Report

RUSSIAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ON POST-2014 AFGHANISTAN AND REGIONAL STABILITY

Round Table Discussion Organized by:
Centre for Policy Studies (CPS),
COMSATS Institute of Information Technology (CIIT)
Held on 7/4/2013
The Centre for Policy Studies organized a roundtable discussion on Post-2014 Afghanistan and Regional Stability on 4 July 2013. The focus was on the Russian and Central Asian Perspectives. Two main speakers; Ambassador Khalid M. Khattak (former Ambassador of Pakistan to Russia) and Dr. Sarfraz Khan, Director Area Study Centre, Peshawar University shared their views on the subject. It was followed by a lively discussion where interventions were made by the participants from the Foreign Office, various think tanks and university academics.

The roundtable was organized as a part of a wider project undertaken by CPS to analyze developments in Afghanistan in the wake of US/ISAF troop drawdown decision by the end of 2014. The aim is to examine the socio-economic impact of the evolving situation on Pakistan and make possible broad recommendations for mitigating the adverse implications and to develop perspectives on strategic decisions and strategic policy-making that could bring dividends for Pakistan.

Professor Dr. S.M. Junaid Zaidi(S.I), Rector COMSATS warmly welcomed the guest speakers and participants and individually exchanged views with them. The discussion began with Mr. Khalid Saeed Director CPS’ brief introduction of the Centre for Policy Studies, its aims and objectives. He expressed appreciation for the two speakers and participants for their attendance.

After the theme was introduced by Ambassador Fauzia Nasreen, Adviser CPS Ambassador Khalid M. Khattak shared his assessment on the subject. He initiated his observation with the question why President Obama chose to announce 2014 as the cut out date for troop drawdown in his election campaign. What were the constraints? These, in his view, included domestic political considerations and compulsion of disengagement from Iraq.

He further elaborated that the prevailing view was that Taliban were locally entrenched people and that the Americans were outsiders. However the Russian position and the Central Asian positions on the issue were different. Russians saw Americans as part of the problem with related issues of small arms, narcotics trade, terrorism and extremism. The Central Asians also believed that the US was leaving behind a “huge mess”. Since the Russian population had the tendency towards separatism (Dagestan, Chechnya etc), all Russian statements mentioned about the objectives of extremist and terrorist elements in terms of separatism.

While talking about the Russian strategic objectives Ambassador Khattak went into the details of Russian doctrine of “warm waters” which had now changed since “the Arctic was becoming warm.” Nevertheless, Russia was a landmass power; therefore, it was important for it to have strategic interests in other countries. In the early days as
part of its Central Asia policy, Russia was initially interested in China and later in India. Subsequently, both Russia and China had sandwiched the Central Asian states.

On the question of Indo-Russia partnership, Ambassador Khattak viewed that in the Cold war period Russia was the senior partner but in the prevailing scenario there had been a shift in this equation and India had placed itself as an equal partner. This very much reflected India’s economic strength, giving more options to India. In his perception, Russia saw Pakistan as a balancer to India provided there was internal stability in Pakistan and if it could put its economy in order. Presently Russian energy markets were in Western Europe and it was reluctant to play a role in Afghanistan. However Russia was willing to cooperate with Pakistan.

In so far as Pakistan’s full membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was concerned, the resistance was basically coming from the Central Asian states. This was so because Pakistan’s membership would mean membership for India which would change the entire orientation of SCO. These states perhaps also feared Indian democracy as the regimes mostly had links to Soviet socialist era and were authoritarian. Moreover, both China (India joining SCO) and Iran were not keen.

Ambassador Khattak further elaborated that President Putin was following the doctrine of Eurasia which meant more strategic emphasis on Europe in policy orientations. The Customs Union had only four countries (Russia+3 Central Asian states). The vexing problem was that of non-state actors and the related public opinion that had emerged as major challenges in the region. Empowering people was a major challenge which was encouraging several protests even within Russia.

Insofar as Afghanistan was concerned Russia identified three challenges: security, peace and stability, and reconstruction and reconciliation. At the time of 9/11, Putin had advised the then President Bush not to physically intervene in Afghanistan based on their own experience. With regard to US bases in Afghanistan, the Russians were of the view that if the purpose was to keep the Talibans at bay and not to use them as intelligence posts, the Russians would not object. Maintaining the bases on a permanent basis would create problems between Russia and the US. In his opinion, the US bases would remain in Afghanistan in post-2014 period. The objective would be to monitor and conduct surveillance of Taliban activities. For the US, the Taliban were a thorn in the side of Moscow and Beijing. Both feared Talibanization, and their interests converged in this regard despite some other competitive issues.

According to Ambassador Khattak, Pakistan was a soft society and would therefore suffer more in the post-2014 scenario. Russians did not press Pakistan to “do more” like the US. On the Pakistani side there still appeared to be no consensus on Taliban (considered some as ‘good’ and some as ‘bad’). There was no policy on terrorism as
there were mere statements which meant nothing in practical terms. His reflection was that if Pakistan could delink Taliban from international terrorism they would be only local groups with no international dimension. Perhaps more dialogue should take place rather than the use of force. There was hence a need to follow a balanced policy which was always difficult in dire circumstances.

