



International Peace Research Institute, Oslo
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Chr. Michelsen Institute



Afghanistan Peacebuilding in a Regional Perspective

Solstrand, Norway
22-24 September 2002

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Conference Report



Chr. Michelsen Institute *Development Studies and Human Rights*

CMI Conference Reports

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The conference ‘Afghanistan: Peacebuilding in a Regional Perspective’ - jointly organised by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) - was made possible by extensive support and assistance from a number of people and institutions. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry provided core financial support. In addition, officials from the Ministry, including the Norwegian embassies in Islamabad and Teheran, and the representation in Kabul, assisted in many ways.

A number of CMI and PRIO staff members helped to organise the conference. Special thanks to Guri Stegali, who had responsibility for the practical arrangements and ensured that the conference proceeded smoothly. Ingrid Samset served as a reporter for the conference and the information departments of both CMI and PRIO provided much appreciated support.

INTRODUCTION

The idea for a conference on peacebuilding in Afghanistan in a regional perspective grew out of a concern that the Afghan peace process, formalised by the signing of the Bonn Agreement on 6 December 2001, would require active support at the regional level in order to move forward. The importance of the regional context to consolidate peace processes has been well established in general; the point is particularly relevant for Afghanistan.¹

Afghanistan's recent history clearly demonstrates that the regional context and external involvement can make or break a peacebuilding processes. In recent years, internal and external divisions have interacted to increase tension both inside Afghanistan and in the wider region. It is therefore in the particular interest of regional states to stabilize the tensions within the area and develop joint approaches towards Afghanistan that can secure a more lasting peace. The Afghan reconstruction process thus offers opportunities for initiatives that might strengthen the forces of peace and cooperation in the region, rather than fuelling intra-regional conflict as has often been the case in the past. Or, as was stated by one of the Afghan participants: *In developing policies, we should not see Afghanistan as an isolated country. The fate of Afghanistan and our neighbours has always been interconnected.*

The conference had three objectives: (i) to map out regional and international views on how best to organise and support the Afghan peacebuilding process; (ii) to examine thematic issues regarded as important for the peace process; and (iii) to promote contacts between academics engaged in Afghanistan, research institutions and representatives of the Afghan authorities and civil society. In this connection, the conference sought to ensure a strong presence from the Afghan government and civil society groups.

The first evening was devoted to the formal opening of the conference and presentations from the conference organisers and Afghan and Norwegian officials. The first conference day started with papers presented by Muzzafar Olimov (SHARQ Research Centre) from Tajikistan and Najia Badykova (Fulbright Scholar, the George Washington University) from Turkmenistan, followed by Ijaz Gilani (Pakistan Institute of Public Opinion) from Pakistan and Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour (Institute of Political and International Studies) from Iran, Vyacheslav Ya. Belokrenitsky (Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Science) from Russia, Martha Olcott (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) from the US and Chu Shulong (Institute of Strategic Studies, Tsinghua University) from China. Director Stein Tønnesson (International Peace Research Institute, Oslo) summed up the discussion of the first day.

The second conference day addressed thematic issues. William Byrd (World Bank, Afghanistan) introduced the subject of economic reconstruction, with Umer Daoudzai (UNDP) as discussant. Regional security issues were addressed by Barnett Rubin (Centre on International Cooperation/New York University) with a commentary by Mohammed Suleman

¹ Kristian Berg Harpviken, 'Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Battleground – to Bridge Between Regions?', in Jamez J. Hentz and Morten Bøås, eds, *Beyond the Nation State: New and Critical Security and Regionalism*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, pp 152-176. See also: Barnett R. Rubin and Andrea Armstrong, 'Regional Issues in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan', *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2003, pp 31-40

(Cooperation for Peace and Unity). In the third session the focus was on repatriation, reconciliation and human rights. Sima Simar (Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission) gave the introductory presentation and Arne Strand (Chr. Michelsen Institute) was discussant. Director Gunnar M. Sørbø (Chr. Michelsen Institute) gave the closing remarks of the conference.

In the interest of an open exchange, it was agreed from the outset that the conference report would only report on general discussion themes and not attribute particular views to any of the participants.

CONFERENCE FINDINGS

Regional perspectives

This first session demonstrated the centrality of a regional perspective in the promotion of peace and development for both Afghanistan and the region at large. Regional relations are influenced by old enmities dating back to colonial struggles and the Cold War, in addition to strong regional competition over influence, particularly as neighbouring countries struggled to define their positions following the collapse of the Soviet Union and, lately, a renewed US presence. These developments add to the regional complexity and make the regional security situation even more vulnerable. Moreover, throughout the last two decades new alliances have been forged between state and non-state actors in Afghanistan and in neighboring countries, often financed from elsewhere. The result is that Afghanistan and Afghans are more firmly drawn into international power struggles, including those played out in the region.

