

ISAS Brief

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At the Heart of Asia, speculation, symbolism and substance

On December 4, 2016 the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia- Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) was held in the north Indian city of Amritsar and attended by over 40 delegations, including Russia, China and the United States. The meeting was inaugurated by the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani and the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi and co-chaired by India's Finance Minister Arun Jaitley and Afghanistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Salahuddin Rabbani. Formed in 2011 as a platform for Afghanistan, and its neighbours, to discuss regional cooperation to promote stability, peace and prosperity, the initiative now includes over 20 other nations and organizations "supporting" the process. The participating countries include Pakistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates.

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The background of escalating tensions between India and Pakistan ever since the attack on India's air force station Pathankot in January 2016, numerous cross-border attacks on India, the cancellation of the 2016 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit, and India's 'surgical strike' across the Line of Control threatened to cast a shadow

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over the Heart of Asia conference. Confirmation that Sartaj Aziz, chief advisor on foreign policy to Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, was to attend and that India's Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, would not attend due to illness, posed another problem – that of deflecting interest away from substance to speculation over whether or not an official meeting was planned between India and Pakistan. A photograph released early on 4 December, showed India's National Security Adviser, Ajit Duval in conversation with Pakistan's Sartaj Aziz. This grabbed headlines and caused an online buzz over the formality and significance of their interaction. Indian authorities emphasized the photo was taken during a mere "100 feet" walk after dinner for the delegates with External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Vikas Swarup having to categorically deny that a meeting had taken place.

In choosing Amritsar as its location for the Heart of Asia meeting, India conveyed two significant messages. At first, given the city's location just twenty kilometres away from the India-Pakistan international border, the event transmitted India's confidence in hosting a major international event despite worsening relations between the neighbours. In fact delegates were taken to visit the Integrated Check Post on the international border with Pakistan at Attari which India's plans to use to boost trade activities, especially with Afghanistan. Amritsar was also used to remind participants of India's old linkages and potential for new connectivity with Afghanistan and beyond to Central Asia. Prime Minister Modi in his opening speech spoke about the flow in trade, people and ideas, through ancient routes such as the Grand Trunk Road and cultural, spiritual emissaries including Guru Nanak Dev who had visited Kabul. President Ghani echoed this message in his speech, when he talked of the present day convergence not only in interests but also of values between India and Afghanistan.

On substance and symbolism, the conference was a success for India and Afghanistan, with a palpable bonhomie between the Indian Prime Minister and Afghan President as co-hosts. In his opening speech, President Ghani sang India's praise and openly lambasted Pakistan for being the source and exporter of terror in the region. Thanking India for investments in 'iconic projects' and lauding India's assistance on the scale and system of delivery, the President went on to elaborate and applaud India's assistance for being "transparent, without strings attached, there are no hidden agreements and secret conditions". This point was reiterated in the closing statement of Afghanistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Salahuddin Rabbani

On multiple occasions in President Ghani's speech, terrorism, the 'spectre in the room', was mentioned in conjunction with Pakistan. President Ghani described the selective displacement

of extremist networks into Afghanistan as the result of Pakistan's Northern military operations. He went on to lament a recent escalation in what he had termed in 2014, 'the undeclared war', which despite bilateral and multilateral ties with Pakistan, had intensified and contributed to Afghanistan suffering the highest number of civilian casualties and military-related deaths in the world in 2016. Pakistan was directly mentioned as providing sanctuary or tolerating the activities of terrorist networks. Finally, President Ghani called on Pakistan (and Minister Aziz directly) to use the country's generous offer of \$500 million for reconstruction of Afghanistan, instead for the containment of extremism. Pakistan's Sartaj Aziz emphasized that his participation demonstrated his country's "commitment for lasting peace in Afghanistan and the region".

Not surprisingly, the bulk of the ensuing Amritsar Declaration was focused on terrorism and counter-terrorism with India scoring a victory through the insertion of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad into the list of named terror groups. India argues that both groups may have been designated foreign terrorist organizations by the United States but they continue to operate out of Pakistan to cause havoc in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. In this way, security in Afghanistan was broadened to include the wider region and to draw reference to various key terrorist groups. The declaration also lists Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Jamat-ul-Ahrar, a TTP offshoot. Jundullah, the anti-Iran group based in Balochistan, is also mentioned along with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and East Turkistan Islamic Movement, apart from the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Although the "Taliban terrorist groups" is mentioned, a whole paragraph is dedicated to the importance of entering into peace talks and negotiations with "Afghan Taliban groups".

The declaration also gives recognition to the crucial roles played by Iran and Pakistan with regards Afghan's refugees over three decades. Two other important issues, namely connectivity and economic development were discussed and the importance of China's projects in the region, specifically the China-Afghanistan Memoranda of Understanding on the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road were recognised. For India, Afghanistan is a valuable and difficult-to-access entry point into Central Asia. As Finance Minister Arun Jaitley indicated in his closing remarks to the conference, efforts continue, to find ways to improve linkages between India and Afghanistan through ports, road and rail links as well as air connectivity.

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