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Pak-India ties, regional conflicts hurdle to stability

Speakers at peace moot welcome Afghan talks, urge Kashmir solution

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ISLAMABAD

Healthy ties between Pakistan and India and the resolution of major conflicts were declared to be key to regional stability by speakers at a conference aimed at peace in South Asia and Middle East.

Peace talks for Afghan conflict was the other talking point at the conference titled 'World Conference for Peace and Conflicts in South Asia and Middle East', which was organised by Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies on Tuesday. A large number of experts from the country and abroad attended the event.

Discussing the geopolitical changes taking place in the region, Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies Director Muhammad Amir Rana declared peace talks with the Taliban as a healthy omen. He underscored the importance of peace for the eco-

nomic development of region in light of academic research of conflicts in South Asia and the Middle East. On the issue of Kashmir, he said it was being ignored by the global community and non-state actors were playing their role in the disputed region.

Also speaking at the occasion, Prof Shaheen Akhtar of the National Defense University observed the complex security paradigm in South Asia, particularly the two nuclear-armed rivals. "India and Pakistan are big players and the region lacks regional cooperation," he said.

He linked the situation in Afghanistan with that of regional stability as well as its impact on relations between New Delhi and Islamabad. "Pakistan was heavily impacted due to instability in Afghanistan. The Afghan conflict has also created issues between India and Pakistan."

He also criticised Indian political and military interference in Afghanistan, calling it detrimental to the quest of regional peace. "Good ties between India and Pakistan

are the key to a peaceful Afghanistan and good for overall security of the region."

Speaking about the influence of global factors, Prof Akhtar remarked that a third force was trying to accomplish its designs by subjecting the region to instability, but welcomed the ongoing round of talks between Washington and the Taliban.

Prof Ibrahim of Doha Institute of Graduate Studies said that it wasn't proxy war but direct military interference of the US that was responsible for disrupting peace.

Meanwhile, Prof. Riaz Shad of National University of Modern Languages also highlighted the need for peace, while underscoring the importance of direct talks between actors he said were key stakeholders. "If Afghan peace talks prove to be a failure, the blame will be put on Pakistan," he said of the talks in Doha between representatives of the Taliban and the US government. He added that negotiations should instead take place between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

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Seminar on 'Strategic dimensions of peace and conflict in South Asia, Middle East'

Myra Imran

Islamabad

There is a need to study the causes of proxy wars, and what are the potential impacts of such wars on the overall conflict. These thoughts in a daylong international seminar on 'Strategic Dimensions of Peace and Conflict in South Asia and the Middle East,' organised by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), an Islamabad-based think tank, participated by prominent national and international scholars.

Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh, Deakin University, Australia, argued there is significant gap in the literature on non-state actors. He called for empirical research, along with concrete policy suggestions, on the topic, so as to mitigate the conflicts in the region, in particular South Asia and Middle East.

Speakers grappled at the notion of non-state actors and proxy wars: PIPS director Muhammad Amir Rana said non-state actors often evoke memories of violent elements. This despite that as per definition, non-state actors include organizations working for human rights.

Prof. Syed Rifaat Hussain, Department of Government and Public Policy, NUST, said the term "proxy wars" is a contested notion. There is no universal agreement on its definition, nor on the set of circumstances behind such wars. Interestingly, he said, proxy wars are as old as the phenomena of conventional war itself.

Speakers noted proxy wars are instruments of state power. As to why states go for it, it was argued, it is because they are often cheap undertaking to change the status quo.

Participants noted over the decades, much of the conflict involves non-state actors. In-

terstate conflict, on the other hand, has declined. In recent times, he said tit-for-tat tactics on behalf of such actors have reduced their appeal.

Dr. Ibrahim Fraihat, Doha Institute of Graduate Studies, Doha, termed proxy war as an arms conflict between two parties, though one of them is not directly involved. This way, domestic conflicts are escalated by external power intervention. At the same time, proxy war, if unresolved, can take the shape of conventional war, the most significant example was of Vietnam War. In contemporary times, he lamented, the Middle East has been rendered a stock market of proxy organizations.

William Guerriache, Associate Professor American University in the Emirates Dubai, said on surface, all states support open diplomacy and multilateralism. Yet the survival of patronage has paved the way for foreign intervention during conflicts in the whole Middle East.

Dr. Marwan Kablan, Director Policy Analysis at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies Doha, also hinted multiplicity of actors involved in Syrian conflict, calling it as mother of conflicts in the region. It was said that wars cannot be ended unless patron states achieve their interests.

Dr. Shaheen Akhtar, Professor National Defence University Islamabad focused on the apprehension of Pakistan about India's involvement in Afghanistan. She said Pakistan's uneasy relationship with Kabul reinforces a perception of encirclement while growing US-India strategic co-operation further aggravates these apprehensions.

Dr. Muhammad Riaz Shad, National University of Modern Languages (NUML) Islamabad, said fighting through proxies gives states an opportunity of deniability.