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Report – Public Talk

“Mr. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, President, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan”

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PICTURES OF THE EVENT



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted President Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Mr. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani for a Public Talk under its Distinguished Lecture Series on June 27, 2019. The Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Honourable Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Advisor to the Prime Minister for Commerce, Investment, Industries & Production and Textile, Mr. Abdul Razak Dawood also graced the occasion.

In his welcome remarks, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry stated that we are living in a world which is becoming ever more complex. Unfortunately, unilateralism is ascendant and multilateralism is shrinking rapidly to the margins. He was of the view that in the background of rapidly evolving geopolitics, bilateral relations between states have become more important. According to Ambassador Chaudhry, Pakistan and Afghanistan are not just neighbors, they share deep bonds of history and culture and the future of this relationship hinges on how both countries build on this mutual asset of goodwill and work together for a future of peace and prosperity for both parties.

He went on to say that in Pakistan, there is a complete consensus that a peaceful, stable, prosperous Afghanistan is in the best interest of Pakistan and the region. Moreover, he said that the destinies of both countries are connected. In the bilateral context, as well as in the multilateral context, the narration, formation and the advocacy of our shared interests is of immense importance. Institutes just like the ISSI, according to Ambassador Chaudhry, seek to provide a venue for a healthy and constructive discourse to bring people and countries closer. He opined that the challenges confronting the two states should be discussed with the aim of finding policy solutions. The ISSI, according to him, also works with several institutes around the world to discuss regional and global developments, and looks forward to having similar interaction with think tanks in Afghanistan.

During his remarks, Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that President Ghani's visit to Pakistan comes at a very crucial time. The future of both countries is interlinked, as are the challenges they both face. The leadership of both sides have a responsibility for the betterment of their people. "We cannot achieve what we want to achieve unless there is peace. To achieve peace, we need each other", he said. He said that we in Pakistan are very clear in our objective - we see our betterment in a peaceful stable Afghanistan. Connectivity can bring prosperity not just to our

respective countries, but to the region as a whole. Pakistan will do all it can to encourage and facilitate the peace process and facilitate the intra-Afghan dialogue which we feel is essential.

President Ghani began his talk by stating that stability and prosperity are linked in order to achieve mutual sovereignty. Moreover it is important to make history by overcoming the past and in this regard, two issues are crucial for the Afghan Government : to normalize relations with Pakistan, and to find a political solution to the conflict in and around Afghanistan. President Ghani went to say that as the representative of the sovereign state of Afghanistan, his visit to Pakistan was aimed at seeking a relation of equality and cooperation between two sovereign states. He emphasized that the stability and prosperity of Pakistan and Afghanistan are linked and related to mutual respect for sovereignties.

Speaking about strategy, President Ghani cautioned against overly used rhetoric and emphasized that the word strategy is one he used to ban in discussions because it is so overused. However, today, he felt that we are truly at a strategic moment.

He emphasized that today was a moment where we can make history by overcoming the past. He added that on April 29, Afghanistan had an unprecedented democratic event, the Loya Jirga of 3200 Afghans, representing all the districts of the country in 27 strata, all elected. Over 30% were women and 60% were youth. They represented the Afghanistan of today, not the Afghanistan of yesterday. Among the 23 items that they laid for the future; two items were crucial. One, they instructed President Ghani and the government of Afghanistan to normalize relations with Pakistan, and second they instructed to find a political solution to the conflict in and around Afghanistan.

President Ghani said that he does not want to dwell on the past, but rather wishes to move forward in Pak-Afghan relations by differentiating between two types of strategies. He explained that the bad strategy is not one that is absent of a strategy, but is rather one that repeats the mistakes of the past and believes that they are going to work in the future. He expressed his belief that today we are in a moment where bad strategy has been recognized and the move is towards the formulation of what is a good strategy. Knowledge of each other and knowing how we complement each other is important for bilateral relations.

In order to move forward we need to adhere to a good strategy. He went on to define good strategy as requiring three things:

1. Firstly, clarity of vision: Where do you want to get to.
2. Secondly, an analysis of the conditions of today, honestly, carefully and systematically.
3. Thirdly, the road map: how do you get from here to there.

President Ghani spoke about the importance of regional connectivity and reiterated Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi's point of view regarding a new narrative in which a sovereign Afghanistan will be a partner of Pakistan in the reduction of poverty, overcoming institutional difficulties and in connecting to a wider set. Moreover, he said that while bilateralism is essential, it's also fundamental that we think Asia wise.

