



Issue Brief

Kabul Conference: Problems and Prospects for Peace in Afghanistan

*Nihar Ranjan Das**

A congregation of representatives from more than 60 countries including 40 foreign ministers and different multilateral institutions was held in Kabul on 20th July 2010. The Conference held under the auspices of the United Nations and the Afghan government led by UN Secretary General Ban Ka Moon, was on a scale not attempted in the recent past in Kabul. The largest international conference organised in Kabul since 2001 brought back the focus on Afghanistan. The international community displayed its concern for the volatile and unstable situation prevailing in Afghanistan and reaffirmed their commitment for reconstruction and rebuilding of the war-ravaged nation. Afghans continue to face the Taliban and Al Qaeda's onslaught even almost a decade after the ouster of Taliban regime. The Kabul conference reiterated support for unity and purposefulness in Afghanistan which offers a glimpse of hope for the future of Afghans.

The main objective of the Kabul Conference was to chart out a road map for the political transition in Afghanistan on the basis of a long deliberation. President Hamid Karzai was engaged in with Western allies including the United States. The outcome of the significant conference shows that the meet discussed and deliberated on two principal agendas. One, the plan to transfer security responsibilities from the international forces to the Afghan national army and police and the other to endorse a political reconciliation between the government in Kabul and its opponents from the Taliban. The blue print for a political reconciliation and reintegration of Taliban was unveiled at the London conference in January 2010.

Political Developments Since London Conference

The London Conference held on January 28, 2010, reversed the policy of liquidating the Taliban and Al Qaeda elements operating in Afghanistan. It rather favoured co-opting them in governance through reconciliation. The Conference had proposed to initiate the process of winning back the ‘good’ section within the Taliban fold back to the mainstream Afghanistan society. From the outset, it was clear that the major players involved in the Afghanistan imbroglio were looking for an ‘honourable’ exit route based on their domestic compulsions. This was considered as the most regressive decision of the London conference. There were hectic parleys immediately after the London conference, both by major international players and the government to reach a consensus for the reconciliation efforts. However, several international developments since January 2010 have influenced the confluence of more than 40 foreign ministers, including Indian External Affairs Minister, S. M. Krishna and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in Kabul to find out a lasting solution to the conflict which has ramifications for global security.

Although the London conference had displayed complete unanimity among the western countries and Afghanistan in unveiling the reconciliation plan for Afghanistan, differences had cropped up regarding the governance matters between the U.S. and President Hamid Karzai afterwards, which was simmering since the Presidential election in Afghanistan. At one point, President Hamid Karzai had lashed out at his Western allies accusing the U.S. of interfering in Afghan affairs and saying that the Taliban insurgency would become a legitimate resistance movement if the meddling didn't stop. It was going from bad to worse as a result of which the US was considering withdrawing the invitation to the Afghan President for his visit to Washington¹. But the unpleasant situation was prevented before it spiralled out of diplomatic domain. President Hamid Karzai's US visit in May 2010 helped reduce the differences which was persisting between US and Afghanistan since the Presidential election in 2009. President Karzai had termed his US visit as “meaningful, and substantive with all the right tones and objectives”².

Peace Jirga and Reconciliation efforts

There were differences both within the country and outside about the manner in which the Jirga was held in the Afghan capital in the first week of June 2010. It was attended by more than 1600 delegates from across the country to debate and discuss the peace plan for Afghanistan. The peace convention appealed to the Taliban and other insurgents to break with Al Qaeda.³ It was reported that the discussions were lively and unrestricted. Although the jirga endorsed President Karzai's reconciliation plan with Taliban, it was not sufficiently inclusive and therefore failed to give a national character and provide legitimacy to the peace plan. While delegates came from all over Afghanistan, the majority were reportedly handpicked by President Karzai and his allies, with political rivals and civil society activists largely excluded from the process resulting in opposition leaders like Dr. Abdullah Abdullah boycotting the Jirga. Although considered as a remarkable achievement in the face of Taliban threat, this unrepresentative assembly was able to issue recommendations which are non-binding in nature. Several opposition parties described the Jirga as one which was to enhance Karzai's prestige before the international community and maintain their support.

Kabul Conference and Future Plan for Afghanistan

As stated above, the landmark international conference in Kabul had twin objectives of addressing pressing issues not only affecting Afghans but the global security pyramid as well. The conference attempted to chart out a plan for transferring the security responsibilities to Afghans and the reconciliation plan of President Karzai with Taliban. Although Karzai expressed his determination to have in place indigenous Afghan national security forces before 2014, it still remains unclear whether this ambitious target will be achieved within the specified time frame or not. Further, it was decided that at least 50 per cent of the annual international aid will go through the Afghan government's core budget rather than spending directly through non-governmental organisations.⁴ In return, Karzai promised to fight corruption which has been a bone of contention between the Afghan President and his Western allies.

