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HEART OF ASIA 2016: A STEP FORWARD?

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The sixth Ministerial Conference of Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) was held in Amritsar on 4-5th December 2016. Essentially, the aim of this conference was to find long-term durable solutions that have a stabilizing effect on Afghanistan. It focused on transforming Afghanistan from a landlocked country to a land-bridge country by enhancing the links of connectivity with other countries in the region and promoting trade and commercial activities in order to boost the economic growth. “Terrorism” took precedence above other matters and was the predominant theme throughout the discussions during the conference.

Afghanistan, fighting a brutal war against Taliban, suffered the highest number of civilian casualties and military-related deaths in the world in 2015.¹ The presence of extremists’ groups and growing violence do not allow sustained economic growth and stability despite all forms of aid and assistance pouring into Afghanistan, creating a security-development paradox. President Ashraf Ghani took a stance

criticizing Pakistan’s selective counterterrorism activities and support to the terrorist networks operating against the Afghan regime including the Taliban. He mentioned Mr. Kakazada, one the key figures in the Taliban movement and said, “If they did not have sanctuary in Pakistan, they would not last a month.”²

Afghanistan rejected Pakistan’s pledge of \$500 billion for Afghanistan’s reconstruction and development during the Brussels’ meet and suggested they use it to contain extremism.³ The military operations conducted in Pakistan against terrorist groups post 9/11 have led to a major but selective displacement of the Pakistani extremists’ networks and their allies to Afghanistan, making it a safe haven for the terrorist groups. Different terrorist groups have settled into the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. For example, the Islamists’ Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the last few years was using Pakistan as a safe haven to perpetrate attacks in Uzbekistan. However, after Pakistan launched a series of military operations to drive insurgents out, they

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returned to the sanctuaries in northern Afghanistan. Another group in northern Afghanistan is the Haqqani network, a brutal group of Pakistani-based insurgents affiliated with the Taliban.

India, fighting a tough war against terrorism impressed upon the issue of a growing terrorism in the region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized that action must be taken not only against the sources of terrorism but also against those who support, shelter, train, and finance them.⁴

The strong statements made by Afghanistan and India, put the onus on Pakistan to sever its ties with terrorist groups it treats as its 'strategic assets' and destroy all terrorist infrastructures. Rejecting the allegations made against it, Sartaj Aziz, advisor to the Prime Minister on foreign affairs present at the conference Pakistan stated, "The security situation in Afghanistan is very complex. It is simplistic to blame only one country for the recent upsurge in violence. We need to have an objective and holistic view."⁵

Although the declaration adopted by the member of the HoA-IP calls for a concerted regional and international cooperation to ensure elimination of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, including dismantling of terrorist sanctuaries and safe havens in the Heart of Asia region, as well as disrupting all financial, tactical

and logistical support for terrorism,⁶ it seems to be incongruous with the existing realities in the international community.

Pakistan and its policy of using jihadi organizations as tools of statecraft vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan are well known and proven. However, the threat arising from this policy continues to be seen as a bilateral issue and not an international concern. This was visible through the responses of Vladimir Putin's envoy Zamir Kabulov at the conference. He praised Pakistan by complementing Sartaj Aziz's speech calling it friendly and constructive and said it was wrong to criticize Pakistan.⁷ Moreover, while replying to a question on Pakistan supporting terror groups operating from its soil, he said that bilateral relations should not cloud forums like the Heart of Asia.⁸ Further, Russia's statements at the conference also reflect a diplomatic shift. Given Russia's relationship with the United States which is at an all time low since the Cold War and the growing proximity between India and US, Russia is looking to strengthen its relationship with China and also Pakistan.

The pressure on Pakistan to give up terrorist groups as a strategic asset is significantly reduced by the support of it receives from China. Earlier this year, China was the only country in the United Nations Security Council to oppose the ban on Masood Azhar, head of the known terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad, involved in the Pathankot attack.⁹ A similar bid

was blocked by China to question Pakistan at the United Nations sanctions committee (per resolution 1267) over the release of Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, a commander in Lashkar-e-Taiba, and a central planner in the November 2008 terror attack on Mumbai which claimed over 160 lives as it was in direct violation of the resolution.¹⁰ China has a long history of helping Pakistan protect terrorist groups from international sanctions and investigations.

