with China. Thinking as a local politician perhaps, she said during the 2021 Summit that she wants excellent cooperation with neighbouring Russia in the Far North, as Stoltenberg also secured when he was Norwegian PM. In the end, perhaps all politics is indeed local politics. Besides, much of the international and military issues of NATO and the world, indeed rearmament, are intangible, illogical and quite impossible to understand for most of us, certainly for me, and perhaps even the leaders—in a world that remains very unequal.

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