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Report- Book Launch

88 Days to Kandahar
A CIA Diary

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Report

88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary

The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI), organised a public talk and launch of the book “88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary” by Robert L. Grenier on March 11, 2016. The guest speaker was Mr. Robert Grenier, former CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) station chief in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Other speakers included; Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq, Secretary National Assembly Division, PM Secretariat; Lt. Gen. Javed Alam (Retd.), and Mr. Zahid Hussain, senior journalist.

In his welcome remarks, Ambassador Masood Khan, Director General, ISSI, highlighted the various issues and challenges Pakistan was confronted with. Speaking about Afghanistan, he said that initially Islamabad was reluctant to get involved in the Afghan peace process. This was primarily because it did not want to instigate an Afghan civil war. However, the Pakistani government was persuaded to play a more instrumental role by the Afghan leadership – both present and their predecessors. He opined that Pakistan has always remained very steadfast and very committed to the peace process in Afghanistan. In this regard, a formula now known as the ‘Quadrilateral Coordination Group’ is being pursued by Afghanistan, Pakistan, the US and China. Ambassador Masood Khan was of the view that the Quadrilateral was a good initiative and was hopeful that as long as all principle stakeholders remained committed, headway could be made with the Afghan Taliban in the peace process. However, he emphasised that patience and resilience was the need of the hour. He also briefly touched on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA’s relations with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and was of the view that both are indispensable arms of their respective governments. They have been partners for a long time and even though there have been sporadic difficulties these are simple ‘quarrels in the family’. He also talked about the current US administration’s policy towards Pakistan, and whether there would be a change in US policy towards Pakistan post the upcoming presidential elections. Speaking about the implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Ambassador Masood stated that this mega-project will be transformative for the whole region. Therefore, Pakistan’s main focus is on economic connectivity and finding security through economic prosperity and connectivity.

The panelists, which included Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq, Lt. Gen. (Retd) Javed Alam and Mr. Zahid Hussain, were unanimous in their views that the book provides an insight into the workings of the CIA and gives a holistic account of the Afghan war.

Ambassador (Retd) Mohammad Sadiq said that the author had done an admirable job of recording the events post 9/11 in an interesting and candid manner. He was of the view that while the US invasion of Afghanistan created a new set of issues, which the author has discussed, the old issues still existing have also been adequately highlighted by the author. Speaking about the peace process in Afghanistan, Ambassador Sadiq gave a brief chronology of the events different processes initiated to establish talks with the Afghan Taliban including the setbacks faced at the Murree Talks due to the disclosure of Mullah Omar’s death. He said that the ‘Quadrilateral Coordination Group’ initiative was essential in reaching out to the Taliban as it included all principle stakeholders and expressed optimism that if all remain committed, peace can be achieved with the Taliban through this forum.

Lt. Gen. (Retd) Javed Alam not only praised the book as a good read, but said that the author is successful in holding the reader's attention by explaining the events that unfolded in the region, while giving a fair account. He also talked about his personal experience of working with the author and said that he enjoyed working with the author whom he found to be understanding and accommodating. Referring to media reports of both spy agencies working against each other's interests, he said that on the contrary, during the author's tenure in Islamabad, the ISI and CIA had a good working relationship. He highlighted the role the ISI played in capturing key terrorists such as Khalid Shaykh Mohammed, Abu Zubayda and Ramsi bin al-Shibh.

Mr. Zahid Hussain also spoke highly of the book, which he said was not only balanced, but also provided deep insights into the uneasy yet sensitive relationship between the US and Pakistan at that time. He talked about the heavy price Pakistan has had to pay for the on-going war in Afghanistan. In spite of the fact that Pakistan has helped in bringing about regional stability and greatly aided the international community, it still faces heavy criticism and its efforts are not given due recognition. Speaking about the ongoing efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, Mr. Hussain stated that if efforts fail, it may lead to more bloodshed and may eventually fulfill the prophecy of a 'third' American Afghan war taking place.

