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'Current Developments in the Afghan Peace Process'

by

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Umer Daudzai [UD]: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Let me take the opportunity first of all to thank the Indian Council of World Affairs for giving me the opportunity to come and talk to such a distinguished audience and also the opportunity to meet so many old friends and colleagues all at once. I may have had the opportunity to meet you one-on-one or separate but to meet you all here that is a great honour, so thank you ICWA. Before going to actual subjects let me also share my experience and my hearts about my two colleagues when I was serving in Islamabad I realized that there was not many visits from Embassy to the Indian Ambassador's house and I went one evening for a dinner and another guest who arrived he said there were so many police outside in the streets what is it and he [Ambassador Raghavan] said because Daudzai is here, so its strange for the Islamabad police and then I met Ambassador Katju and its true and on a very sad occasion, the hijacking of the Indian plane, which if ICWA ever wanted, I can come on some occasion and give extensive presentation because I cannot tackle that subject in just a few minutes. It is a very long subject and there is a lot of aspects that I think you people in India do not know about it. One memory I will share with you. Many years after that, I was watching Zee TV and the captain at that time of the plane was the guest in talks there and he was asked how was he treated and he said well they were sending us food from outside, where there were very big na'an [Afghan bread] like a towel with a chicken wrapped inside and he said I give them a call and said we do not like chicken most of them, they would actually prefer dal and rice, but they were not eating anyway because they were so depressed and the anchor asked him so what did you do with that big na'an, he said we used it as a towel. There is a lot to say about that nine days of a very tragic episode. So, coming back to today's world. I will talk to you if you allow me about basically three main topic[s] and if you ask me questions about other topics I would be at your disposal, about peace, about democracy and about defence, these three subjects I will talk initially but first on peace because that's the most important subject and there are a few facts about it. One of the facts is that there is a complete unanimity inside Afghanistan inside the country that everybody wants an end to the war, 40 years of violence is enough, people are worn with the violence and now they have grey beard they have grown 40 or above and the war is still continuing so they have not seen a peaceful Afghanistan. I may be one of the few lucky that I have seen peaceful Afghanistan before the war. I remember the Kabul, the Afghanistan where couples from the neighbouring countries will come to spend their honeymoon in Kabul and in Bamyan and Mazar-e-Sharif and when again a memory of Islamabad when I was serving there, I came across many couples who said that they were going to Kabul taking a bus spending a couple of days to watch Indian movies in cinemas in Kabul, because they were prohibited in Islamabad, so they will travel all the way to Kabul to watch Indian movies. Well many of those sweet memories I have and I am one of the few that have that memory. I consider it as an obligation of my generation, at least when we leave this world we hand over an Afghanistan to the next generation that is peaceful, that they would say that okay thank you, you have left a good thing for us not that [Tahiri- an Afghan participant] would say

