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Report – Panel Discussion

“Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Turkey's Role in Afghanistan”

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) had a Panel Discussion on ‘Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Turkey's Role in Afghanistan’ which is the first in a series of conversations CAMEA will be having on Afghanistan - under its Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process series.

The distinguished speakers included: Ambassador Haroon Shaukat, Former Ambassador of Pakistan to Turkey; Dr. Merve Seren, Assistant Professor at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Department of International Relations; Dr. Zalmi Nishat, Researcher at the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS); Dr. Salim Cevik – Researcher at the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) and Dr. Murat Aslan, SETA Security Researcher and Faculty Member of Hasan Kalyoncu University (Turkey). Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General, ISSI also took part in the discussion.

Mr. Muhammad Yaseen, Research Associate at CAMEA gave a brief presentation on Turkey’s role in Afghanistan.

During her opening remarks, Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, said that the war in Afghanistan, which has spanned for nearly 20 years appears to be coming to a rather inconclusive end, with the political, security, and economic transition processes still in limbo. With limited gains, Afghanistan is far from being stable, as it continues to be challenged by a plethora of problems, thus presenting challenges to the international community and the region. Perplexed by instability in Afghanistan, there is a realization within the region that geopolitical dynamics are not what they used to be, new and multiple actors that have taken centre stage with new realities, and strategic rivalries over and in Afghanistan have increased. As a result, regional actors, (Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian states and Turkey) have come to the realisation that they no longer can stay on the sidelines, nor depend on the international community, but rather it is time for them to take ownership of the region. And one such country is Turkey, which has played a substantive role in Afghanistan - Politically, Turkey has played a pivotal role in the Afghan peace process through a number of initiatives chiefly through the Heart of Asia Istanbul Process as well as the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Turkey trilateral.

Apart from focusing on peace, through the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Turkey Trilateral, Turkey has also tried to bridge the gap between Pakistan and Afghanistan, whose relationship has been

strained to say the least. In light of the recent announcement by the US to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by July 2021, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Brussels said that Turkey was seeking Pakistan and Hungary's involvement in the security of Kabul airport after the withdrawal of foreign troops. While there is talk of this proposed mechanism, involving Turkey, Pakistan and Hungary, the modalities of this mechanism remain unclear - while Hungary has welcomed the proposal Pakistan has yet to respond. Moreover, the Afghan government has stated that Afghan forces are capable of protecting their airport, whereas the Taliban have said that they will stand against such a move. While the whole world closely follows the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan along with the rather hasty withdrawal of foreign forces, that too in the absence of an intra-Afghan negotiated settlement, the future of Afghanistan remains uncertain to say the least.

Ambassador Chaudhry said that an unstable Afghanistan would not only be a nightmare for the whole region but more so for Pakistan. He said that the people of Pakistan unanimously advocate for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, believe that there is no military solution and instead the best chance for peace in Afghanistan is through a political process which unfortunately is at a stalemate currently. Regarding Turkey's role in Afghanistan, he said that Turkey is a respected name in Afghanistan and has not only been helping Afghanistan through political means such as by hosting various trilaterals aimed at starting a sustainable peace process but by also being a viable economic development partner to the country.

Ambassador Haroon Shaukat said that Turkey has evolved itself into a reconstruction and capacity building role in Afghanistan. The important question is how to bring the Afghan factions to the point where they can be convinced for peace talks. Turkey has an advantage of being at a distance in terms of geography and so does not have the same baggage that Pakistan has to face due to geographical proximity. Turkey can work with regional neighbours and global powers to help the Afghans reach the objectives of the peace agreement. There is currently a two pronged problem, the first is to bring the Afghan factions in harmony and the second is to bring in neighbouring countries to officially take part in the process instead of merely backing their respective faction. Turkey is in the best position to play a potentially great role which should be strongly encouraged. It is uniquely positioned as it has relations with both Afghanistan and

Pakistan and hence it can play a more active role in making the two countries reach a compromise.

Dr. Merve Seren said that despite having the latest military technology, it has failed to repress the Taliban and instead we see the Taliban have gained dominance in most parts of Afghanistan. She said that there is no homogeneous Taliban, hence it still remains to be seen with which faction of Taliban negotiations are taking place with and are other factions of Taliban on the same page. Failure of the US has been primarily with regards to failure in building a nation state. Where there is no right of ownership or justice, war will always continue as we see in Afghanistan at the moment. It must also not be forgotten that there are other regional players in Afghanistan which include Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India.

