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Report – Public Talk

“How Pakistan and the US Can Provide a Plan B for Afghanistan”

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The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a Public Talk on November 12, 2019 under its Distinguished Lecture Series titled, “*How Pakistan and the US Can Provide a Plan B for Afghanistan*”. Dr. Marvin G. Weinbaum, Director, Afghanistan and Pakistan Program at the Middle East Institute, Washington, DC was the guest speaker at the occasion.

In his opening remarks, the Director General of ISSI Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry stated that Dr. Weinbaum has offered to speak to us on a topic that has kept the policy makers engaged for nearly four decades. Despite nearly two decades of rampant violence in Afghanistan, the last few months witnessed signs of hope for a political settlement to end the Afghan war. After nine rounds of direct talks between the US and the Taliban via the Doha talks, it appeared that the complex Afghan jigsaw might finally come together. However, this optimism came to an abrupt end when President Trump declared that the talks with the Taliban were effectively 'dead'.

President Trump’s rationale for cancelling the talks remains unclear considering the fact that the Taliban’s violence and insurgency was not novel. Moreover, an 'agreement in principle' was reached over the Doha rounds even during the absence of a ceasefire. Hence once again, the Afghan peace process finds itself in a limbo adding to the miseries of the Afghan people.

So, where do we go from here? Everyone is convinced that we need a negotiated peace settlement. Everyone is also aware that a peace settlement requires an agreement on all relevant pieces of the puzzle: withdrawal of foreign troops, ceasefire, future political set up, and a regional consensus to ensure that Afghan soil is not used by outsiders for their own strategic objectives. What if this route does not make progress. Is there a plan B? If so, how would that look like? Can the US and Pakistan facilitate a peace settlement, whether through plan A or plan B? These are the questions that we hope to talk about in this public talk today.

Islamabad believes that a peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in the best interest of Pakistan and the region. Islamabad further believes that a critical first step towards the peace settlement is a credible intra-Afghan dialogue amongst all political and warring factions in Afghanistan, especially between the two principal stakeholders, namely the Afghan government and Taliban.

Of late, there have been several initiatives to foster intra-Afghan dialogue. In June, 2019, Pakistan hosted an intra-Afghan dialogue in Murree, where many influential Afghan leaders took

part (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Haneef Atmar, Atta Mohammad Noor, Abdul Latif Pedram, Mohammad Mohaqeq, Ustad Atta Mohammad Noor, Mohammad Karim Khalili and members from the Afghan high peace council). More recently, in early October 2019, Islamabad hosted a Taliban delegation headed by Mullah Baradar and also facilitated Taliban's meeting with US Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad in Islamabad with the hope that talks could be resumed.

US, China, Pakistan, and Russia came together in the recently held Moscow talks where all four sides agreed that 'negotiations' are the only road to peace in Afghanistan, including an early resumption of direct US talks with the Taliban. China has also offered to host an intra-Afghan dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Beijing. While no specific date has been announced, it is Pakistan's sincere hope that both parties avail of that opportunity to engage in peace talks.

Pakistan and the US have a crucial role to play in the future of Afghanistan. Pakistan had welcomed the decision of direct talks between the US and the Taliban. We were satisfied when the direct talks started, and we were disappointed when the talks, having made substantial progress, got stalled. We are however, convinced of the continuing imperative of urgent resumption of the peace talks.

The question is whether the two principal stakeholders, namely the Afghan government and the Taliban, engage in a serious meaningful dialogue towards a peace settlement. The recently held elections, the results of which are not yet known, have added to the atmosphere of uncertainty in Kabul. Although it remains to be seen whether both parties will engage in talks in Beijing? However, if both parties do engage, it is imperative that they deliberate on all aspects of the peace settlement, i.e. how to ensure a credible and sustained ceasefire, a responsible and measured withdrawal of foreign forces, a participatory future political set up, and major and regional powers acting as guarantors of the peace.

This is a tall order. But that's the only way forward to deal with the uncertainty that surrounds Afghanistan's future and that of the region.

In his address, Dr. Marvin Weinbaum stated that he wanted to start his talks with the conclusions first. His conclusions were:

- For the foreseeable future efforts to achieve comprehensive peace agreement will not succeed.
- Without a Plan B, Afghanistan is headed towards a prolonged chaotic civil war.

International community consumed all its energy to reach for a political solution for 10 years. The Plan A is based on reaching a grand bargain with Taliban, a compromised agreement, above all, power sharing with Taliban in one form or another including have Taliban compete for power through elections as a political party and amend the constitution to reflect Islamic values. In order to reach this agreement, the first step is to sit down with the parties involved in the conflict and negotiate.

