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Summary of the Symposium on Afghanistan



清华大学战略与安全研究中心

CENTER FOR
INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND STRATEGY
TSINGHUA UNIVERSITY

Summary of the Symposium on Afghanistan

On April 13, 2019, the Center for International Security and Strategy, Tsinghua University held the Symposium on Afghanistan. It brought together experts and scholars to discuss possibilities for US troop withdrawal, how the US affects the situation in the country, and the responses of the Chinese government.

The following are major opinions were advanced:

I. The Afghanistan policy of the Trump administration has shifted from military pressure to political peace talks, but it has remained difficult to make breakthroughs.

The Afghanistan policy of the Trump administration can be divided into two stages. The first started with the “new strategy for South Asia and Afghanistan” rolled out in August 2017. Following the tactic of “troop surge before withdrawal,” the Pentagon announced the deployment of an additional 3,500 troops to enhance its military pressure in the country. However, the strategy resulted in an increase in US losses and failed to achieve its expected goals. By the end of 2018, the Trump administration’s Afghanistan policy had entered the second stage: its focus shifted from military pressure to political peace talks. The intention of withdrawing nearly half of the US armed forces (roughly 7,000 out of 15,600 troops) as soon as possible was made explicit. Trump believed that the US military operations in Afghanistan had been too costly and thus “not worthwhile,” and should be halted.

In terms of peace talks, the US-Taliban negotiations involved four major issues, namely, how US troops would withdraw from Afghanistan, the Taliban's commitment to counter-terrorism, the Taliban's promise of a ceasefire, and talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. According to the US, "great progress" had been achieved in the first two issues, but little headway was made in the remaining two, as the Taliban regarded the Kabul regime as a weak western lackey and firmly rejected a ceasefire or peace talks.

II. There is disagreement in the US over the Trump administration's policy for troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

One of the fundamental reasons why the Trump administration adjusted its policy toward Afghanistan was to make a complete break with the recent counter-terrorism-centered approach and return its global strategy back to traditional great-power competition. Nevertheless, there was widespread disagreement in the US regarding the quantity and pace of troop withdrawal. The Democratic Party and the US Central Command opposed the policy proposed by the Trump administration, while their North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies objected to an "irresponsible withdrawal." In addition, the US military, concerned about its own position, hoped to maintain as many of its overseas operations as possible. As military spending on overseas operations is flexible, they were concerned this action would result in a reduction to their overseas operations funding.

III. The US may seek a future "decent and orderly withdrawal," but this goal will be difficult to achieve fully.

If an agreement can be reached between the US and the Taliban, it is likely that the US will seek to have a "decent and orderly withdrawal" in

the future. This will follow the general principle of pulling out most of its combat troops, retaining only a smaller military presence. Meanwhile, its large-scale combat troops would remain mobile and available to return whenever needed. The US cannot prevent Afghanistan from being plunged into warfare again, but it will strive to restrain other forces from interfering in the region.

There is a risk that the situation in Afghanistan will increase after the US troop withdraw, as the US has neither the intention of providing adequate guarantees for sustaining the present Afghan central government nor the determination to prevent any turmoil or war in the country. After the US's withdrawal, the Afghan regime will be faced with great uncertainties, and the conflicts among different political powers will be fierce; it is very likely that the armed Taliban will again dominate the political landscape and even return to power. Additionally, given that, the present Afghan central government is completely financially dependent on the US, uncertainties about the level of this support in the future will be a key factor in whether the current Afghan regime can remain.

IV. Afghanistan's features restrict the future of its situation after the US troop withdrawal.

Afghanistan features a relatively dispersed and primitive economic structure, that cannot get rid of its current status as a “war economy” and “drug economy.” The US's long-lasting war on terror in Afghanistan has brought hardly any positive changes to the country; instead, the local economy has become more dependent on opium poppy cultivation, and the stark reality of “drugs-for-weapons” deals remain prevalent. The country's social structure also retains the characteristics of traditional tribalism, and extreme xenophobia.

Afghanistan's geopolitical importance remains its most significant value to the international community. The country is an important pivot point for the US to maintain its military presence in Central Asia and the Middle East, as well as a significant rallying point for the US to exert pressure on the Islamic world in the Middle East.

V. It is in the common interests of China and the international community to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan and prevent it from becoming a source of terrorism and extremism.

China, as a responsible power, has long been supporting the Afghan government's policies to achieve peace and reconciliation. When dealing with Afghan issues, China should take its own, and the legitimate and reasonable interests of other countries into account; while this should take into consideration the changes in the Afghan domestic situation, China should also bear in mind any changes in the international landscape and China-US relations.

In view of Afghanistan's complicated ethnic, sectarian and tribal structures, and the impacts of external forces, its future will probably be determined by its own people rather than outside influences. China should continue in its commitment to supporting reconciliation and the maintaining long-term peace and stability and encourage the Afghan people to follow the country's own development patterns and advance the peace and reconciliation process in their own way.

Appendix: Attendance List

Fu Ying	Chairwoman of the Center for International Security and Strategy, Tsinghua University
Rong Ying	Vice President of the China Institute of International Studies
Fu Xiaoqiang	Director and Research Fellow of the Institute of Security and Arms Control, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations
Li Li	Deputy Director and Professor of the Military Technology Teaching-Research Office, PLA National Defense University
Wu Dahui	Professor of the Institute of International Studies, Tsinghua University
Li Li	Professor and Research Fellow of the Institute of International Studies and Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies, Tsinghua University
Wang Shida	Deputy Director of the Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceanian Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations
Li Tao	Executive Deputy Director and Professor of the Institute of South Asian Studies, Sichuan University
Wang Xu	Executive Deputy Director of the Center for South Asian Studies, Peking University
Zhu Yongbiao	Professor of the School of Politics and International Relations and Director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies, Lanzhou University
Hu Bo	Director of the Center for Maritime Strategy Studies, Peking University

- Lan Jianxue Associate Research Fellow of the Department for
Developing Countries Studies, China Institute of
International Studies
- Han Hua Director of the Center for Arms Control and
Disarmament, Peking University
- Lu Yang Research Fellow of One Belt-One Road Strategy
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