

Round-table on US-Afghanistan Relations under President Trump

19 January 2017



AISS-R-003-2017



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Roundtable on “US-Afghanistan Relations under President Trump Administration”

The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies

Jan 19, 2017

Kabul, Afghanistan

1. Summary

The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) organized a roundtable under the title of “US-Afghanistan Relations under Trump Administration” to discuss Kabul and Washington ties during president Trump administration and to evaluate how US policies will be adopted in relation to Afghanistan when the new president-elect take the office on Jan 20th, 2017. Michel Albin, Scholar-Librarian from US Congress Library and Hamid Arsalan, Program Officer from National Endowment for Democracy were the panel speakers. Ashraf Haidari, Director-General of Policy and Strategy from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, moderated the panel.

Mr. Haidari begin with that, there was no ‘much clarity’ on US – Afghanistan relations under president Trump administration. He added that Afghan government is expecting the new US president to put more pressure on Pakistan to cooperate in fight against terrorism.

Mr. Albin gave a brief of his own experience working with US governmental entities and his interest on US foreign policy toward Afghanistan. He added that to understand Trump was not difficult. He believes Trump will put ‘AMERICA FIRST’ policy in front and will seek US interest in any relations. Pointing out the recent telephone conversation between president-elect and Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, Albin said that the new US administration would more focus on ‘security’ aspect rather than ‘development’. According to Albin, the future of US-Afghanistan relations will mostly depend on how ties between Trump and Afghan National Unity Government (NUG) will be established.

Mr. Arsalan began his remarks by saying that Afghanistan as one of the main non-NATO major ally bond by Strategic Partnership Agreement and Bilateral Security Agreement will help the new administration to work with the Afghan government. He added that some of high ranks in US new administration like General Mattis (US Secretary of Defense) and General Flynn (US Security Advisor) have a well understanding of Afghanistan situation and will hopefully have ‘tougher stance’ on Pakistan. Arsalan said that the new US administration would not give ‘blank cheques’ to Afghanistan and would definitely push for accountability and fight against corruption.

2. Remarks by the Panel

Mr. Michel Albin, US Scholar-Librarian – US Congress Library

Panelist – “US-Afghanistan Relations under Trump Administration”

Mr. Albin whose interest in Afghanistan goes back in 1960, emphasized that his remarks rely on long years of experiences of him working with the US government and his interest for foreign policy affairs, especially regarding Afghanistan.

MAKE AMERICAN GREAT AGAIN

“First we must think of phenomenon of Trump. Understanding of him is not hard. All you have to do is to listen to him. When he says he will “make America great again” he means he will do what is in America’s interest. To Trump being American is more important than being a globalist. Second, my advice for now and for the next four years is that “listen and read” critically all sides of each argument that interests you. A few of the topics that would interest you could be “domestic affairs”, “health insurance and tax policy”, “energy independence”, “trade issues”, “immigration” and “the American budget” as it pertains to arms and development assistance. However, primarily you are interested in US-Afghan relations. If all you know comes from the Main Stream Media (the MSM) including printing media like Washington post, The Economist, The Guardian, Lomond Diplomatic, etc., and TV outlets like CNN and the BBC, you must be surprised by Trump winning the presidential election. However, as I read all media not just the mainstream media, for me Trump’s victory in the election is not a surprise. We are currently witnessing the battle of the think- tanks in Washington. In general they have ignored Afghanistan; for example in a recent publication by the National Defense University titled ‘Charting a Course; Strategic Choices for the New Administration’¹, Thomas F Lynch emphasizes, “The greatest security threats in the region is the risk of war, even nuclear war between Pakistan and India”. To Lynch Afghanistan and its security comes at distant second place. This is troubling to me, but not untypical of think- tank analysis across the board. Nevertheless, Washington is not America. To understand this, is to understand Donald Trump success.”

SECURITY NOT DEVELOPMENT

“In my personal view, our relations divided into two main headings: security assistance and development assistance. When Donald Trump and Ashraf Ghani spoke on the phone no December 2nd, 2016 the conversation was about Afghanistan’s security not development, at least according to press accounts. The foundational documents between our relationships include not only enduring strategic partnership but also the essential agreement for establishing Resolute Support. Afghanistan and the United States are bound to accept these umbrella agreements and as far as I know, the Dari words “Talimat, Comak wa Moshawerat” embody the continuation of our objectives. In fact, it was only the withdrawal of the US Advise and Assist forces in December of 2011 that led to the penetration of the country by the ISIS in December 2013. Resolute Support in Afghanistan seems to me reasonably well as far as I can tell from the media. That is my reading of media not necessarily the media’s writings of the situation. Unfortunately, however the media is not as resolute in reporting the Afghan and International forces, how successful they had been in fighting tripartite enemy – Taliban, ISIS and Al Qaeda. In fact, the administration of Barak Obama recently revised the rules of engagement to allow US soldiers to take a more active role in partnering with Afghan armed forces. In my view this move is vital and overdue in preserving the security of Afghanistan. As far as the new Administration is

¹ Charting a Course: Strategic Choices for a New Administration, <http://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1024908/charting-a-course-strategic-choices-for-a-new-administration/>

concerned, it will place US security goals in Afghanistan in the context of “global war on terrorism”. There are probably two schools of thought on this overall strategy including left and right, but since both of them view Afghanistan as an essential ingredient in the American security recipe, my assessment is that Trump will take no radical measures to reduce the American security commitment.”

