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Working Group 3: Regional Stability in Central and South Asia: The situation in Afghanistan, and Indo-Pakistani Relations

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The presentations and ensuing discussions in Working Group 3 focused on three outstanding issues of South Asia: Reconciliation and the “End-Game” in Afghanistan; prospects for co-existence of Indian and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan; and key challenges in the India-Pakistan relationship, namely terrorism and Kashmir. The group included some 30 attendees, including diplomats, media, and renowned experts from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Iran, China, Germany, Canada, Russia, the Netherlands, UK, and the US. Pugwash Working Groups do not seek consensus; however, this group did seek constructive approaches and, when possible, viable solutions in order to create a follow-on document to use for consideration when moving forward.

Reconciliation and the “End-Game” in Afghanistan

President Barack Obama’s recent announcement of a phased withdrawal plan until 2014, as well as meetings of US officials with members of the Taliban, served as entry points into a rather spirited discussion on reconciliation talks in Afghanistan. Members noted that the instability in Afghanistan has affected the entire region, hitting Pakistan most severely: The war has strained Pakistan’s economy, prompted an influx of thousands of refugees within its borders, and introduced radicalized groups in villages and cities throughout the country. Most of the group members agreed that, at this stage, all actors in the negotiation process—whatever shape such process might take—must have the same motives, i.e., stability in Afghanistan, for it to be successful; as to the configuration of an end-game, that remains unclear. Group Members pushed for reconciliation talks that would be Afghan-led and have an international, regional, and national dimension. One participant suggested that, before the United States pulls out in 2014, it should launch serious confidence-building measures (CBMs) to foster regional development planning and peace-building (within the framework of the United Nations). Much of the Working Group’s conversation centered on the question of engaging the Taliban in inclusive reconciliation discussions; several suggested that Afghanistan should be left to decide for itself the role of the Taliban. Participants noted the flaw of the original Bonn Agreement, stressing that it was not inclusive enough and left out some key groups among the Pashtuns. Transparency of reconciliation talks (and specifically the players in those talks) was noted as germane to the peace process. One participant noted that there are two competing narratives of the Taliban—for example, as the Taliban overruns groups in the East, most of the world’s attention is being paid to the South and West. The participant cautioned the group not to forget the nightmare scenario of a civil war. There was also talk of degrading the strength of the Taliban, and leveraging Pakistan to make the Taliban more amenable to negotiations. For some of the group members, however, such acceptance of the Taliban elicited heated debate; some argued that, fundamentally, there is no division between a “good” and “bad” Taliban, and others were skeptical that a democratic agenda could ever be congruent to that of the Taliban’s agenda; women’s rights and minority
rights were mentioned several times in this regard. One member countered that the Working Group did not fully understand the architecture and belief system of the Taliban. Excluding the Taliban in a peace process, a participant noted, could breed mistrust in the region. It was mentioned that Afghanistan must redefine itself culturally, politically, and economically, and, as such, there seemed to be consensus that now is the time to recast how to look at the reconciliation process within Afghanistan—and to begin looking at this as an internal, rather than external, matter. That said, several suggested that Pakistan should play a direct role—along with the US and Afghanistan—in a peace process. Though many participants discussed only the reconciliation process, one participant pushed that the discussion go beyond peace talks, noting that reconciliation is only one of four parts to create a stable political solution in Afghanistan, i.e. a peaceful, democratic transition of power in 2014; political reform to decentralize power; a peace process including reintegration and negotiations; and cooperation from Pakistan on anti-terror efforts and negotiations.

Co-existence of Indian and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan

Overwhelmingly, this conversation led the group to articulate that India and Pakistan must agree on its economic agendas to ensure stability in Afghanistan; in order to cement this stability, the take-away seemed to be that each country must co-exist vibrantly and cohesively inside and outside Afghanistan. Members of the Working Group suggested that both India and Pakistan must calculate and demonstrate how to cooperate economically—and free of threats. Together, the countries must encourage investment and be able to participate in an integrated process. One approach to achieving this, some members noted, would be developing the TAPI pipeline, which would include the cooperation of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; however, one member expressed skepticism, expressing the challenges and frustrations of the IPI pipeline, an older pipeline project. It was noted that India’s economic success in Afghanistan depends on successful and peaceful cooperation with Pakistan—as this country bridges India to Central Asia and Russia—quoting “we are secondary players in Afghanistan because we don’t have the geography.” There was dissent in this approach from a European member of the group, who argued that, at this time, the economy is not the road to success; the member stressed that the focus should be on CBMs that encompass security, military, and political dimensions. Group members countered this and reasoned that the voice of the region would respond better to an economic-based approach, rather than a political one; that is, a political focus would be more bilateral in nature, whereas an economic focus would foster a trilateral approach to ensure immediate confidence gain via business modeling and mutual building, as well as economic exchange. The overall strategy of this approach—that is a unified India-Pakistan-Afghanistan model—seemed to resonate with a member voicing Afghanistan’s needs, which were rather straight-forward: The countries that lead this process in a proper, regional dialogue will be rewarded; a blueprint can be implemented and sustained. There seemed to be consensus that whatever the India-Pakistan approach in Afghanistan, transparency was paramount. Some participants pointed out that historically, Afghanistan has used its leverage with one country to balance the influence of the other, and stressed that both India and Pakistan must operate peacefully within Afghanistan for it to respond favorably.

