



ANDIANA FOUNDATION

Comprehensive Report: The Future of Regionalism in Afghanistan, South, and Central Asia

Overview

On October 30, 2024, the Andiana Foundation and the Sigur Center for Asian Studies convened at George Washington University to host the conference *The Future of Regionalism: Afghanistan, South, and Central Asia*. The event brought together leading experts to assess the interplay of security, economic, and environmental challenges facing Afghanistan and its neighbors. Discussions spanned regionalism's untapped potential, the consequences of U.S. withdrawal, and the critical need for multilateral solutions.

The conference comprised two panels, focusing on Afghanistan's regional complexities and interlinked environmental and security challenges. **Dr. Nilofar Sakhi** opened the session by contextualizing Afghanistan's engagement with regional platforms. She acknowledged that while the country plays a pivotal role in South and Central Asia, enduring security concerns and internal instability have limited its contributions.

Panel 1: Afghanistan's Regional Complexities

Key Takeaways

Michael Kugelman:

- The U.S. withdrawal has intensified security issues, notably Pakistan's challenges with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) insurgency.
- India, while directly impacted by Afghanistan's instability, adopts a "practical" foreign policy, reopening its Kabul embassy and pursuing economic connectivity via Iran due to transit restrictions through Pakistan.
- Despite concerns over U.S. disengagement, regional actors like China are cautiously increasing their presence, though overstating their influence risks misinterpretation.

Dr. Asfandiyar Mir:

- Pakistan-Taliban relations are rooted in historical ties but face friction due to the TTP's resurgence within Afghanistan.
- Economic connectivity to Central Asia remains aspirational for both India and Pakistan due to geopolitical and logistical challenges, compounded by U.S. sanctions on Iran.
- The Taliban's bilateral engagements with China and Russia signal a shift in their diplomatic approach, focusing on counterterrorism agreements and economic incentives.

Ashraf Haidari:

- Afghanistan's youth face radicalization through a proliferation of over 20,000 madrasas, which fuels internal instability and external threats.
- Multilateral platforms like SAARC and SACEP remain stagnant, unable to mitigate terrorism, poverty, or climate challenges.
- He called for international accountability mechanisms, as statements by Western nations on human rights lack enforcement.

Fatemeh Aman:

- Iran's water disputes with Afghanistan, particularly over the Helmand River, reflect broader environmental mismanagement and geopolitical tensions.
- Border clashes linked to water scarcity exemplify the region's struggle with resource insecurity, worsened by limited leverage over the Taliban.

Marzia Hussaini:

- Afghanistan faces acute water scarcity, exacerbated by governance issues and climate change. Rising temperatures and mismanagement contribute to a "zero-sum" water security situation, impacting agriculture and energy generation.
- She emphasized the need for transboundary water treaties, citing the Indus Water Treaty as a potential model for cooperative management.

Discussion Themes

1. Regional Rivalries:

- Afghanistan's historical proxy wars with Pakistan have complicated India's engagement. While India remains keen on Central Asia, regional conflicts hinder its aspirations.
- The Taliban's foreign policy reflects a balancing act, seeking ties with China and Russia while navigating traditional hostilities.

2. Climate Change and Water Security:

- Poor governance in Afghanistan, coupled with regional water disputes, has made water security a pressing issue. Iran and Afghanistan's lack of a formal water-sharing mechanism contributes to tensions.

- Experts highlighted how opium cultivation, a significant water-intensive activity, undermines sustainable agriculture.

3. The Role of External Powers:

- China and Russia's engagements remain cautious, with minimal substantive investments in Afghanistan.
 - U.S. disengagement has left a vacuum that regional actors struggle to fill, raising concerns over counterterrorism and economic stabilization.
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Key Recommendations and Insights

1. Fostering Regional Cooperation:

- Experts underscored the need for renewed multilateral dialogue, particularly around economic corridors and environmental sustainability.
- Platforms like SAARC should be revitalized to address transnational threats collaboratively.

2. Climate-Driven Solutions:

- Regional agreements on water sharing and energy management are essential. Expanding electricity generation through sustainable means could alleviate Afghanistan's reliance on imports.

3. Addressing Human Rights and Radicalization:

- International pressure on the Taliban must extend beyond statements, with actionable enforcement of UN mandates.
- Tackling youth radicalization and supporting education are critical for Afghanistan's economic recovery and stability.

4. Strategic Engagement with the Taliban:

- While the Taliban has made some counterterrorism progress, meaningful outcomes require robust regional partnerships.
 - Economic incentives tied to governance reforms could drive incremental progress.
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Panel 1 Conclusion

This conference highlighted the intricate web of Afghanistan's challenges and its critical role in regional stability. Despite its strategic importance, sustained engagement from both regional and global actors remains uncertain. Experts agreed that collaborative, multilateral approaches are necessary for addressing the region's economic, security, and environmental hurdles.

Panel 2 – Search for Solutions: Security and Economic Cooperation

Overview

The second panel of the *Future of Regionalism in Afghanistan, South, and Central Asia* conference focused on addressing solutions to Afghanistan's intertwined security and economic challenges. Discussions highlighted the necessity for regional cooperation, the evolving ideological and geopolitical nature of the Taliban, and the barriers to economic integration within South and Central Asia.

Key Takeaways

Said Jawad:

- Emphasized Afghanistan's critical role in regional integration, with terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban presenting distinct threats to neighboring states.
- Despite shared recognition of these threats, regional actors lack consensus on strategies to address them.
- Infrastructure deficits and reliance on limited bilateral cooperation, particularly between Pakistan and China, further restrict Afghanistan's economic potential.

