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A Closer Look at Afghanistan's Political Transition: A Record of the Herat Security Dialogue

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Began in 2012, the Herat Security Dialogue is an annual event organized by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) that focuses on the discussion of peace and security in Afghanistan. On September 27-28, 2014, more than 100 representatives from 17 countries and five international organizations participated in the third dialogue held at the Herat Citadel in northwest Afghanistan. The dialogue has 8 sections, the themes of which are respectively: challenges and opportunities for the transformation decade (2014-2024); the world's political unrest and the future of the Islamic world; the peace process in Afghanistan; opportunities and barriers to regional economic cooperation; Sufism and inclusive security; women and peace and security in Afghanistan; drugs, organized crime and terrorist networks; regional and international cooperation in the issues of Afghanistan.

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The basic consensus formed by the dialogue is that Afghanistan's peace and security is closely related to regional and global peace, and the next decade is a critical period for transition in Afghanistan. Yet the representatives have different opinions on specific issues, such as how to judge current situation in Afghanistan and how to achieve peace and security in Afghanistan and the region in the future.

1. A basic judgment on the political situation in Afghanistan

Although the current and future development of Afghanistan faces many problems, representatives from Afghanistan were more optimistic and full of expectations on Afghanistan's future, while representatives from other countries were relatively pessimistic.

Non-Afghan representatives were more concerned about the difficulties of Afghanistan, especially the current and future major challenges, including corruption, governance capacity, political reconciliation with the Taliban, drug production and trafficking, organized crime, and economic autonomy etc. They held that Afghanistan has many difficult tasks to tackle in the future, and the new government is facing many daunting challenges. Some representatives mentioned that as the world situation is changing, the US is adjusting its strategic focus, which might result in a reduced international support for Afghanistan.

Afghan representatives, however, stressed that, although the existing achievements are relatively weak, Afghanistan has made significant progress over the past 10 years in terms of political, economic and social development. They thought that the recent efforts should be focused on continuing to improve security and develop economy and building the Afghan air force. They called on the international community to sustain the support for Afghanistan, "because today's situation in Afghanistan is not Afghanistan's own problem, but is a problem shared by the world". Many

representatives worried that the US would "once again abandon Afghanistan", leading to the Taliban's return to power. They hoped that "the world should be more patient and expect a bright future for Afghanistan with Afghans". Some representatives spoke highly of President Hamid Karzai's patriotism and his outstanding contribution to the country and its people.

2. Disputes on the political reconciliation process in Afghanistan

There was a consensus among the representatives that the essence and core of the political reconciliation in Afghanistan is negotiations with the Taliban. On all other issues, including whether the negotiations will be fruitful, why the negotiations are so difficult so far, how to seek reconciliation in the future and what are the prospects for national reconciliation etc., representatives from Afghanistan, the US and Pakistan had a fierce quarrel. That scene has repeated itself again and again for the past few years when the three governments were having peace talks. The conference hall was filled with bustling atmosphere for a moment.

The overall situation is that representatives from the US had doubts about the Taliban's sincerity of reconciliation. Yet they put blame on Pakistan, claiming that Pakistan's support is the root cause of the Taliban's tough stance and the key reason for no icebreaker for the deadlock in the political reconciliation in Afghanistan in the short term. Their claim is not new. Some representatives even said that the reason Ireland and South Africa are able to achieve reconciliation is that "they have no neighboring countries like Pakistan".

Representatives from Afghanistan mainly criticized Pakistan, and also criticized the US for not giving enough efforts in helping Afghanistan. They had split opinions the specific issues, and the divergences focused on whether or not to set the precondition for peace talks. For example, the former mayor Bamyān insisted

that Afghanistan should never seek reconciliation with the Taliban by amending the Constitution and trading the development achievements of the past ten years, and should not compromise too much. He believed that preconditions for peace talks, that is, the Taliban accepts the existing constitutional system in Afghanistan, cuts ties with al-Qaeda and disarms and stops the violence, must be set.

A former senior official of the Taliban regime and current member of the Afghan High Peace Council held a completely different opinion. He proposed that no preconditions should be set for national reconciliation and peace talks, for that the fundamental starting point and goal of peace seeking is to the survival and development of the country and the nation. The Taliban's acceptance of the constitution should be a result of the reconciliation rather than a precondition. Now that the new government claims to be a unity government, it should unite all sides, including the Taliban. He believed that the peace process in Afghanistan has made significant achievements, the sign of which is the establishment of a variety of mechanisms to support peace inside the country. Besides, the international community is also supporting the political reconciliation in Afghanistan; the agreements of London Conference are one example. He believed in the practice of national reconciliation in Afghanistan, Pakistan hasn't given any sincere help, and the US is not sincere, too.

Facing criticism from representatives of both the US and Afghanistan, the representatives of Pakistan had to repeatedly defend themselves. They stressed that behind every peace process achieved so far there are support and help of Pakistan. Except for Afghanistan, Pakistan has suffered most from the turmoil in Afghanistan. They stressed that since the terrorists hide among ordinary people, it's impossible for the Pakistani government to kill all the members of the Taliban. In recent years, the Pakistani

government has made sincere efforts to promote political peace process in Afghanistan. However, Afghans didn't trust them, and the US sometimes didn't cooperate. To solve the problem of peace in Afghanistan in the future, all the countries involved must stop blaming each other and work together for the true collaboration.