The involvement of the United States, with a focus on US regional strategies, was central to the discussions. Some questioned whether the US would maintain its interest and presence when the 'war on terror' came to an end. Following the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 some countries bordering on Afghanistan have taken the opportunity to renew or forge new alliances with the US, Iran has been added to the 'axis of evil' list, while other governments have become more authoritarian. China has maintained its position as a distant neighbour (though concerned about Islamic insurgency), while Russia has resumed an active role in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

While neighbouring Tajikistan is a case where conflicting parties have managed to negotiate a peace settlement, the Afghan settlement is not incorporating all political and military fractions in a coalition government. As for the enduring dilemma between an unjust peace and justice without peace, several Afghans argued that peace without justice would not be the peace most Afghans strived for.

The discussion revealed considerable divergences among the conference participants in their analysis of the conditions for peacebuilding in Afghanistan and the appropriate roles for state and non-state actors. The differences reflected diverging assessments of the present situation in Afghanistan, as well as the impact of the historic role that various countries have played in relation to Afghanistan and how Afghans recollect these. There are also fundamental differences in political culture and discourse within neighbouring states, and variations in the degree of self-reflection and policy adjustment undertaken by the neighbours with respect to Afghanistan and Afghan groups. Several conference participants noted strong links between their countries and Afghanistan - historically, culturally and linguistically - but observed that

these do not necessarily form a common regional set of links and norms towards Afghanistan. Some argued there was a need for a formalised regional body to support Afghan peacebuilding, in addition to Afghanistan joining already established bodies. A regional forum would provide a meeting point between Afghanistan and all neighbouring countries where issues of mutual concern could be addressed.

The summary of the debate emphasised the complexity not only of the internal Afghan situation, but also of the surrounding environment. It was argued that not only is improved security a requirement for the Afghan nation-building process, but so are reconciliation efforts and economic development. The latter must involve regional policies on issues such as oil, drugs, trade, water and agriculture. The fact that a regional peacebuilding approach entails cooperation with authoritarian regimes poses particular challenges. There is also a need to enhance grassroots-oriented peacebuilding processes that can reach beyond national borders. Although the present US military and political involvement can be seen as containing a number of regional conflicts, this might be temporary, and efforts should be made to address the potential for conflict and to strengthen cooperation before major conflicts erupt.

Thematic issues

Acknowledging that Afghanistan is facing a number of challenges, the conference focused on three thematic issues that were considered particularly important for the peacebuilding process from a regional perspective.

Economic reconstruction

Distinct differences of view emerged with respect to economic reconstruction. One view emphasized the need for Afghanistan to orient trade relations and economic cooperation towards USA and Europe, as the draft National Development Framework (NDF) of May 2002 advocates, while another view emphasized increased regional trade. It was further argued that Afghans had been not sufficiently involved in drafting such documents as the NDF, though it was also claimed that Afghans in central positions were not yet ready to set aside their fundamental concerns about destructive interference from neighboring states.

Several Afghans expressed a hope that the suggested oil/gas pipeline from Central Asia could both generate income and assist in the peacebuilding efforts. Such a view was questioned by other observers who expected donors would be reluctant to fund the project due to security concerns, and doubted that the project in the end would generate much income for the Afghan government. Likewise, Afghans emphasized the possibility of obtaining funding from the Afghan diaspora, while other observers noted that regional experience indicates considerable reluctance among exile communities to invest in their home countries as long as there is uncertainty about future political developments.

A number of participants pointed out that the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan needed to be accompanied by legal and administrative reforms, as well as increased government capacity to implement policies and distribute resources. An important element would therefore be to establish a proper tax collection system and institutions to monitor economic activity, with consequential questions about ensuring some equity in the distribution of resources.

Regional security issues

Afghanistan is located geographically at the interface of three distinct regions: Central Asia, the Middle East and South-West Asia. Traditionally, the country has served as a buffer state, its current borders having been established in the late 19th century with the declared aim of preventing conflict. More recently, however, the country has become the site of proxy wars or political competition for other states. Regional order has not emerged, and there is a pressing need to avoid intensified regional rivalry. In this respect, several security challenges were identified:

- security imperatives related to an ongoing process of state formation;
- a deep sense of insecurity within Afghanistan, fuelled by high levels of uncertainty about the position of the US and regional powers; and
- regional powers that are dissatisfied with their current status and expect to play a larger role in the region and in the process of reconstructing Afghanistan.