that what is that you have left for us, we cannot live in it and we cannot sell it, so I hope I can see those days. Anyway, there is anonymity, all Afghans believe that it is time that the violence ends and the war is over. And this is what was evident in the Loya Jirga we just held. Now I will come to the Loya Jirga a bit later but I will start with the new era that has started. The new era is one year old. It started with the U.S. Presidential instruction or whatever you call it, to look for ways and means to end the war. It was about a year ago that the deputy foreign minister of U.S. [Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs] Madame Alice Wells, she visited Kabul a couple of times and I was at that time not working with government, not working with High Peace Council. I was sort of opposition, you can call it a political group outside the government. She consulted me also in group and also private. Now as I understood all Afghans that matter then that the U.S. consulted they told them yes and the time was right that you speak to Taliban face-to-face, but then most of us put a condition and a clear advice to it. One of it was that do not enter into negotiation with Taliban. Because Taliban is not the state it is not the government and also those understanding you are creating in the context you may conduct should not be prolonged, it should be short. Once or twice and then the third time should be the Afghan government and Taliban talking to each other, but they started. The first meeting between Taliban and the US was with Madam Alice Wills and then they appointed Ambassador Khalilzad, they made a new team and in no time he took it to the level of negotiations with Taliban and it is still continuing. Although in principle he and his team is regularly sharing information with us as government and with us as the High Peace Council, but we are not sure that how much they are sharing with us. Is that the whole truth that they are sharing with us or is it something is left that they are not sharing with us, we do not know about that, but at least each time Khalilzad arrives to the region he comes to Kabul and meets with government and with the political elites and then go and talk with Taliban and then come back to Kabul and debrief us. Some circles in Kabul are complaining that not enough is shared with them. I personally am in a position to say that maybe he has shared as much as was possible for him, probably that is because I carry two hats, and before going on in this subject on this hats issue also I want to say a couple of words. For four years I had no hat, sitting home, resting and waiting or basically having no title, and all of the sudden you said two titles, I have actually five titles and the two others are President's Special Envoy on Regional Consensus Building and Spokesperson for the Leadership Council and Reconciliation, which is the top leaders' Council and sometimes with media in Afghanistan want to quote me they gave a call to Tahiri and say which title of him shall we use? This is life, sometimes you have no title and sometimes you have too many. By the way coming back to the hats and Ambassador Khalilzad's sharing information with us, as much as I know I am willing and more than happy to share with you as we move along. But one thing is clear that the people of Afghanistan look more optimistic from the start of the talks between America and Taliban. Generally people are more optimistic that is one truth and the second truth is that Taliban's profile went up, they benefited politically and that the level that Taliban benefited politically does not reflect the ground

realities at the battlefield, which I will come later under the sub title of defence. Anyway, the people are optimistic but also people are pessimistic, both. Why they are pessimistic, I noted to you earlier because the talks went too long and the real party one sided that the government is missing in that, so that is the source of their pessimism. Now, under any circumstances, there were four topics that came under discussion between the U.S. and Taliban and sequence was, which is important in this kind of circumstances, sequencing is important. They say, the first topic was U.S. withdrawn from Afghanistan. The second one was the Taliban's relationship with terrorism and terrorists, the third one was intra-Afghan dialogue and the fourth one was the ceasefire. Now on the first one, where they are; although various different versions have been circulated in different languages we knew, but as far as I know, Taliban asked for withdrawal schedule that should not exceed six months. While the U.S. has told them that we are not interested to stay in Afghanistan forever, although withdrawal has to be after the peace agreement, so that all Afghans ask us to leave then we can present a schedule for withdrawal. We cannot present a schedule of withdrawal based on demand of one segment of the Afghan society that is the Taliban. As far as I know this is the real position, but in principle, they have said we are not interested to stay here forever but our withdrawal depends on peace and on peace deal and post peace deal if all Afghans together ask us to leave, then we will present to you the schedule of withdrawal. Either Taliban misunderstood initially or they intentionally wanted to misunderstand, they gave a different version that Americans have agreed with them, that they will withdraw soon.

On the second topic also various languages were used, various versions were circulated like Americans asked Taliban to give a guarantee that Afghan soil will not be used against any other country. That was not the case because nobody can say the Taliban to be the rulers of the whole of the country or nobody assumed that they will take over the whole of the country that they then give a guarantee that the country will not be used against another one. American's explanation was that we refer to the areas that are under their control and the areas that remain under their control until complete implementation of the peace agreement, so until then if there are areas under their control then they should make sure that that area is not used against the third country. Now there is gray area in that language also, in our view, we would have expected that the clear language was used that Taliban should cut ties with all terrorist and extremists groups and have no ties, no collaboration, no cooperation and together with the state, fight against terrorist groups if necessary. That is the language we would have expected. Now lately U.S told us that that is the kind of language they are switching to, and they said even specifically, Taliban used the language that we were in the past somehow linked to Al Qaeda, we are willing to mention the name Al-Qaeda that we will have no longer have relationship with Al-Qaeda. But anyway, there may have been some level of understanding on these two topics but the U.S. Representative clearly said and he is repeatedly saying that there is no agreement on any issue until and unless there is agreement on all issues. So that is the overriding picture.