Dr. Sarfraz Khan, Director Area Study Centre, University of Peshawar, talked at length about Central Asian perspectives on post-2014 Afghanistan. In his view, the Central Asian perspectives could be highlighted under the following six points:

- Stability of the region and regimes;
- Muslim extremism and terrorism emanating from Afghanistan and entering Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and others;
- Markets;
- Trade and supply routes;
- Border security and narcotics;
- Central Asian energy pipelines.

Central Asians viewed Pakistan’s position in Afghanistan with general suspicion when NATO forces would leave Afghanistan. They felt insecure and considered Pakistan as “part of the problem rather than the solution.” In the past, when the Soviet Union collapsed and various Central Asian countries emerged different Islamic missionaries that included Muslim extremist groups tried to enter Central Asian region through Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In most of Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan they forged association with Chechans and the perception on the part of other nations was that it had destabilized their states to an extent. The Islamic Party of Waziristan and Afghanistan was very well known. Whenever Uzbeks were killed inside Pakistan or Afghanistan and arrested in Pakistan diplomats tried for consular access as per international treaty (Vienna Convention) and other details from the Pakistani authorities. They were interested to know what was happening in madrassas where they suspected many of their descendants received religious education and hence were of primary and foremost concern as it affected their stability.

As far as Afghanistan was concerned, Kabul was buying gas and oil from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and other central Asian countries. While Pakistan’s exports to Central Asian countries were very low, the energy supplies from Central Asia remained a non-starter for Pakistan as the supply routes were blocked by Afghanistan and they considered it was detrimental to trade with Pakistan due to its instability. An alternative trade route
from Xinjiang was there but was presently not economically viable. The Iranian route was blocked partly as Iran was considered an economic rival.

Border security was still in the hands of Russia. However, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were concerned more about narcotics trade. Central Asian countries were also worried regarding border security and narcotics. Mostly Pakistan was using Almaty and Tashkent routes. According to Dr. Khan, the Almaty route was banned now as Pakistan was allegedly involved in human smuggling and promoting unethical practices there. According to several feasibility reports, Pakistan was in dire need of energy. India and China were also deficient in energy: that was why the Asian markets and India needed Central Asian energy.

The post 2014 scenario in Afghanistan was not looked at optimistically since the Central Asians feared that they might come under extreme pressure of terrorists and extremists; also they would have less leverage from other countries and would be adversely affected economically.

Central Asian states’ fear emanated from Uzbekistan because it was rich in resources. The question was: whether terrorists from Central Asia were a threat to South Asia or terrorists from South Asia posed threat to Central Asia? Despite loss of nearly 4 trillion dollars and thousands of people killed, the US’ objective of subjugation of Afghanistan had not been achieved.

However after 9/11 Pakistan played the role of a facilitator. But after the U.S withdrawal who would be taking charge of Afghanistan’s security and maintenance? Apparently, China was reluctant. Due to democratic developments in Russia, they would prefer to be part of the West and not Central Asia in matters of trade and business.

Was this apprehension confined to Central Asian countries or others beyond? The threat from Afghanistan was not in the physical form, it came in the form of fundamental ideology on religious views that Talibans professed. Dr. Khan’s advice was that we should sit down and thrash out these problems. There were non-state agents. We normally knew that Islam had spread from Central Asia to South Asia. These states now had strong regimes, which did not want to get destabilized. It was about substantial differences in perceptions. The Central Asians were not wishful for markets in Pakistan but we needed them for oil and gas. When ex-President Musharraf was in power, contract for the expansion of Steel Mill-a project of $ 1.5 billion was initiated but this project was given to China that was why Russians had some grievances.
The first priority for Central Asian states was Western Europe, the second China and the third South Asia unless and until Pakistan and Afghanistan got stabilized. Central Asian States did not have long history and experience of diplomacy. If Afghanistan’s rich resources were not exploited well and used by Afghans themselves then these resources would be used by neighbors including Pakistan.

### Question and Answer Session

**Foreign Policy Formulation:** To the question about the input of foreign policy it was said that in every country these were taken from different stakeholders including military and intelligence agencies. The doctrine of ‘warm waters’ was first coined by the imperial British navy—then the strongest navy of the world at that time. Pakistan at this moment did not have any favorites in Afghanistan. It had been playing a vital role in peace and stability of Afghanistan since 2012 when President Karzai had asked Islamabad to play peace-building role in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s policy now was to try to be coherent in the case of Taliban. It believed in Afghan-owned and Afghan-led reconciliation process in Afghanistan. It was pointed out that as far as Pakistan’s Afghan policy was concerned, not a single meeting was held in the Foreign Office and all were held in the General Headquarters.

**The Issue of Terrorism:** In response to another question it was remarked that the term “terrorism” implied an extreme state of frustration in a situation. The society unfortunately gets dehumanized. One view was that terrorism flowed from Central Asia or Pakistan to Afghanistan.

**Central Asian Republics:** The leadership in Central Asia belonged to the old Communist background and wanted to maintain hold on power at all costs. These Central Asian Republics benefited from the US presence in Afghanistan in the form of financial payments on transport routes and many jobs were also created. Uzbekistan had economically benefited the most in this regard. It had lately exercised much independence from Moscow and developed close relations with the US. Because of its size it also was looked with suspicion by its smaller neighbors, viz., Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

**Pakistan’s Position:** It was reemphasized that Pakistan at the moment did not have any favorites in Afghanistan and was playing a key role in peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. Pakistan had urged the Taliban to help in making this process successful. Afghanistan was vital to Pakistan as peace and stability and economic development of both the countries was closely interlinked. After the 2014 Afghan elections the US position would become clear and Russians would most likely support
a pro-Karzai government. Pakistan believed that it can serve as a facilitator in the reconciliation process but was still considered as “part of the problem.”

Pakistan’s policies at times seemed quite coherent about Afghanistan. They comprised 3D’s i.e. Dialogue, Development and Deterrence. However in reality, things were quite different and Afghanistan had plenty of grievances against Pakistan. In another context it was pointed out that Pakistan wanted a friendly government in Afghanistan which could help in the reconciliation process. It was only Pakistan that was supporting reconciliation with Talibans. Pakistan did not carry out military operation in North Waziristan even when asked by the foreign agencies. Also, foreign states and agencies of other countries did not have policies and solutions regarding reconciliation and withdrawal of U.S from Afghanistan.

Globalization and Its Impact on Security: In this age of globalization, Talibanization and extremism affected Russia and China indirectly. Moreover democratic situation of Russia suggested that their inclination was not towards Central Asia. The perception that Russian influence had disappeared in Central Asia was completely a wrong notion. Central Asians did not have any experience of democracy and diplomacy. The current leadership of Central Asian countries feared that they might face more problems so Afghanistan’s neutrality should be respected and its territory should not be used against its neighbors.

Trade and Narcotics Issue: Around 15% of supply through Afghanistan and Pakistan was taking place through Uzbekistan and Tajikistan while 80% of narcotics were moving through Central Asia.

US Military Withdrawal: The vacuum would be created after US withdrawal when a substantial number of forces located in Afghanistan would leave by the end of 2014. Afghan presidential elections were scheduled in May 2014 in Afghanistan. By that time a new government in Afghanistan would be in place provided elections were not engineered. On the perception of Central Asian States about Pakistan, a participant mentioned that there were positive as well as negative features. Positive things could play some role in the betterment of the region when the US forces would leave. The question arose: were they going to leave Afghanistan? And, if they were not going to leave, were they going to sustain and maintain their presence there? The US had already nine bases and its record was that it had not left any country of occupation. The question of immunity provisions was vital in this regard. The US feared that Taliban could rise again and their helpers would support them. And if Afghanistan was left to Talibans and Karzai, then what would be the role of Russia in that scenario?
**Russian Viewpoint:** When it came to Russia, it saw the revival of Taliban in Afghanistan as a potential threat as it believed that Pushtuns had to be co-opted regarding the future of Afghanistan. While SAARC and SCO were regional organizations, Russia did not attach much importance to SCO (as a counter to US presence) as American bases were already in Afghanistan. For Russia, Pakistan was a struggling democracy and Putin’s postponed/cancelled visit to Pakistan was meant to establish bilateral trade relations and seek participation in various energy projects. So, there was potential which could have been capitalized.

The proceedings were summed up by Dr. Maqsudul Hasan Nuri, Adviser, CPS. The Roundtable ended with the final concluding remarks and vote of thanks by Mr. Khalid Saeed, Director CPS.

**POLICY GUIDELINES**

- Engagement with the Taliban forces may be pursued with a balanced policy between dialogue and the use of force;
- Pakistan should delink Taliban from international terrorism so that it can be dealt with as a local problem;
- Policy statements should be matched with action. Consensus should be evolved on approach towards Taliban;
- Active engagement with regional countries especially Iran should be followed for the solution of Afghan problem;
- Central Asian states do not operate as a collective body. Relations with each should be based on bilateralism;
- Russia–Pakistan relations have immense potential for development, especially in economic field which needs to be capitalized;
- Common threats of terrorism and extremism, narcotics, arms and human smuggling and border security should serve as strong foundations for consolidating ties with Russia and Central Asia;
- Proactive policy be pursued in seeking pledge from Afghanistan’s neighbors to maintain its neutrality;
- Skillful use of Pakistan’s geopolitical location and calculated regional connectivity initiatives would be in Pakistan’s national interests;
- Pakistan-India normalization of relations could have positive impact on Pakistan-Afghan relations in the long term. The strategic divergence on political reconciliation in Afghanistan could be a serious impediment;
- Afghanistan needs global engagement for reconstruction and rehabilitation. Pakistan should continue to play a facilitating and active role in this regard.