

Public Talk

The Future of Pakistan-US Relation

Speaker: Moeed Yusuf

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Transcript

Director Ashraf Qazi, ‘Ladies and gentle men it is a great pleasure on behalf of the chairman and the Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad to welcome a young and distinguished scholar like Mr Moeed Yusuf, who is Pakistani as well as based in America distinguished scholar who is at this young age already an expert in South Asia and in particular in Pakistan-US relations, and the subject of his talk is the Future of Pakistan US relation. It reminds me a bit about what they used to say that it is Brazil, which is the superpower of tomorrow, except in our case, the future, where the US Pakistani relations would be mutually satisfactory always somehow or the other seems to lie in the future and that is the challenge which confronts us today. The Pakistan-US relationship is a relationship of critical importance to both countries particularly to Pakistan and yet it is relationship that is based on a deep seated mutual symmetry and ...? Of course there are positive elements, but the most salient elements that come to mind at least now are the elements of mutual alienation, mutual suspicion, mutual misinformation and it has also been a relationship that apparently appears to be enduringly contingent it is always based on the needs of the moment, we hope and we keep talking about the common values that we share and the fundamentals that bind our people together and yet the fact is that it is a relationship that has equally been characterized by the constant threat of sanctions and very regular military assaults or incursions by the United States in Pakistan which have led to ever more strange relations. We are currently going through a phase where we are recovering to some extent from the assault on Salala and there is some hope that this relationship can move forward now, it will never be a problem free relationship but we can hope that it is a relationship which is marked more by positive elements than by negative elements. The fact is that we are in a very strange situation today. The government of Pakistan and its major interlocutor according to the poles both enjoy almost single digit popularity or approval according to Pakistani public opinion. And the fact also is that the ‘American War on Terror’, they now choose not to use this word war on terror but in fact this is the apparent lead motive of the American Foreign Policy since 9/11, and Pakistan is also a country which is confronted with the menace of terrorism yet the ironic fact is that being associated with the American War on terror with Afghanistan, de-legitimizes Pakistan’s war on terror to the extent that Pakistan is committed towards inside Pakistan. This is a fundamental contradiction, the more you are associated with America’s major effort in Afghanistan to that extent you triple and paralyze your ability to take on the single biggest menace that threatens Pakistan. Obviously, a question of governance arises here, so we are faced with the twin problems of governance inside Pakistan and a huge shortcoming of American Strategy to watch a

region which is not just Afghanistan but also Iraq and who knows what will happen in Iran or Syria or in Pakistan itself. So here we are, in this extraordinary difficult situation and accordingly it is going to be extremely interesting to hear what Moeed has got to say and we wait with waited breath because he is a man who is already distinguished himself with his great insights and wisdom and we look forward to your talk Moeed and welcome once again to the institute of strategic studies.

Mr. Moeed Yusuf, Assalum o Alaikum, Thank you Qazi Sahab and thanks to the institution for organizing and hosting me. The best way to make somebody fear is to put them under pressure and you have done this by saying things very generously about me which I am not sure are entirely true, but it is indeed a pleasure, I see way many friendly faces, colleagues and even mentors sitting here, it is indeed an honor for me to come and speak to you about something which if there is one thing that can be said about it is that it is not very popular to be talking about this in either capital right now and you cannot leave the place unskilled so I am bracing forward I get, but the last three or four years that I have spent in Washington working on Pakistan and fortunately or unfortunately there are only about two or three Pakistani's who sit in Washington think tanks and work on Pakistan. I have seen my role as trying to explain from my perspective to Washington that how and why Pakistan does what it does and then to explain to Islamabad what I think Washington is thinking and why they are doing things which may be very unpopular here. So in that spirit I will talk about it not necessarily my personal views but to explain how I see this relationship developing as we move forward. To start on an optimistic note because I don't have much positivity radiating from the rest of what I say, when the institute, we talked about this, the initial title suggested was 'the current impasse in the US-Pakistan relationship. And then somebody rightly pointed out that 'you know there is fare chance that may it may be over by the time that you come here. So at least, we are at a point where we don't have to talk about the pros and cons of keeping the NATO supplies on shut for the next half an hour, which is a good thing. That said as much as we talked about it in the last eight months, I think we will have to b very clear that what happened for Salala was a tactical impasse where both countries got stuck on an issue which is essentially tactical in nature. It was not a real issue between these two sides, strategically thinking long term which to my mind for the next two years and beyond is Afghanistan. And then looking beyond that, it is the bilateral Pakistan Us relationship, what is going to be the basis, what is going to be the reasons for holding it together and how do you actually make it work. That is essentially that what these two countries have been struggling to come to terms with over the past ten years but definitely since the Obama administration took over, the last eight months were not about that. It was more about how do you get through the current problem to start talking about these issues again. And in that I think both sides lost precious time as we reach the so called ambient in Afghanistan. Now the irony of this relation is that we have talked about US and Pakistan endlessly over the past ten years. But in neither capital the relationship is being about the bilateral issue. Washington for the most part has seen Pakistan through an Afghanistan lens. And I think that is fairly natural, troops are there, the money is there, the war is there, and so Pakistan started off being incidental