To begin, the parties would not even sit down until a year ago. The Taliban sent out a feeler that there is a political solution. Taliban were wearing out the opponents and foreign allies as they had time on their hands. There is no evidence that Taliban ever gave up on a military solution. What really changed during the past one and a half years is that the Taliban came to a conclusion that they can negotiate from a greater position of strength. They have also clearly gotten the understanding that US is very much dedicated in leaving. They have also watched progressively the Afghan political system falling apart as the threat to state came from within the state.

Discussing the aims of the Taliban, Dr. Weinbaum stated that the Taliban always made it clear that what they sought here is the restoration of an Islamic emirate. They want peace on their terms and the US discarded it as a bargaining tactic. However, what the Taliban rejected was that they cannot be a part of a liberal democratic order that is foreign and un-Islamic. The Taliban further explained that they will be more tolerant and more inclusive where they will be willing to share power, but within their own values. For example, they are now willing to respect the rights of the women according to their understanding of Shariah.

Dr. Weinbaum further stated that he sees three key objectives of the Taliban in negotiating:

1. Achieve international legitimacy.

2. Release of their prisoners.
3. Withdrawal of the foreign forces.

The Taliban have succeeded as they have made no compromise of their own. The Taliban have accepted the idea that they can achieve peace through negotiations, while a military solution can be a long one. So where does this lead us today? There is now an aborted US-Taliban agreement and American policy is now dependent on the next tweet of President Trump.

It should be made clear here that the Taliban never made any concession on their stance. They made promises which they neither intended to do or were not able to do. We may see resumption of talks as the Taliban want the talks to continue as they have benefited handsomely in this diplomatic process. They have enjoyed everyone coming and knocking on their doors and today, they have more international legitimacy than Kabul government. The 9 rounds of discussions have been on when will the US leave and Taliban guarantee on not engaging with the terrorists. As a result, the agreement that was almost reached had nothing to do with peace. There was no truce and no concessions. Now imagine negotiations on every single stage of what the new political order would look like. Anyone who puts a timeline on the grand bargain has not studied negotiations as there are no alternates when US has accepted that it cannot win militarily.

If the state fails, we move to plan B, whether US reach a side deal with Taliban, the chances of destabilization is very real which will also be felt in the region and beyond. Without the support of US air power the Afghan security forces will collapse. Over the years, it is the US air power that has provided stability.

Our basic concept of what will go wrong is very wrong in itself. In the 90s when the Taliban walked into Kabul there was very little fighting. This does not apply today. In the 90s, there was unity of command on both sides i.e. Taliban and Northern Alliance. This does not prevail today. The alternative with the collapse of the state and return of 300,000 Afghan forces back to their villages has a number of implications. These men are trained and armed and can return to militias. The sad reality is that the Afghan war fits in that category of conflicts that pit two existential value systems. All Afghanistan's consecutive civil wars, six since 1978, had two elements in common:

1. A radical Islamic challenge to the reigning authority.
2. Foreign interventions.

What we have today in Afghanistan is an existential conflict with irreconcilable values. Existential conflict always end the same way where one succeeds, or one signs a surrender agreement which is essentially the same as first one.

Coming to the Plan B, Dr. Weinbaum stated that we have to get realistic. We cannot turn our heads away and hope that the Taliban would come say that they want to come for peace. We should not blind ourselves with what is possible and what is not possible. Plan B is a rededication to the Afghan state, a state which we have lost sight of. It will take the same energies of the international community that were spent into finding a negotiated outcome of an illusionary peace settlement and put it back into the state. US and Pakistan are the two most important states because they have the most to gain and the most to lose. The Taliban would like the new regime to be ruled by an Emir and the politicians won't be incorporated. A civil war in the region is not feasible for anyone. Proxies would be at a much higher level than in the 1990s. A radical regime would reenergize the disruptive elements in this region. This would also mean that Pakistan can look at approximately 5 to 10 million refugees. The only bonus for Pakistan is that the Afghan notion is that they must have a counter weight against India. A stable Afghanistan lowers dependence on India. This means buying time for the state to come together politically, to build its own security and regain the trust of the Afghan public.

He concluded his talk with the statement that Plan B also sounds like an illusion. There is a political way forward that we need to reassess and that a serious disintegration of Afghanistan would be disastrous for the region. Plan B means for the time being Afghanistan is condemned to continued conflict. However unattractive that prospect, it is still preferable to the all other likely alternatives.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, concluded the talk by thanking the guest and the participants of the event. He praised Dr. Marvin G. Weinbaum for an insightful analysis and how this talk shed light on the future scenario of Afghanistan.

PICTURES OF THE EVENT