Policy recommendations:
* There is no military solution to the Afghanistan problem; reconciliation talks with full transparency should be pursued by all stakeholders.
* The Afghanistan-US dialogue is central; this dialogue should spearhead the reconciliation process and the US should be more forthcoming in taking the region into confidence on its plans. The right kind of ambience is necessary for all parties to play a positive role in ensuring a successful outcome of the reconciliation process.
* All parties with leverage should use their influence to bring all Afghan stakeholders to the negotiating table.
* No militant sanctuaries should be allowed on Afghan territory; Afghan soil should not be used to perpetrate acts of terror against anyone.
Concrete plans should be put in place to transition Afghanistan’s war economy into a sustainable post-war economy.

Civil society groups in Afghanistan should be encouraged to play a positive role in complementing the reconciliation process.

India and Pakistan should include Afghanistan on their agenda during their bilateral dialogue.

Both India and Pakistan should recognize that there is potential for Afghanistan to become a transit route for trade and commerce and that it offers great economic advantages for the region.

**Terrorism and Kashmir**

The group expressed optimism in moving forward with identifying a peace process in Kashmir, articulating that if a peaceful solution has ever been doable, it is doable now. All agreed that the cease fire is holding; the number of attacks is down and when protests have taken place, Kashmiris have resorted to non-violent means of expression. Members pointed out that this is a window of opportunity; however, there is a danger that if no one listens in times of peace, then militants could exploit the situation. Group members disagreed on which side is causing the delay in re-energizing the Kashmir peace process. Much of the Working Group’s dialogue toggled between reminiscing and debating Musharraf’s Four-Point Formula; it was pointed out that the formula seemed to be acceptable in Kashmir, but that it lacked political ownership, especially in Pakistan—a situation that participants felt needs to be rectified. From the perspectives of both India and Pakistan, there is a sense that terrorism and Kashmir are inextricably linked—that is, Kashmir immediately elicits the conversation of terrorism and vice versa; thus, both conversations—and solutions—must work in tandem. Members noted that if CBMs are implemented and cooperation between intelligence chiefs—or other high-profile political personalities—are articulated, this could be a game changer. Many echoed that a symbolic gesture is needed. Members noted that, in terms of danger, the society is less dangerous and more civil. To encourage this calmness, the group members spoke of the need for India and Pakistan to remove the obstacles in allowing Kashmir to be the hub of economic activity—the better the economy, the more secure the government, and the more likely this type of environment would safeguard youth from terrorist groups. It was reflected by several in the group that Pakistan, India, and Kashmir must do more to not only combat—but acknowledge—terrorism. It should be noted here that there seemed to be a consensus that the post- 9/11 environment has allowed countries to use “terrorism” as a convenient excuse to avoid addressing the causes of violent movements and ignoring the human rights agenda under the guard of “fighting terrorism.” All agreed the problem needs to be introspectively examined.

* **Policy recommendations**
  
  * Both Pakistan and India need to show extreme political will to implement the Kashmir-specific CBMs agreed upon during the composite dialogue.
  
  * An uninterrupted dialogue must continue between Delhi and Srinagar; moreover, Pakistan and India should use the opportunity provided by the re-initiation of their bilateral dialogue to make progress on Kashmir.
  
  * The economic exchanges in Kashmir should be expanded with a vision of making Kashmir a model of economic integration for the region.
  
  * New Delhi should make a concerted effort to improve the situation in Jammu and Kashmir by taking measures such as reductions in security presence and addressing human rights abuses.
  
  * Pakistan must show more concrete progress against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks as a show of its sincerity toward tackling anti-India militants on its soil.

* [www.pugwash.org](http://www.pugwash.org)