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IPRI Webinar Press Release

“Afghan Peace Process: The Way Forward”

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The peace process in Afghanistan should not be seen as a zero sum game, but as a much needed bid to restore peace as well as prosperity in the country and the region.

The Islamabad Policy Research Institute organized a special webinar on “*Afghan Peace Process: The Way Forward*” here in the capital today. Featured speakers included **Ambassador (R) Riaz Mohammad Khan**, **Ambassador (R) Ashraf Jehangir Qazi** and **Ambassador (R) Rustam Shah Mohmand**. It was unanimously agreed that the US-Taliban peace deal in February this year, and the more recent President Ashraf Ghani giving Abdullah Abdullah the leading role in seeking peace with the Taliban and the ability to name half the cabinet, are historic achievements. Both offer hope for the much more challenging stage of the peace process in Afghanistan, the intra-Afghan dialogue between the Kabul government, various political factions and the Taliban. It was discussed that while the US may have arm-twisted both to sign the power-sharing deal in order to make the environment conducive for dialogue with the Taliban, it also addresses President Ghani’s reservation of being pushed out of the loop on the Doha Agreement, putting him back into the heart of affairs, along with Abdullah Abdullah, who is not only the government’s chief negotiator but also getting a hefty share in the cabinet. All the speakers agreed that the Taliban’s capacity to control violence is questionable and so before the withdrawal, the US along with other regional leaders need to define the minimum standard of what will constitute the new governance framework of the country. It was also opined that complete withdrawal of the US is not on the table. The US will likely have presence in Afghanistan to keep a close eye on China, and perhaps even support Indian interests in the region, which might keep them in confrontation with the Taliban. The speakers also discussed that it will be interesting to see how various powers engage with Afghanistan after the

withdrawal of troops based on local interests or in the context of geopolitical interests towards the United States which has the ability to offer long-term commitments.

Ambassador Riaz Muhammad Khan discussed how this power sharing arrangement between two election opponents lucidly defines the role of both: President Ghani, who enjoys being a technocrat, will have undivided control over the office of the executive without having to deal with another de facto “Prime Minister” and his power play, whereas Abdullah Abdullah, having a reputation for building consensus amongst different political groups, is saddled with leading the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR). Responsibilities are split based on the strengths of both politicians which is a good omen. He also pointed out that while the Taliban have outlasted American military might, their test begins on the negotiating table. They have to prove themselves as more than a group of militant fundamentalists as they are still under international scrutiny. Moreover, the group needs to manifest that it has “modernized” to the needs of the contemporary Afghanistan. In this regard, small but symbolic steps have to be taken to ensure women and ethnic groups don’t have serious qualms about their rule given their blood soaked history. The potential peace spoilers like the Afghan Taliban’s future relationship with ANSDF and future shape of the government needs to be kept in view, while pursuing the peace process. The role of outside players like the US, especially its military establishment’s proclivity to have a military imprint might also act as spoilers. Whatever role Pakistan plays in the peace process, it needs to be done circumspectly.

According to *Ambassador Ashraf Jehangir Qazi*, the existential challenge of global warming, Covid-19 and its succeeding pandemics are likely to occur with shorter and shorter intervals and are likely to fatally distract and disable Afghanistan. He called for a comprehensive ‘green new deal’ which would transform national policies, including foreign policies. This is because of the nature of the overt and covert corporate/military dominance over governance countries like Afghanistan; and the corporate capitalist economic model that prioritises the interests of the rich over poor. Ambassador Qazi held that similar to Pakistan, in Kabul there is ruthless and unending high-level corruption on daily display - a classic instance of elite governance through class warfare. He regretted that in such circumstances, merely honest and well-intentioned leaders may at best bring about piecemeal improvements, but never the systemic structural

change required for survival. He outlined that the best case scenario is of a coalition political set-up which integrates the Taliban with the current dispensation in power-sharing, declares Daesh as the single biggest threat to Afghanistan, power is decentralized, with foreign troops replaced by an international monitoring mission. Ambassador Qazi warned that the success of such a peace settlement depends on the independence of the Afghan economy. China could very well include Afghanistan as a major building block in its Belt and Road Initiative, in other words global powers as well as regional ones, need to ramp up investment in the land-locked nation, he urged.

Ambassador (R) Rustam Shah Mohmand was of the view that the role of regional powers has been instrumental in the once considered elusive peace process in Afghanistan. The joint statement of representatives of Pakistan, China, Iran and Russia on 18 May 2020, shows the intent for an Afghan-led peace and reconciliation process. All regional players will be beneficiaries of peace deal. However, he warned that given the huge financial investments made by India in various sectors, it will continue to meddle in Afghan affairs, especially to destabilize Pakistan. He opined that regional players are on the same page by being non-partisan towards all stakeholders of the intra-Afghan dialogue and want to ensure the Afghan soil does not become a hotbed of proxy warfare. Albeit, India's role should not be taken lightly by Pakistan, because this fascist bellicose regime will resort to extreme measures to jeopardize peace in the region since it has been using Afghan land to stir up insurgency for years in adjoining tribal areas and Balochistan. He also cautioned about some past policies that have resulted in reduced trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan souring relations between the two countries.

In his welcome and concluding remarks, **Acting President IPRI, Brig (R) Raashid Wali Janjua**, highlighted that there is consensus on the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan which is contingent on the outcome of the intra-Afghan dialogue. All regional stakeholders need to be on board for withdrawal to happen in an orderly fashion. He said that one of the most important challenges is chalking out a power-sharing deal with the Taliban and acceptability of that deal by all factions. He stressed that the future of the Afghan peace process is dependent on the outcome of the peace process which in order to be sustainable needs to be inclusive and participatory with full support of the regional countries.

