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The Crucial Nexus between Security, Politics and Development An Interview with Ashraf Ghani

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The Center's interview with Ashraf Ghani took place on September 28 during breakfast at the Columbia Princeton Club, where he detailed his views on the role of the UN Secretary General and the specific goals he would make a priority.

Ashraf Ghani, the latest nominated candidate to the position of U.N. Secretary General, officially endorsed by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on 20 September, says that his first priority as Secretary General “would be to restore the trust in the organization,” and that the key to achieving this goal would be to delegate tasks and allocate resources appropriately. He would address the reforms and the increasing North-South divide by finding common ground among the constituencies that “today seem to be divided more over issues of process than of substance. For instance,” he continues “the largest beneficiaries of an effective United Nations are actually going to be the poorest countries in the world but, today, reforms of the UN have been perceived as if they are against their interests.” A Secretary General’s task will then be “to build a very significant constituency for change from those whose citizens are going to be most directly dealing with the outcomes of these changes.”

Dr. Ghani, currently Chancellor of Kabul University, has been the successful Minister of Finance of Afghanistan from July 2002 to December 2004. He says he would bring to the position of Secretary General of the UN a profound “knowledge of the frontline” and “a life dedicated to serving the poor and the excluded.... To me, any given policy is not an abstract concept,” he explains “it is measured. It is the concrete woman, man, child and older person that is going to be affected by that policy, positively or negatively.” He adds that he would bring to the Secretariat “a discipline of implementation.” Each policy “has to be seen from a perspective of implementation. I can reorganize, and have been reorganizing, complex systems around difficult tasks,” he adds.

“My job as finance minister taught me to manage complex systems, to have a fine understanding on how to bring transparency and accountability to systems that have lacked that...and to have the imagination to tailor specific solutions,” explains Dr. Ghani. “My job at the World Bank” he continues “has prepared me to understand the complexities of multiple stakeholders and build coalitions; it was a job of facilitation and consensus building, while my job at the University has prepared me to understand non-state actors and to be able to relate to them.”

He would also bring to the Secretariat his strong knowledge of the different regions of the world. Dr. Ghani has worked on projects and issues in all of Asia and particularly “was privileged to work with China and India, Afghanistan and Pakistan.” He also worked with Russia for five years and thus became very familiar with the issues of transition. He has studied and taught about the Middle East for many years; and recently dealt with the situation in South Sudan and in assessing situations in Nepal and Lebanon. He explains that he has “pulled these experiences together into a series of frameworks that range from state-building to challenges of globalization, and to modalities of peacemaking among others...”

The second priority on Dr. Ghani’s agenda would be establishing a focus for the organization. He explains that “the United Nations cannot do everything; consensus must be built on what tasks it must perform and, vis-à-vis those tasks, the goals need to be clearly identified. Is the UN going to be an enforcer, a referee, a monitor, an administrator? Clarification of goals is essential to effectiveness.” He adds that transparency would also be on the top of his agenda, because “every UN dollar that is spent must be disclosed to all the public so that there can be public scrutiny to decide how effective the organization is.”

A further priority on Dr. Ghani’s program of work would be to address the “wide agenda of global threats that no nation alone can deal with. Formulating, understanding and reaching consensus on a doctrine of global security that we can consistently act upon is ... critical to our understanding of the legitimate use of force.” Asserting that there is no other instrument like the UN to which “all the states of the world have agreed to give the most vital issue, namely legitimate use of force...the ultimate criterion of trust and responsibility.” He explains that in order to understand the doctrine of global security, the concept of security needs to be tied to stability, as a way to address inequalities and foster development. Indicating that security and stability cannot be imposed, he points out that “legitimate institutions need to be created that respond to the needs of the people.” It is in this light that “the nexus between security, politics and development is going to be critical” and the key question becomes “how do we make development more effective?”

Thus, from his point of view, the achievement of human stability draws directly from development and addressing inequalities. UN agencies need to be “fundamentally reoriented to the task of being catalysts for building local institutions and supporting them in defined periods of time, and then either redefine their roles or get out of places when they are not needed anymore. This is the most suitable answer to the question of poverty and exclusion.” And in terms of development, he stresses that it is important that the UN’s functions in this realm do not duplicate the work of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the regional institutions and Governments.

Another priority on Dr. Ghani’s agenda is the need to build consensus regarding “which other global public good issues the UN must concentrate on, for example human rights and gender rights in particular.” He adds that since the Secretary General “does not set the path but proposes the options, my task would be to ensure that the owners of the UN, the Member States, can agree on a focused agenda so that the Secretariat in particular, and the UN community in general, can be held accountable for the delivery of those tasks.”

A further effort that Dr. Ghani thinks would be crucial to increasing the effectiveness of the organization would be the reporting of an evaluation along the lines of the UNDP Human Development Report, which he says, “really broke new ground.” Such a report would have to be divided into “different monitoring functions by the UN at the global level, so that it will be made multidimensional. This type of report can provide an objective analysis of countries to be presented a month prior to the opening of the General Assembly and would become a general focus for discussion and useful to keep track of the fundamental issues.”

Asked whether he is satisfied with the progress of reforming the UN, he replies “in terms of management reforms, a very good diagnosis of the problems has been offered.” But he adds that it will be in the light of the findings of the report of the High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence, that the fundamental issues of focus can be analyzed and reorganized. “In terms of ideas,” he adds “they seem to have been derived from the private sector, and while the private sector has a lot of good things to offer, we need to understand the distinctive nature of the public sector in a global environment....I would also involve the staff of the UN in a participatory exercise,” he continues, “on reconfirming the diagnosis of the problem and identifying the solutions, so that they can contribute to creating criteria determining why staff should be changed, reappointed or, in some cases, asked to leave.”

In answer to my question regarding whether it was important for the UN to have an independent Secretary General in order to be effective, he replies that the key to that question lies in how the SG relates to “his/her two masters, the Security Council and the General Assembly.” The answer to the question lies in how he/she is able to find ways “out of the box” to deal with problems. Therefore, in his view “independence is not really the issue, the issue is how to mobilize in the most effective way within a range of options that can secure agreement...The authority and the power of the SG are not fixed, there is a range within which actions can take place and the more effective the organization is, the stronger is the standing of its Secretary General.”

Asked to provide an assessment of the new UN bodies, the Human Rights Council and the Peacebuilding Commission, he replies that it is too early to judge their effectiveness. “They are very good ideas on paper and I hope they can be implemented.” With respect to the issue of Security Council Reform he is optimistic that “at least there is agreement that the Security Council needs to be changed to reflect the realities of the current international community and the modality is being discussed and debated. The challenge is to secure the key agreement to change the Security Council and its membership, and that of course requires discussions to find the right formula.”

My last question to Dr. Ghani concerns his personal background: “do you think that the fact that you are Muslim could be an asset in resolving, if not the crisis in the Middle East, at least the increasing lack of understanding between Islam and the ‘West’?” He replies that he is very proud of being Muslim “because the environment in which he grew up is cosmopolitan, tolerant and incredibly open. What passes for extremism is a very little part of what Islam is...There is a lot of misunderstanding and as somebody who has devoted his life to universal public service my origin should be an asset to bridge the current gap....We cannot afford to make the clash of civilizations a self-fulfilling prophecy.”