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GLOBAL UP-TO-DATE

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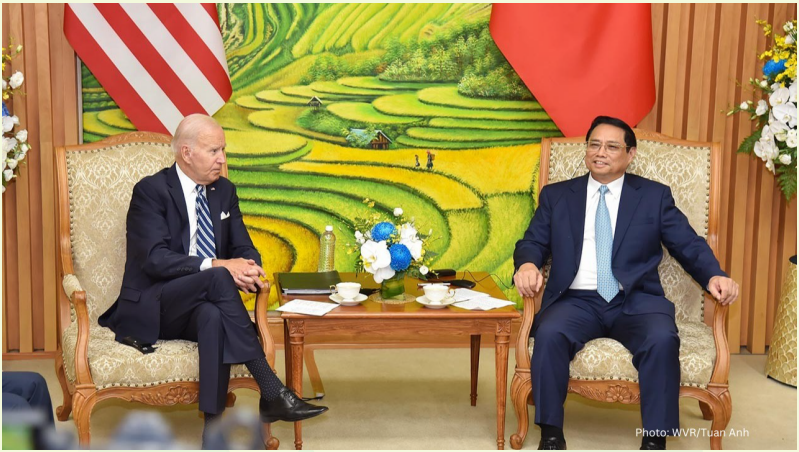
The world around us is changing rapidly. Wars, new turn in global politics, human rights issues are occurring every day, posing new challenges and concerns. Global Up-to-Date is an initiative by Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) which will work as a hub for explaining the contemporary global issues.

The regular briefs will focus and explain the issues related to International Politics, Economy, Security, Human Rights, and Development. There will be a monthly printed version newsletter containing briefs of all the contemporary global important issues. The online version contains regular updates of the pressing issues along with the PDF version of the newsletter.



Vietnam and the USA: Diplomatic Dance of the Dragon and the Eagle

Depanjali Roy



In the era commonly referred to as the Cold War, the term "superpower" held an undeniable allure, dominating the global geopolitical landscape. However, as we find ourselves in the year 2023, a profound shift has occurred in international relations. Small nations have emerged as significant players, reshaping the geopolitical chessboard. In this contemporary landscape, even the world's great powers — the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and China — find themselves in a position where they must seek the support and goodwill of smaller nations such as Nepal, Rwanda, Bangladesh, and many others in order to achieve their strategic objectives. The interconnectedness of nations through trade, politics, and the global economy has ushered in a new era of dynamic international relations. Each day brings alterations to the intricate web of global dynamics. In this age of globalization, the pursuit of advantages extends far beyond the traditional realm of power politics. Nations now vie for strategic benefits that encompass a multitude of factors beyond mere power projection.

In a noteworthy development, the United States and Vietnam, whose relationship has seen limited progress since the Vietnam War in 1955, have taken a significant step forward in 2023. President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. and Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh convened on September 11, 2023, in Hanoi, Vietnam, marking a potential shift towards a strategic partnership.The primary objective of this meeting is to foster economic development through increased investments and business collaborations. Both nations view this as the beginning of a "new chapter" in their relations, one that aims to mend the scars left by the Vietnam War.

Notably, the U.S. seeks to establish a stronger foothold in Asia through this burgeoning relationship.During his visit, President Biden engaged with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and participated in a business forum. The discussions revolved around enhancing cooperation in areas such as cloud computing, semiconductors, and artificial intelligence. Additionally, a significant $7.8 billion deal between Boeing and Vietnam Airways was announced, which is expected to create 30,000 jobs in the United States.While a 30-year-old arms embargo is currently in place against Vietnam, there are indications that it may be lifted in the near future. James Hardy, the Asia-Pacific editor at IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, suggests that U.S.-Vietnam ties have been steadily improving, making the lifting of the arms embargo a plausible prospect.