it became much and more important overtime, but still many of the people who are talking about Pakistan in Washington are people who know Afghanistan much better than any other place. And I think in Pakistan, we could not, even if we tried, move away from the regional calculus, which essentially goes down to the India-Pakistan issue. And we continue to see US as this outside actor which is creating a fresh imbalance. And so it has never truly been bilateral. But for the longest period if you remember 2009 -10 people who were people who were starting to write that this Afghanistan issue is not going to work out. And you have Ijaz haider sitting over here who had strongest critique of policy on both sides, saying that it is never going to work out. And the reason I thought that Pakistan and US would continue working together and get through many of the problems they had, was precisely because they could not afford, not to work together on Afghanistan. Because whatever story you sort to bend down, if the two sides were on the opposite end of an afghan solution, it would have been a disaster. Turns out, and I don't have hesitation in acknowledging that I think my view was not the correct one. And it turns out that Afghanistan now has to loose salience in this bilateral relationship. For the two side to get any opportunity, to recalibrate their ties in a more positive way. Unless and until you have this security issue over Afghanistan which is clearly going to be their till 2014 very least, I don't see any possible way of a positive recalibration, in this relationship. And let me explain my pessimism to you. There are two fundamental reasons here.

First of all, both countries have shied away for a long period, with good reason. Saying, well we really are connected, we have strategic convergence, and we are partners and all. The fact is that in Afghanistan there is a strategic divergence of interest, on how to achieve the ultimate goal. Which I think is fairly common, no civil war in Afghanistan, inclusive government; we don't have a complete blowup of the place. But the policies being applied are the polar offices of what the other side wants. There is idiosyncrasy, Haqqani network etc. But even more important in this pessimism to my mind, is that this debate is no longer about reality, it is about the narratives that have outlived much of the reality on the ground, to the point that nobody knows what is real now. Because both the sides are making to cool it and drink it , as the Americans have put it. The perception in US is that Pakistan is the main spoiler in Afghanistan, the haqqani network is the relative alarm of the isi, isi is supporting them, they want to use Afghanistan for influence, FATA is the real problem not Afghanistan. Pakistan's nukes are a real problem. Anti Americanism is manufactured etc.

You talk in Pakistan, corridors of power would believe that the US is entirely insensitive to Pakistani concerns, it is backing India for its growing presence in Afghanistan, its not sincere in reconciliation talks, it wants to break up the Taliban rather than reconcile, it doesn't want to give Pakistan a role in that, its not interested in TTP, the intelligence network is penetrated, etc. All of what you hear all the time, and the narratives are now so strong that I don't simply see a way that you can pull back from this, over the next year and a half, which is a critical period, in which you have to solve Afghanistan, if you are the USA, and if Pakistan has to be on board with a solution. To underscore this further let me just point you, what I think is the current mood, in Washington