Ahmad Farid Tookhy:

- Called for a nuanced understanding of regional security architecture and its implications for Afghanistan.
- Critiqued the tendency to lump regional actors together, as key players (Pakistan, India, China, and Russia) approach Afghan security from diverse, often conflicting perspectives.
- While Pakistan has occasionally floated the idea of including Afghanistan in regional security frameworks, concrete steps remain absent.

Dr. Hassan Abbas:

- Characterized the Taliban as a departure from traditional Deobandi thought, describing the group as a “new cult” that diverges ideologically from mainstream Islamic sects.
- Highlighted Afghanistan's enduring geostrategic importance, with regional countries cautiously engaging with the Taliban for economic interests.
- Pointed to the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement and other internal dynamics, indicating long-standing grievances among Afghanistan's Pashtun population and broader implications for Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Cecile Fruman:

- Stressed the positive impact of regional integration on economic growth, security, and quality of life.

- Discussed World Bank initiatives such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and hydrological monitoring, although progress has stalled due to the Taliban's governance.
- Highlighted the World Bank's reengagement strategy, which includes offshore revenue management to avoid empowering the Taliban.

Dr. Sebastian Peyrouse:

- Analyzed the economic hurdles facing Afghanistan and its neighbors, critiquing the CAREC program for its limited success.
 - Noted that border closures and lack of coordination among Central Asian countries hinder Afghanistan's potential for trade and development.
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Discussion Themes

1. Terrorism and Regional Security

- Terrorist groups active in Afghanistan pose distinct threats:
 - Al-Qaeda targets Western interests.
 - ISIS aims at fellow Muslims it deems heretical.
 - The Taliban's primary victims are Afghan state structures and women.
- Regional actors remain fragmented in their responses, reflecting varying strategic priorities and limited collaboration.

2. Taliban Ideology and Governance

- The Taliban's ideological evolution underlines its divergence from traditional Islamic jurisprudence, alienating both local and international religious scholars.
- Although viewed as a cult-like entity, the Taliban has adapted economically, engaging with Central Asian countries and accommodating symbolic cultural practices like safeguarding Sufi shrines.

3. Economic Integration and Barriers

- Afghanistan's infrastructure deficits and dependency on Pakistan and China restrict its trade and investment opportunities.
 - Regional platforms such as SAARC and CAREC have struggled to deliver meaningful results, hindered by geopolitical conflicts and limited funding.
 - Water management and energy projects, including those addressing transboundary resources, remain key areas for cooperation, though progress is slow.
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Recommendations

1. Strengthen Regional Security Frameworks:

- Establish mechanisms for coordinated counterterrorism efforts targeting Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban.
 - Enhance intelligence-sharing networks to mitigate threats spreading to Central and South Asia.
- 2. Support Infrastructure and Connectivity Projects:**
- Revitalize stalled initiatives like the Trans-Afghan Railway and prioritize the creation of regional energy corridors.
 - Encourage multilateral investments in hydrology and meteorology to address water scarcity and climate adaptation.
- 3. Engage with the Taliban on Pragmatic Terms:**
- While recognizing the Taliban's ideological extremism, selective engagement may yield progress on critical issues such as counterterrorism and economic cooperation.
 - Tie international aid and investments to measurable governance reforms, particularly in women's rights and education.
- 4. Promote Regional Dialogue:**
- Host forums involving Afghanistan and its neighbors to address shared economic and security challenges.
 - Foster bilateral and multilateral agreements, particularly between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asian states.
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Panel 2 Conclusion

Panel 2 underscored Afghanistan's complex role in shaping regional stability. While security and economic cooperation remain crucial, tangible progress depends on resolving geopolitical conflicts, addressing infrastructural deficiencies, and finding consensus on countering extremism. A balanced approach involving selective engagement with the Taliban, alongside robust regional dialogue, is essential for fostering sustainable development and security.

Final Statements:

The Future of Regionalism in Afghanistan, South, and Central Asia conference underscored the profound interconnections between security, economic cooperation, and regional stability in one of the world's most strategically significant yet fragile regions. The discussions highlighted not only the challenges posed by terrorism, governance deficits, and geopolitical rivalries but also the untapped potential for economic integration and collective progress. The urgency of addressing Afghanistan's unique position as both a crossroads and a conflict zone justifies continued scholarly focus and policy engagement. Future programming is essential to bridge gaps in regional collaboration, develop innovative solutions to complex transboundary issues, and foster dialogue among diverse stakeholders. Without sustained efforts to enhance cooperation, the region risks deeper instability, but with targeted initiatives, there is a path toward shared prosperity and enduring peace. This work is not only important—it is imperative for a secure and interconnected future.

The Andiana Foundation remains at the forefront of fostering meaningful dialogue and innovative solutions to the complex challenges facing Afghanistan and its neighboring regions. By convening thought leaders, policymakers, and scholars, the Foundation seeks to bridge divides and inspire actionable strategies for sustainable development, peace, and stability. Events such as this conference reflect Andiana's commitment to creating platforms for nuanced discussions that address not just immediate crises but also long-term structural challenges. Through its programming, the Foundation aims to amplify diverse voices, facilitate regional cooperation, and champion a future where connectivity and collaboration replace conflict and division. As a catalyst for transformative change, the Andiana Foundation continues to work toward a vision of a more secure, integrated, and prosperous region.

Photo Gallery:

