

Focus on peace beyond the present

By P. S. Suryanarayana

A thoughtful call for “just and realistic” Afghan settlement has been voiced by speakers at an international workshop which, for the first time, offered a unique opportunity to Afghani players and opinion-makers themselves to ponder over this complex issue. The two-day event – Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014? – was organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in Singapore on 9 and 10 January 2012.

The binding theme of the ISAS Workshop was the uniformity of open and hinted preferences for realism sensitised by justice. Indeed, such a mood, in varied nuances, was transparent throughout what turned out to be a concert of assorted but purposeful ideas. The future of Afghanistan and not its past was in prime focus.

The fervour of the presentations and discussions was modulated by Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, Minister and Home Security Adviser to the Afghan President, during the final session of the Workshop. Stanekzai is also Secretary General of the High Peace Council of Afghanistan and Chief Executive Officer of the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme.

In an obvious reference to the decade-long and worldwide exercise of re-imagining Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 catastrophe in the United States (US), Stanekzai said “everyone [across the spectrum within and outside Afghanistan] was thinking of a military victory ... in the beginning.” However, Afghans with differing shades of opinion “want to achieve just peace”, he said, emphasising the predominant mood at the grassroots at present. The bottom line, as articulated by him, is that the peace-seeking process “must be realistic” as well.

Surely, there have been a number of beginnings in Afghanistan during and after the Cold War – Soviet occupation, post-Soviet civil war among Mujahideen groups, the Taliban dictatorship in what passed off for governance, and the current political flux which has been punctuated by the actions and agendas of the US-led multinational military forces. With this as the obvious but dismal background, the Minister said the players “are now learning from mistakes”.

Among all the Afghan groups, ranging from the heavily-armed protagonists to those with hopes and visions of non-militant and non-militarist future, Taliban was singled out by several speakers and interlocutors as the player to be watched most. Understandably, there was no consensus on the present political profile and terrorist posture of the Taliban and its *perceived* Pakistani patron(s) and fellow-traveller(s). Noticeable, too, in this context was the overarching sense of decency that permeated discourse at the ISAS Workshop, despite all the

prevailing passions at Ground Zero in Afghanistan. Evident were some sparks of genuine proposals rather than fumes of anger.

The challenge of “Afghanization” of the Way Forward and the future of governance, with particular reference to international aid and investment as also trade and connectivity, were of much appeal as sub-themes. Various addressed, too, were the current perspectives of the US, India, China, Pakistan, and a few other external powers as stake-holders.

A sufficiently articulated Afghan view was that the US was now drafting the drawdown of its forces in Afghanistan in the context of the American political calendar and economic compulsions. At the same time, Ali A. Jalali, formerly Interior Minister in Afghanistan and presently a Distinguished Professor in Washington, spoke of the need for some carefully considered “residual presence” of international forces after 2014.

A related Afghan view, expressed on the sidelines of the Workshop, was that any residual international force could perhaps perform a purely non-combat role of training the security forces of Afghanistan. Significant in this sub-context was a remark by Stanekzai during the final session. Afghans, he said, “do not want to go to Square One” by seeking an interim United Nations peace-keeping force to succeed the US-led troops during the transition to full “Afghanization”.

The Workshop generated a number of ideas. Sample a few takeaways: (1) Jalali’s view that the current Afghan search for justice and rule of law (obviously, in circles outside the Taliban circuit) is in harmony with the basic Islamic concept of political power; (2) the call by Afghan parliamentarian Fawzia Koofi for stabilisation of Afghan democracy at this very moment when “transition is the need, not an option”; (3) the spirited proposal by Rangina Hamidi, Founder and President of Kandahar Treasure, that it is time to “demilitarise [international] aid” to Afghanistan, where women should be increasingly seen as “agents of change” for the better; and (4) a forceful argument by Ahmad Wali Masoud, Chairperson of Masoud Foundation, for radical political reforms, including a parliamentary form of governance instead of the current executive presidency.

Setting the tone for the discussions, Lim Wee Kiak, Chairman of Singapore’s Government Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Foreign Affairs, said: “Our interest in Afghanistan extends beyond the issue of terrorism ... [in fact] developments in Afghanistan have a strategic bearing on our regional security. Hence we all have a stake in developments in Afghanistan ... [Moreover] Singapore has been part of the multinational stabilisation and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan ... and it is imperative that the international community continue to play a helpful role”.

** Please refer to Annex A for a summary of key points discussed at the two-day workshop.*

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The workshop focussed on the current efforts in Afghanistan to ensure a successful transfer of authority to the Afghan security forces in 2014. The talks mainly centred on four key areas of concern: Economy, Security, Governance and the Political Process.

<p><u>Economy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop institutions and infrastructure • Strengthen the agricultural and eco base by developing infrastructure, road and connectivity • Increase revenue generating activities like mineral exploration • Develop trade and transit facilities from Central Asia connecting South Asia and leverage on Afghanistan's unique geographical location 	<p><u>Security</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for a stronger army • Better policing to increase public confidence • Training • Equipment • Independent action • Intelligence development
<p><u>Governance</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decentralisation of power • Improving the rule of law • Accountability of government • Transparency in decision making • Civil service reform • Federal polity 	<p><u>Political Process</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electoral and constitutional reforms • Comprehensive and inclusive peace process

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