In contrast, when considering the political alignment of both China and Vietnam within the communist spectrum, it becomes evident that China is resolute in maintaining its claims over the South China Sea. The issue at hand centers around China's assertive pursuit of the "nine-dash line" in the South China Sea, encompassing approximately 90 percent of the region. This expansive claim extends over several islands that fall within the territories of neighboring Asian nations.Vietnam, in particular, has become increasingly protective of its maritime territory, which has faced encroachment by the Chinese government. China's construction of artificial islands and its aggressive maneuvers in the region, including the deployment of ships, have strained relations between Vietnam and China. Tensions escalated in 2014 when China sank a Vietnamese fishing boat within the contested area and deployed an oil rig in a different part of the South China Sea.Moreover, Vietnam has observed the presence of U.S. naval vessels patrolling the South China Sea, aimed at ensuring unimpeded access for other countries in the face of China's territorial claims. In light of China's assertive actions, Vietnam has been compelled to reassess its diplomatic priorities and seek closer ties with Western nations. Despite differing political ideologies, the pursuit of strategic and trade partnerships offers Vietnam a means to bolster its standing in the broader South Asian region.

From the perspective of the United States, there is a concerted effort to expand its influence across Southeast Asia. Notably, countries such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines have established amicable relations with the USA. It's crucial to emphasize that the United States has been clear about its intentions: it does not aim to disrupt the ties between China and Vietnam, nor does it seek to interfere in Vietnam's internal affairs. Instead, the USA's objective is to encourage China to act in accordance with established international norms and regulations.In this intricate geopolitical puzzle, the role of another significant player, Russia, must not be overlooked. Russia's involvement adds another layer of complexity to the dynamics at play.The primary driver behind Vietnam's pursuit of a closer relationship with the USA is its strategic positioning amid the proximity of China and Russia. Vietnam recognizes its place within this triangular relationship and is determined not to be marginalized.

Consequently, Vietnam has taken proactive steps to seek partnerships beyond its traditional alliances and reduce its dependence on China's dominance.If Vietnam continues to cultivate its friendship with the United States, potentially supporting the USA in the Russia-Ukraine conflict by supplying weapons, it may need to reassess its longstanding policy of "The Noes," which was originally crafted to balance its relationships with major global powers. The evolving stance of Vietnam will undoubtedly shape the dynamics of Southeast Asia and its relations with Western countries. This emerging partnership has the potential to script new chapters in the geopolitics of Southeast Asia and beyond.

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict – Azerbizanin Gained Swift Control of the Nagorno Region

Aong Cha Ching Marma



Approximately 120,000 Armenian ethnic residents in the Nagorno-Karabakh region live in a state of despair, haunted by the constant fear of ethnic cleansing. While Azerbaijan adamantly denies any intent for such actions following its swift takeover of the region within a mere 24 hours, a recent offensive launched by Azerbaijan on September 19th has rekindled unrest in the area. The humanitarian crisis has now reached its zenith and has persisted for several years, with shortages in fundamental essentials such as food, medicine, and toiletries only exacerbating the crisis over months and years.

The Lachin corridor, the sole lifeline connecting Artsakh (the Nagorno-Karabakh region) to Armenia and the wider world, has remained under blockade by Azerbaijan since December 12, 2022. The Azerbaijani government has engaged individuals identifying as "eco-activists" to support this blockade for months. These so-called eco-activists encompass civil servants, undercover military personnel, members of pro-government NGOs, and youth organizations. Furthermore, non-Azerbaijani journalists have been barred from crossing checkpoints in this conflict-ridden area.

Commencing on March 26, 2023, the Azerbaijani government escalated its blockade efforts by seizing and securing strategic territory surrounding the Lachin Corridor, both within Artsakh and Armenia. To compound matters, Azerbaijan established a military outpost obstructing a critical alternate dirt road, further deteriorating the already dire situation stemming from the protracted blockade.