So then just before the Loya Jirga the U.S. Representative came to us and said now it is time that an intra-Afghan dialogue take place in Qatar. We at that stage were thinking of Loya Jirga though, initially our government's position was that let's wait for the Loya Jirga to refresh our mandate from the people of Afghanistan to gave us guidance on how far can we go and to give us a framework for talks, and then after the Loya Jirga we can go to Qatar. But then they insisted and because we are partners, strategic partners, the Afghan Government agreed that, okay we can go to Doha and then Loya Jirga can take place. But we resisted changing Loya Jirga date that we stick to. A preparation for Qatar was on the way, the small list, medium list, big list, extra XXL list, finally it became 250 and that became a sort of a joke and then everything was on halt, it did not take place. We switched back to the Loya Jirga which we had decided not to change the date. Now let me say a few words on the Jirga and then we can come back to any question that you may have. This Jirga was held with a purpose to refresh Presidential mandate on talking to Taliban because, we do not have a referendum system and we do not have party based politics that the President consult the public and consult his party. Our tradition is that whenever President faces a major decision it has to go Loya Jirga and that is the forum where things can be discussed, and President can take mandate, can take guidance. The last Loya Jirga on peace and on reconciliation was held in 2010 when President Karzai thought the same way that he needed a fresh mandate on talking to Taliban and in that Loya Jirga representatives recommended establishment of the High Peace Council. So, now it was time that President Ghani also felt that he has to go back to Loya Jirga but there was some something unique about this Loya Jirga. First of all in terms of size it is the biggest Loya Jirga of the history of Afghanistan. As you know in the modern history the most prominent Loya Jirga was in 1747 when Ahmad Shah Abdali became the King and the territory was called Afghanistan from that date onward. So then throughout that there are dozens of Loya Jirgas that various rulers have held. Before this Loya Jirga the biggest one was what Dr. Najibullah has held in 1986 or 87 I think and in more or less the same location at Polytechnic. He called in 2000 delegates. Here this time the number of delegates was 3,383 but then what was quite unique about this Loya Jirga was all delegates were elected; not elected by through direct votes that there is ballot box and everybody goes and vote, it is indirect like leaders of various walks of life gather in a geographical area in a big hall and then they vote or they simply raise their hand and choose somebody as their representative. So nobody was appointed, everybody came through this indirect election system. There were two principles that we attached to this Loya Jirga and luckily we met those two principles although it was the shortest period of time. One was that there should be at least 30% women members, which was again unprecedented, and happily reporting, that at the end we had 30.5% women, and it was not easy because from very far districts, we had to make sure that women have opportunity to be elected and come there.

The second principle was that and this was a basically Presidential instruction also not in a decree but verbal instruction that he said he wanted to make sure that no Afghan

anywhere in the world feels that he or she is not represented. So, practically if we implemented that in practice that meant that from every district in Afghanistan there has to be a representation and not every district in Afghanistan is under government control. There are some districts that are under Taliban control, so we choose that objective that we want to make sure that even from Taliban control districts there should be representation and luckily that happened. Out of 386 districts, all together 381 districts had representation, and based on population, at least one representative from every district was a must. From some district where they had more than one district then again we pressed that there should be a woman also representing that district. From the farthest districts like remote districts in Paktia and Nuristan, which Ambassadors are familiar with that geography, we had woman representation and they were interviewed by media. It is not my claim. The media interviewed them and they were broadcasted through the Liberty Radio and many other. So anyway that five districts that failed to send representative, four of them are districts that we as government never controlled them. It was two districts in Helmand which are called Baghran and Dishu right from the beginning until now we have never controlled and we do not know what is going on there. That may be where Daesh is growing or breeding or may be Taliban too is breeding or we do not know what is going on there. Now, the other two districts one in Khak-e Afghan and Zabul and the other one is Nawa. One district which was quite safe and secure it was in Parwan in Salang, that was also deprived but it was their choice. They wanted twice the number we could give the number of representatives who are allocated based on population. They wanted twice more saying we were the centre of resistance in the war against Taliban we have given so much sacrifices, we should be given a double number, that was not a criteria that the Commission would accept. The Commission rejected their demand and they said we are not sending delegates, so the fifth district was that. So this principle of Afghans having representation was met to my satisfaction. We had one Afghan from Australia, we had a few Afghans from U.S. We had many from Europe also, but they were not given that representation was not given based on population. The Afghans with prominence were contacted if they want to come they could come and that is how people came. Refugees from Pakistan attended, refugees from Iran attended, and then we had other national categories, and I am going to mention one very important category that we recognized for the first time war victims and war victims we divided into two categories the civilian victims and families of military that have been killed in the war. The reason we brought them in is because we knew from district under control of Taliban or reconciled Taliban will be there in the Loya Jirga, and they will bring their perspective. We wanted to bring the other perspective also from the other extreme who are screaming everywhere in media and say we do not want reconciliation with Taliban. We want Taliban leaders to be in court, not in Ministry or elsewhere. So we brought that category also.