AFGHAN TIES-BUILDING MATTERS

“Important of all is the personal ties developing between Trump and the Afghan executives (Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah). After all, the personal distrust led to the unfortunate falling out between President Karzai and Obama, with its unhappy effects on bilateral relations.”

A MULTIPARTY ADMINISTRATION

“Afghan planners and foreign affairs advisors should not assume that the new administration will speak with one voice on Afghanistan. There is a mythology in Washington that our leaders will take “a whole of government” approach to security and development assistance. My own close observation of this principle in Iraq is that whole of government is a myth. In Washington, foreign policy professionals are more often at odds with the department of defense. Therefore it is my view that the personal relationships between President Trump and his Afghan counterparts, Ghani and Abdullah are most crucial to the founding and deployment of assistance dollars. I will also add that we have a republican congress whose members will be divided between those senators and representatives who are sympathizers of Afghanistan’s needs and those who are hostile, not to Afghanistan itself, but to the concept of foreign aid in general. Afghan diplomats in Washington, New York and Europe will have to be keenly aware of these differences among political leaders. American development programs in Afghanistan are numerous and far-reaching. USAID, s annual budget for the country -by my guess is about 3 billion\$. I think that is generous, although it is difficult to determine just how much USAID spends, because the figures are not easily accessible on the web and because the overall sum is divided between Afghanistan and Pakistan. People in this audience should also be aware there are other difficulties with USAID; Difficulties and misunderstandings, which occur over technicalities. Important technicalities such as on- budget and off- budget spending or humanitarian assistance in case of earthquake, flood or other catastrophes. Policy issues like these are very important to officials of both governments. Currently USAID funds project and programs in these broad areas: “agriculture”, “democracy and governance”, “economic growth”, “education”, “gender”- meaning mostly women – “health” and “infrastructure”.

OPTIMISM VERSES PESSIMISM

Mr. Albin gives few reasons why to be optimistic about Trump’s administration:

1. Around 2006 and 2007, President Bush and his advisors judged the war against the Taliban as “being won” and the war in Iraq as a matter of strategic importance. Bush was very wrong about this and had to reverse course. I do not think Trump will make the same mistake, especially if President Ghani and CEO Abdullah - or PM Abdullah, develop a strong personal tie with President Trump.
2. In my view, Trump would pursue the global war on Islamic terrorism to victory. Afghanistan’s role cannot be neglected. In fact if I had to guess, **Pakistan has a great deal more to fear from the Trump Presidency than Afghanistan dose.**
3. If Afghanistan can make progress with its two social problems: poppies and peculation (corruption), then there is no limit to American willingness to found development assistance. However,

if this does not occur, then Trump, congress and American public will not spend funds for corrupt projects. On this topic please read Sarah Chayes' important book² "Thieves of State".

4. There is a lot of cross- party agreement in Washington that Afghanistan is important and that the United States must be involved for the long term in its security and economic advancement. However, the Afghan government must not take this goodwill for granted and above all not be seen as manipulating the US government via quasi relations with lobbying firms. I referred to the New York Times report that the Afghan government was paying a well-connected lobbying company³ \$50,000 a month to influence the government. This will not be a good idea in the new administration.
5. It remains a mystery to me how a country can conduct diplomacy or development from inside fortified compounds. American diplomats and USID officials must get out of their offices and enter the field. This proposal entails great risk, so provision should be made for the security of these officials when considering assistance budget and staffing.
6. There is no limit to the goodwill that people-to-people programs can provide for cementing relationships. There are government and non- government programs such as Fulbright, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, JFK Peace Corps and many more.

Mr. Hamid Arsalan, Program Officer – National Endowment for Democracy

Panelist – "US-Afghanistan Relations under Trump Administration"

Mr. Arsalan sees the New US Administration as a new opportunity for National Unity Government and he believes with his advisors who knew Afghanistan very well, president Trump might put more pressure on fight against terror.

GOOD FRAMEWORKS IN THE NEW US ADMINISTRATION

"Everything we hear from the media is speculations. But luckily for Afghanistan, President Trump has a few good frameworks that he can work with. One of them is the Strategic Partnership Agreement, under which Afghanistan is designated as a Non-NATO major ally, which is very significant for Afghanistan. Furthermore, since the formation of National Unity Government, the two governments also signed a bilateral security agreement under which the US administration is able to assist the Afghan national security forces. With regard to security framework, President Obama's decision to keep 9,800 troops in Afghanistan sent important messages to Afghans and regional spoilers that Americans are not leaving Afghanistan and will continue supporting the country against its enemies. This will allow President Trump to adjust the troop numbers. Based on what we heard from many senior officials including General Mattis (US secretary of defense) and General Flynn (US national security advisor) and President Trump himself, the next administration will focus on counter- terrorism. It is expected that the two Generals - Flynn and Mattis- who know Afghanistan and the region well , will have a tougher stance on Pakistan and other regional actors.