The author, Mr. Robert Grenier, while speaking on the occasion stated that the primary aim of the book is to "inform" the present and future policy makers on the region of the practical lessons learned in what he called the 'First' American Afghan War, and the events that led to the failures of the Second, so that they may be useful in making future decisions. Speaking about his personal experiences during the launch of what is referred to as the US-led "southern campaign" in Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks, he shed critical light on the evolution of the US policy following the war in Iraq and subsequent ten years. Mr. Grenier talked about the numerous errors the US has made in Afghanistan, and highlighted two specific examples. Grenier stated that President Bush's demand from the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden was futile because bin Laden and his aides had taken refuge in areas beyond the reach of the Taliban. Therefore, the US allegation against the Taliban for harbouring terrorists was void. Grenier pointed out that the main aim of the US government at that time was regime change and that President Bush was determined to take war to the Taliban as well as al-Qaeda. According to Grenier, this was the first major mistake of the US. The second mistake was that after the fall of Kandahar, the US made no effort whatsoever to include any senior member of the Taliban in the Karzai-led government. Grenier criticized the US's government's decision to detain the former Taliban foreign minister, Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil and former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaef. The author further talked about the US strategy in Afghanistan and how it changed between the first invasion in September 2001, during which it sought to include local stakeholders and its second major campaign against the Taliban in 2005, when it tried to lead operations more unilaterally. He said that the United States has failed to strike the right balance for empowering Afghan leadership, as Washington's attention has shifted elsewhere to focus on the threat of global jihadists. Speaking about the current US policy towards Afghanistan, Mr. Grenier, was of the view that it is far too limited and that the government is reluctant to do what it can on a sustainable basis, and for this the US will have to pay a price. He said that for all the billions spent and lives lost, there is little to show, and most of that will not long survive our departure.

Speaking about the state of affairs in Afghanistan, Mr. Grenier also pointed out how the relatively new government of National Unity, headed by Ashraf Ghani is facing a situation similar to that of Hamid Karzai in exerting control over its provincial territories. He expressed concern that Afghanistan will remain a safe haven for terrorists if the government is unable to establish its writ, improve governance and security and win the confidence of the masses. The author also briefly talked about the importance of focusing on issues pertaining to drug production and trafficking because wars not only create, but further fuel the drug culture in Afghanistan which continues to be the largest producer of opium. He said that despite all the mistakes of the US in Afghanistan, at the end of the day only the Afghans have the power to bring peace and stability to their country. However, for this to be achieved, immense patience will have to be demonstrated by the Afghans as well as international community. Therefore, it was critical that the international community, particularly the United States and other important stakeholders do not repeat the mistakes of the past and remain committed to ensure that terrorists do not find a foothold in Afghanistan.

Speaking about the CIA's relationship with the ISI, Grenier said that there was a perception in the US about the ISI paying a double game. However, the author dismissed this perception and said that the ISI has provided critical and invaluable assistance to the CIA in the war against terror and in hunting down al-Qaeda members. He referred to the capture of high-profile members of al-Qaeda, such as Abu Zubayda, Khalid Shaykh Mohammed, Ramsi bin al-Shibh, and said that without Pakistan, it would have been impossible to capture them. He acknowledged the role and sacrifices Pakistan has given in the war against terrorism and concluded by saying that many terrorists, including al-Qaeda operating in Pakistan's tribal areas not only benefit from the support of local militants like the TTP (who are at war with the Pakistan Army), but also benefit from the terrain and geography of the area as it is beyond Pakistan's effective control.

In their concluding remarks, the panelists were unanimous in their view that the only way to put an end to the instability in Afghanistan was for all Afghan's to put their political/ethnic differences to a side and unite under a common joint strategy towards establishing talks with the Taliban. Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq said that one step that could help bring peace to Afghanistan was the creation of a 'peace lobby' within Afghanistan as well as within Pakistan. All panelists agreed that it was pivotal that peace in Afghanistan is of immense importance not only for the Afghan's themselves and the region, but because it has direct and indirect repercussions on peace in Pakistan.

Ambassador Masood Khan, concluded by reiterating that peace and stability in Afghanistan cannot be delivered on the battlefield, and that avenues for dialogue will have to be found; and resilient institutions need to be built. He said that Pakistan cannot develop economically unless there is peace in Afghanistan. This derivation compels Pakistan to invest in peace and stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan, he said, looks forward to a robust relationship with the US and both countries need to benefit from each other's strengths.