3. Regional and international cooperation on the problems of Afghanistan

All the representatives agreed that in order to solve the problems of Afghanistan, regional and international cooperation must be strengthened. Representatives from the UN, the UK, Russia, India, Iran and other countries gave presentations of details of their important efforts and achievements in promoting regional and international cooperation and helping socio-economic development in Afghanistan.

Regarding the issue of the prospects for regional and international cooperation, the representatives actually had different stands. The US shows a tendency of drawing-back. Its representatives made it clear that as a result of the geopolitical influence of Ukraine crisis, and the rise of the ISIS, which becomes the greatest threat to the US, as well as the domestic politics of the US, the US' Afghan policy will change. Although the US may not be completely hands-off based on the lessons of Iraq, the Afghan government must learn to be self-reliant, and must take concrete action to improve governance and promote socio-economic development. Only in this way can the international community have reason and motivation to continue the support for Afghanistan. In other words, "the US' Afghan policy largely depends on the Afghans". The Afghans cannot always wait for foreign support. They must solve problems like governance, military construction and economic development etc. on their own.

Representatives from countries that suffer greater directly from

the Afghan unrest, such as Russia, India and Iran, appealed for continuous strengthening of regional and international cooperation on the issue of Afghanistan, particularly in the fight against drugs, organized crime, money laundering and terrorism, economic reconstruction and so on. A representative from Russian mentioned the sharp increase in drug production in Afghanistan over the past 13 years, which has a serious impact on neighboring countries, especially Russia, while the US is largely unaffected. "This basic fact can explain many important phenomena," said she. She believed that as the economic bubble is dissipating from 2014 on, Afghanistan will face serious economic difficulties. Countries in the region must strengthen cooperation to prevent the situation from worsening.

A representative from Iran stressed the intrinsic links between drugs, money laundering, organized crime, terrorism and extremism. He believed that drug economy and illegal economy have become a regional economic phenomenon with some regional political forces deeply involved in it. It is the greatest threat to the future development of regional peace and security. In the long run, the key to reduce this threat is to "integrate the fragmented Eurasia and realize the real cooperation between countries in the region". He called on the UN to take the lead and choose Afghanistan as a priority for the controlling of traditional drug problem.

Representatives from India emphasized India's important role in postwar reconstruction and future development of Afghanistan. They described India's regional economic integration program, which is to connect the five countries of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran and India together around the Port of Chabahar in Iran. Currently, India is actively involved in the construction and development of the Port of Chabahar. They suggested that it is subject to Pakistan whether India will play a positive role in Afghanistan in the future, and it will form a competitive relationship

with China.

Representatives from the US, Russia, France, India and Afghanistan were all concerned about China's strategy on Afghanistan and its influence, and some expressed doubt and skepticism. Some representatives said that guided by its strong economic strength, China's "creative engagement" policy aims to seek political and economic interests in the region, which could lead to a restructuring of the geopolitical economic pattern in the region, and thus would put the region at risk of greater changes in the future.

4. Two impressions outside the conference

Firstly, I will describe my impressions on the security and development situation in Herat and Kabul.

Afghanistan is always associated with unrest and terrorist attacks in media, giving the impressions of war, devastation and destitute people. However, the actual situation there is completely different. People live in peace throughout Herat. There are modern commercial buildings and multiple shops in downtown Herat; there is a rich variety of goods on the Grand Bazaar; all are full of vitality. Kabul's streets are clean, with many tall buildings standing on both sides. Herat is said to be the most developed and safest city in Afghanistan. Yet the security measures that densely cover public places and the very strict security check indicate that the country is still far from being in peace. The local young people who service the conference demonstrate the vitality and hope of the future of Afghanistan: they are full of youthful spirit and ideals, enthusiastic about various social development projects; they have an international perspective, and have a strong faith and sense of responsibility towards their country. From this I partly understand why representatives from Afghanistan are more optimistic and positive on the current and future situation than representatives



from other countries.

Secondly, the major powers of the world and the region generally pay more attention to Afghanistan than China does, and even give emphasis on the role of China in Afghanistan than China does.

The US, Russia, India, Iran, France and the UK sent several representatives or diplomats to attend the dialogue, while China only sent one representative. During many sections of the dialogue, representatives had heated discussions on China's strategy and role in Afghanistan. As the only Chinese there, I got a chance to respond and have dialogue with other representatives in the last section, but the effect was still weak.

Currently, Afghanistan is at a critical transition period. Meanwhile in China's western frontier region, the security has entered a fragile and sensitive period. We must attach great importance to moments of transnational forces. In addition to political security, Afghanistan's strategic value to China also lies in China's economic development, the great power status and the pursuit of reputation. It is strongly recommended that all parties in China should re-examine the important value of mechanisms like Herat Security Dialogue, put them to good use, and participate in shaping mechanisms and norms of international cooperation in Central and South Asia. China should make its own voice heard among many questions and speculations from other countries, and play a constructive role.

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