about Pakistan. Pakistan is essentially friendless in Washington, that is simplistically put, that is the bottom line. And I see this at a personal level as somebody who tries to explain how Pakistan is thinking the very few take us for that kind of message any more. Second, as it is the election year on the both sides, the election dynamics dominate in both the capitals, in a way that no government want to take a risk on this relation ship. So no body will come out, stick their neck out for the other party. You must rather stand back and let the narrative continue as it is and so there is a blame game among both the sides over the period of next year and so. The fact of the matter is that you can never get one message out of Washington. We have tried, and tried, and tried, and it doesn't happen. But what has happened is because of the narratives taking over reality in some ways is that the hawkish view is not starting to win out. Over the others who were pulling down and saying hold on. So you hear words like containment being thrown out now. Two years back, no one took it seriously, now people are talking I wrote an opaque for the New York Times last with another American scholar, I being against containment. And the responses I got from readers told me that, its serious business. People are thinking about containment, whether it happens or not is a separate story. The last part of the mood in Washington in positive and I think that we missed that in Pakistan. That despite all the "hoo haa" about Pakistan and every body saying do this and do that, cooler head do prevail and have prevail every single times when things have gone to the break. There could be congress, there could be state department, there could be white house, ultimately there is a realization you cannot do without Pakistan. So let's pull back, this is going to be very bad, but every single time I think both countries are getting much closer to the red line. Every time they fall into crises. So whether this pattern can hold or not we will have to wait and see. On the Pakistani side, I think if there is one uniting factor, right now for Pakistan unfortunately is anti Americanism. I think the policy paralysis in some way as we have seen in Islamabad, just like the election dynamic in other town here too its just perpetuating it self. And so over the past eight months and all of you are knowledgeable about this but every time I talk to people who matter in this town,, you know quietly they would me, "yes! Yes! NATO supplies don't need to open. Yes! We cannot do this for too long". And yet it took 8 months to figure out how to move forward because there is a political dynamic around this. And third, I think the tale has started wagging the dog, in terms of anti American sentiments. I am one of those, who don't believe that all of these anti American sentiments in Pakistan is manufactured. A lot of it is real. But I also do not believe that all of this is a coincidence. I think there is some interest that played this over the past ten years. But it is completely out of control now. And it is impossible to pull it back in the environment we are. And finally, I think if we look back to the mood in Pakistan, I would think that there has been a decision at some level that we can't keep on hearing this does more business about centuries. We simply cant go out and blow them up because the back clash is going to be huge in strategic issue and what so ever. So if you combine these two, what you are looking at, is that the next year you are completely stuck. Elections in November in Washington, some time next year, in winter or whatever, but next year in Pakistan the dynamic is going to get worse, the narratives are going to continue the way they are continuing, they are not going to be pulled back to solve the problems

in the relationship. You will have the hawkish view win out in both sides. And anti Americanism, I think here will continue, and Pakistan will not fundamentally alter its policy on this Afghanistan issue. As, I can see, it just like there are no takers in Afghanistan for altering the drone policy. We need to be very clear about that. And so for the next year, till summer of 2013 you are boxed in. If that is true summer of 2013 is that last real fighting season in Afghanistan for the foreign forces. And if you have not even started a real dialogue towards a solution, but I don't think there is going to be a remarkable progress because everybody is risk at worse right now. If that's true, then if I understand the realist paradigm correctly, then both the countries are a much more likely than all the other actors, a much more likely to hedge even more on their quote and quote, friend, partners and proxies, whatever, then not. And in some ways you are out of time if you project this forward by a year and year and a half. What happens then? If you get stuck for a year? And you realize, it's too late, I think it is unrealistic to imagine the political solution in Afghanistan both Pakistan and US working together and finding a very good outcome in which they can pat each other in the back and move on. The only hope then for this relationship to my mind to improve drastically is recalibration on different terms post 2014, or on terms other than about Pakistan. The good news here is, that the people who ask why recalibrate? Why not get rid of it? I don't think I have a compelling argument. Fundamentally there are two basic worries that the US has, the terrorism emanating from Pakistani soil, be it 9/11 or some other mega event; and the idea of lose nukes and Pakistan sort of getting troubles and causing problems in the region. Neither of those goals are near being satisfied. In fact, they have gone much further away from the goals if you will over the past ten years as Pakistan has spiraled downward. So that compulsion very much remains in Washington. And people do understand that. whether the politics allows that to take precedence one will have to see. On the Pakistani side, one, its never a good idea to be on the wrong side of the superpower when you are friendless. And I have no sort of hesitation in saying that Pakistan looks to me increasingly like India was in 1990. Really, clutching its straws to find real partner who can substitute this. And I don't think there is one that exists, to be honest. So that will remain, isolation is never a good idea. Secondly, Pakistan's dependency doesn't seem to be going away. In fact, it seems to be increasing. So a lot of people who would tell me, you know, supply routes, it is about emotions, it is about egos, it is about principle, I completely agree. But I also saw Pakistan interlocutors in Washington going around with a begging board. To make sure that the budget could be made possible, by Washington agreeing to help. At the same time that we were standing our ground on the NATO supply routes. So the two things are actually mutually exclusive in a lot of way if u look in the post 2014 scenario. So the dependence I think in Pakistan and the need to not be on the wrong side of the super power will hold as we move beyond 2014. So I think recalibration, the good news is, still makes perfect sense for the both countries, but to be able to recalibrate post 2014 in a positive light. There are three things that will have to happen. There are three prerequisites in my mind.

