

Report: Roundtable on “China and South Asia” with a delegation of the Gansu Association for International Friendly Contact (GAIFC) and Xinjiang Association for International Friendly Contact (XAIFC) on March 25, 2014.

Issues in China-South Asia Relations

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ISLAMABAD: “The purpose of India’s improving relations with Japan and the U.S. is to have access to military hardware that China does not have, and to conduct joint exercise with them to improve its military prowess,” said Mr. Liu Guangjun, Vice President of the Gansu Association for International Friendly Contact (GAIFC). He expressed these remarks during a roundtable at the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) here on Tuesday. He added that India had become a regional power and was aspiring to be a global player expanding its interests in faraway regions like Africa and Latin America for imports of raw materials. He maintained that India considered China a major hurdle in the way of its becoming a global power. Mr. Liu highlighted improvement of India’s relations with those East Asian countries which have disputes with China under the former’s Look East policy. He maintained, however, that China’s aspirations are internal; that it wants to concentrate on its internal economic development and reducing the regional income disparities. He added that because of China’s inward-looking aspirations and its quest for resolution of all issues through peaceful means, it does not want to disturb its relations with India. This is the reason, he said, for China’s signing of several agreements with India related to de-escalation of border tensions.

Mr. Liu expressed his concern about the situation in Afghanistan. He argued that post-2014 instability in Afghanistan could be a problem for all the regional countries. Violence and lawlessness would not leave any room for development interventions from friendly countries like China in Afghanistan, said Mr. Liu. He shared that China will be hosting a mega conference on the future of Afghanistan in August this year. He added that China wants all the neighboring countries of Afghanistan to play a positive role in promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan.

President of IRS, Amb. Arif Ayub, was of the view that Americans aggravated the internal divide in Afghanistan along ethnic lines because of a wrong emphasis on siding with a minority ethnic group. He partly attributed the resilience of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan to ethnic discontent among Pashtuns. He added that the Taliban had destabilized the whole of the country except a few provinces. Amb. Ayub pointed out that warlords were dominating the army and the police in Afghanistan. He predicted deterioration in the internal situation of Afghanistan in the run-up to the election as well as in the period immediately following it. Amb. Ayub remarked that in the absence of credible foreign monitoring, the elections are most likely going to be embroiled by massive irregularities. He expressed his agreement with Mr. Liu that any instability in Afghanistan would have spillover effects for regional countries, especially Pakistan.

Amb. Ayub underscored that the Indian defense budget is higher than the whole budget of Pakistan government. He added that India is the biggest buyer of arms in the world for the last five years. He presented data about the purchase of sophisticated military equipment by India, which could be a matter of concern for both Pakistan and China. He highlighted the military infrastructure developments in northern India such as construction of roads, railway tracks, and

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airfields that were primarily directed against China, as was the raising of an 80,000-strong new mountain strike corps with two independent armed and infantry brigades.

Brig. (Retd.) Bashir Ahmed, Senior Fellow at IRS, was of the opinion that Indian military buildup in the north was geared toward an ‘offensive defense’ rather than offense. He explained that earlier the Indian military doctrine called for containment in the north, ‘offensive defense’ in the west, and surveillance in the south, but that it had now changed to ‘offensive defense’ in the north as well because of growing Indian military capabilities and political influence. Brig. Ahmed argued that development of a blue water navy and improvement of New Delhi’s relations with Australia, Japan, and Vietnam, were part of strengthening its maritime presence in the vicinity of the Indian Ocean. Commenting on the upcoming Indian elections, he expressed his disagreement with the generally held perception that Baharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) Prime Ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, would become the Prime Minister. “India cannot afford a leader like him in the twenty-first century,” said Brig. (Retd.) Ahmed.

Ms. Farhat Parveen, Research Fellow at IRS, opined that the upcoming Indian general election is a contest between secularism and fundamentalism. She agreed with Brig. (Retd.) Ahmed that the election results could turn out to be a surprise for Modi supporters. She argued that Congress might not be in a position to win the election itself but it might still be in a position to not let Modi become the Prime Minister. She added that Modi had weakened the BJP by tilting too much in favor of the religious right and sidelining senior party members like L.K. Advani, Murali Manohar Joshi, and Jaswant Singh. She maintained that India was going toward a two-party system but that Modi’s rightist politics could push it back toward regionalism.

“Indian voters are shrewd voters; they would vote for stability in the upcoming elections,” said Ms. Parveen. Brig. (Retd.) Ahmed added that the Indian voters who vote for regional parties in provincial elections also tend to vote for national parties in the national elections, which shows their political maturity. He added that it was a clever move on the part of the Indian National Congress not to nominate Rahul Gandhi as its Prime Ministerial candidate because in case the BJP wins the elections, the reputation of the Gandhi dynasty could be at stake. Ms. Parveen was of the view that Priyanka Gandhi is a much better choice for the seat of the Prime Minister than Rahul Gandhi. She emphasized that the party also favored her over her brother. Ms. Parveen added, however, that whenever she steps forward, she and her husband are made targets of scandals. “Congress is wasting its time on Rahul Gandhi; Priyanka Gandhi could very well become the Indra Gandhi of today,” said Ms. Parveen.

The roundtable was also attended by Mr. Li Mingbao and Mr. Li Chaofeng from GAIFC as well as Mr. Shi Boyin from Xinjiang Association for International Friendly Contact. Other IRS scholars who attended the roundtable included: Mr. Khalid Malik, Mr. Aarish Khan, Ms. Heba al Adawy, Mr. Basharat Hussain, Mr. Imran Sardar, Ms. Sidra Tariq, Ms. Humera Iqbal, and Mr. Yasir Masood.