ACCOUNTABILITY

"One key point that President Trump also made many times is that the time to give blank cheques to Afghanistan is over. There is going to be definitely more push for accountability. We do see some very good signs on the Government of National Unity including the formation of a commission for investigating cases of corruption in Afghanistan; especially going after high- level officials as recently a high-rank military official was imprisoned. A cabinet minister also lost his job because of allegation of

² <http://www.thievesofstate.com/Reviews---Thieves-of-State.html>

³ <http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/assets/epaper/November%202012,%202016/Back%20Page.pdf>
<http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/28270-question-remains-over-what-trumps-afghan-policy-will-be>

corruption. The more American public and American policy makers see such tough stances against corruption, it will definitely help Afghanistan. Another important point is that besides talking about security and counter-terrorism in his conversation with President Ghani, Mr. Trump also talked about Afghanistan's mining sector. Given the fact that at end of the day, the president is a deal maker and he comes from a private sector background, it will be on his agenda. On political front, recently in Afghanistan, we have seen positive developments; one is the formation of new Independent Election Commission, which was a major concern for different parities. This commission hopefully paves the way for the upcoming elections, especially parliamentary elections. With regard to counter- terrorism, I assume that Mr. Trump will send a very strong envoy to Afghanistan who would be capable of helping Afghan and US leaders to develop a better relationship. President Trump knows the regional challenges especially with regard to Pakistan. Mr. Arsalan quoted Mr. Trump's message on twitter about Pakistan "Get it straight: Pakistan is not our friend. We have given billions and billions of dollars. What we get in return is betrayal and disrespect and much worse." This shows he knows about regional spoilers. Therefore, we have mutual understanding in some important subjects. However, it is important for us to tell the success stories of Afghanistan. If we compare Afghanistan from 2001 until today, based on any indicators – economically, politically or socially, you see progress.

3. Conclusion

Mr. Haidari appreciated comments of both commentators and suggested that we need to institutionalize our achievements. He said institutionalization is the key word for future development of Afghan- US relationship and this could include peace. There should not be any shortcuts to peace, what we want is an institutionalized peace-based on achievements that we gained. The United States spent significant amount of blood and money over the past 16 years. He repeated that both General Mattis (US secretary of defense) and General Flynn (US national security advisor) in the new administration know Afghanistan well.

The round- table ended with the Q/A session. These are the main questions, concerns and remarks put forward by the participants and the commentators:

1. What will be Trump's policy towards regional stakeholders especially China and Russia?
2. How we can deal with the unpredictability of the new administration policies?
3. Are there going to be a shift of policy toward regional countries (like Iran over its nuclear deal with the west)? If yes, what will be the consequences on Afghanistan?
4. What will be the new administration's stance toward the peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan?
5. What are some the personal qualities of Mr. Trump as businessperson that can confirm his political agenda?

Mr. Hamid Arsalan: "there will be more cooperation between Russian and Trump administration for several reasons including resolving Syrian crisis. Regarding Afghanistan, Russians have shared their views and demands publicly through their ambassador in Afghanistan. The next US administration also have serious considerations towards Iran, Pakistan and other regional countries. With regard to Iran nuclear deal with the west, as it is a multilateral deal, it will not be easy for the US administration to unilaterally change the course of action regarding peace and reconciliation, the main approach is that peace process must be Afghan led."

Mr. Michel Albin: Right now, I think no county across the world can expect a shopping list of actions in the next four years. Things will develop, things will be settle down and we will be able to smell a direction; I hope it is in the right direction. We are in favor of looking forward to a long-term relationship not short term approaches to foreign policy. Regarding the regional stakeholders, we must know that Afghanistan is the pin that holds this region together. Trump will realize that Afghanistan is the center of the region, whether we talk

about Russia, China, India, and Pakistan, Iran or the Golf countries. They all want to make Afghanistan a little playground. Trump will not let this happen. I do not think we must be worry about US- Russia relationship at least at the outset. The Trump – Putin relation seems reasonably sound as far as Afghanistan is concerned. The two countries that for different reasons should be worried are Iran and Pakistan. Regarding Iran’s nuclear deal with the west, whatever happens to the deal will not affect Afghanistan. There may be some regional implications but those implications are most related to the Golf countries.

Peace and reconciliation is a matter of government policy. For example, there has been tension and there is tension in congress about foreign aid. The intention of administration will be good and positive. Furthermore, it would be a matter of a lot of encouraging NGO, s like US Institute for Peace (USIP) to bring sides together. They had some success in Iraq.

Regarding Mr. Trump’s views as a businessman, reading “The Art of Deal”⁴ (written by Donald J. Trump and Tony Schwartz) is helpful to understand Trump.



⁴ http://www.flame.edu.in/pdfs/fil/book_review/FIL_The%20Art%20of%20the%20Deal.pdf