First of all, you have to continue talking to each other on Afghanistan, which is the main issue. And on post 2014, over the next year and a half. The danger there is that you might be falling

into one crises and then the other and then the next one as we did. Because the strategic disconnect as I said very much remains there. What about a black stone event that gets blamed on Pakistan something happens in Afghanistan. Or what about some sort of drone strike going wrong in Pakistan which inflames the sentiments beyond a point. So a number of problems here which can not allow you to keep talking over a next year and a half and you may actually fall from crisis to crisis. But if that happens then I think recalibration become much more difficult. Second, I think Pakistan has to have some role in the political deal in Afghanistan. Whether that come out right or wrong, I don't know. But both sides actually have to give it a try and let the process continue if something has to come out of that. The problem there is that the mistrust is so high, that I think they are playing chicken and egg. They want to see who is going to blink first. Who is going to put out there plan on the table. To say this is what we want, what can you do for us? And let me tell you neither side is going to put a plan, because they don't have one. Neither the American side, nor the Pakistani side has a clear cut plan. This is a hit and try kind of policy on the Taliban. And when you have mistrust, hit and try means you don't want to show your cards at all. You want the other side to play their cards. And that to me is again a recipe to be boxed in.

Third, for Rica alibration to take place positively, you can not have a civil war in Afghanistan. Because if I see it correctly Afghanistan unfortunately, if things go completely wrong in Afghanistan the most likely scenario is the Pakistan and the US actually falling on the opposite side of the equation. As a new sort of proxy situation unfolds. And you cannot be on the opposite side actually trying to play that came and trying to recalibrate on the positive note. And so these three prerequisites if you can meet them , I think there is hope for recalibration. I don't think there is a guarantee you can, I think there is a fair chance. But if you see another crises in two months and then another one. I think you can pretty much write this hope off. So we will have to sort of hedge up and see where that goes. Having put that on the table finally, let me point to in my view, the nodes of optimism and pessimism, in terms of the post 2014 scenario. The worrying part here is that virtually all of them that I mentioned is optimism for the two sides recalibrating post 2014 are based on weakness, or on something one or the other side, much rather not have.

First of all, the biggest point of optimism is that both countries fundamentally cannot afford a complete rupture. Neither at this point nor later is the importance of both sides is it is true its too much for that to happen. So a bad marriage is better than a divorce in this case. And that has become a cliché in some ways.

Second, I think Afghanistan's salience in the bilateral relationship will go down by definition post 2014. Afghanistan will still be an issue, Pakistan will be needed, all of that is true, but with the troops going down, the presence decreasing, I think the salience, the in the face kind of element in Afghanistan's policy that the Pakistan and US have been quimming over I think will actually decrease to salience. So you will have more space in recalibration, I think.

Third, I think is a very interesting one, but this is one of the weaknesses in some ways. Neither Pakistan, nor US the interlocutors at least I have talked to for over the past five- seven years, no body has been able to explain to me what a good plan B is. Everybody hates plan A which is “US is doing this, Pakistan s doing that” but no body has been able to explain what is the alternative. And so if u don’t have a plan B. the plan B is to stick to plan A and try to make it work. SO I think, THERE will be a chance to do that.

Fourth, again a weakness, Pakistan would love to get out of this, But I unfortunately don’t see the governance model switching positive so quickly that Pakistan will get out of its dependency. And I don’t see other partners who are in a position to be substitute for the Pakistan-US relationship either.

