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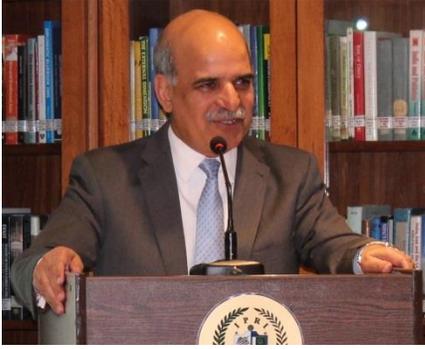
PRESS RELEASE

Pakistan-Austria Roundtable on “Afghanistan and Regional Security”



- The current peace talks between the United States and Taliban need to be more transparent, inclusive and open.
- An intra-Afghan dialogue is more important and should be promoted in a way that the Afghan government does not feel excluded and Taliban are also a part of the process.
- Any solution for bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan needs to have the support of the Afghan people who have suffered more than anyone else in the decades of war and instability.

These were some of the conclusions of the Pakistan-Austria Roundtable on “Afghanistan and Regional Stability” held at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute, here in Islamabad today. The roundtable, moderated by Ambassador (R) Fauzia Nasreen included eminent diplomats who had served in Afghanistan, Austria and Saudi Arabia as well as academics and defence analysts.



Giving his welcome address, **Ambassador Vice Admiral (R) Khan Hasham Bin Saddique** said that since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the country has witnessed unprecedented violence which has considerably weakened the state and society. The instability in Afghanistan has remained a major source of concern for the international community, particularly Pakistan. “Pakistan endured the spillover of humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan into Pakistan’s western border regions, when we hosted around 5 million Afghan refugees during the 1980s and 1990s, and continue to host around 2.5 million Afghan refugees,” he said. President Saddique highlighted that conflict in Afghanistan in the post-9/11 milieu gravely impacted the stability of Pakistan’s western border regions, especially the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Balochistan. “Pakistan’s viewpoint on Afghanistan is clear: we want an intra-Afghan dialogue which involves all segments of society. It is only through building an intra-Afghan consensus that the beleaguered country can finally be ushered into an era of peace and stability,” he stressed.

Dr Syed Adnan Ali Shah Bukhari, Senior Consultant at IPRI provided an overview of the internal security situation in Afghanistan; the regional security matrix; and current US-Taliban peace process. He shared that the power struggle between state and anti-state actors in Afghanistan has intensified with the country’s militant landscape becoming more complex since 2015. He said that suicide attacks were up by 29 per cent in Afghanistan with 2343 civilian casualties in the July-September 2018 period alone; along with a sharp rise in civilian airstrike deaths. He was of the view that while the Taliban movement is fractured, there is multiplication of terrorist groups in the territory. Dr Bukhari outlined that given the worsening security situation, regional countries continue to remain threatened by presence of hostile elements on their borders; and hence, there is emphasis on bilateral and multilateral cooperation among regional countries. He also pointed out that given the lack of success of regional peace initiatives, individual countries like Pakistan, Russia, China and even Central Asian Republics have started improving their border defences. On the issue of the current negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, Dr Bukhari opined that while there appears to be seriousness of intent shown by all the sides, yet suspicion continues to exist between these stakeholders. “Any deal will not be a simple walkover, but full of implementation challenges,” he concluded.



In his keynote, **Dr Werner Fasslabend**, President of the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, offered a strategic analysis of Afghan situation from the Austrian and European Union perspective. He was of the view that the situation in Afghanistan is more or less defined by its geostrategic location, being in the middle of South, Central and Western Asia and even having links to Eastern Asia. “Being a landlocked country will continue to

define the course of Afghanistan's inner politics as well as the movement and decisions of global powers and regional powers around it," he said. Speaking of the current prevailing situation, he said that the United States is now tired and is ready to withdraw with minimal conditions even if that means fewer bases in the territory since ultimately "the Americans understand the central function of Afghanistan and will not give it up completely without maintaining a foothold there." He was of the view that once the US leaves, China will strive to have a stronger presence in Afghanistan. He pointed out that "For China, Afghanistan has a strategic function that goes far beyond other countries because it is a gateway towards East and West Asia. It also offers a link to Central Asia which is of utmost importance to China. The strategic alliance between Beijing and Moscow is an alliance which is against the West, and especially the US. The first strategic interest of this alliance is dominance in Central Asia." Dr Fasslabend further shared that Europe does not have an immediate geopolitical interest in Afghanistan since it is more concerned about having peace in the region, free of humanitarian crises, drugs and anti-terrorism. He concluded that Afghanistan, as a country, is divided. "What the country lacks most is a common agenda accepted by internal and external powers. For Afghanistan, the main challenge remains: whether this region will be a region of divide or cooperation."

Brig Walter Feichtinger, Head of the Institute for Peace-Keeping and Conflict Management at the National Defence Academy shared that Austrian forces were one of the first to join the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in 2002, providing expertise and logistical support. "Austria continues to contribute to the follow-on Resolute Support Mission (RSM) to further train, assist and advise the Afghan security forces and institutions," he said.



Ambassador (R) Fauzia Nasreen

shared that the major transformations and transitions are taking place in Afghanistan. But while terrorism remains a major threat for all countries, instead of handling it in a way that leads to confrontation, it should be tackled in a way that leads to cooperation.

Ambassador (R) Umar Khan Ali Sherzai warned that while on paper the Afghan question may look simple, in reality, Afghanistan is a complex issue because of the diverging interests of all the concerned stakeholders. "The best thing would be to let the problems in the country be solved by the Afghans themselves however they want so that the world is able to see once and for all, what the Afghan population truly want in their land. Pakistan has no negative designs and has always stood with the international community for peace...the recent Pulwama crisis is proof of our sincere intentions," he said.

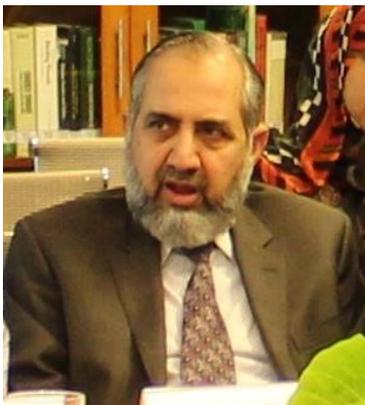


Ambassador (R) Ali Sarwar Naqvi highlighted that the 21st Century geopolitical paradigms are no longer about zero sum game. Alliances of the past have metamorphosed and are no longer only conflictual or cooperative, rather they are both. Globalization, too, has blurred territorial identities. He lamented that these changes have, however, brought international institutions and systems under stress and deepening nationalist trends are undermining and weakening them even further. He called for more people-to-people contact between Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as more interaction between the civil society and academia of both countries to built trust and friendship.



Lt. Gen (R) Talat Masood stressed that India’s role in Afghanistan needs to change and move towards cooperation. “Pakistan will not have such serious concerns about the New Delhi-Kabul relationship if it does not have any negative repercussions and impacts for Pakistan, especially the use of Afghan soil against us,” he remarked.

Amb (R) Muhammad Ayaz Wazir opined that the negotiators in the present peace process with the Taliban need to be mindful not to make this process another Geneva Accord which proved to be disastrous for the region in the long run.



Ambassador (R) Syed Abrar Hussain highlighted that Pakistan is among the top countries that want peace in Afghanistan but there has always been a history of scuttling Afghan peace efforts such as Murree talks, Quadrilateral talks, Moscow talks or recent Doha peace dialogue. Intra-Afghan dialogue, which is vital to peaceful settlement in Afghanistan, is missing from the peace process. Without intra-Afghan dialogue, nothing can be achieved, he concluded.