The United States plays an important role in this matter as well. Although it has time and again reprimanded Pakistan for its lack of action against terrorist groups, for example, recently, the US blocked USD 300 million military aid under the Coalition Support Fund to Islamabad as it failed to get a Congressional certification for "satisfactory" action against the dreaded Haqqani network.¹¹ However, at the same time, it has never declared Pakistan as a 'terrorist state'.¹² This is due to the fact that Pakistan has always played a very crucial role in US' foreign policy calculations when it comes to Afghanistan and has time and again turned a blind eye to its activities. Declaring Pakistan a terrorist state would eliminate any control they have in Pakistan, which is currently not acceptable given the strong Chinese influence and presence in the country.

The gravity of the security situation in Afghanistan was acknowledged by all the

countries present in the conference, including Pakistan, as it affects the entire region. However, the divergences in the actions towards countering terrorism on the international front do not allow such initiatives to be effective and result in poor implementation and sustenance of resolutions.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ "Transcript of H.E. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani's Remarks at the Heart of Asia 6th Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan," *Office of the President Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, December 04, 2016, see <http://president.gov.af/en/news/transcript-of-he-president-mohammad-ashraf-ghanis-remarks-heart-of-asia-6th-ministerial-conference-on-afghanistan>. Accessed on 6 December 2016.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Inaugural Address by Prime Minister at the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia Istanbul Process on Afghanistan," *Government of India*, see <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27744/Inaugural+Address+by+Prime+Minister+at+the+Sixth+Ministerial+Conference+of+the+Heart+of+Asia+Istanbul+Process+on+Afghanistan>. Accessed on 6 December 2016.

⁵ Statement by Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs, Mr. Sartaj Aziz, at the Sixth Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference to be held in Amritsar, *Government of Pakistan*, December 04, 2016, see <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NDU1NA>. Accessed on 5 December 2016.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Russia Lauds Pakistan's Stance at Heart of Asia Conference," *Radio Pakistan*, December 04, 2016, see <http://www.radio.gov.pk/04-Dec-2016/russia-lauds-pakistan-s-stance-at-heart-of-asia-conference>. Accessed on 7 December 2016.

⁸ "Heart of Asia Summit: Russian Envoy says India, Pak should not use HoA to score brownie points," *FirstPost News*, December 04, 2016, see <http://www.firstpost.com/india/heart-of-asia-summit-russian-envoy-says-india-pak-shouldnt-use-hoa-to-score-brownie-points-3139614.html>. Accessed on 6 December 2016.

⁹ UN ban on JeM chief Masood Azhar blocked by China over 'different views'," *The Indian Express*, October 12, 2016, see <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/china-again-blocked-un-ban-on-jem-chief-masood-azhar-over-different-views-3072420>. Accessed on 14 December 2016.

¹⁰ Smriti Kak Ramachandran, "China blocks bid for U.N. action on Pak over Lakhvi," *The Hindu*, April 07, 2016, see <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/china-blocks-bid-for-un-action-on-pak-over-lakhvi/article7347637.ece>. Accessed on 14 December 2016.

¹¹ "US blocks \$300 million military aid to Pakistan for failing to act against terrorists," *FirstPost*, August 23, 2016, see <http://www.firstpost.com/world/us-blocks-300-million-military-aid-to-pakistan-for-failing-to-act-against-terrorists-2971604.html>. Accessed on 14 December 2016.

¹² "US Says Does Not Support Declaring Pakistan a 'Terrorist State'," *The Times of India*, October 7, 2016, see <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-says-does-not-support-declaring-pakistan-a-terrorist-state/articleshow/54729952.cms>. Accessed on 6 December 2016.