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Report – Public Talk

by

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The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a Public Talk by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman, High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), Islamic Republic of Afghanistan under its Distinguished Lecture Series on September 29, 2020.

The Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Honourable Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi and Pakistan's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq were also in attendance. Members of the diplomatic corps in Islamabad, academics, civil society, and former and current diplomats were also present.

In his welcome remarks, Director General Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI), Ambassador Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry welcomed Dr Abdullah Abdullah to the Institute and said that he felt deeply honoured that Dr Abdullah had chosen this Institute to send out his message of peace and hope to the academics, experts, and intellectuals of Pakistan. Ambassador Chaudhry observed that helping to stitch peace in Afghanistan is indeed an onerous responsibility and that in Pakistan, there is a consensus that a peaceful, stable, independent, sovereign, and prosperous Afghanistan is in the interest of Pakistan and the region. He recognized that securing peace will not be easy. However, time has never been more opportune for peace, he said. All stakeholders are acutely conscious of this rare window of opportunity. He referred to the people of Afghanistan as brotherly as no two nations share so much in common than the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. All that is left is the need to build on these commonalities.

Ambassador Aizaz also pointed to the positive momentum in the bilateral relationship that he said must now be maintained. It is so heartening, he said, that the government of Pakistan at every level is now striving to contribute to a positive relationship between the two countries. He reassured that every strata of Pakistani society keenly looks at the peace process in Afghanistan while sincerely hoping and praying for success as all stakeholders have huge stakes. He mentioned that the honourable Foreign Minister has earned for himself, the reputation of a man of peace while Prime Minister Imran Khan has wisely suggested through his recent op-ed in Washington Post how best to ensure that peace wins.

Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq welcomed Dr Adullah Abdullah on his visit to Pakistan. He stressed that this visit was taking place at a time when promising progress is being observed both

in the Afghan peace process and our bilateral relations with Afghanistan and that both these tracks were mutually reinforcing. He emphasized that it is important to continue this work diligently with a view to addressing all the issues including bumps that would come in the way of intra-Afghan negotiations. He further went on to say that working for peace and power sharing are always intricate and complex particularly in a situation like Afghanistan where violence has raged for decades. It is a herculean task but an inclusive and broad-based political settlement is the only wise option.

He further stated that in order to negotiate peace one has to be braver than the bravest soldier as wars can be fought by many, peace could be strategized only by few sagacious and brave ones. He also said that during the Doha talks, Dr Abdullah Abdullah rightly commented, “There would be no winners through war in Afghanistan and there would be no losers through an inclusive peace”. Afghanistan at this stage needs someone experienced and wise like Dr Abdullah Abdullah, he said, in order to handle the peace process and that the international community also feels that the peace process is in safe hands while he is in the saddle.

Ambassador Sadiq expressed he was hopeful that this visit would generate a positive momentum in bilateral relations ranging from leveraging mutual soft power particularly people-to-people contacts which signify an important reality that Pakistan has to continue to strengthen its outreach to all segments of the Afghan society. It is also important for the Afghan leadership to interact and engage with all sections of Pakistan society. It is also very clear that today's Afghanistan is different than the Afghanistan of yesterday and had made commendable progress in many fields. Pakistan fully supports the preservation of development gains of Afghanistan and the end of violence and these are two natural stepping stones towards a peaceful and prosperous future. He hoped that this visit of Dr Abdullah Abdullah is the beginning of a fresh surge of strengthening mutual engagement between our two countries and peoples and this will bring significant dividends for both nations.

Honourable Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi welcomed Dr Abdullah Abdullah and started his address by introducing the Institute to the honourable guest. He highlighted that ISSI is one of the premier think tanks in Pakistan and is affiliated with the Foreign Office and that the Foreign Office intends to make full use of the input being provided

by the Institute. He said that Dr Abdullah Abdullah needed no introduction as a man who has seen it all during the last 42 years of struggle which speaks volumes about his experience. As the Chief Executive of Afghanistan, he fully understands the ground realities, challenges, strengths weaknesses and compulsions.

However, his present position as Chairman of the Reconciliation Council is the most challenging job of his career and wished him luck. He said that in his success lies our success. Therefore, it is important to see eye to eye, engage, connect and exchange views in a candid manner. He also added that, the timing of this visit is significant as it has taken place after a number of historic events. He stressed that the peace agreement signed on the 29th of February in Doha between Taliban and the US was a historic agreement. He also recalled his first engagement with US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo when he visited Islamabad and said quite clearly that all roads to Washington lead via Kabul.

The February 29th agreement and bringing Taliban to the negotiating table was not easy but was possible in the end. The second round of talks that took place on August 31st in Kabul was a step in the right direction. He also mentioned that Prime Minister Imran Khan's telephonic conversation with President Ashraf Ghani on September 25th was very positive. He said that this current convergence did not happen overnight and has evolved over time by learning through past mistakes. Today there is a new international environment that is supportive of a political settlement, he said. He added that the peace process has regional support and it cannot move forward without this regional support. There is a greater realization bilaterally in Afghanistan and Pakistan that peace is needed for a prosperous future, he stated.

