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PRESS RELEASE-DAY TWO

Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: Role of Major Powers and Regional Countries

War can never be a road to peace. Pakistan is the only country which has always stood next to Afghanistan and its people and for world peace. We have always stood with the right. Even now, when the world is saying we are not doing enough, even now when our efforts are undermined, this country, its people, its government remain strongly and unequivocally committed to peace and stability in Afghanistan. These were some of the passionate and heartfelt thoughts shared by Lt. Gen (Retd) Nasir Khan Janjua, National Security Adviser, at the closing ceremony of IPRI-HSF's two-day international Conference on 'Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: Role of Major Powers and Regional Countries.'

Addressing a packed hall of delegates from Kabul, Washington, Tehran, Beijing, Ankara and Moscow, Mr Janjua remarked that the notions of victory are not visible from any side especially not to the Afghan people, and certainly not to its children. Initially aimed at driving out Al-Qaeda and the Taliban from Afghanistan based purely on the desire for vengeance, post 9/11 U.S. intervention has had the most far-reaching consequences for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The presence of foreign troops in the region has added further complexity to the existing volatile mix of ethnic and religious tensions, he said. Talking about the objections of Afghan authorities when Pak-Afghan border at Torkham was closed, he posed a simple question, 'can a house be protected without having any boundary wall or fence?' He confessed that focusing on military options alone has not allowed the political processes to take root in Afghanistan and this strategy has greatly injured the Afghan people. While Pakistan's role is that of a facilitator, real reconciliation needs to take place between the New Unity Government and the Afghan Taliban, he stressed.

Similar views were echoed by Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry, Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, when he emphasized that for effective counterterrorism, strengthening border controls to regulate the movements across the border is vital. He stressed the need for a positive response from the Afghan government regarding effective border management. While chairing the session on 'Role of States Assisting Peace in Afghanistan', he further pointed out that vested interests have often tried to create a perception that Pakistan controls the Taliban. Such an impression breeds unrealistic expectations from Pakistan. Plus, 'mistrust between the two countries has also taken its toll on the efforts for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The blame game only serves those who do not want intra-Afghan reconciliation. It is important that inter-state parleys should not be conducted through media', he said.

Discussing the reasons behind the U.S. launching a war in Afghanistan, Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown from the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., stated that countering terrorism and disempowering terrorist groups in the country and making Afghanistan stable and peaceful have been the core objectives behind the U.S. War on Terror. Given the precariousness of the security situation, the U.S. has also reversed its previous decision to reduce U.S. military troops in Afghanistan. Instead, at least in 2017, U.S. troops would be reduced to 5,600 from 10,000. However, reduction of forces will be a great challenge for ISAF, she predicted. Nonetheless, the U.S. is keenly supportive of the dialogue process, she said. Contrary to many perceptions, ‘war is not in United States interests, it is not a U.S. objective. The U.S. does not want perpetual conflict in Afghanistan; it wants South Asian countries to be stable’, she emphasized.

‘Russia’s primary concern in Afghanistan is maintaining security in the Afghan–Central Asian region. Moscow seeks to prevent instability in Central Asian countries, some of which—Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan—are its allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO),’ said Petr Topychkanov from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Moscow Center. He deliberated that while a peaceful, stable, and developing Afghanistan would be in Russia’s interest, Moscow does not have vital stakes in any of the possible Afghan regimes. Thus, it would be dangerous and pointless for Russia to get involved in Afghanistan’s internal power struggle, he pointed out. Moscow can work with any potential leaders in Kabul and maintain ties with any regional or ethnic groups as long as they do not engage in activities directed against Russia. An unstable Afghanistan does, however, pose indirect risks to Russia’s security, primarily in the form of the drug traffic that originates on Afghan territory and reaches the Russian market through Central Asian countries, he said. Moscow can engage in focused diplomacy inside Afghanistan and in relations with regional powers, under CSTO and use the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as a platform for diplomacy. However, in order to use these tools effectively, Moscow will need to develop a cohesive strategy, he admitted.

‘China and Pakistan should strengthen their cooperation, play constructive roles and support the principle of *Afghan-led and Afghan-owned* to ensure the comprehensiveness, legitimacy and continuity of Afghan peace and reconciliation to achieve substantive stability and prosperity of the whole region at the earliest,’ shared Dr. Wang Xu, Executive Deputy Director, Center for South Asian Studies, Peking University. He was discussing China’s Afghan diplomacy and objectives. The news of Mullah Omar’s death was a watershed moment in the Afghan security situation, but the Islamic State (IS) from the Middle East has been trying to influence the region, implication of which should not be neglected, he said. Instability in Afghanistan will also pose a serious threat to successful completion of China Pakistan Economic Corridor, he warned.

In the session on ‘Transnational Security Problems & Neighbouring Regions’, Dr. Zubair Iqbal, Adjunct Scholar, Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., discussed the stakes and role of Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan. He shared that while the younger leadership that seems to be taking over decision making in the new Saudi government is clearly more interested in addressing domestic economic challenges than those far afield, it is critical that they should consider increased economic linkage with Afghanistan as a foundation for developing a more strategic relationship with the country. ‘Increased trade and employment of Afghan expatriate workers could not only help develop an alternative and a more durable source of income than foreign aid for Afghanistan, it could also develop a constituency in Afghanistan that could support Saudi initiatives for peace. Saudi private sector investment in the mining and agricultural sectors could be mutually beneficial, providing employment opportunities in Afghanistan, helping develop skills, and—perhaps, in conjunction with the Chinese OBOR initiative—diversifying the Afghan economy and strengthening economic links with Central Asia’, he highlighted.

Mir Mahmood Mousavi, former Ambassador of Iran to Pakistan analysed Iranian engagement in Afghanistan and shared that with a 900km border with Afghanistan, Iran has strong stakes in seeing a stable neighbour and hence wants to play a constructive role like it did during the Bonn Conference in late 2001, when the country broke a stalemate over the composition of Afghanistan’s first post-Taliban government. He said that Iran is actively engaged in the country, spurred in part by shared cultural ties, as well as through economic and financial investments worth US\$ 500 million. However, like other regional delegates at the Conference, Ambassador Mousavi raised concerns that the Taliban insurgency is funded in large part by narcotics trafficking, and Iran is a chief destination. This illicit trade fuels Iran’s acute drug crisis.

Mr. Orkhan Gafarov from Ankara Policy Center evaluated the multi-faceted linkages between Afghanistan and Central Asian States. He gave an in-depth overview of bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. He shared that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is seen as an important player by the Central Asian Region (CAR) through which they are more eager to develop their security policies. He opined that Russia’s Afghanistan policy considerably affects the foreign policies of Central Asian countries because these countries have not sufficiently developed militarily and politically. He warned that since more and more young people from Afghanistan and Central Asian countries are going to Daesh camps in Syria, NATO’s withdrawal plan from Afghanistan should be examined more closely. The session was chaired by the former Secretary Defense Lt General (R) Asif Yasin Malik.

The two-day moot ended with all the delegates in unanimous agreement that the dream of an inter-connected and economically integrated region cannot be realized without a peaceful Afghanistan. Long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan requires synchronization of efforts by Afghanistan, neighbouring and regional countries as well as the broader international community including the United States, Russia, China, EU and other major players.