Though the endorsement of President Karzai's security timeline by the Kabul conference is non-binding and appears unenforceable, it addresses a growing desire on the part of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies to have some kind of pullback plan in place. This assumes importance as domestic political support for the Afghan war in countries including

Britain, Canada and Germany is declining sharply. The Obama Administration has set a target of July 2011 for the beginning of withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan albeit without a time frame for completion of the pullout. Already, doubts have been raised as to whether the tide can be turned against the Taliban by the time the US withdrawal starts. A major military operation to secure the southern city of Kandahar, which was described by U.S. commanders as a linchpin of the Afghan war, has moved slowly than planned.

Although President Karzai's transition plan was endorsed at the conference, many leaders stressed that the 2014 target for hand over of security responsibilities to the government in all 34 provinces would be dependent on the Afghan police and army demonstrating their ability to take the lead, on a province-by-province basis. The situation at the moment does not instill confidence among the international community despite intensive training being imparted by Western mentors as the army and the police are ill prepared to step into that role. Even NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has stated that, "transition will be based on conditions, not calendars,"⁵ about the road map on transition to Afghan led security. The 31-point Communique on the conference has covered issues including governance, human rights, gender and child rights, economic and social development, peace, reconciliation and reintegration, security and regional cooperation.⁶

It is indeed essential to have effective regional cooperation among countries surrounding Afghanistan to have long term peace and stability in the region. The conference re-affirmed international community's support for good neighbourly relations, in particular the shared determination to defeat terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking on the basis of mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty. The scourge of terrorism and drug trafficking can be effectively tackled and controlled only when all countries work unitedly to crush the terror elements in the region.

Iran, which is an important neighbour with considerable influence in the region has proposed five principles, giving stress on regional dimension, at the conference to help resolve the Afghan crisis⁷. Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki expressed his country's hope that the Kabul Conference would be able to explore ways to resolve the crisis based on the political security, and economic realities of Afghanistan and the region. His five-principles

include strengthening the government and civil institutions, timetable for withdrawal of foreign forces, avoiding dual policy and approaches in fighting terrorism, security and development should be considered inseparable and more stress should be given on reconstruction of infrastructure in Afghanistan, besides the important regional approach should be supported.⁸

Kabul Conference and India

As far as India is concerned the Kabul Conference is important from different aspects. Although India has been opposing the concept of ‘bad’ Taliban and ‘good’ Taliban, there is a shift in New Delhi’s approach on the backdrop of international support for reconciliation and reintegration of Taliban in Afghanistan. India supported Hamid Karzai’s initiative for peace and reconciliation efforts with External Affairs Minister underlining that it must be ‘Afghan-led’ and ‘Afghan-owned’.⁹ India’s stand assumes significance at a time when it is believed that ISI propelled by the Pakistani government is brokering talks between the notorious Haqqani network and President Hamid Karzai’s administration. Dealing with Haqqani group for reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan will negate the principles adopted at the London Conference, i.e., giving up violence and cutting off all links with terrorism and accepting democratic and pluralistic values of the Afghan Constitution. In a strong message to the promoters of terrorism Mr. Krishna has rightly stressed on the need for dismantling terror sanctuaries outside Afghanistan saying that, “it is essential to ensure that support, sustenance and sanctuaries for terrorist organisations from outside Afghanistan are ended forthwith”,¹⁰ which is the root cause for the continuing problem in the region.

The Al Qaeda-linked Haqqani group led by Sirajuddin Haqqani has been engaged in fomenting mindless violence in Afghanistan and is also responsible for attacks on the Indian Embassy in Kabul. India’s consistent stand on the role of ISI in fomenting terrorism in the region has been vindicated with the latest disclosure of secret military reports of the US by the WikiLeaks.¹¹ The revelation suggests that Pakistan allows ISI elements to meet directly with the Taliban in secret strategy sessions to organise networks of militant groups to fight against American troops in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's blatant support for the Jihadi elements was criticised by the British Prime Minister David Cameron during his official visit to India when he said, "although we are for a stable and democratic Pakistan, we cannot tolerate the idea that Pakistan can look both ways and export terror to India, Afghanistan or anywhere else in the world."¹² David Cameron's bold statement probably marks a departure on the British foreign policy from the previous government led by Labour Party when a Downing Street source defended the British Premier by saying, "The Prime Minister believes in plain speaking. This is how he intends to conduct his foreign policy."¹³ India has been a victim of Pakistani-grown and state-sponsored terrorism which is responsible for the vitiated bilateral relations affecting more than one billion common people of both the countries.