The Armenian ethnic populace in the region has long endured recurrent conflicts and actual warfare, tracing back to February 20, 1988, when the first Nagorno-Karabakh war commenced. Professor Stuard Kaufman, an authority in political science and international relations, has asserted that the initial episode of racial violence transpired in October 1987 during a protest against the appointment of a new collective-firm director. This resulted in punitive actions taken against the predominantly Armenian-inhabited village of Chardakhly (now known as Cardaqh). However, Kaufman's assertion lacks solid evidence to corroborate the reported incident. Subsequently, in February 1988, mass violence unfolded a few months later, which was more conspicuous and witnessed by the international community.

The First Nagorno-Karabakh War concluded with the loss of 28,000 to 38,000 lives on both sides, culminating in a ceasefire agreement signed in Bishkek in 1994, with Armenians emerging as victors. Nearly three decades after the inception of the first war, another conflict erupted in late 2020, with Azerbaijan gaining the upper hand. The second Nagorno-Karabakh War tallied thousands of casualties, further escalating the persistent decade-long conflict.

Significant transformations have transpired since then, including shifts in political and power dynamics. Azerbaijan's newfound wealth derived from oil resources bolstered its regional influence and garnered support, primarily from Turkey and, to some extent, the USA. Conversely, Russia's stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict has evolved over decades, shifting from supporting the Armenians in the initial Nagorno-Karabakh War to adopting a neutral mediation role in recent times.

The decade-long Nagorno-Karabakh conflict poses ominous threats to the residents of Artsakh, with no foreseeable peaceful resolution. The enduring racial conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis continues to inflict terror and suffering upon the people of Artsakh. Recurrent attacks, borderland seizures on both sides, and the application of diverse tactics and political maneuvers by each party will inevitably escalate the humanitarian crisis in the region. The question remains: Is there any glimmer of hope amidst this protracted conflict, or is the situation poised to deteriorate even further?

Beyond Borders: Afghan Refugees, Pakistan's National Interests and Pakistan-China Cooperation

Mohammad Nihad Nowsher



Shahzada Zulfiqar, a Quetta-based political analyst, suggests that the Pakistani government is employing mass deportations as a means of conveying a message to Kabul. “The main objective of this crackdown is to pressure the Afghan Taliban government to stop supporting the Pakistani Taliban,” he remarks.The current refugee crisis taking place at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border adds to the dysfunctional and unfortunate political narrative of the region. In the past, Pakistan has undertaken comparable initiatives. Seven years ago, in the assessment of displaced persons in the region during 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had released related data:over 600,000 Afghan immigrants, both authorized and unauthorized, left Pakistan and returned home. The returnees had cited excessive monitoring, unpredictability in relation to maintaining a legal status in Pakistan and the fear of being deported as the primary causes of entering Afghanistan. Such an evacuation had taken place in Pakistan in 2018 as well and according to UNCHR numbers, about 50,000 Afghans, of which some were in possession of legal papers, were sent back that year.Three years down the line, in 2021, Afghanistan’s political system completely collapsed. The Fall of Kabul officially spelled the end of the War in Afghanistan as the Afghan Taliban took control of the nation.After the Taliban’s seizure of power, an estimated 600,000 to 800,000 Afghans are thought to have migrated to Pakistan. This influx joined the existing 4 million Afghans who, in the years preceding 2021, had already left Afghanistan and sought refuge in Pakistan with the aspiration of leading ordinary lives. At this point in time, the Afghan population residing in Pakistan consisted of those who had obtained legal status (and been living in Pakistan for many years), undocumented persons and persecuted Afghans who were looking for refuge (exp. journalists).