He went on to say that there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict and the voice for dialogue, previously unheard, has finally been heard. There is a recognition that a negotiated political settlement is perhaps the only and the best way forward. This is both a unique and historic opportunity and must be seized by the leadership of Afghanistan. Reduction in violence leading to a ceasefire is a prerequisite and a necessity for peace. An overwhelming majority of Afghans want peace but there will always be spoilers which must be taken into consideration. The Foreign Minister stressed that sustainable peace can only come from within Afghanistan, it

cannot be imposed on Afghanistan and that only the Afghans can determine the future of their country.

He also said that, peace has many dividends. Regional connectivity, trade and investment cannot happen without peace. CASA 1000 and the TAPI gas pipeline will only become a reality after lasting peace is achieved. He said peace was also a requirement for the dignified and honourable return of Afghan refugees back to their homeland. He emphasized that it was important to not shy away from reality and add a new chapter to the bilateral relations to build a common future for the region. Both sides have gained from mutual support thus, a relationship of cooperation and understanding is the only way forward. The road ahead, will not be easy but it cannot be denied that peace will not be offered to us on a silver platter. Rather it needs work, commitment and patience.

Foreign Minister Qureshi relayed a special message for the people of Afghanistan that Pakistan does not wish to meddle in their internal affairs and has the utmost respect for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Afghanistan. He went on to say that whatever consensus evolves through the Afghan dialogue and negotiations will be completely acceptable to the people of Pakistan. In the end, he quoted from the book of Former President Ayub Khan, “We want to be friends not masters” which is a paradigm shift and new realization and recognition of the benefits of coexisting in peace and building a common future. that we have no favorites, we do not want to meddle in your internal affairs. He concluded by saying that “We respect and want to respect your sovereignty your independence and your territorial integrity, and whatever consensus evolves through your dialogue and your negotiations. We as the people of Pakistan will accept the will of the people of Afghanistan.”

Dr Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) began his speech by saying that effective diplomacy, dialogue and research are very important in today’s environment; in our region and beyond. He said he was confident that we are on the threshold of a new era in our bilateral relations based on mutual respect and sincere cooperation for shared prosperity. Pointing to earlier statements by Ambassador Chaudhry, FM Qureshi and Ambassador Sadiq Khan, he said that he considered the current opportunity, the start of

negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban movement, an important opportunity.

He said that he could not emphasize enough, the importance of this opportunity for peace and as Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), he is delighted to contribute to the strengthening of bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. He said that to do so was in the interests of both countries and of a peaceful region. He pointed out that his visit comes at a crucial time when a new peaceful future is on the horizon referring to his participation in the September 12, 2020 negotiations between Taliban and Afghanistan where he represented the Afghan government. He informed that as we speak here today, there are delegations of both sides in Doha, discussing ways and means of ending decades of conflict through a political settlement in Afghanistan.

Dr Abdullah stressed that Pakistan has played an important role in facilitating these negotiations and he thanked the government and people of Pakistan for making this possible. He said that we are looking forward to joint practical steps between the two countries. He said he is a firm believer of moving beyond rhetoric and the shadowy conspiracy theories that have held us back in the past.

Dr. Abdullah emphasized the need for fresh approaches and to view our region as one region by looking at the realities of the past four decades. It is also important to take into account, the current conditions along with the geo-political and geo-economic shifts and to draw necessary lessons about gains, losses, threats and opportunities. He said that there is a need to reflect upon our past decisions and whether we could have done things differently. If so, then could we have aimed for stronger cooperation, reduced tensions, promoted moderation, increased regional connectivity, trade, transit, economic integration and established business to business and most importantly, people-to-people relations? He said it would be up to the distinguished scholars to count the cost of lost opportunities and non-cooperation.

Dr Abdullah noted that while there have been significant advances in bilateral ties, there are certain areas where we have lagged behind. In today's highly competitive and technologically interconnected world, there are a number of serious threats laid out before us such as terrorism, extremism, intolerance and most recently, Covid-19 pandemic that has not spared any country.

He assured that there is a huge untapped security, political and economic potential for cooperation within the region. Considering the current geopolitical regional context, several new windows of opportunities have opened up, therefore now more than ever, both countries need to pursue an enhanced level of interaction for a peaceful and prosperous co-existence.

Commenting on the future of Pak-Afghan bilateral ties, Dr Abdullah said that the time is now for both nations to define a new vision, address outstanding issues as well as our shared interests. It is also important to realize that peace and instability in Afghanistan or any country in our South Asian region can have far reaching constructive ripple effects. By setting course on a new path towards good neighbourliness and greater regional economic integration, regional prosperity can be achieved.

He said as Chair of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), his job is to help build consensus and manage collective efforts to promote reconciliation to justly, inclusively and honourably end the conflict and seek political settlement. In order to do so, it is important to first recall that remind ourselves that the Afghanistan of today is not what it was in the 90s or even early 2000s. Afghanistan today is young, diverse and connected nation and eager to freely decide its own future with a form of government corresponding to its unity in diversity.