Although the Kabul conference decided on the future plan for Afghanistan, it remains unclear how the security situation will improve if ISI and Pakistani military remain hand in glove with the Afghan fighters. India must work with regional powers like Iran, Russia and China to convince Pakistan that the current, almost daily, attacks by suicide bombers in populated Pakistani cities will not stop unless the ISI and Pakistani military stop supporting and encouraging retrograde and fanatic forces. It is also not in the interest of Pakistan to have a Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. India should also be able to directly convey to the various political leaders in Pakistan – for whatever it is worth - that a gradual return to greater democratic governance in the country will enable effective tackling of terrorism that is striking at the very root of Pakistani society. Pakistani political leaders must shift gear and champion the case of partnership for peace and prosperity in the region at this time of reckoning.

Way Ahead for Peace Process

Even though formally initiated after the London Conference and supported at the Kabul meet the peace process will not be successful unless the root cause of the Afghan problem is addressed. Pakistan still remains a trouble maker to gain an upper hand in any future political arrangement in Kabul and it's ambition to have a 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan is growing by the day. Although the international community has endorsed President Karzai's peace plan, dealing with organisations like Sirajudding Haqqani-led Haqqani Network and Gulbudding Hekmatyar's Hezb - e - Islami will push back Afghanistan into dark age if they are given

prominence in any of the future governments in Kabul, as both outfits are known for their scant regard for human rights including rights for women.

The peace reconciliation process should include all sections of the Afghan society irrespective of their numerical or political influence. All inclusive peace process was strongly advocated by William Crosbie, Canadian Ambassador to Afghanistan when he said, “the international community should be insisting that the process is one that includes all Afghans because the reconciliation cannot be between the Karzai government and the Taliban leadership. That’s a recipe for disaster,”¹⁴ It is essential to have strong cooperation among all the countries surrounding the Afghanistan to find a way out of the present imbroglio as common people need peace and prosperity to return. The regional conglomeration, along with other developed countries involved in Afghanistan, should convey to Pakistan to stop providing shelter, promoting and supporting terror elements both on its territory and outside. This was publicly stated by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she accused the Pakistani government officials of harboring Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar¹⁵. The supply chain of terror infrastructure which is vibrant in tribal agencies of Pakistan not only needs to be blocked but dismantled to pave the way for a credible and inclusive peace process.

** Dr. Nihar Ranjan Das, Ph.D is Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*

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Notes

¹ Jon Boone, "US-Afghan Relations sink further as Hamid Karzai accused of drug abuse", *Guardian*, April 7, 2010.

² Karen De Young, "In Speech, Karzai, expresses satisfaction with outcome of Washington visit," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 2010.

³ Carlotta Gall, "Afghan Peace Talks End with Plea to Combatants," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2010.

⁴ "Draft Communique Sets 2014 as Target for Afghan Military Lead," *The New York Times*, July 20, 2010.

⁵ Speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the Kabul Conference, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_65024.htm accessed on August 4, 2010.

⁶ "Draft Communique Sets 2014 as Target for Afghan Military Lead," *opcit*, July 20, 2010

⁷ "Iran presents five-point plan for Afghanistan," *Teheran Times*, July 21, 2010

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Statement by S. M. Krishna, External Affairs Minister, Government of India during Kabul Conference, July 20, 2010 available at www.mea.gov.in accessed on August 4, 2010.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ "India Slams Pak over WikiLeaks Charges," *The Economic Times*, July 28, 2010.

¹² V. Sridhar, "Cameron: We Can't Tolerate Pakistan Exporting Terror," *The Hindu*, July 29, 2010.

¹³ Rosa Prince, "David Cameron Defends 'plain speaking' on Pakistan," *Telegraph*, [London], July 29, 2010

¹⁴ "Canadian ambassador worries Taliban talks 'going too far, going too fast'," *The Globe and Mail*, July 5, 2010 available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/asia-pacific/> accessed on August 6, 2010.

¹⁵ Rob Crilly, "Pakistani officials Know Where Osama bin Laden Hiding: Hillary Clinton," *Telegraph*, [London], May 11, 2010