



Discussion on the report 'Reconciling with the Taliban' with G Parthasarthy, Indrani Bagchi and P S Das
15 July, 2009; 4:00pm
WWF Auditorium, 172-B Lodhi Estate, New Delhi

Aspen Institute India today organized a panel discussion on the report 'Reconciling with the Taliban' authored by Dr. Ashley Tellis, with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The discussion was framed in the Aspen Institute style of freewheeling discussion amongst the participants.

All the participants were in general agreement with the broad conclusions of Dr. Tellis's report, namely that reconciling with or talking to the Taliban at this stage was a bad idea. According to G Parthasarthy, Visiting Professor, Centre for Policy Research, the strategy of talking to the Taliban was demoralizing those fighting them and that one should only talk to an adversary from a position of strength. He pointed out that the Taliban were Pashtuns by ethnicity, and only 42% of all Afghans are Pashtuns, amongst whom also, only 10% support the Taliban leadership. The real change that has come into American strategy under the Obama administration is the admission that the US and NATO cannot deal with Afghanistan on their own and that they need the European Union, Russia, Iran and central Asian countries to get involved.

Indrani Bagchi, Diplomatic Editor, Times of India, was of the opinion that since the last eight years, four lone attempts had been made at reconciling with the Taliban, none of which had worked. The crucial question was one of exactly who the Taliban are and which of them we should be talking to, since the central Taliban leadership is loyal to the Quetta Shura and is not interested in dialogue.

P S Das, Former Commander in Chief, Eastern Naval Command, Indian Navy drew a sharp linkage between the Taliban, the Al Qaeda and the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) and stressed that until the Pakistani army is brought under civilian control, not much can change in Pakistan's approach towards the Taliban since they are seen as strategic partners in keeping alive Pakistani's influence in Afghanistan.

Some of the other issues that came up during the discussion were the question of Indian influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan's sensitivities about the same, the radicalization of Pakistani society, the potential of the Afghan national army to fight against the Taliban and so forth.

The session was moderated by Ambassador Kishan Rana, Professor Emeritus, Indian Foreign Service Institute and Former Indian Ambassador to Germany.