

Insurgency and Stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan after bin Laden

Panel: Session 1 (Violet/Cosmos)

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Organizing Institution: FOI-Swedish Defense Research Agency

Speakers: Jon Ryqvist, FOI-Swedish Defense Research Agency (moderator)

Robert Lamb, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Thomas Ruttig, Afghanistan Analysts Network

Shuja Nawaz, The Atlantic Council

Panel Short Summary

Jamola Khuasanjanova, Ewha Womans University
Kyle Cassily, Seoul National University

The future of the conflict in Afghanistan is a “tyranny of timelines”, Shuja Nawaz said as the four panelists discussed the war-torn nation through the lens of leadership, regionalism, and the transition of the U.S. out of the theater by 2014. The panelists analyzed the shortcomings and difficulties of leadership in a country that is ethnically and politically diverse. The complexities of regional politics and avoiding tempting, but ultimately futile, shortcuts in Afghanistan remain crucial tests. As the 2014 exit deadline approaches, one of the biggest challenges to surmount remains the waning attention spans of the Western powers as international focus shifts away from Kabul.

The panelists agreed that Afghanistan faces a significant deficit of leadership. Lamb argued that it needs a Nelson Mandela who can unite the disparate factions within Afghan society, while the West needs a Lawrence of Arabia who can coordinate NATO’s efforts. Nawaz emphasized Afghanistan needs an honest, transparent leader who can inspire credible government building rather than a transformative figure. Ruttig criticized the U.S.’s tendency to install abusive, illegitimate leaders and focusing authority only in the person of Hamid Karzai. He pointed out that the military and political polarization has led to a situation where the plurality of opinion in Afghanistan’s diverse society is not reflected in the decision-making process.

Nawaz focused on Pakistan’s role in the stability of Afghanistan. He stressed that it is

crucial for India and Pakistan to normalize their relations, which would then facilitate greater regional security. However, Pakistan currently lacks a clear agenda due to a deep divide between civilian and military leadership. The Afghanistan Taliban is often viewed as a terrorist organization, but Ruttig emphasized that they are an ideological organization that uses terrorism as a means. The U.S. has a long history of promising more than it can deliver in Afghanistan, Lamb argued, while it pursues counterproductive shortcuts.

It is outmoded to think that Pakistan could possibly turn Afghanistan into a client state, Nawaz said. The next year will be crucial as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the U.S. all will hold elections that prevent centralized decision-making in Washington or elsewhere. The U.S. is bad at transition, which Lamb considers a “fancy word for we want to get out” and not leave a state of chaos. The Taliban have become more open toward education, reflecting the progress of Afghan society as young intellectuals return from abroad. Ruttig suggested that political coalition talks should be broadened in order to avoid giving too much influence to the Taliban.

Afghanistan is not a medieval society, contrary to much debate on Afghanistan. The Taliban’s vision for the future of the nation may center on a similar ideology, but the Afghan people are highly adaptive to modern technology. During the Taliban reign of the 1990s, Afghans secretly assembled antennas to watch television despite the regime’s ban. Afghan society thus has potential, but there has been a lack of creative decisions from Washington. The West cannot afford to stand still this year.

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