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Report – Roundtable
with

"Ms. Nancy Lindborg, President and CEO of the US Institute of Peace"

February 20, 2020

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The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI), arranged a Roundtable discussion with Ms. Nancy Lindborg, President and CEO of the US Institute of Peace (USIP) on February 20, 2020.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry, Director General, ISSI welcomed the guest and introduced the Institute, the researchers and the work they do. He said that Indo-US strategic partnership has put a burden on Pakistan. While Pakistan has good relations with China which have stood the test of time. He expressed the wish to have good relations with the US as well. He said that Pakistan's relations with China and US should not be zero sum.

Delving into the history of Pakistan-US relations, he said that the latter had stood by us at the outset when Pakistan was a newly independent country, and had many alliances and military cooperation. At the time of independence, Pakistan had many security issues with India like Kashmir, water division, division of assets. At that time, US appeared as a benevolent partner and ally. It provided Pakistan with military aid and support. In the 1960s, the two countries became part of military alliances like Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). But the history of relations between US and Pakistan has been a roller-coaster one, it has seen many ups and downs and has not been steady. He said that it is understandable that national interests drive relations. However, he stressed that Pakistan values its friendship with US, and it is still the most sought-after education destination for Pakistanis and large Pakistan Diaspora.

Ms. Nancy Lindborg talked about building peace in fragile states. She said USIP was formed by the Congress as an independent, non-partisan entity. She said that USIP mandate is to work with partners around the world to prevent, mitigate and resolve violent conflicts. She said that towards the end of the Cold War, threats were emanating from states that were plagued by civil war, violent extremism, migration or displacement through violence. The issue of state fragility thus became prominent and USIP has been engaged with it. She said that there came a realization that peace needs to be built from top down and bottom up. The weaker a state is, the more vulnerable it is to climate change, calamities and conflict. She said that most of her earlier work had been on working on states or situations after conflict had broken out. So the question arose on how to move upstream? How to work on prevention of violent conflicts? She said that when she was running the humanitarian operation of the US in 2014, the US budget for the purpose

was $3 billion, today it is $9 billion. This reflects the level of crises that have arisen in the last six years. This underscores the question that the world needs to collectively figure out how to get ahead of these crises. The world needs to come together to work on prevention rather than the cure of the malady of fragile states and the subsequent problems arising from them.

USIP has been tasked by Congress to convene non-partisan high-level study groups, commission, and taskforces to look at the most difficult problems in the world. For example, USIP was called upon to form an Iraq Study Group 2004-5 to help the country think of the right policy at that difficult time. A year and a half ago, the Congress asked the USIP to convene a study group to look at extremism in fragile states, especially in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. The premise was that the US has spent $6 trillion since 9/11 fighting violent extremism around the world. However, violent extremism has increased four times. She said that it became apparent that something was not working. The 9/11 commission also gave three major recommendation. The third recommendation was how to create policy of prevention which was never taken up. A USIP Task Force of 15 eminent people produced two reports and a number of recommendations for the Congress, which later became the Global Fragility Act.

The recommendations by USIP said that one of the problems was that the US had been pursuing policies that had a deep disconnect between development, diplomacy, and security efforts. The lack of coherent strategy between the three streams of efforts was undermining the ability to be more successful. USIP research also highlighted that where the society-state contract is weak there are greater chances that conflict would become violent. One of the recommendations was thus on focusing on strengthening the society-state contract, and more inclusive of broad sections of society. It looked at a number of data and found that the key driver for young to chose extremist ideology was if a family member had experienced repressive act by a security actor. Security sector therefore becomes very important part of the equation.

She said that many studies by the World Bank and in UK have come about that consolidate this kind of thinking. In terms of recommendations to the US government there were three big baskets of recommendations that went into the heart of the Global Fragility Act. One was that the US needed to be more coherent with its strategy. There was a need for greater understanding of what development, diplomacy and security are all doing or else it would be a wasted effort.

Secondly, there are a number of ways US assistance is encumbered by timelines and earmarks, things that are driven by what the US wants, not what is in the best interest of the concerned country. She said that change needs to be led locally - ultimately not what US wants, but what is beneficial for the country. Thirdly, the US cannot do it alone, more countries need to be involved in the funding, development and the overall efforts.

There is convergence of ideas by UN, UK, World Bank and EU on how to deal with the issue of weak state and society contract. So there is increasingly convergence of agreement by many bureaucracies.

Discussion

Comment: One participant sharing his experience said that US problems need to be addressed in a broader sense and not in a linear fashion. He added that in Pakistan, one tends to look at problems in a linear way, with the result that they never get solved. He stressed that there is a need to look at issues comprehensively. Those on top must look at the problem holistically and seek solutions accordingly.

Comment/Question: The US perspective is that a fragile sate is a non-democratic one. However, in reality that is not the case. There is a need to understand the political culture. What is your view on the situation in Kashmir? The decades of suppression in Kashmir, would it not create scores of extremists? How to address that situation?

Ms. Lindborg said that Kashmir is a prime example of a situation where armed response is going to generate resentment. Having said that, not all suppressed people will turn to terrorists. But sometimes it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy when suppression lasts of decades and young people have no hope, meaning or purpose. When all options are curtailed, it is more likely to create extremism and terrorists.

Comment/Question: The Citizenship bill introduced in India has created many problems within that country. The international community is not paying heed to the ever-worsening situation in India. Our Prime Minister, Imran Khan has pointed to rise of Fascism in India. How would US deal with that?

Ms. Lindborg said that Fascism is a cause of concern. There is an overall rise of fascism worldwide.

Question: Would you consider Pakistan as a fragile state? It would be a good idea to have a preventive approach to conflict and extremism. Budget of militaries is lopsided. Which side the scale is to be tilted?

Ms. Lindborg said that fragility of a state should be seen in terms of a spectrum on a number of indicators – it tends to moves up and down. Every state is on the spectrum.

Comment: Is Afghanistan a fragile state?

Ms. Lindborg said there are a number of indicators of a fragile state. These include things like - is the state legitimate in eyes of people? The state of human rights in a state and the inclusiveness of society. An alienated society is more prone to fragility. The state of the economy is also an indicator. Afghanistan almost fulfils all the indices to qualify to be a fragile state. Part of the problem in Afghanistan is that military and political strategy has no synergy. There has been a realization in last few years on part of US that there is not military solution to the problem. US is talking with the Taliban and there is hope of a positive turn in the negotiation process.

Comment: The question of fragile states is more of a political issue. It hinges on disenchantment between governance and society. In many cases the US is party to the conflict.

Ms. Lindborg said that channelling of security aid is often in contradiction with political goals. For sustained stability of a state, peace is needed. Forcing democracy in countries is not a solution to problems.

In his concluding remarks, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BoG, ISSI said that there is increasing awareness worldwide that state fragility is a threat that one needs to guard against. Therefore, there is an emphasis on adopting policies that focus on prevention of state fragility. Once states slide into fragility, it is more difficult to bring them out of it. The realization that prevention is more important than dealing with states once they become fragile is a step in the right direction.

PICTURES OF THE EVENT

Ms. Nancy Lindborg,
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