



INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

The Situation in Afghanistan and Prospects for International Cooperation: Perspective from India, China and the USA

Panelists: Amb. Amar Sinha, Dr. Rubin Barnett, Amb. Gautam Mukhopadhaya, Dr. Wang Shida, Ms. Li Qingyan & Mr. Lin Yiming,

Moderator: Amb. Ashok K Kantha

Venue: Seminar Hall 2 & 3, Kamaladevi Complex, IIC

The panel discussion on the ‘Situation in Afghanistan and Prospects for International Cooperation: Perspective from India, China and the USA’ was organized by the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), Center on International Cooperation, New York University (NYU) and the India International Centre (IIC). The evening commenced with the Director, ICS and the moderator for the evening, Amb. Ashok K Kantha, welcoming the panelists and giving a brief introduction on the current situation in Afghanistan. He invited the speakers first to make their initial comments, which would set the stage for further dialogue with the discussants.

Dr. Barnett Rubin brought to the audience’s attention the fact that Afghanistan has more or less been at war for the past 4 decades. He asserted that the international involvement has been historically significant in maintaining internal stability in the country. This was done by design, as the colonial competition and compromise between the erstwhile British and Russian empires resulted in political and territorial demarcations that rendered an unsustainable state system. Dr. Rubin remarked that the US intervention in Afghanistan was predicated on the consensus for a need for stability and order in this sensitive area. However, this consensus started fraying, with earliest signs of domestic stakeholders demurring against the implication that the US motivation for its intervention in Afghanistan was not to ensure internal stability but consolidate a permanent strategic presence in this geopolitically critical

location. He said that were two general trends that stood out in the face of developments in this region. First, a striking shift in Chinese Foreign policy regarding engagement with this region has been observed. Secondly, there was a movement towards Iran-US convergence, however this aspect is suspect under the turn taken with the current dispensation of the US government. He questions the wisdom of Trump's policy for South Asia, which seems to be premised on a projected idea of an India-China cold war. He concluded with the remark that Afghanistan is a pressing arena of cooperation and convergence for both India and China.

Amb. Gautam Mukhopadhaya, wearily recognized the notable absence of representation from Afghanistan in the panel, and highlighted the need for the process towards stabilization efforts to be 'Afghan led and Afghan owned'. Though the international factor is important, the record shows that 'security mentored by external powers' has not been successful in subduing internal challenges in Afghanistan. Amb. Mukhopadhaya quoted the dismal figure of an estimated 60 per cent of the country being outside of government control. The Taliban threat is formidable, and he contended that the prospects for effective reconciliation with Taliban was congruent to the pursuit of a mirage. He attributed this to the ineffective leadership, fractious nature of the various factions, and inability to share power. Despite these challenges, the record of Kabul's security forces shouldn't be underestimated. Even when found lacking, public morale has not completely subsided as was witnessed with the public turnout for the recent polls held for the Parliamentary elections. It is Amb. Mukhopadhaya's understanding that there is an underlining public support for the idea of an Islamic republic which persists even in the face of internal challenges. In such a context, India and China can come together and play an important role to support the stabilization process in Afghanistan, and focus on connectivity projects, investments into Afghanistan and international diplomacy efforts for more inclusive 'Afghan led and Afghan owned' platforms.

Dr. Wang Shida sought to outline the common interests that the US, India and China shared with regards to the situation in Afghanistan along with the potential areas for cooperation. The common interests included the need to contain and neutralize terrorist threats that incubated in unstable environments and the potential of developing Afghanistan as an economic partner. The US has directly been involved in Afghanistan since 2001, in pursuit of rooting out terrorist outfits and directly intervening to stabilize the country. Dr. Wang stated that the cost of the US involvement has amounted to US\$ 1 trillion. Although there is a realization that a prolonged and committed intervention is not sustainable, the US is