President Ghani went on to define the importance of Asia by saying that while there is global uncertainty, Asia is living in an incredible moment of time. He believed that Asia is having what the United States had in 1869 when the Pacific railways were joined and the Suez Canal was opened. President Ghani elaborated that in the next 20 years, he foresaw the formation of an Asian continental economy, and more accurately, a Eurasian continental economy, because for the first time, trade between Asian countries exceeded trade with the rest of the world. Hence, instead of just either multilateralism or bilateralism, it is important to think of units of analysis that can allow us to connect.

In this regard, President Ghani took great pride in his efforts to turn Afghanistan's location into a major asset. He went on to say that when he became president of Afghanistan, everyone was saying Afghanistan is a landlocked country. The narrative however has changed. Afghanistan is not a landlocked country, but is rather a roundabout or a land bridge.

President Ghani spoke about the economic success of Afghanistan in relation to Central Asia by emphasizing that Central Asian countries are Afghanistan's largest trading partners. He pointed to the fact that Kazakhstan's wheat competes in every single district of Afghanistan with local wheat and with Pakistani imported wheat, and that it is this diversification that has contributed to Afghanistan's success. He cautioned that he did not mention this to highlight the missed opportunity, but rather to highlight how one creates opportunity. President Ghani stated that what

is important to achieving this is common vision at the leadership level, in relentless pursuit of detail, and in common understanding on ground. He was of the view that this is needed to be able to connect Central Asia to Pakistan in South Asia, India, Bangladesh and beyond.

In recalling the past, President Ashraf Ghani added that Afghanistan's northward look allowed them to look for relevance in the past. He recalled that the trade of Bengal in South and East India with Europe is widely known and is in every textbook, but his own historical research reveals that what is Pakistan today, exported more textiles to Central Asia and Russia than Bengal and East India combined, to Europe. In other words, he added, we were an economic region long before the concept of economic region was known.

President Ghani emphasized that Pakistan and Afghanistan's past, united by the Hawala system, was a past of open flow systems and trading links insurance. So, what does that mean for today's connectivity? In answering this self-proposed question, President Ghani said he had six quick points in succession:

Firstly, he emphasised that South Asia is the least connected region on earth, in fact it is less connected than Africa, because South Asia has not yet had agreement on the rules of the game. He proposed that if Pakistan and Afghanistan take the lead, they can form an agreement on the rules of the game with Central Asia and the Caucasus because what is lacking today is predictability and regular flows.

President Ghani's second point was regarding the role of the state and government in achieving connectivity. He stated that he was delighted with his meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan during his visit and previously in Mecca, because Khan's abiding concern with empowerment of the least privileged elements of Pakistan society is what they both share in common. He added that Prime Minister Imran Khan's belief that connectivity is the future is the bond and the foundation that Afghanistan and Pakistan can build upon. He added that as Foreign Minister Qureshi mentioned, the first thing is that we must have a shared special vision. We cannot treat ourselves as isolated countries because while bilateral relationship is important, there is a limit to how much Afghanistan and Pakistan can trade with each other. He emphasized that when we just look at our imports from Uzbekistan, cotton goes through six countries. Each container brings the wider system to a win-win situation and critical to this is leadership level common understanding in common vision. The second element, according to President Ghani, is

commitment of political will. We must mobilize political will together because they are going to be a lot of naysayers. He recalled that Machiavelli long ago observed, reform has no constituency, and said that if you want to be open there are going to be a lot of hurt voices in the short term, but a lot of beneficiaries in the medium term.

His third point highlighted the need for a programmatic approach, as according to him we cannot go project by project. He said that a programmatic approach needed to be followed, instead of just expecting the investment and infrastructure to follow, the aim should be to connect. President Ghani expressed his delight that both Pakistan and Afghanistan had agreed that the customs at Torkham will become a 24-hour facility, and said that we have to align systems and processes through such acts. He further elaborated on this point by pointing out that if Afghan goods are delayed 20 to 40 days in Karachi, what sane Afghan trader would come to Karachi? He said that it is not that the Afghan trader does not want to come to Karachi, it is the problems of services at the port of Karachi that deter Afghan traders. Currently, Batumi in Georgia, Baku in Azerbaijan, and now the latest in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan are open to Afghanistan. So, in this system, one must benchmark and compete by services that are essential because they allow internal drivers of competition to move forward.

For starters, he stated that political risks need to be differentiated. Second, he stated was the risk of disruption. President Ghani proposed that because we have experienced these sorts of things in the past, he wishes to propose an escrow account managed by a third party that in case there is disruption because of political decisions, there will be a penalty. He further added that the penalty would be so heavy that nobody would dare repeat it because when we link tens of thousands of megawatts of power or billions of cubic meters of gas, we have to think systems. The third according to him was financial risks. President Ghani explained that financial risks require both insurance and sovereign guarantees, and that by bringing people together we can deal with this phenomenon.

His fourth point was regarding environmental and social risks. He stated that on environmental risks he was of the view that what steel and coal did for Europe, environment would do for Central and South Asia. He said Pakistan's floods and Afghanistan's earthquakes requires environmental coordination.

For his fifth point he stated, the most important issue is security risks. President Ghani elaborated that the narrative he was offering the people of Pakistan was partnership in peace, as the rest of the agenda would fall in place. He said that Loya Jirga has mandated peace not because the Taliban are powerful, but because peace was the only way. President Ghani emphasized that the security dynamics within Afghanistan were moving forward and that very recently, Afghan forces took another district from the Taliban - he said there is no shortage of Afghan volunteers for the Afghan security forces.

President Ghani called attention to the history of civilian leadership in Afghanistan and stated that he had to retire around 2000 colonels and generals and there wasn't a murmur. Afghanistan's culture is of civilian leadership, he said that since 1747, only one general has been in charge of Afghanistan. All the leaders have been civilians, so there is a culture as all political cultures have differentiation. President Ghani added that he wanted to address this so that the realism of the agenda that he is proposing becomes the subject of discussion. He explained that what he is proposing is a realistic agenda, not just an idealistic agenda because the problem with a lot of vision is that it is not grounded in risk analysis, in concrete proposals, and because of this it becomes insane, in other words it's a pipedream, and the agenda of connectivity is not a pipe dream.

Calling attention to the TAPI pipeline, President Ghani stated that the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline is moving as financing is secured and in a couple of months work in Afghanistan is going to begin. He stated that this is a breakthrough project as it's a proof of concept, we have synchronized energy from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and we are synchronizing it now with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. President Ghani said that CASA was talking about less than 1000 megawatts, however here, potentially we are talking about 50,000 megawatts of power from Central Asia to South Asia. He highlighted that what is most impressive is that a private sector firm is right now discussing with Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, about putting 1.7 billion dollars of its own money to try and transmit between one to two thousand megawatts of power from Turkmenistan via Kandahar to Pakistan.

Calling for increased cooperation, President Ghani stated that the port of Gwadar and Karachi, can become the ports of choice for Central Asia. However, he cautioned that Pakistan does not need to wait for the system of railways, the existing system of highways is sufficient to

underwrite this, as the age of railways has been missed. He added that Afghanistan's fibre optic system is moving enormously as they have just secured 400 million dollars of private sector commitments to fibre optics. He explained that in other words, the vision Afghanistan is offering is not of one or two decades but of years. What it takes is political will and the organizational capacity to be able to bring this.

For his sixth and final point, President Ghani highlighted that infrastructure needs to be approached differently. He recalled, that in his old job, particularly from 1991 to 1996, he worked on infrastructure both in South Asia and East Asia simultaneously and saw the differences. He explained that the first thing needed from a connectivity perspective is critical infrastructure. He recalled that in Afghanistan, there was a single dry port to Central Asia - the port of Hairatan with Uzbekistan. Now Afghanistan has two with Turkmenistan, one is in Herat called Turghundi, and the other is in the province of Faryab called Aqeena. He elaborated that what it took to achieve this was persuasion of fifty to sixty miles of railways to link the existing system that has connected us to the Lapis Lazuli corridor all the way to the Caucuses and beyond. However, he added that this needed to be defined in terms of an agenda of future growth and be able to have a logic for it.

President Ghani emphasized that in terms of approaching infrastructure differently, the second step is to prioritize taking these two proposals from a regional perspective. He said that Afghanistan and Pakistan would be the beneficiaries because while the critical gaps are in their territories, so are the linkages. Geometric progression, according to President Ghani, was possible in this agenda and could be moved forward, but this required an agreement of systems. He said that there was not a single road between Pakistan and Afghanistan that is aligned. Hence, it is extremely important to realize that South Asia builds the most expansive infrastructure.

He highlighted the importance of connectivity by pointing to the fact that such initiatives create jobs. Mining, he said, generates wealth, but infrastructure creates jobs. President Ghani said that diplomacy is going to have to be economic diplomacy and connectivity its strategy. He was of the view that the future was not about reporting intrigues in the elite, but about creating commonwealth in the true sense of the word. He further added that to develop programs and project management capacity, both countries can work together and to do this, knowledge of each other is extremely important in knowing how we complement each other.

In pointing to the logistics of securing funding for these projects, President Ghani was of the view that the agenda behind these projects was not one of competition, but rather an agenda of cooperation. He further said that securing funds for the project would come from the private sector, and if the right system and processes were put in place, further funds could be mobilized. While he emphasized the need for detailed work on this agenda, President Ghani gave a tentative estimation of \$30 to 40 billion dollars as the cost of the projects, which he said was being mobilized. Moreover, he talked about other sources of funding ranging from grants and loans followed by regional funds, bonds and joint budgetary commitments.