The US will never leave Afghanistan because that means giving space to China and Russia to an energy rich country with mineral value. She went on to outline how in Afghanistan there are formally declared 19- 23 terror organisations. Hence there will be likely clashes once the US leaves. Moreover, the reason for Turkey to be in Afghanistan is not just because of NATO but also because of its migration issue with regards to refugees from Afghanistan flowing into Turkey. Turkey's presence in Kabul is also important for a lot of international organizations present in Kabul. However notwithstanding this, Turkey's exact role needs to be further clarified. It can act as an economic, diplomatic and social supplement in Afghanistan. Turkey's existence in Afghanistan needs to be legitimized through a UN Resolution and the Afghan government needs to make Turkey's presence official as well through government channels. She also said that the Kabul airport is the heartland of Kabul and Kabul is the heartland of Afghanistan, hence it is important.

Dr. Zalmay Nishat said that the depth of the Turkish-Afghanistan can be seen in Turkey's multifaceted role over the years which has also included assistance in health, education and social development. He foresaw a large Turkish role in Afghanistan. First in internal consensus building among Afghanistan's multi ethnic populace and second in regional consensus building. He said that nation building in Afghanistan is not as strong as compared to Turkey. Attempts for reconciliation have existed for a decade but the Taliban either refused to sit with the Kabul government calling them puppets of the US or demanded direct talks with the US. The Trump

administration gave in to this demand and this led to the peace process led by Zalmay Khalilzad. The Istanbul conference did not take place because of the tough conditions set out by the Taliban. A post withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan is yet to take shape, he said. It needs to be analysed how the Taliban are so successful in Afghanistan with only around 15 per cent public support. In this regard, the role of neighbouring countries is very important, he said.

Dr. Salim Cevik said that Turkey has remained as a non-combat force and relied on its economic, cultural, health and educational contributions. Unlike colonial powers, Turkey has always treated the Afghan people as equal. Any negotiations will see Turkey taking substantial risks. There is a general shift in Turkish foreign policy from soft to hard power in the last 5 to 6 years and how it uses its military capability. The latter has so far been rather successful as can be seen by the strategic lead Turkey has gained in Syria and Libya. An important point that should be viewed is the Turkish-US relationship considerations, which more so than Turkish regional policy, is about what Turkey can offer to the US such as employing its military in line with US policy. This way Turkey will avoid President Biden's rising rhetoric on democracy which the US can use as a strategic instrument to pressurise other nations. As long as the Taliban agree to a Turkish role, only then can Turkey play a part. On the question of whether there will be a complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan, he said there will not be a complete withdrawal. For instance, there will also remain some forces in Kabul airport to assist Turkish forces and provide security. On the question of China and Russia's role in Afghanistan with regards to Turkey he said that there will be simultaneous competition and cooperation. Here he cited an example of Turkey and Russia in Libya and Syria.

Dr. Murat Aslan presented different parameters on the topic of the discussion. He said that the 1920s is a benchmark in understanding Turkey-Afghanistan relations. Perceptions on either side as well as the role of different actors play a very important role in any relationship. Turkish mentality usually takes Central Asia and Afghanistan as the route of their culture. On Turkey's interest in Afghanistan, Dr Murat said that Turkey's policies are based on a shared interest policy opposed to one based on self-interest. Afghanistan interests lie in a peaceful stable country in order for any development project to be realised. Likewise for Turkey, there needs first and foremost there must be a consensus in Afghanistan in order to embark on any prosperity projects in Afghanistan in the future. The peace process itself is a question mark right now. Afghans

should talk and build consensus on how to proceed in post-withdrawal. Merely a security-oriented approach regarding the Kabul airport is not enough.

Tahir Khan, an independent journalist was of the opinion that anyone can play a role in a peace process if there is trust but I don't think there is any trust between the Turkish government and the Taliban. He said that Turkey has lost an opportunity to play a role in the peace process.

He also pointed out that there is mistrust between the Taliban and the Turkish government and this mistrust has increased. He also quoted the June 14 statement of the Turkish President which he made on the sidelines meetings with NATO members in Brussels. It stated that if the Americans do not want us to leave Afghanistan, and if they want Turkish support there then the diplomatic logistics and financial support by the US will be of great importance. He said that this is very surprising and said that if the Turkish troops stayed in Afghanistan it would be a violation of the Doha agreement. He also said that if Turkey wants to keep its position in the Muslim countries they should leave Afghanistan and they should let Afghans decide whether they need Turkish forces for the security of Kabul airport or not.

Husham Ahmed - from the Pakistan Embassy in Ankara - while talking about Turkey-Pakistan coordination in the Afghan peace process stated that ever since early this year when the Istanbul conference was announced Pakistan welcomed the role of Turkey and are in contact with Turkish authorities in Kabul and other places. He stated that recently, during the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, the Pakistani Foreign Minister had bilaterals with the Turkish Foreign Minister, with Afghan leaders, the Afghan Foreign Minister, Dr Abdullah Abdullah the Chairman of the High Peace Council and former Afghan Foreign Minister Mr. Saladin Rabbani. During these meetings, issues of Turkey's role in the peace process were discussed. He concluded by saying that Pakistan has been welcoming Turkey's role in the Afghan peace process and Turkey's outreach to various actors is very valuable.