The proceedings of Loya Jirga had three portions, an opening which is basically political and then the committee works. The delegates were divided into 50 committees

and that is where the real debate took place. The deputy chair and secretaries of the entire Loya Jirga was directly elected through ballot boxes and in the committees also they choose their chair and their reporters. The debates there were quite interesting. Again there we noticed that there was complete unanimity on the need for peace but how to go for it and what kind of concessions are we willing to give for peace, there were serious differences of opinion and that is what we wanted to be reflected and that is what we called it the framework for talks, because some members did not want altogether a reconciliation that majority wanted, but those who wanted it gave us some limitations and that is what we were seeking, like for instance they circled some Articles of the Constitution and those Articles are not for negotiation. Like the name of the state Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, they said this is not for negotiation. Freedom of speech, rights of women to education, to work, to exercise their political rights, all these were circled as red, that they are not for negotiation but other articles are.

So I think on this subject probably I have said enough and on the two other subjects I will be briefer than this one. Now the two others is one is democracy, which we are grateful for India because we get inspiration from India. Our democracy gets inspiration from India, but more practically our Parliament is built by India, by Indian money with Indian engineers, and which is the one of the biggest in the world and one of the most attractive facility in this whole region, and it is functioning, and India has been helping us in terms of making Parliament functional, exchange of parliamentarian, training. All sorts of support is there. For a while Parliamentary proceedings were disrupted because for three years parliamentary election was delayed, finally, it was held last year and it became problematic thank God two weeks ago the new Parliament was opened and yesterday they had election for speakership. Nobody succeeded to get 50% plus one vote which was required, so there would be a runoff and if in the runoff again, if somebody failed to secure this, the new candidates will come. The democratic and parliamentary exercises are contract, which we are very happy and then now we can happily go to Presidential election. I am sure you may have heard that 22nd May is the end of President Ghani's term and there should be interim government and caretaker. I think it is a part of campaign issue, they are not real issue because Supreme Court is the main body that gave interpretation of the Constitution and their interpretation is that President continue until a new President is elected but there is another Article that is also important, which says that President is for five years. Now President Ghani's five years completes on 29th of September, so at least until that date there is no real issue of legitimacy, and that is why the new date for election is fixed on 28th of September, and on that one, I am pretty sure that it will take place. It may take place even before because we have a new Commission, the old Commission was dismissed and it is a new Commission. Now the new Commission may come a bit forward to be on safe side because if there is a runoff and then winter comes. I know there is debate within the new Commission that they might bring the data a bit forward. Another reason that why I say I am sure it will take place, they had funding problem, and then government decided to

give them funding then international efforts came and said we also want to give you funding but we will have some say on the level of transparency. If the funding is not a problem, Commission is not a problem then why should it not take place. The problem was that it should be biometric. Now they have given up because the new Commission is of the opinion that they do not have enough time to go for biometric. Even the whole year may not be enough to switch to biometric. Let me assure you on that, that the 22nd May is not a big issue and a presidential election will take place on 28th of September, but what happens after that is very difficult to predict. Because at each time we had presidential election, there had been problems after that, and it would be a miracle that we have the election on 28th September and then there is no problem. There may be problem, but for me result is predictable. My personal prediction is that we will see a replica of the past five years. This kind of arrangement could be replicated, but it will not be smooth to come to a replica. There may be problem, there may be mediation, and then we end up with another national unity government basically with the same faces, but that is my personal prediction, I do not know.

Last issue is defence and again, we are grateful to India and the basic principle is that you can have a meaningful dialogue and meaningful and sustainable peace if you have a strong state. If the state is weaker in terms of legitimacy and performance and in terms of looking after itself in defending its people's security, then you cannot have meaningful dialogue with the other side. In that case, then you have a dialogue between two warring factions. The war in Afghanistan is not between two warring factions. It is state on one side and there is a warring faction on the other side. Now for that state to remain strong, India together with the United States has played a great role in keeping the state strong and while talking of keeping the state strong, it is democratic identity and good governance; all those are important, but when you in the middle of war, your security and defence is crucial; it becomes the most important thing and you have heard in the news that yesterday two helicopters were handed over and two more will be coming. This is a token, this is an example of the many different kinds of support India is providing to Afghan state institutions, particularly security and defence institution and we are grateful for that.

Now, this is my last part. As I said in the beginning that Taliban profile, political profile has gone up because US started talking to them, but we are not critical of US talking to them because we were consulted. But then that situation is not reflective enough of the level of the situation in battlefield. The situation in battlefield is very different this year. The last year, the year before, and the year before, each time spring started, two or three provinces were on the verge of collapse. We were afraid that like last year this time Farah, Ghazni, and Kunduz were on the verge of collapse and Baghlan was under severe pressure. This year that is not the case. Some of the districts that were always on the control of Taliban and considered as their stronghold are on the verge of collapse. No provinces are under pressure, no important district is under pressure.

Districts under Taliban control are under pressure, so in a way from defensive we are into offensive. Our forces are in offensive and another good example of the good performance was during the Loya Jirga. Taliban had rejected the Loya Jirga, it had many other enemies also, but within the radius of 40 kilometres in the neighbouring provinces, it was fully secured, not a single bullet was shot, not the Taliban had decided not to attack, that was not the case. 102 attempts were foiled for it and prevented and people arrested, so that means the defence side is growing, it has grown up enough. It is not up to the task that you can perform independently. For a long time, we will need help, we will need assistance, but it is much better than the year before and the year before. In one particular part, our forces is the Special Forces which we think are the best in this region because they have grown up in the middle of war and some of their recent and latest operations, which I follow; I am not a military person by background, but as I was Minister of Interior for a while, I can understand that language or I can see how much efficient they have become and how committed they are. I think with that note, I will stop there and seek questions.

Ambassador Vivek Katju [VK]: Thank you, thank you Sir for covering such a wide area and giving us insight, your personal insight on what is happening and thank you also for keeping us in time so we have...
UD: I never looked at the clock.
VK: I did.
UD: The clock was here [indicating towards his head].
VK: We have now 25 minutes and since I think there will be many questions. May I request questions to be brief and please identify yourself and one question. I will be quite, quite ruthless in implementing. Let us start.
Mr. Vijay Naik: I have just one question about what is the role of Pakistan in Afghanistan because we always hear that it plays a destabilizing role in Pakistan [Afghanistan]. What is the connection of Pakistan with Taliban and how do you look at the situation, whether there will be instability in Afghanistan in the future if the things go in the hands of Taliban, thank you.
VK: Would you like to take the number and then we answer or...
UD: Whichever way...
VK: I think we can do three questions at a time. .
Wion journalist: My question is India's role in the entire process, in the peace process, and you met with the Indian External Affairs Minister, what transpired during those conversations, including your meeting with the NSA.
VK: That is two, but I will let it pass.
VK: Yes, Ma'am, mic. please identify yourself.
Question: I am Dr. Shalini Chawla from Centre for Air Power Studies. Sir, I just think you, need know how big is the ISIS presence in Afghanistan because we keep hearing contradictory narratives on that. Does Taliban see it as a competition to their presence.

VK): I think you have three rather larger areas, now Pakistan, India, your conversations, and of course ISIS.

UD: On Pakistan, we all know the background that Taliban was born there and how they helped them to take over Kabul and the rest of the country and then as Afghanistan is always an accident-prone country, accident drive away plan. The 9/11 basically reversed that plan, the Taliban over [of] the whole country. That relationship between Taliban and Pakistan remains. We have asked our US colleagues and partners, we endorsed four issues I mentioned that topics of discussion between US and Taliban, we have said to them that they should also include clarification of Taliban's relationship with Pakistan because it is important for us that they clarify it . The US is interested in clarification of Taliban's relationship with the terrorists and terrorism and extremism. That is important for us, but we are adding that they should clarify their relationship with Pakistan. Now another fact is that when Mullah Baradar appeared in Qatar, he travelled from Pakistan and some days him and many of them may go back to Pakistan, so that explains the whole relationship, but on the other hand, Pakistan's contribution to the peace is that so far they are claiming and stating that they have helped the American Taliban talks to take place in Qatar. They have not offered Afghan Government in Taliban talks to be facilitated by Pakistan or Pakistan help. That is our demand from them, they should facilitate government and Taliban talks. So far they are not very clear and in the near future, President Ghani will be travelling to Pakistan, this will be one of the topics of discussion. I cannot predict the outcome of it. Now, that notion that Taliban take over the country, that is the wrong way to put it and I think Taliban can join the state, they can join the rest of Afghans. The rest of Afghans cannot join the Taliban. That is not the right way to put it, so when the right time comes, when a solution emerges, it would be Taliban joining the rest of their country. How would Pakistan benefit from that? Obviously, one way to look at it is that Taliban being part of the larger system, Pakistan may feel more confident in terms of securing their interests. That is a question of debate, how and to what extent, but it is a bit too early to judge on that.

India's role is key in the peace process and Madam Foreign Minister very clearly said that India cannot sign a dotted lines. The line should be very clear and then India could subscribe to that, could be part of it and that explained the whole thing in that one sentence that India wants to be part of it, wants to be clear about its interest and about that converged Afghan-India interest and we also have our requests to India to do more load sharing with us and at time, give us support in the region and at the global level. We are fully satisfied with the support we get from India and with the level of interaction we have with India. You know this region is not unanimous. There are different pages and different countries are in different pages. I think India and Afghanistan are very much on the same page and we are not alone. The number of countries that are shifting to that page is increasing, so that is good news, more details maybe later.

ISIS is a problem in Afghanistan, but it is not as big as Taliban. Taliban is still the problem number one. Now, there is a difference between ISIS and Taliban. We may have various definitions of ISIS. There may be different versions of ISIS. Some ISIS may be Taliban too; may have split from Taliban and have shifted the title, shifted the badge and called themselves ISIS. Some of them may be the real ISIS that was born in Syria and Iraq. Now which one is which one it requires research. Some ISIS are the regional terrorist groups such as ETIM, IMU, and others they have also shifted badges when it suited them to be called themselves Al-Qaeda, they call themselves Al-Qaeda, and then for a while they shifted their name to ISIS. What is different for us between Taliban and ISIS is because Taliban is a rural phenomena; it is a village phenomena - Taliban. ISIS is more urban and more academic phenomena. We see in universities even to the level of professors, our security forces have traced them, have caught them. Some of the attacks that has taken place in cities that has been traced to University. Kabul University, Nangarhar University, that is the difference between the Daesh and Taliban. Now in terms of relationship between Taliban and Daesh, it depends. Some of those Daesh who might be Taliban too , they may have a good relationship or they tolerate each other, but the Daesh that are ideologically very different from Taliban, they fight each other. In terms of territory, in Nangarhar, or in other words, provinces neighbouring with Pakistan, there we saw Taliban fighting Daesh, but in Badakhshan, in Takhar, they are tolerating each other. In Kunduz, they are collaborating with each other, so it is different from one province to other. The other thing that you may want to know is the total strength. It is estimated to be around 4000 ISIS, around 4000 in the whole of the country.

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