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Report – Panel Discussion

“Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Iran’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: Iran's Role in Afghanistan' which is the third in a series of conversations CAMEA has had on Afghanistan – under its Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process series.

The distinguished speakers included: Dr. Saeed Ghaderi, Researcher at Institute for Policy and International Studies, Iran. Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh, Deputy Director (International) of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Australia, Prof. Amin Saikal, Adjunct Professor of Social Sciences at the University of Western Australia, Mr. Mohammad Hashim Pashtun, Adviser for Research & Policy to Kabul Institute for Peace, Dr. Mohsen Shariatinia, Assistant Professor of International Relations, Shahid Beheshti University, Iran and Ambassador Asif Ali Khan Durrani, Former Ambassador of Pakistan to Iran. Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, and Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG, ISSI, also took part in the discussion.

During her opening remarks, Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA said that the situation in Afghanistan took a drastic and dramatic turn when the Taliban took over, declaring the war in Afghanistan over. Despite assurances, President Ashraf Ghani made an unceremonious exit, leaving the Afghan masses angered, confused and most importantly abandoned. With the US exit and in the absence of a negotiated settlement, a military takeover by the Taliban was expected, the manner and speed at which the group has taken over was certainly not anticipated, nor was the relatively smooth manner in which transition has taken place. While there has been talk of an inclusive political set-up, little is known about its mandate and structure. Until then, Afghanistan will continue to be a major issue of concern for the international community but more so for regional countries. Perplexed by instability in Afghanistan, regional actors like Iran, have come to the forefront to play a more proactive and prominent role in Afghanistan. Considering the repercussions Iran has faced, Tehran shares a consolidated view with its neighbours over Afghanistan, entailing regional ownership, recognition of an inclusive political settlement, and recognition of Taliban as a major component of a Future political settlement as well as curbing transnational terrorist groups particularly like the ISKP.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry was of the view that events in Afghanistan are unfolding at a breath-taking pace that has surprised everyone. It remains to be seen what kind of government will come to Kabul and what approach Afghanistan's neighbours will adopt. In this regard, regional countries have been calling for an inclusive government. He stated that in the last seven years of Ashraf Ghani's rule, Pakistan has suffered tremendously as the Afghan government allowed India to operate against Pakistan from Afghan soil. Contrary to the former government of Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan Taliban is giving assurances that no terrorist organization will be allowed to use Afghan soil against any state, he said.

While giving his overall analysis on Iran's role in the future of Afghanistan, Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh said that Iran had been trying to play a hedging game establishing a relationship with the government in Kabul while also providing some level of support and legitimacy to the Taliban, unless Iran realized that the US is leaving and Taliban will remain a reality in Afghanistan. Further, the swift victory of the Taliban proved their significant political existence in Afghanistan. Perhaps, this was the main reason that the Iranian leadership was giving statements that the Taliban have changed and Iran can work with them. Although Iranian political leadership has accepted the Taliban's role in the future of Afghanistan, the Iranian public thinks differently. It does not consider the Taliban as a useful element in its neighbourhood. Despite this issue, Iran cannot go against regional consensus over basic issues pertaining to Afghanistan, he said.

On Iran's potential role in Afghanistan, Prof. Amin Saikal stated that the Taliban has taken over Kabul, which is a positive development for Tehran particularly regarding US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This was one of the top reasons that Iran was supporting the peace process. Finally, Iran openly hosted the delegations of the former Afghan Government and the Taliban in Tehran for discussing the political future of Afghanistan.

As long as, the future government in Kabul is not hostile to Iran in terms of security threats including controlling the refugees and sending drugs to Iran, and would be willing to address bilateral issues on a priority basis, Tehran will be happy with the new set up in Kabul. Prof. Amin further mentioned that Iran would be observing issues like giving representation of shia segment of the Afghan population in the government before giving recognition to the Talibans.

Dr. Saeed Ghaderi mentioned that Iran is closely monitoring the situation and is trying to reconcile different Afghan factions for peace in Afghanistan. He appreciated the constructive role of Pakistan in the Afghan peace process - particularly hosting the Afghan delegation in Islamabad on August 15, 2021. He emphasized that Iran wants the Taliban to manage the situation peacefully and establish an inclusive government in Afghanistan. Now, peace in Afghanistan depends on the actions of the Taliban and the success of dialogue depends on the level of rationality in the Taliban leadership. So far, Taliban has shown positive signals however, It needs to be seen, how much the Taliban are open to changing their strategy and attitudes.

While addressing the question on how does Islamabad view Iran's role in the future political settlement in Afghanistan, Ambassador Asif Durrani said that Pakistan and Iran have stood shoulder to shoulder in hard times and there is an emerging consensus between Pakistan and Iran regarding peace and stability in Afghanistan. He mentioned that both countries have a mechanism for regular political consultations where each side shares their views particularly with regards to the evolving situation in Afghanistan.

He added that India cannot create competition between Iran and Pakistan, because Chabahar port is a shallow port, and Gwadar is a deep port. Right now Iran depends on UAE's Jebel Ali port as a mother port. The kind of relationship Iran has had with the UAE, it seems that Iran would like to consider Gwadar as an alternate mother port for supporting its long-term maritime economic interests. He further said that Indian investments at Chabahar port for strengthening its trade relations with Afghanistan and Central Asia are useless, because if it can not compete with Russia and China in Central Asia, then how can it compete other stakeholders in Afghanistan.