This transformed nation also wants to preserve its core accomplishments including the rights and liberties of all men and women of all communities and groups in Afghanistan. We do not want a terrorist footprint in our country or to allow any entity to pose a threat to any other nation. The current talks offer the best hope to put this war behind us using patience, dialogue and compromise and to agree to unite the country.

Dr Abdullah mentioned his special appreciation for the tremendous efforts, contributions and sacrifices of all partners of Afghanistan made in the past 19 years. However, what still stands elusive, is a dignified, durable and sustainable peace within and without. What is needed, is a friendly and peaceful country that does not harbour any terrorist groups that may pose a threat any countries in our neighbourhood. A sovereign, independent and democratic country with people of diverse ideas who fight principally for implementation of such ideas in a peaceful manner barring any violence.

He said that his responsibility in the current position as Chairman HCNR, cannot be fulfilled without internal as well as external support from the regional countries as well as strengthening of our bilateral relations. He reiterated that this will help in achieving the aspirations of the people who have faced tremendous challenges in the past for more than four decades. He said in his talks with the leader of the Taliban during negotiations that we can all be heroes for our country and also the cost of not seizing the moment not capitalizing on the moment which could be huge. He emphasized the need for seizing the moment now that the international community is supportive. Dr Abdullah informed that President Ghani and himself reached a consensus to be patient and make compromises and to not lose opportunities for peace. He further said that these instructions have also been given to the negotiating team.

Discussing the scourge of terrorism, Dr Abdullah said both Pakistan and Afghanistan have paid a high price by facing various terror groups that are still acting as the spoilers, thus we need to cooperate with like-minded countries against such elements. He also referred to Prime Minister Imran Khan's telephone conversation with President Ashraf Ghani in pursuit of talks and negotiations in good faith and hopes for reduction of violence and a comprehensive ceasefire. Such an environment is especially important in terms of helping the spirit of negotiations back in Doha. He went on to say that the content of discussions being held during his stay in Pakistan has mainly revolved around peace negotiations and also certain areas of bilateral relations.

He said that these meetings held with representatives of the people of Pakistan in the National Assembly were reflective of the sentiment of continued cooperation and goodwill between the two countries. A whole new level of interest is evident in pursuit of our common interests such as the visa regulations, friendly pedestrian crossing points, facilitation in spite of poverty and other challenges that exist. He said there was a need to enhance bilateral relations on the basis of mutual respect and cooperation. Dr Abdullah thanked Pakistan for hosting millions of Afghan refugees and said that he shared the idea of dignified and voluntary return of refugees to Afghanistan. He said that efforts were being made to facilitate this process on the Afghan side. He concluded by saying that peace is not only an Islamic tenet and duty but is also that unique historical opportunity that should not be squandered.

Q & A Session:

A brief question and answer session followed:

Q.1. Are we working on collaborative models between the two countries to prevent spoilers from sabotaging the peace process like Prime Minister Imran Khan has mentioned in his Op-ed in the Washington Post about preventing externally enabled terrorist groups from attacking Pakistan from Afghan soil?

Dr Abdullah said that Afghanistan has never wished to harbour any terrorist group under any name as country and a nation which has suffered because of the activities of terrorist groups for so long. This is our firm view, he said.

Q.2. How do you view the role of China in the Afghan peace process and the future of Afghanistan and if the peace process is successful, what will it mean for CPEC projects materializing in Afghanistan?

Dr Abdullah said that China has played an important role as a peaceful neighbour which has helped us in reconstruction through humanitarian assistance. The Belt and Road Initiative could turn into an opportunity for Afghanistan as well the entire region. China will continue to play its important and constructive role in support of peace and prosperity in Afghanistan.

Q.3. As the peace talks have started between Taliban and Afghan government, what are the prospects of unifying the Afghan society keeping in mind the diverse cultural and ethnic landscape and what kind of future political setup do you envisage?

Today there is a better environment and situation where the international community is also calling for peace the region is more cooperative in in that regard. We hope as Afghans that we have to live together and make peace while having differences amongst ourselves and address those differences peacefully. A majority of the people in Afghanistan are supportive of this and on issues of terrorism there is a firm commitment and realization that these terrorist groups under any name and banner should not be allowed to use the Afghan soil against any country. There are still suspicions and doubts due to what we all have gone through. We all also have a mission and responsibility to address our concerns in a candid and friendly environment and that is what I

have witnessed during my visit this time around in Pakistan and will encourage it back home as well.

While concluding the event, Chairman BoG ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that in the ongoing negotiations, interests of the Afghan people must be a top priority. He stated that Pakistan fully supports all efforts toward peace in Afghanistan. This visit by Dr Abdullah reiterates the warm friendship and deep bond between Pakistan and Afghanistan. We fervently hope that with Dr Abdullah's visit, our bilateral exchanges would gain further momentum, he said.