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Report – Panel Discussion

“The Next Chapter for Afghanistan”

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) had a Panel Discussion titled The Next Chapter for Afghanistan today. The distinguished panel of experts included: Mr. Mirwais Yasini, Former Deputy Speaker of the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament ; Dr. Jonathan Schroden, Director of Countering Threats and Challenges Program (CTCP) at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA); Ms. Suzanne Schroeder, Independent analyst on Afghanistan and Ambassador Riaz M. Khan, Former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan. Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI and Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG ISSI joined in the interactive discussion which followed.

During her introductory remarks Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, said that while President Biden has stated his withdrawal plan, the onus has been shifted on the Afghans. The four-month period is meant to provide the Taliban and the Afghan government room to demonstrate their willingness to compromise and ultimately achieve a negotiated settlement. However, there are serious concerns as to whether both sides will be able to accommodate each other and agree on a workable compromise as well as fears of the possibility of a rejuvenated civil war after US troops leave. She stated that a reduction in violence, concrete intra-Afghan dialogue, success of the Doha talks, as a mutually accepted constitutional framework as well as a future political structure that is acceptable to all are crucial facets of the Afghan conflict that need immediate focus without which, chances of peace and stability in Afghanistan remain elusive to say the least. While there is much talk of an interim and inclusive set up, little focus has been on its actual structure, composition and implementation. This now needs to be prioritized more than ever. It is important to remember that mistakes of the past should not be repeated – therefore hasty and haphazard policies must be avoided and focus should be on a responsible and measured withdrawal, without showing undue haste. This is a historic opportunity for the Afghans to rewrite history but for that both principal stakeholders, the Afghan government and Taliban will have to move beyond the rhetoric, find the middle ground and be willing to compromise.

While answering a question on what policy does he envisage from Biden's policy and what does he visualize for the future of the peace process, Mr. Mirwais Yasini outlined the history of the violence in Afghanistan and elucidated how internal corruption also contributed to the damage in the country. He said that Afghanistan fought the war against terrorism for the whole world.

Similarly, he hoped that President Biden and the international community would not abandon Afghanistan. He said that the current political leadership is very fragile and very personal-interest oriented. There is nothing in the name of national interest and democracy only remains as a slogan. The Taliban now have to prove themselves as a viable entity and integrate themselves into Afghan society. He went on to outline how poverty is increasing at an alarming rate and refugee returnees are now trying to migrate back to Pakistan because of concerns such as lack of job security. He said that the immediate concern is how to avoid bloodshed. He further stated that the Biden administration, international community and Afghanistan's neighboring states should not abandon Afghanistan as it did not fight the war against terrorism for itself but for the sake of whole world and if Afghanistan gets abandoned then "this will have a deadly aftermath for the region".

Dr. Schroden outlined how the US experience with terrorist groups was more problematic in places where the internal structure of the country has completely broken down because complete state collapse leaves space for terrorist groups to fill the void. He believed that the US administration would try and navigate its way through the various players and it should be expected that the Biden administration would continue to try and generate as much leverage as possible without leaving its troops on ground. He also said that there would be continued engagement of the US and Afghanistan in terms of humanitarian and development assistance in pursuit of the core interest of preventing the whole peace process from collapsing. He also underlined how the Biden admin is likely to continue to provide security assistance funding to Afghanistan for at least the next 2-3 years. He said that the most critical question is what will happen to the Afghan forces without contractor support. He also highlighted that we would not see a wholesale departure of US diplomatic personnel as there will be continued security, humanitarian and development assistance and thus a continued engagement.

On the topic of the chances of a civil war happening, Ambassador Riaz M. Khan said that elongation of US presence in Afghanistan would lend some legitimacy to the Taliban to continue fighting and would continue to prolong the status quo. He stated that over time the Taliban have also realised that international cooperation is a requisite and that they will remain isolated if any military ventures are undertaken. Secondly, the Taliban victory over Kabul cannot be taken for granted because situations have changed with regard to those in 1990s, as Kabul seems

defendable, the Afghan strongmen are more prepared, and Iran and India are having an assertive approach towards Afghanistan that was not there two decades before. There is some change in the attitude of the Taliban as they have been exposed to the outside world. Concurrently, sustainable peace will have to start with certain recognition of the Taliban because they have proved that they are a part of the political landscape of Afghanistan. There is also a need for utilising traditional structures in Afghanistan for consultation. He went on to say that at present Pakistan is in absolutely no position to provide any economic assistance to Afghanistan and this has to come from outside and is only possible in case of a peaceful resolution. While Pakistan must try and extend all facilities especially on the Afghan trade and must continue to extend its hospitality to the Afghan refugees, this process has to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

Ms. Schroeder sketched how over time the Taliban have gained a certain level of legitimacy. Even though splits within the Taliban can be taken as an indicator of a brewing civil war, what is more problematic is the strengthening of private militias and increasing sectarian fault lines in Afghanistan. Moreover, there is the absence of a strong government structure across the country. Now the US needs to regard the Taliban through a different lens but this in no way means to let go of the violence the latter perpetrated against the common people whether in the London bombings or the Madrid bombings. She said that the Taliban have been very skilled so as to use the rampant corruption to craft their public messages. Without a doubt, there is a deep longing for normalcy and security within the people of Afghanistan and one needs to look at what is preventing this. It is important that the need for security should be recognized by all sides, and there has to be a demonstrable act that there will be no fighting and a ceasefire that actually works. And it is incumbent upon the Taliban to prove themselves to the Afghan people and to the US and show that they are capable of ending the violence which would be both detrimental and destructive for Afghanistan.

Ms. Suzanne believed that the cohesion among Taliban would remain intact as it had remained in last two decades. She further said that building of militias is not a good sign at all as it can lead to the terrible civil war. Even though situations in Afghan conflict have quite changed but there is still an absence of a strong central governance across the country.

While talking about the role of China Ambassador, Khalid Mahmood said, China is a stakeholder but not a party to the conflict. Another factor that impels China to have peace and stability in Afghanistan is the situation in Xinjiang as there is a lurking fear that Afghan soil can be used by the ETIM to make trouble in the Chinese province. Similarly, presence of Indian influence in Afghanistan is also one of the reasons for Chinese involvement. He stated that withdrawal of foreign troops is one of the important pre-requisites for the stability in Afghanistan but it will not solve the problem. Therefore, the reduction of violence is an important thing and it should not have to wait for 11th September, as it could possibly again affect the withdrawal of the United States. He pointed out that Pakistan may have a benign influence over the Taliban but it does not control them, but still Pakistan would try to bring the various factions together, including Taliban. He concluded by saying that, for the permanent settlement among the Afghan factions, it is important for regional countries to play their part as without their involvement the agreement would be fragile even if the Afghans agree to it among themselves.

During the interactive discussion, Ambassador Aizaz stated that a major concern is that once the US forces withdraw and the attention of Afghan factions is towards infighting, the focus of militants – especially Al-Qaeda and ISIS – will be in the direction of ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan.