

THE IMPACT OF THE US DRAWDOWN IN AFGHANISTAN
ON US –PAKISTAN RELATIONS



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Strategic Vision Institute (SVI) organized a one day seminar on the topic titled, “Impact of US Drawdown in Afghanistan on US-Pakistan Relations” held on August 12, 2015. Dr. Kenneth Holland, Professor of Political Science and the Executive Director, Centre for International Development at the Ball State University, Muncie Indiana, was the Guest Speaker.

Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema, President SVI, thanked Dr. Holland and participants for affording their valuable time for discussion on an important political issue in the current international strategic environment and its relevance to the Pakistan’s National Security, Regional Power-politics and stability on the global scale. In his address, Dr. Holland talked about the reasons and motives behind US presence in Afghanistan. He stated that the US handed over its last base, Camp Leatherneck in the southern province of Helmand, to the Afghan National Army on



October 28, 2014. However, there is a continuing US military presence in Afghanistan owing to the bilateral agreement signed on September 30, 2014. This agreement allows 9,800 American and at least 2,000 NATO troops to remain in Afghanistan to extend training and advising services to the Afghan Security Forces and “to carryout counterterrorism operations against remnants of Al-Qaeda”. Prof. Holland added that the Presidential order of November 2014 supports the same cause. For this purpose, a base in Jalalabad, in Eastern Afghanistan, remains a launching point for armed drone missions in Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan. He quoted a report by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which states that 11 CIA drone attacks have occurred so far in 2015 in the North and South Waziristan Agencies of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan.

Dr. Holland opined that Pakistan is highly skeptical about the situation in the country as well as in the region as the consequence of the US troop’s withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan’s fears centre on the fact that the withdrawal of the US troops will create a power vacuum in Afghanistan, which will encourage advances by the militants and may lead to a full-blown civil war in Afghanistan. He also pointed out the presence of Pakistani Taliban finding safe haven in Afghanistan, which they will use as a base to attack Pakistan. In the wake of diminished

financial assistance from the US, Pakistan will find it hard to fight insurgents, which will further make Pakistan a less favorable venue for the foreign investments.

While discussing the positive and negative trends witnessed during the last eight years in the region, Dr. Holland mentioned that Afghanistan faces problems like large scale insurgency, widespread unemployment, and difficulty in revenue generation that highly impacts Afghan government's capability to carry out operations against the insurgents, to whom Afghanistan has lost important areas of Kunduz, Badakshan, Kunar, Nangarhar, Logar and Helmand. He further mentioned that the former Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, is continuously interfering in the National Unity Government by creating impediments in the political process. Another dilemma is that some of the Taliban have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and do not have any real interest in the peaceful resolution of their conflict with the Afghan government. And to top it all, the news about the death of Mullah Omar has further fractured the peace process.



However, he suggested that all is not bad and the glass is half full too. While discussing the positive events that have taken place in the last eight years, he mentioned the significant role that Pakistan has successfully played in bringing the Taliban to the bargaining table with the Government of Afghanistan. He was of the view that the Taliban are willing to negotiate from strength, seeing the US drawdown as a victory for them, which may be psychologically good for the peace prospects. He also applauded the performance of the Afghan National Security Forces (army and police) who are well trained and have fought well, despite high casualties, and have retaken most districts seized by the insurgents. Another positive trend that he mentioned is China's growing interest to promote peace efforts in Afghanistan. China is encouraging Pakistan to put pressure on the Taliban to negotiate a peace settlement with the Afghan government. He acknowledged the development by the government of Nawaz Sharif that has renounced the old policy where Pakistan's military and intelligence forces supported the Taliban and stated that its current goal is a stable and peaceful Afghanistan.

Dr. Holland enumerated four key points in the Pak-US relations as were identified in the meeting between the US secretary of State, John Kerry and Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif.

These include:

- The elimination of terrorism in the region
- Maintaining Pakistan's security over its nuclear weapons
- Building a united and prosperous Pakistan
- Addressing Pakistan's energy problems

He also highlighted a change in Pakistan's approach towards its relations with the US. He said that Pakistan has always been a major recipient of economic and military assistance from the US but now it wants to make it a mutually beneficial relation where Pakistan will be able to give something back to the US. So the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has a plan to move the US-Pakistan relationship from aid to trade. For this purpose, Pakistan is opening energy sector to foreign investment and recently asked the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation to increase private investment in the country, particularly in the energy sector. Dr. Holland also mentioned a statement from Pakistan's Finance Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar saying that Pakistan is quite serious about reforming government rules and policies to establish an investment-friendly environment, especially in energy, infrastructure development, large-scale manufacturing, and agriculture sectors.

Dr. Holland also stated that there are a number of people from Pakistan who are now based in America, and are making it big there. He said that these Pakistani-Americans are not only doing well for themselves but are also making huge contributions to the US business industry. He mentioned people like Shahid Khan – President of Flex-N-Gate Corp., with \$2 billion in annual revenue; Michael Chowdry - (1955–2001) – Forbes 400 businessman and later the founder of air cargo company Atlas Air which in 2001 was worth in excess of \$1.39 billion; Fred Hassan –the Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of pharmaceutical company Schering-Plough from 2003 until November 3, 2009 when the company completed its merger with Merck & Co. ; and Farooq Kathwari –Chairman, President and Chief Executive officer of Ethan Allen (furniture company). Dr. Holland felt that this shows the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship between the US and Pakistan.

Further elaborating on the size of trade flow between the two states, Dr. Holland stated that Pakistan is America's 62nd largest goods trading partner with \$5.3 billion in total two-way goods trade last year. Staying positive about the future prospects, Dr. Holland mentioned that the US

government believes that the large Pakistani-American Diaspora can play a key role in increasing trade and investment between the two countries.

In his concluding remarks he summarized the key points of his talk, reiterating that the drawdown of the US armed forces in Afghanistan has resulted in an increase in insurgent attacks and a doubling of civilian deaths, for which President Ashraf Ghani blames Pakistan. However talking about the US' stance he stated that the United States applauds Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's efforts to promote a peaceful neighborhood in South Asia, which is a precondition for a tangible progress in the fields of economic growth and development in the region. Dr. Holland maintained that both the US and Pakistan are in the favor of greater trade and the latter is particularly interested in growing the US investment in the energy sector, including Liquefied Natural Gas. He was hopeful that the large number of Pakistani-American business people can play a major role in moving the relationship from aid to trade.

A very informative question answer session followed Dr. Holland's presentation. One could witness a good range of divergent point of views from the audience. Ms. Rubina Waseem, PhD candidate at NDU, posed the first and a very valid question to the guest speaker Dr. Holland, asking him to clearly state America's stance on Pakistan's commitment towards the US war on terrorism, since a lot of negative propaganda by the American media was witnessed recently targeting and doubting Pakistan's intentions especially after the Operation Abbottabad (Operation Neptune Spear). Responding to her question, Dr. Holland explained that there is a difference between what media says and what the American government says. He agreed that the general public opinion in the US is much pro-Indian but the official US stance is otherwise. He further added that the US government has always appreciated Pakistan for its genuine and dedicated efforts.

Ms. Nida Shahid, a graduate from NDU, asked which trajectory Dr. Holland sees in the relations between Pakistan and the US going into if the US doesn't completely leave Afghanistan. Dr. Holland replied that whether the US stays or leave, the coalition support fund will not continue. He said that Pakistan has received the US \$ 13 billion to support the US in the combat mission, which Pakistan has utilized in the budget deficit. And now since the nature of the mission is not the same, the funding will be stopped too.

Gen. (Retd) Asif Yasin Malik, former Defence Secretary, asked two very critical questions and in the end gave one suggestion as well. He asked why the US is so paranoid about the safety

of Pakistan's nuclear assets. He then asked why is the US so concerned about a united Pakistan, and why does it think that Pakistan is disunited? He said that Pakistan is very much united from within and only someone from the outside can try to break it. He sent a strong message across by mentioning that the Baloch separatists are usually treated very cordially in the US. He then suggested that the US should not be giving any loans and grants to Pakistan in return for the sanctions as it is only further damaging Pakistan's economy. Dr. Holland gave a rather brief reply and said that he agrees that the assistance can hurt in the longer run.

Ambassador Ali Sarwar Naqvi while posing his question stated that he only needed to seek Dr. Holland's opinion on the fact that the US is quite inclined towards building a strategic partnership with India as is evident from the Indo-US nuclear deal and that it is not just the American media which is pro-Indian but the US government itself likes India more than Pakistan. Dr. Holland responded by saying that the US' 'Pivot to Asia' policy is a very real thing, which aims at deployment of forces from Atlantic to the Pacific. The major concern for the US is the presence of Chinese forces in the region and safety of other regional countries. This is what the US is focusing on. The signing of the US-India nuclear deal is the continuation of the same thought process. Also the driving force behind the thaw in the US-Iran relations is to further contain Chinese influence.