It was pointed out that regional security concerns are determined to a greater extent by external countries than by countries within the region, but also by a variety of non-state actors who may be autonomous but instrumentalised by states, including Al-Qaida associates as well as warlords that are currently associated with the Afghan administration. Another less frequently discussed dimension concerns the social aspects of security and the need for a strategy to enhance people's capacity for non-violent interaction and conflict resolution.

Several participants emphasised the need to address issues related to water rights and water flows which remain unsettled at the northern border (Amu Darya) but which also affect the relationships with Pakistan (Kunar river) and with Iran (the Helmand water treaty).

Given the importance of external actors and influences, it was questioned whether Afghans would be in a position to define a common and active position on foreign relations. A related issue was the difficulty of balancing the international emphasis on a strong Afghan government to counter the warlords with developing at the same time a decentralised project management system. While no definite answers were provided, the need to increase Afghan capacities to address such issues was affirmed. In this connection, one suggestion was to establish a new Afghan research institute focusing on the dynamics of peace and conflict.

Repatriation, reconciliation and human rights

A range of obstacles to repatriation and resettlement was discussed, including the lack of water, shelter and education, as well as the need for disarmament, demining, improved security and ways of addressing land ownership issues. A further concern was rapid urbanisation, especially in Kabul, and an agricultural sector in acute need of alternative crops and irrigation methods to be able to feed an increasing number of Afghans as refugees returned.

It was argued that people's will to repatriate and resettle will be influenced by the extent to which human rights are upheld and issues of justice and reconciliation are addressed. This would entail managing the tension between, on the one hand, addressing the grievances of those who have been subjected to injustice and, on the other hand, building an inclusive political coalition to move forward. Moreover, persons on all sides of the conflict might wish to manipulate such a process as all groups have violated human rights, and one result may be that ethnic sentiments are strengthened.

A set of requirements to be met to accommodate refugee return and resettlement were listed:

- (1) *Security*: ISAF troops should be extended beyond Kabul, and their mandate should include disarmament;
- (2) *Employment*: to deal with drought and mines in rural areas as well as urbanisation;
- (3) *Conflict resolution*: in the areas where people come from and want to return to;
- (4) *Social services*: such as education and health care; and
- (5) *Human rights education*: in schools and through the establishment of a radio channel.

Neighbouring countries were encouraged to avoid a forced repatriation of Afghans in the present situation, while it was also acknowledged that the war has made regional migration patterns more complex. Hardly any Afghan family has not moved across international borders over the last two decades and thereby established ties and informal networks which now function as a safety net.

Improved security and protection of returnees were seen as decisive for the return of refugees. This entails demands on the UN, the international community and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) to assume a more vocal role on rights violations. It also requires efforts – not least by the UN and the wider international community - to ensure that the AIHRC has the necessary resources and the political support to fulfil its mandate.

CLOSING REMARKS

The closing remarks emphasized the continued need for analysis of the Afghan and regional context and the peacebuilding process. Research and policy implementation must go hand in hand, it was argued, and Afghans must be active in setting the research agenda.

It was observed that the conference has contributed to the formation of an informal network of experts, including cooperation between CMI and PRIO.

A number of concrete suggestions for follow-up measures were made. PRIO and CMI will a) establish a web page on Afghan peacebuilding in a regional context, b) organize follow-up conference(s) in the region that can address issues of particular importance for the peacebuilding process and c) support efforts to establish an independent and Afghan-based and -run peacebuilding institute.

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Summary

Afghanistan's recent history clearly demonstrates that the regional context and external involvement can make or break a peacebuilding processes. In recent years, internal and external divisions have interacted to increase tension both inside Afghanistan and in the wider region. It is therefore in the particular interest of regional states to stabilize the tensions within the area and develop joint approaches towards Afghanistan that can secure a more lasting peace. The Afghan reconstruction process thus offers opportunities for initiatives that might strengthen the forces of peace and cooperation in the region, rather than fuelling intra-regional conflict as has often been the case in the past.

The CMI and PRIO organised international conference 'Afghanistan: Peacebuilding in a Regional Perspective', therefore set out (i) to map out regional and international views on how best to organise and support the Afghan peacebuilding process; (ii) to examine thematic issues regarded as important for the peace process; and (iii) to promote contacts between academics engaged in Afghanistan, research institutions and representatives of the Afghan authorities and civil society.

Paying particular attention to the regional perspective on peacebuilding, and issues as economic reconstruction, regional security issues and repatriation, reconciliation and human rights, PRIO and CMI was encouraged to a) establish a web page on Afghan peacebuilding in a regional context, b) organize follow-up conference(s) in the region that can address issues of particular importance for the peacebuilding process and c) support efforts to establish an independent and Afghan-based and - run peacebuilding institute.