Highlighting the need for insurance within connectivity, President Ghani explained that the involvement of the private sector was another form of insurance, as the private sector will not risk its money if there is political disruption. When countries commit their futures together it is another form of insurance for the initiative. In this regard, he said that he had made a proposal to Prime Minister Imran Khan of a task force at the level of leadership, a second at the ministerial level, and a third at the technical level. He said that the European Union had shown keen interest in this agenda.

President Ghani added that the coalition for peace will be much larger than the coalition for war. The C-5 (Central Asian States), Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Russia and China are now coming together for peace. Talking about the prospects of peace in Afghanistan, President Ghani believed that the presidential elections of September 28, 2019 is a must. He said that there had been suggestions from various quarters in Afghanistan to postpone the elections, and that the current government, which he heads, should govern for another ten years. However, President Ghani stated that contrary to beliefs, his mandate does not come from the elite, but rather from the people of Afghanistan. An elite mandate is undermining of democracy and the rights of the people. Nobody can give you a mandate except the people of Afghanistan, sovereignty is vested in people's freedom. He said that during the parliamentary elections, rockets were raining but the Afghan people stood in line and cast their vote. Similarly, the Loya Jirga was held, the most contentious issue was the number of delegates who wanted to participate, as they were competing fiercely. He said the people of Afghanistan want the Centre to function, the view of the capital is of a moral authority and not of a physical source of coercion. So the notion of the republic is central in the rights of the people.

President Ghani added that the second thing Afghanistan wants to be is a roundabout. He differentiated between two concepts and stated, a cul-de-sac is where things come and get stuck, and a roundabout is where flows take place. For two and a half thousand years till the 19th century, Afghanistan was a roundabout.

He explained that if one looks at the Subcontinent today, or even in the past, Afghanistan is the shortest way of connecting this area. Apart from serving as a geographical gate, Afghan culture has been one of free flows. In this regard, President Ghani talked about Data Ganj Bakhsh, whose actual name is Ali Hajveri who was from Ghazni. Moreover, every single one of Afghanistan's languages is a source of pride and connection, the Dari language is shared with Iran and Tajikistan, Pashto and Balochi with Pakistan, as well as Uzbeki and Turkmeni with Central Asia. Hence, Afghanistan aspires to be a roundabout of coming together and connecting.

President Ghani was of the view that Afghanistan also aspires to be a platform for regional and global cooperation, and issues such as the threat of terrorism, drugs and radicalism need to be dealt with. He said that this triple nasty formation needs to be tamed and it cannot be tamed without an alternative. Elaborating on the threat from drugs, he said that for years, Afghans denied the production of drugs and presence of addicts. However, Afghanistan has at least two and a half million addicts and a comprehensive way of dealing with this threat is required. In this regard, he said that a month ago, his government carried out an operation in which 54 crystal methamphetamine laboratories were destroyed and the damage inflicted upon the criminal organizations was worth \$1 billion.

Furthermore, President Ghani emphasized that monopoly of force has to be vested in the state in this region and that our citizens should enjoy physical, human, social, and economic security. In this regard, he talked about the place of the Taliban in Afghanistan and stated that Afghanistan was adhering to a political inclusion strategy. Afghanistan, he said, acknowledge the Taliban as a part of its society and the mandate of the Loya Jirga is to find a political process for ending the violence.

Without elaborating on the details, President Ghani said that Afghanistan had constructive discussions with Pakistan's leadership, the heart of which has been that two sovereign states are talking about cooperation. He said that "you cannot take an Afghan to heaven by coercion, but

you can take him to hell by persuasion." This is the balance sheet, the strategy of persuasion Afghanistan intends to adopt with its neighbors.

He further said that Pakistan has an important role in the future of the peace process, and that he hopes both countries will use this recognition to move from conflict to cooperation. President Ghani recalled that Prime Minister Imran Khan had mentioned that the road would be bumpy, however all strategic decisions are bumpy and that is the inherent nature of strategy in a time of uncertainty. President Ghani said that both countries have to take uncertainty for granted because the world of the Cold War where there were certain certainties and there were certain assumptions, is gone. In this world, it is going to require agility and capacity to devise joint solutions into implementation.

In conclusion, President Ghani hoped that Pakistan and Afghanistan will not fault each other if they meet bumps. He asserted that the test will be our common collective will to overcome the bumps, and once we have made a decision regarding destination, to not to look back but move forward.

Chairman BOG ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood concluded the talk by stating that bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are making progress, and the peace process is moving forward. Pakistan is committed to the promotion of peace and cooperation with Afghanistan. He said that President Ghani's visit was significant and hoped that it would provide an important impetus for improvement of bilateral relations of the two countries.