Finally, I think India may have partly the solution of its leaf, which it will throw out at some point. In Washington, if you talk to people in 2004 or 2005, the then Pakistani president was the person to work with. No body could say anything other than saying we have got the right person at help, he will fix it for us. Of course things went sound, with India, there is also this honeymoon period, nuclear deal, a new partner in ally. Well I think India is going to play this at Washington soon enough and explain at no cost is India able to or willing to give what it calls strategic defines. And so it will force Washington I think to rebalance its sort of tilt, if u will to make it more multilateral in someway, because I think India will disappoint Washington, The Indians buying rafale from Europeans rather then going to US buying the US fighters doesn’t go down to well, because the calculus is that we are the new allies. And so I think there is some re-correction to be done on the US India front. And it has already started healthy for both countries. But I think that will then have a positive spin-off for the US-Pak relation because you wont have that dichotomy of we looking from here and saying “Oh you are in the other camp completely.”

On the reasons for pessimism, first of all, every single reason for the two sides to work together unfortunately, is built on the negativity, nuclear weapons, terrorism, danger, don’t be on the wrong side of the super power if you are Pakistan, you need money etc. but there is no real positivity attached to this where I can say there is a fundamental reason why they will never disconnect. And this is because it has been a statist relationship. The people to people and business to business kind of part completely is non existent for the most powerful countries of these sides.

Second, I cannot at least rule out the possibility that things may go terribly wrong in Afghanistan. I don’t think its waiting to happen. But that is a possibility and as I said if it happens you will find Pakistan and the US on the opposite sides of the divide.

Third, I also don’t see anywhere that either side can willingly pull back the anti other sentiment in their public now, specially Pakistan. I think it is out of control, it is not going to be easy to do that. And fair bit of its is true in the US as well. If that is true, then again there is a possibility

that ideas like containment, punitive action etc become more popular, and the narratives advise that forward to a point where you cannot pull it back if you want to.

Fourth, complacency and overconfidence at both sides it is something that I have seen over and over again, as I see both capitals. Pakistan saying, we are way too important, so ultimately there is no way this can happen. Which as I said I agree with. But if you become too complacent then the policy starts reflecting and you may actually force the other side to push you in the corner or pull a trigger. And on the US side, I think there is bit of complacency attached to the fact that, of course ultimately, we will dictate, it will happen. There is no guarantee that it will go the way everybody wants. It is a bit out of control for both the parties. So that I think is a fair danger.

Finally, I don't think anybody can control the black stone events, another Faisal Shahzad, another 9/11 titled thing, a drone gone haywire hitting something which Pakistan simply can not tolerate. Another may do. A lot of things can go wrong which can sort of chop the head of this work. If you have to make this work then, if you are taking everything as I said, let me just point to four or five concrete things that I think both the sides should look at. And I have to confess right off the bat. That when I used to say this 6 -10 months ago many more people were willing to listen to this than now. And that's the reflection of how the relation has gone. But one, I think in a very Machiavellian way Pakistan does ultimately need a role in Afghanistan accede on the table whatever you want to call it. And because this break happened the narratives are so bad, I am not really sure if everyone is convinced if that is the way to go. But who is not convinced he must be convinced that Pakistan has to be brought in not out. I think the drones require a midway ultimately, and I am completely clueless to what that midway is. Joint operations are not a possibility, but something which is a calibrated approach, and I am not exactly sure I figured out what that exactly means. I think the US aid will continue, there is a lot talk about this is going to disappear. I don't think it is going to disappear of course there will be more talk about conditions but I think that is needed. Because aid became manicure of this relationship in some ways or the positive side. If that disappears then I think you made a huge mistake as both sides will not have anything to sell to their publics as why keep this going. But the key here to my mind, ultimate key is Pakistan and India in Afghanistan and on the eastern front for Pakistan. If you can see this progress continue on Pakistan and India, I think Pakistan gets more space to maneuver. And I don't think that the US will be upset at all, I think it will be great for the US to see these countries get together. The worry though is that Pakistan-India don't talk over Afghanistan, there is more likelihood that there competition in Afghanistan spoils the potential for progress in the eastern front, rather than the other way around. Because Afghanistan's timeline is much shorter than what you actually need to build the trust on the eastern front. So that is my worry. But I think Pakistan and India must be pushed into a room for their own good. And talk to Afghanistan and see how they are going to manage this.