Dr. Mohsen Shariatinia said that it is difficult to say anything about Iran's role in Afghanistan as things are still uncertain at the moment. He was of the view that at a global level, the failure of the US-led regime in Afghanistan is a positive development for Tehran. It could pave the way for a potential regional solution to mitigate the crisis in coordination with Pakistan, Turkey, Russia, and China. He said that the Taliban's ideology and international communities' behaviour towards recognizing the Taliban are two significant points for Iran to consider before recognizing the Taliban government. At present he does not consider Taliban as an enemy, friend

or a foe to Iran. He further added that even though Iran is hopeful for a better situation in Kabul, it is still preparing for the worst.

Mr. Mohammad Hashim Pashtun said that since Iran shares close historical, political, cultural, and linguistic relations with Afghanistan, these elements will help Iran play a vital role in Afghanistan. He mentioned that US absence in Afghanistan suits Afghanistan-Iran relations. He was of the view that since mostly non-Pashtun political leadership of Afghanistan was in Islamabad for a three-day visit, therefore like Iran, Pakistan also has a vital role in the future of Afghanistan particularly for a peaceful settlement in the country. He further added that Iran should play a responsible role to make sure the Government in Afghanistan is as inclusive as possible by reserving the rights of the Shia community.

Prof. Amin Saikal was of the view, that though the Taliban's ideology has not changed, their tactics certainly have changed, particularly with regards to regional and international recognition. Prof. Saikal mentioned that the Taliban have learned from the past and now they want their government to be successful which is why they are acting positively for getting maximum recognition from the international community. Further, the Taliban leadership realizes that the group's isolated policies cannot resolve the protracted issues of Afghanistan, which include unemployment, poverty and the absence of a healthcare system for the Afghan public. Moreover, the new government will have to depend on international financial assistance for resolving these issues, he mentioned.

Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh said that Iran has traditionally looked at the Taliban as a power to undermine the US since Tehran had been very concerned about the US using Afghan soil to enforce regime change in Iran so this is a positive development for Tehran however he also expressed his suspicion about how open Taliban will be in changing their strategy and attitude towards Iran as a Shia state in its neighbourhood. He further mentioned that this goes in favour of all immediate neighbours and regional countries, which have reached the conclusion that Afghanistan can be stabilized only through intra-Afghan reconciliation, assurances for the protection of human rights and finally making an inclusive government in Afghanistan.

Responding to a question regarding the extent to which Iran is ready to cooperate with regional powers and play a lead role in Afghanistan, he said that it would probably be a great mistake for

a single country to be a dominant foreign player in Afghanistan. In the past, Afghanistan has suffered political instability, civil war and foreign interventions due to such reasons. Now, all regional countries need to own this responsibility and act together for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

With regards to the Chinese role in Afghanistan, Dr. Shahram said that Beijing has several concerns over the situation in Afghanistan particularly in terms of the security of Chinese projects. Hence, China has a significant role in Afghanistan as it is trying to expand regional connectivity as well as trying to create an image of a friendly regional actor.

Mr. Mohammad Hashim Pashtun responded to the question about the changing perception of Afghans towards Pakistan and said that the anti-Pakistan approach has failed with the unceremonious exit of Ashraf Ghani and Pakistan's positive approach for hosting a delegation of Afghan political leadership in Islamabad. He said that the Taliban leadership and the three members of the Coordination Council have always had a positive approach towards Pakistan, which is why the future relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan will be productive as compared to the past.

While addressing the question about how Iran views the role of India in the future of Afghanistan, Dr. Mohsen Shariatinia was of the view that the fifty years long history of Afghanistan gives us a lesson that geopolitical perspective has failed in Afghanistan. Therefore, Iran views the role of India in Afghanistan in the context of multilateralism, but it is up to India on how to play a constructive role in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Asif Durrani also addressed the same question and said, India does not have a direct role in Afghanistan at the moment, though, in the past, India has used Afghan soil to carry out activities against Pakistan. The terrorist network of Kulbhushan Jadhav is a clear example of Indian attempts to spoil the relationship between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, he highlighted.

Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh responded to the question about what kind of responsibility the regional countries take after the complete withdrawal of US from Afghanistan. He mentioned that the US signed the agreement with the Taliban and started evacuating its forces from Afghanistan. None of the parties took the regional countries on board for having a consensus

over the political future of Afghanistan. Therefore, regional countries also started engaging the Taliban directly. This was the main reason that no structured regional consensus or framework could emerge except a general understanding between like-minded countries of the region, which led them to draw some conclusions pertaining to the situation and future of Afghanistan.

Christian Wagner, an expert on South Asian affairs said that despite the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, there are certain issues that will drag Western powers' interventions in the region. The first issue is a threat of terrorism, which can emerge from Afghanistan again. The second issue is about the future of Afghan refugees, who are not only residing in the immediate neighbourhood of Afghanistan but also in Turkey, the Middle East and in the Western world. The third issue is the smuggling of drugs and narcotics, which are produced in Afghanistan and then smuggled to other parts of the world.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, concluded the session saying that though the relations between Iran and the Taliban were inimical in the past, the situation has now taken a 180-degree turn and now Iran views Afghanistan differently. Iran needs just protection of basic human rights of Hazara and Shia communities, a concrete understanding over border security on both sides, repatriation of Afghan refugees, eradicating the network of terrorist organizations and drug cartels in Afghanistan. The nature of Iran's relations with Afghanistan will depend on how much the Taliban put their assurances into practice. So far it looks like they are on the right path, which is a good sign, he said.