conscious that the pullout of its troops shouldn't return Afghanistan to the state it was in, in the 1970s. He averred that it was the prospect of the US pullout that stirred China into focusing on the direct threat that terrorism posed. The common boundary shared between China and Afghanistan, as well as the extremist challenges posed by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) lie at the base of this concern. Dr. Wang also pointed to the potential Afghanistan held as an economic partner for all three countries, as its strategic location allowed it to act as a 'land-bridge' between the different regions of Asia. Afghanistan also is a rich source of minerals and natural resources. He noted that India has long considered a land route to Eurasia through Afghanistan, and mentioned the Chabahar port project as an effort in this direction. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has seen heavy investments in transport corridors and other connectivity projects in this region as well. Afghanistan lies between the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. Dr. Wang argued that if the prevailing conditions would allow it, the CPEC could potentially be extended to Afghanistan. On the potential areas for cooperation he cited examples of bilateral training initiatives of technical officers in fields such as defence, diplomacy and so on. Other than infrastructure and connectivity projects, fields such as medical assistance and joint mineral exploration projects could be a way forward.

Amb. Amar Sinha reiterated the role international support played in the Afghan peace process. He maintained that the way forward started with complete commitment to the government in Kabul, albeit the processes and structures currently in place may be flawed. Amb. Sinha argued that democracy is young in Afghanistan, and inevitably more time would be taken for it to mature, as citizens would become active stakeholders. In this regard, he highlighted the success of initiatives for women's education in Afghanistan, and posited that women would have the most to lose were the government in Kabul to fail. He was in agreement with the previous speakers on the need for investment in connectivity and infrastructure projects, citing the Chabahar port project, corridor through Lapis Lazuli, and the TAPI pipeline. However, he also advocated at length on the importance of human resource development, such as technical and vocational training and investment in sports. He claimed that the investment in developing cricket as a national sport in Afghanistan has been very successful, as it has had a highly integrating effect on the Afghan people. Sports investment promised to be a low-cost, high-impact venture.

Li Qingyan and Lin Yiming were in general agreement with the speakers before on the need for cooperation on China and India's part to contribute towards Afghanistan's stabilization process. Li Qingyan argued that there was a pressing need to set aside geopolitical difference and strategic competition, and come together on this front. In addition to the investment in connectivity projects and setting up of inclusive 'Afghan led and Afghan owned' diplomatic platforms, she also addressed the need to rope in international financial institutions for humanitarian projects. Ms. Li brought to the fore, how energy cooperation was a field of importance to the Afghan people to address the energy deficit faced by the country, and was potentially an area where India and China could play a role. Lin Yiming also sought to clarify the Chinese approach towards Afghanistan in the context of CPEC and BRI. He was of the opinion that the option of extending the CPEC to Afghanistan shouldn't be viewed as a threat by India, and that there are no competing strategic calculations made in pursuing such a line. He additionally highlighted the role regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could play in the future in stabilization efforts.

With this the panel discussion was concluded, and the floor was opened for questions from the audience. The general theme in several questions pointed to the impact of Pakistan in such cooperation efforts between India, China and US in Afghanistan. Question of how Afghans would perceive and react to China's alignment with Pakistan's policy on Afghanistan was also posed, along with skepticism of the US dependence on Pakistan in its own Afghanistan policy. While the developments on the former issue are still to be seen, Dr. Rubin clarified that US dependence on Pakistan was due to unavoidable geographical and structural limitations.

This Report has been prepared by Rashmi Muraleedhar, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speakers

Amb. Amar Sinha is Distinguished Fellow, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, (RIS), New Delhi and Director, on the Board of Hindustan Petroleum Corporations Ltd. He retired from the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) as Secretary Economic Relations in the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, in June 2017 after a diplomatic career spanning 35 years. He has served in different capacities in Indian Mission around the

world including in Algiers, Buenos Aires, Washington DC, Jakarta, and Brussels. At Headquarters he has served in various capacities. In 2007 he was India's Ambassador to Tajikistan (2007-2010) and on his return to New Delhi served as Joint Secretary Trade Policy in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2010-13) where he handled various trade negotiations and oversaw India's participation in various multilateral fora. He was India's Ambassador to Afghanistan during 2013-16. After Kabul he was Secretary (Economic Relations) in the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi. He regularly advises the Chambers of Commerce on trade and investment issues.