Throughout 2023, the Pakistani establishment has been challenged by security threats, especially in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. According to Al Jazeera, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has initiated upwards of 300 coordinated attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa this year. The Pakistani government has maintained its stance that the Afghan Taliban is providing sanctuary to militants affiliated with the proscribed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which shares ideological alignment with the Afghan Taliban.Political experts have observed that the TTP has altered its strategy following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and contend that the said outlawed organization has, today, broadened its operational scope to include Balochistan.This year, the mentioned province has witnessed kidnappings, the killing of Pakistani officials and innocent civilians, and a sudden surge in lawlessness, prompting Balochistani authorities to declare a state of emergency.While this provincial announcement was made in late September 2023, it was promptly followed by an ultimatum from the Pakistani government in the first week of the subsequent month, when it was publicly declared that no 'illegal aliens' would be permitted to reside in Pakistan after November 1st. During this proclamation, it was stated that Afghans had, in 2023, been heavily involved in terrorist activities taking place in Pakistan, possessions of "illegal aliens will be confiscated, illegal business operators and their facilitators will be prosecuted" and that a government-assigned task force would "seize people with fake identity cards and illegal properties built on their fake documents."Since assuming power in 2021, the Taliban government has encouraged Afghans to return home and from this perspective, the exodus seems to be a win-win situation for both nations. However, the Afghan administration has also criticized Pakistan's actions, asserting that citizens are being penalized due to tensions between Islamabad and Kabul.

Pakistan has stated that the deportations aim to safeguard its national security in response to a significant increase in attacks, which Prime Minister Kakar's cabinet attributes to armed groups operating from Afghanistan. In accepting Pakistan's decision, the Taliban government in Afghanistan has appealed to Pakistan to grant additional time for undocumented Afghans within the country to depart, particularly as pressure increases at border posts with thousands of returnees congregating. With approximately 900 kilometers between them, the Torkham and Chaman border crossings are being used to enforce Pakistan's new anti-immigration policy and facilitate the repatriation of undocumented Afghans to their home country. It has been reported that about 300,000 Afghans have left Pakistan in recent weeks. This comes after Prime Minister Kakar's caretaker government publicly acknowledged that around 1.7 million undocumented refugees and migrants were still living in Pakistan. At both the aforementioned border crossings, temporary settlements have been established to accommodate returnees. Aid organizations have issued a warning that the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Afghans from Pakistan will worsen the already severe humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. They are urging increased international funding to meet the requirements of the returning population. The United Nations (UN) has also shared its viewpoint on the present situation.

In a press release, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) expressed deep concern about Pakistan's deportation announcement, citing the presence of more than two million undocumented Afghans currently residing in the country. Nevertheless, the message from top ranking Pakistani officials is clear and seemingly in cohesion. Zubair Jamali, the Balochistan state home minister recently stated, “Afghan nationals had carried out 14 of 24 suicide bombings in Pakistan this year. They are involved in destabilising the country and it won’t be tolerated.”

Balochistan borders Afghanistan and is home to Prime Minister Kakar’s political party, Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), which is one of the leading parties in the Senate of Pakistan (the upper house of the bicameral Parliament of Pakistan). Presently, several Islamist, jihadist, and sectarian groups are active in Balochistan which are advocating for Baloch separatism on the basis of the Baloch nationalist movement, history and Pakistan-China collaborations within Balochistan. Such groups allegedly maintain links with like-minded associations in, both, Iran and Afghanistan. In this regard, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)opposes Chinese investment in Pakistan and Balochistan, arguing that the local population does not reap any benefits.The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, known as CPEC, represents a bilateral expansion of Beijing's worldwide Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Balochistan happens to be a vital part of its agenda. Pakistan, approximately a decade ago, transferred the operations of the Gwadar Port (located in the province of Balochistan and at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz) to the China Overseas Ports Holding Company. This move is a significant aspect of the CPEC project, which aims to promote economic development and trade connectivity in the region.The Gwadar Port holds much geo-strategical influence for both, Pakistan and China, and has been identified as one of the most significant aspects of the CPEC initiative.Groups like BLA, though,oppose the notion of a Chinese-led development agendaand condemn Beijing and Islamabad for profiting from the natural resources, such as oil, copper, gold, and iron ore, in Balochistan.According to the vigilante groups, the sovereignty of Balochistan is at stake in the face of external interference and perceived threats to regional autonomy. Amidst the chaos, the Pakistani administration has come forward with its own plans and seems determined to achieve its own objectives.

Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Jalil Abbas Jilani, had this to say during the 2023 Meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of Government, “CPEC is a force multiplier for regional connectivity. Lack of connectivity is an impediment to regional trade, investment, and development. CPEC does not only connect Pakistan to its neighbour, China, but also offers all SCO Member States a chance to invest in our shared future and full regional economic integration.”It is of note that the Pakistani administration’s latest involvement in the Afghan refugee crisis comes at a time when the largest percentage of Pakistan’s external debts are owed to Chinese entities. More than a balancing act, the November 1st ultimatum may be seen as the nuclear-armed state making a stern decision. This resolution, however, is one in which history has repeated itself.

Call for Deliberation on Cryptocurrency Issues in Current WTO E-Commerce Negotiations

Aong Cha Ching Marma



The Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) has recommended the inclusion of Cryptocurrency in the ongoing E-Commerce Negotiations among WTO members. GTRI's co-founder, Ajay Srivastava, highlighted that "The incorporation or exclusion of cryptocurrencies, and the differing stances among powerful nations, will significantly influence the future of international e-commerce policies."

Cryptocurrency, or crypto, is a digital currency specifically designed to function as a medium of exchange through a computer network, operating without dependence on any central authority. Its introduction into the digital sphere has catalyzed revolutionary changes in our perception of currency. The security and decentralized nature of digital currencies have contributed to their increasing popularity due to their versatile features.

The growing popularity of cryptocurrencies has extended their influence across countries worldwide, significantly impacting monetary and financial policies in the global economy. Several influential nations, including the US, India, China, and others, are actively working on regulating the sphere of digital currencies within their borders.

In terms of the world economy, cryptocurrency is leaving its mark by enhancing the autonomy of international transactions. As of 2022, the global cryptocurrency market size was USD 2,191.25 million and is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 11.6% during the forecast period. Presently, the global cryptocurrency market cap stands at USD 1.3 trillion, according to Forbes.

The data underscores the escalating significance of cryptocurrency in digital trade. Notably, various prominent e-commerce platforms such as WooCommerce, BigCommerce, and Shopify are either accepting or facilitating cryptocurrency transactions, further emphasizing the importance of discussing the role of cryptocurrency in the e-commerce domain.

Currently, WTO member nations are engaged in two-pronged e-commerce negotiations, focused on a joint initiative and the e-commerce moratorium. The talks aim to address subjects including tariffs, customs clearance, paperless trading, online privacy, and cybersecurity. However, the absence of the US in these discussions, announced on October 25, presents a significant hurdle for other members in making comprehensive decisions. India also refrained from participating following the US withdrawal.

The ongoing moratorium, initiated in 1998, prevents countries from imposing customs duties on electronic transmissions and was extended for two years in 2022. India argues that the moratorium disproportionately affects developing countries and proposes new regulations to support the digital advancement of such nations, regulate imports, and generate revenue through customs duties. This argument has received strong support from nations such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

GTRI claimed that the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development estimates an annual potential tariff revenue loss of USD 10 billion for developing countries due to the e-transaction moratorium, whereas developed countries are only losing USD 289.

GTRI emphasized the increasing complexity of discussions due to the rise of cryptocurrency, a digital currency beyond the control of central banks. They stressed the importance for WTO members to prioritize discussions on cryptocurrency and its potential connections with ongoing e-commerce negotiations to avoid misinterpretations that may lead to disputes.

The ongoing WTO negotiations confront a crucial juncture as the GTRI advocates for the integration of cryptocurrency to shape the future of international e-commerce policies. The global impact of cryptocurrency on financial systems and e-commerce platforms demands immediate consideration. Recent setbacks, including notable absentees and disagreements over e-commerce moratoriums, highlight the conflicting opinions among influential nations. The ascent of digital currencies in global trade underscores the urgency for immediate discussions within these negotiations to prevent future disputes and establish a comprehensive framework capable of accommodating this dynamic economic landscape. The inclusion of cryptocurrency in these discussions is pivotal for shaping resilient and inclusive global trade policies.