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PRESS RELEASE

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: Role of Major Powers and Regional Countries



No country has suffered more than Pakistan due to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, having lost more than 5000 soldiers, hosting more than 1.5 million registered refugees, and economic losses of 100 billion, shared Lt. General (retd.) Abdul Qadir Baloch, Federal Minister for State and Frontier Regions, in his inaugural address at the two-day international conference on ‘Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: Role of Major Powers and Regional Countries’ organized by the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) and the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF). The ‘war of the Kalashnikov’ has continued to fester and create mistrust and suspicions on both sides because of a porous border that leads to weapons proliferation as well as drug exports. The post 9/11 policies of major powers for state- building have not only failed within Afghanistan, but have also affected Pakistan since they provided our adversaries opportunities to use Afghan territory to destabilize us, he said. ‘There can be no peace in Pakistan, if there is no peace in Afghanistan,’ he emphasized.

Mr. Kristof Duwaerts, Resident Representative of Hanns Seidel Foundation, also stressed that Pakistan is Afghanistan's Siamese twin, linguistically, culturally, historically and geographically, so it is a relationship that must be improved. In his welcome address, Ambassador (retd.) Sohail Amin, President IPRI, hoped that by bringing together views from major powers and regional countries on one platform, the Conference will help cement regional ties and bring important stakeholders on the same page in handling the evolving Afghan security and stability situation. 'Pakistan has been engaged in sincere and consistent efforts to facilitate an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process. Our collective war should be against the ideology of hatred, extremism and militarism', he said.

Chairing the session on 'Overview of Afghanistan's Situation', Ambassador (retd.) Aziz Ahmad Khan, former High Commissioner of Pakistan to India and Afghanistan, noted that the timing of bringing such diverse regional and global views about Afghanistan was opportune since the 5th round of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) for the proposed peace dialogue between the Afghan government and Taliban insurgents is also simultaneously taking place in Islamabad. He pointed out that while the situation in Afghanistan was dire, there is hope for the region since slowly but surely institutions are being rebuilt; despite threats of violence and brutality, voter turnout during their General Elections was almost 60%, with more than 2.4 million Afghan women voting, accounting for approximately 38% of total turnout. 'There exist strong undercurrents of change and efforts to establish peace which must be garnered.' He was of the view that 'While one must be firm towards insurgents, they also need to be mainstreamed into the political process.'

Veteran Peshawar-based journalist Rahimullah Yousafzai, speaking on a framework for political reconciliation in Afghanistan cautioned that there is no magic concept to make peace in Afghanistan as the conflict is old and complicated due to involvement of foreign powers and non-state actors. Discussing the fluid positions of Pakistan, U.S.A, China and the regime in Kabul, he observed that the Afghan scenario is 'primarily a waiting game', with each actor waiting for the other to either weaken, give up, give in, with no clear idea if the Taliban would eventually agree to negotiate with the Afghan government or not. 'Their annual spring offensive named Omari on April 12, including the suicide bombing in Kabul on April 19 that killed about 70 people; and the counter attacks by the government in 15 provinces explains the challenges facing the QCG,' he remarked. However, the QCG mechanism with its four-member countries hold the key to making peace in Afghanistan, he said, and all sides needed to be realistic and adopt a sincere approach to talks since there had been too much hatred and blood-feud already.

Speaking on the current security situation in Afghanistan, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and emerging challenges, Dr. Abdul Baqi Amin, Director, Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS), Kabul, shared that the war in Afghanistan is a war not just of armies and intelligence, but also a war of the international drug mafia who are still profiting from increasing global drug exports. He stressed the need for an Afghan mediatory group composed of Afghan nationals and academic personalities acceptable to all engaged parties, who can bring together their views. Furthermore, establishing a foreign pivot for the Afghan peace process working within the framework of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) and United Nations is important. Dr Amin also strongly urged the need of coordinated national pressure groups for bringing peace. 'Strategic think tanks can lay the groundwork for the peace through

academic programmes and research publications and even impact public opinion to influence regional and international policies’, he said.

Mr Haroun Mir, founder of Afghanistan’s Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Kabul, drew a painful picture of day-to-day life of ordinary Afghans. He stressed that the Afghan people, having endured decades of hardship, understand that improvements in the security and economic sector will require time under the national unity government, but what they will not tolerate is failure in fixing a dysfunctional government which has been unsuccessful in addressing endemic corruption and a culture of impunity. This is also a concern of donor countries as it could weaken their financial commitments. ‘Any reduction in funding for the Afghan government could negatively impact the Afghan security forces, giving the Taliban room to increase their offensive,’ he warned. The international community can play an important role and help in supporting and reintegrating the Afghan economy within the region because without a flourishing economy, there can be no progress and development. The new generation in Afghanistan is evolving, we recognize that Pakistan has legitimate demands, but the reconciliation process in Afghanistan needs to be given a fair chance and more time, more patience by our Pakistani brethren. With time, the phenomenon that is ‘Taliban’ might soon become obsolete, he hoped. In an answer to a question, he shared that no matter how the outside world views the current democratic government in Kabul and how it was formed, it is a government which is not based on a copy pasted formula of democracy. It is a government which accommodates all ethnicities and groups within the country and hence, fits the Afghan culture perfectly.

In the session on ‘South Asia’s Security Concerns in Afghanistan’, Former Chief Secretary of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Khalid Aziz, gave an overview of Afghanistan and the deterministic nature of its geography. Discussing the story of the region from December 2001 to date, he emphasised how Afghanistan is the gateway to riches of Indo-Ganges Plains. ‘We are children of our geography. This geography is pushing us into strategic policy making,’ he said. Stability in Afghanistan would bring security in FATA and Southern Punjab. The aim of the U.S. to launch a war in Afghanistan was to dismantle the Taliban. What was the objective now that Mullah Umar was dead, he questioned? ‘We are looking at chaos in the future. If chaos takes place in Afghanistan, it will naturally spill over to Pakistan,’ he predicted.

Ms Farhana Asif, Director (Afghanistan) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, discussed the Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process which was established in 2011 at the initiative of Afghanistan and Turkey to foster regional cooperation and connectivity. Giving an overview of the multi-tiered approach of the process, she briefly outlined the Ministerial meetings held in Turkey (2011), Kabul (2012), Almaty (2013), Beijing (2014), and Islamabad (2015). The fact that the process is Afghan-centered is one of its biggest strengths, she said. Its intrinsic link between peace and economic progress and it complementing existing mechanisms are also fundamental. However, the complexity of Afghanistan’s situation; insufficient organisational support and funding; and the transition from a conceptual framework to tangible results are impending challenges. ‘It is important that the process should retain its distinctive character with deepening cooperation through CBMs and projects of connectivity,’ she proposed. Dr. Muhamad Mujeeb Afzal, Assistant Professor, School of Politics and IR, Quaid-e-Azam University, while discussing the role of India in Afghanistan said that India had been using soft power by investing in

infrastructure projects in the country. India is the country's fifth largest donor, he informed. 'Indian role in Afghanistan is a partial success story, it is trying to become a benign regional power,' he argued. The session was chaired by Major General Noel Israel Khokhar, Director General, Institute for Strategic Studies Research and Analysis (ISSRA), National Defence University (NDU), Pakistan.

Conference delegates unanimously agreed that Afghanistan was at a critical junction in its turbulent history, a junction where a political settlement of the conflict is not only the desire of regional countries, but is also the desire of the Afghan people. The Conference which concludes on May 19, 2016 was well attended by academia, media, students as well as government officials and policy experts.