Dr. Barnett R. Rubin is a Senior Fellow at New York University's Center on International Cooperation, where he also directs the Afghanistan-Pakistan Regional Project. From April 2009 until October 2013, Dr. Rubin was the senior adviser to the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the U.S. Department of State. He previously served as special advisor to the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Afghanistan, during the negotiations that produced the Bonn Agreement. He subsequently advised the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan on the drafting of the constitution of Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Compact and the Afghanistan National Development Strategy. Dr. Rubin is the author of *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror* (2013) and has written numerous articles and book reviews on Afghanistan, South and Central Asia, U.S. foreign policy, conflict prevention, state formation and human rights. His articles have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The New Yorker*, *Survival*, *International Affairs*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Review of Books*, as well as several academic journals.

Amb. Gautam Mukhopadhaya has served in Indian Embassies in Mexico, France, Cuba, the Permanent Mission of India, New York, and Ministry of External Affairs, India; as well as on deputation with the Ministries of Culture and Defence of India, Consultant on Social Development at the UN, New York, and Visiting Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC. He graduated from the NDC and re-opened the Indian Embassy in Kabul in November 2001 after the ouster of the Taliban, and served as India's Ambassador to Syria, Afghanistan and Myanmar before retiring from service in May 2016.

Dr. Wang Shida is Deputy Director of the Institute for South & Southeast Asian and Oceania Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR). Wang received his BA in Art in Shandong Normal University and his MA in Law in China

Foreign Affairs University. He received his PhD in International Politics & Relations from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) in 2014. In 2015 he was a Visiting Scholar at Center for International Cooperation (CIC), New York University. Wang's main research focus is the political and security situations in South Asia. Wang published several books as well as dozens of articles. For example, "The Research on Belt and Road Initiative" (Published by Commercial Press, Jan 2017). "The Terrorism Situation and Regional Security in Central and South Asia" (Published by Si Chuan Press, Aug 2013). "The Report on Regional Security of South and Central Asia" (Published by Intellectual Property Press, 2013). "The Coexistence of China and U.S in Asia Pacific" (Published by World Knowledge Press, 2012).

Amb. Ashok K. Kantha is currently the Director of the Institute of Chinese Studies. He was Ambassador of India to China until January 2016. Prior to this, he was Secretary (East) at Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi. His previous assignments include High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka and Malaysia, Consul General in Hong Kong, Deputy Chief of Mission in Kathmandu, and Joint Secretary (East Asia) and Director (China) in Ministry of External Affairs.

About the Discussants

Ms. Li Qingyan has been associated with China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) since 2006. Ms Li is an associate research fellow in the Department for Developing Countries Studies, where she specializes in South Asia, China's Neighboring Security and "One Belt And One Road" ("China-Pakistan Economic Corridor") etc. She has presided over or participated in a number of national and provincial research projects related to those issues. Ms. Li has published dozens of academic papers both in Chinese and English as "New Developments in South Asia and their Impact on the Belt and Road Initiative", "China's Diplomacy towards South Asia", "The US and China in Afghanistan: Cooperation and Competition" and built a strong reputation in China's academic circles as council member of Chinese Association for South Asian Studies.

Mr. Lin Yiming is a researcher at the Institute of South & Southeast Asian and Oceania Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR). He graduated from Peking University and joined CICIR in 2014. His major research interests include Pakistan-related issues, counter terrorism and deradicalization. He writes chapters for several CICIR publications, including annual Strategic and Security Review, and

International Terrorism and Counter- terrorism Yearbook, also publishes papers and commentaries on journals and media, including Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review, World Affairs etc.