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POINT OF VIEW

2018: New Saplings across the Hindu-Kush!

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Where a rather detailed visit to the adjoining regions of Southwest Asia and the Gulf allows one to reconnect with the friends, fellow thinkers and civil society activists, it also affords a sought-after opportunity to observe first-hand all the vital developments. Dubai's unending sky rises, its boulevards infested with endless and often flashy cars, private residences surrounded by meticulously manicured lawns, and principality's Western food joints and ever growing shopping malls exhibit modernity with its unchallenged invincibility on this side of the Gulf. But it also hides the regional tensions and sordid volatilities across the blue waters, which have sadly become region's more apparent characteristics over the past four decades. Dramatic and equally traumatic developments including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Iraq-Iraq War, the Second Gulf War, 9/11 and the Western invasion of Afghanistan—longest of its kind in recent history and with no victors but endless victims—have bequeathed millions of widows, orphans and refugees in Southwest Asia.

The harrowing sanctions of the 1990s, whose immense cost in terms of half a million infant lives acknowledged by U.S. Secretary Madeleine Albright, had already put Iraqis in a nutcracker between a vengeful Washington and a ruthless Saddam Hussein. Subsequently, the second invasion of the country in 2003—immensely grievous and relentlessly illegal—, the rise of ISIS/DAESH itself a beneficiary of de-Baathification, and President Assad's refusal to accept the demands of the Arab Spring in Syria followed by an internecine civil war with insidious foreign interventions, have collectively left enduring legacies in the Arab-Kurdish heartland. The ISIS has been recently defeated in Mosul and beyond whereas in Syria, thanks to Russia, Hezbollah and Iran, President Assad defiantly remains in command, yet the militant group active as a death cult has expanded its tentacles to Afghanistan with daily bomb blasts claiming scores of innocent lives. In a familiar metamorphosis, the ISIS has shifted to places like Afghanistan and Libya and amidst undiminished Saudi-Iranian rivalries and contestations all across the

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Middle East it is pursuing a pernicious nihilism.

Whereas across the Oxus, Central Asian republics remain quiet but no less watchful of transforming neighbourhoods, Pakistanis are eager to develop Gwadar into a new Dubai, if not Singapore, even though their regional rivals and some Baloch dissidents are no less complacent in causing strains for them. Interestingly, more Baloch live just in the mega polis of Karachi than in the entire province of Balochistan that accounts of 43% of the Indus country. Balochistan's smaller portions, since the British territorial demarcations of the nineteenth century, form eastern provinces of Afghanistan and Iran, yet all three share a strong sense of underdevelopment and constantly being neglected by Teheran, Kabul and Islamabad where decisions are undertaken by partisan elite kowtowing to exclusive interests and their external backers. In Southwest Asia, other than the human and financial costs of seven-decade long Indo-Pakistani rivalries featuring warfare, secessionism and nuclearisation, relations among the three polities of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran are still deficient of mutual trust and cordiality. Afghanistan blames Pakistan for harbouring and helping predominantly Pashtun Taliban who, since their dispossession in October-November 2001, have sustained an enduring rebellion against the Kabul regime and the NATO forces fighting their longest and equally ambivalent war in the landlocked Hindu-Kush country. Pakistan, confronted with geo-political threats to its security from a hostile India and unfriendly Kabul, has been attempting a balancing game though keeping Washington and Brussels is proving as difficult in their insistence on "Do More" as is managing its own agitated bearded folks who perceive war across the Hindu-Kush a war on Islam per se. Pakistan is worried about growing Indian influence in Afghanistan and with President Trump incessantly critical in his admonishments and eager to register some triumphalism, has been steadily seeking proximity with Moscow while cementing its relations with a globalised Beijing.

With the United Nations and other multi-lateral forums such as the EU, the Arab League, the Organisation of Muslim Co-operation (OIC), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have proven peripheralised if not totally redundant amidst these regional and global conflicts, civil societies across the divides valiantly seek peace and co-existence. Mostly on the receiving ends of statist, ethnic, extremist and sectarian backlash, several scholars, opinion makers, journalists, women activists, human rightists and even some religious elements are seeking new paradigms to ease multiple human miseries. For them, Saudi-Iranian rivalries are as damaging through their pernicious Sunni and Shi'i henchmen as are the dire external interventions all the way from Kashmir, Afghanistan to Iraq and Libya, and Syria to Yemen. It may take many more efforts and even decades to let civic groups obtain some of those ideals but it is worth a while idealism that one observes all the way from the Nile to the Indus and even beyond. Apparently, issues like Brexit, Trumpism, dire situation in the Occupied Territories, generations of refugees in the camps or on the move, killing fields in Yemen and human rights violations in the Kashmir Valley may not augur enough modicum of optimism but given the historic resilience of these people all the way from antiquity to today's testing times there may be some hope.

The newspapers and television channels in the Gulf and North Atlantic regions are focused on the ongoing protests in Iran that began last Thursday of 2017 in Meshed—country's second largest city and a holy place for Shi'i pilgrims. Other than claiming a dozen lives so far, their spread to other urban centres and expansion in grievances from price hike to political suffocation is worth watching. These angry Iranians with a fair proportion of younger women demand an urgent reorientation of national priorities and policies away from fighting wars in the Arab Middle East to ameliorating situation within the country itself. They may be hushed up by official coercion but could also lead to more transformative changes by weakening clerical unilateralism. It is not just Iran, almost every country in the region needs prioritising their own domestic prerogatives anchored on participatory systems, egalitarian policies, empowerment of women and minorities and economic well being, instead of fishing dangerously in their neighbourhoods. In the same vein, Trump, Netanyahu and their backers in the West must abstain from fanning ethnic and inter-state volatilities and should strictly shun interventions, which have never been successful besides causing enormous human miseries and fragmentation of nation-states.

One may entertain reservations about what some call “neo-colonialism” from the East in the form of One Belt, One Road (OBOR) vehemently being pushed by President Xi Jinping. But that could also prove harbinger for a new beginning by turning several contentious trajectories into stakeholders for peace through economic interdependence. With the Chinese financial, political and commercial involvements in Pakistan, Afghanistan and further up in Central Asia, one could foresee substantive improvements in infra structures besides assuring millions of jobs in a region confronted with an unprecedented youth bulge. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), heavily focused on densely populated regions within the Indus Valley, and with Balochistan’s Gwadar being posited as a new and even more vibrant Dubai, plans to link China, Central Asia and Pakistan with the rest of the world certainly make a gigantic project. China, eager to ensure its energy supplies and foreign markets besides establishing geopolitical paramountcy, is acutely sensitive to political instability in Afghanistan and Pakistani tribal areas. The PRC has been persistently persuading both Kabul and Islamabad to develop commonalities along with nudging Afghan Taliban for political engagement with Kabul. The recent round of parleys among the Chinese, Pakistanis, Afghans and the Taliban took place on the 26-7th December in China, and despite the paucity of information on the outcome, even convening such a process is itself quite positive, especially at a time when President Trump is unilaterally threatening Southwest Asia ad nauseum with even more misadventures while trying to further isolate Tehran. Washington seems to be irrelevant to the fact that such derisory policies not only reflect an ignominious ingredient of Islamophobia, they may equally end up fortifying extremist forces in the region making prospects for domestic and regional peace even more untenable. In a way 2018 seems to augur on a mixed note of cautioned optimism and diehard self-flagellation across these Muslim lands.