Lt. Gen.(ret'd.) Asad Durrani, while sharing his opinion, was very vocal while stringently stating that the US is betting on the wrong horse, if it thinks Pakistan cannot fight its own insurgents and need the US' help for that. He further mentioned that since 2012 Pakistan on its own had been trying to bring Afghan war to an end and he himself is privy to these efforts by Pakistan. He stated that the only interest the US has in the region, is to make money. He rejected the claim that the foreign troops are extending any training and advising to the Afghan Security Forces, because in reality the task has been assigned to the private companies. The sole reason for American and NATO troops to stay back in the region is to continue with the combat mission. He suggested that the US should rather pack up and leave, and not worry about the internal problems of



Pakistan, and that Pakistan can even survive without the US aid if it has to come in coupled with interventionist intentions.

Dr. Holland responded by saying that these were very well reasoned arguments, however he emphasized that Afghanistan government itself is eager to retain the US troops. He said that it is not just the US who would like to stay but NATO and ISAF also recognize the need for the US to remain in the region, which is why the ‘Resolute Support Initiative’ has been launched this year. He further said that NATO’s willingness is reflective of the willingness of international community to carry on with the coalition but with a different mission of providing training and assistance.

Mr. Tong Liang, a Chinese journalist, asked a very pertinent question about the coalition support fund (CSF), which the US intends to discontinue after its withdrawal from the region. He stated that it was not a good time for the US to withdraw CSF and abandon Pakistan because of looming threats from ISIS and Daesh. He further asked how the US perceives its anti-Daesh policy in Afghanistan and how Pakistan is expected to contribute in that. Is it not an ally anymore for which the CSF is discontinuing? Dr. Holland, in response, stated that he did not think ISIS or Daesh is an immediate threat for Afghanistan, Pakistan or even for China. He was of the view that the number of people, who have offered their allegiance to ISIS, is very little and does not raise any alarms either in the security calculus of the US or any of the other concerned states.



Dr. Tughral Yamin was interested in knowing about the US views on prospects for Pak-Afghan educational cooperation. Dr. Holland recognized it as a very timely question since he himself had recently met the minister of Higher Education in Afghanistan and Chancellors and Vice Chancellors of universities in Pakistan, and was looking forward to another meeting next day in Karachi for the same purpose. He said that there is a great interest on both sides for collaboration in this area. He was hopeful that it is a natural opportunity available to both the neighbors, with all the essential ingredients available but requires a stronger political will from the both sides.

Ms. Anum Riaz, a graduate from Quaid-i-Azam University, asked the guest speaker about what interests the US has in Afghanistan other than bringing peace. Dr. Holland stated that the US has always had geopolitical interest in Afghanistan, as can historically be seen in the events of the Cold War. However, after that the US completely withdrew from the country since there

was no rationale to stay there anymore. But, now the US government thinks it was a mistake to leave like that. So in the present scenario the US has a bigger agenda. He mentioned Hillary Clinton who in one of her speeches suggested to have a look at the number of consumers/ middle class people in China and India on one hand and then to think of resource rich Central Asia on the other hand. Wouldn't it be wonderful to link the two, she asked? However, Dr. Holland stressed that to make this vision a possibility, we need to have a stable and peaceful Afghanistan and Pakistan. He stated that TAPI could serve as a new silk road and this is what US is striving for i.e. to create this region into a very dynamic economy, based on energy highway.

Gen. (Retd) Saeed Zafar asked what threats the US visualizes to the territorial integrity of Afghanistan from outside. Could it be Russia, India or Pakistan? And how peace and stability could be guaranteed in Pakistan if Afghanistan became a safe haven for the Taliban? Dr. Holland emphatically replied that the US stands true to the commitment to guarantee the territorial integrity of Afghanistan from any enemy under any circumstances. He stated that a peaceful and stable Afghanistan will automatically be helpful in bringing about peace in Pakistan.

Mr. Zahid, PhD candidate at NDU, in his question asked about the stance of the US regarding increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan. Dr. Holland stated that Afghanistan carries broader strategic interest not just for India but for China and Russia as well. For the US the ever increasing Chinese tilt towards Afghanistan is a matter of bigger interest than the Indian presence there.

At the End, Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema offered his thanks to all the participants, especially to the Guest Speaker, Dr. Kenneth Holland for his detailed and enlightening talk and for responding positively to the SVI invite on such a short notice. He also appreciated the audience for their active participation in the question answer session and making the Seminar more lively and informative. Dr. Cheema also thanked the whole team of the SVI for making all the arrangements for the seminar and contributing to its success.