Let me end by saying, what I think is the best and the worst case scenario at this point. Because I don't want to leave sounding as if the game is up. I think the best case scenario, here is recalibration, which means that the prerequisites are laid out are in place. We have talked that

something has happened on the Afghanistan front is a recalibration post 2014. on the basis of a bilateral equation which is still built on negativities and worry. But it is one way you can talk beyond this current danger presence of forces next door. It will still be an acrimonious relationship there will still be slinging. Pakistan will never be the favorite partner of South Asia, I think, for the foreseeable future. But i think that the both sides will make it work in fairly bad but instrumental way. The worst case scenario also does not look like 1998 thank you very much will see you later. It looks as a schizophrenic couple dealing with one another. Where the punitive part is very much in the face and you can see some of the harsh part of policy on both sides, but the under current of the postivity of aid and we want each other and we must work together still being very much there. Because the difference is that the US has longed from the mistake of 1989, they are not going to pack up. I think that is fairly clear. So it will be a mix of fairly strong punitive versus some of the pretense to keep this going. The problem is worse case scenarios. If the narratives continue, if Afghanistan does not work out for both as they want , if the Pakistan governance does not work out, there I think the narratives are strong enough that they would hijack the worse case scenario to a much more punitive extreme then one would hope. And that I don't think either US or Pakistan can ultimately deal with, especially Pakistan with problems next door, problems in the region, and fundamentally it comes back to the governance issue, and lot of people tell me well it is because of the weakness that we have to do this. But the point is that if Pakistan's governance was fine and Pakistan was not weak internally, much of you wont have to do it in any case. So that is a constant in this equation, you have to take as a starting premise rather than debating whether it was a good or the bad thing.

Question Answer Session:

Sayed Nazir commented that NATO supply was a tactical issue but this tactical issue took the steam out of the strategic dialogue and the operation on both sides. Non state actors in FATA and one of them is the drones. We don't know the source. So these non state actors are killing the tribal's. He asked a question that already the containment policy is sorted and the non kinetic war is against Pakistan very much in and when will be the time or which will be the collaborated point or the boiling point when war will start against Pakistan? He answered; containment has not started its much more punitive. America won't go war with Pakistan. Everybody understands that this war will be a huge destruction for both sides.

Sehr Abbas asked how realistic is that India and Pakistan can negotiate over issues they are facing through ages? In answer to this question, Moeed replied that nothing is realistic when it comes to India and Pakistan. Through negotiation, the conflicts prevailing between group through centries has been resolved in history.

Daud Kakar asked that post 2014 what relation between America and Pakistan in the case of Afghanistan. America's policy is to weaken the Afghan n Pashtoons economically and meanwhile India is providing scholarships to Afghani students and they have harsh remarks for Pakistan. What will be the situation if northern allies will capture Afghani government what will

be Pak Afghan relation after 2014? In answer to this question Moeed focused on Pakistan impressions on Pushtoons, Pakistan has to recognize a very harsh reality across the border Pakistan is not a light country we have to move away from this idea that Pashtoons are pro Pakistan and everybody else is anti. On serious issues we look from Pakistan and say India dare not hegemonise Pakistan and if we look from Kabul we look at Pakistan and say Pakistan is not doing justice to Kabul. Pakistan is not at all a popular country

Khalid Munir questioned that Afghanistan may get divide on ethnic lines is there the thinking in Washington about this and will Pakistan become Cambodia in this war? Answering on this issue Moeed said that there is not a single afghan who want ethnic division there are people who put this out no serious scholar or policy maker say about this.

Wazir asked what America wants from Pakistan and in Afghanistan what is its policy. It invaded Afghanistan with two clear objectives to crush or defeat the Al Qaida and remove Taliban and what are they after to achieve. If Pakistani government and Taliban negotiate whatever Americans want will America leave Afghanistan? He answered that the bottom line of war is no more then 9/11 and some people who have prevailed upon policy may agree. In Pakistan we underestimate the cost effect that is being put in this war. The biggest worry is that America will leave and when it will leave there won't be any funds.

Another question was asked from Moeed Yousaf was either create incentive structures and to change its tag and bring that country into solution rather than spoiling the issue. Unfortunately Pakistan at this point sees itself isolated and left out. In a realistic way if you want to resolve the issue you need dedicated people sitting in rooms for months to figure out what exactly the game plan is without upsetting the sensitivity of Afghanistan because it's them who will ultimately win or lose out.