



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Report – Panel Discussion

“Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Uzbekistan’s Role in Afghanistan”

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Rapporteur: Muhammad Yaseen Naseem

Edited by: Amina Khan

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: Uzbekistan's Role in Afghanistan' which is the fourth in a series of conversations CAMEA had on Afghanistan – under its Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process series.

The distinguished speakers included: Mr. Ibraheem Bahiss, Consultant with Crisis Group's Asia Program, Dr. Baktyor Mustafaev, Deputy Director of the International Institute of Central Asia Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Dr. Akram Umarov, Senior Research Fellow - The University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Tashkent, Dr. Vladimir Paramonov, Director / Founder, Central Eurasian Analytical Group, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and Ambassador Masood Khalid, Former Pakistan Counsellor to Uzbekistan from 1995-98. 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 since the Taliban takeover, with the exception of terrorist attacks by the ISKP, followed by the US drone strikes against the group, the transition process has been relatively smooth. So far, the Taliban have presented a moderate face, where they have allowed the re-opening of schools and return of women to work - moreover, there have been talks of forming an inclusive government. While there are some signs of resistance in the Panjsher areas, by and far all political Afghan factions appear to be willing to work with the Taliban in an inclusive framework. However, with the US withdrawal, the real test for Taliban has only just begun. It is imperative for the Taliban to engage with Afghan stakeholders and form a government that is inclusive and representative of all Afghans. Bewildered by instability in Afghanistan, regional actors have come to the forefront to play a more prominent role, and one such country is Uzbekistan, which has played an important role in the Afghan -peace process, by engaging with all sides as well as hosting initiatives to help achieve a negotiated settlement. Moreover, Tashkent and Islamabad have a close and coordinated approach towards Afghanistan.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that regional countries can play a key role in Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan is one such country. He raised four important questions pertaining to the Taliban; will the Taliban be able to establish stability in Afghanistan, will the world

recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, how will the Taliban run the government financially and technically, and lastly, what will be the role of regional countries. While talking about Uzbekistan, he said that under the dynamic leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, a new era of economic prosperity has opened for Uzbekistan, under which the country can play a key role in the regionally connectivity in general and prosperity, peace and stability of Afghanistan in particular.

Dr. Vladimir Paramonov said that it could be a new era of development for Afghanistan as well as Central Asia, if the Taliban fulfil their promises regarding human rights and inclusiveness. Uzbekistan can play an active role in the development of Afghanistan especially in the Northern provinces of Afghanistan by initiating industrial and infrastructure development projects. Uzbekistan has already been playing a proactive role in Afghanistan as evidenced by the commitments for building rail routes which will lead to connectivity between Iran and Pakistan. He further mentioned that Russia and China can also play a key role in this scenario, where particularly China could become a key investor in development of Afghanistan. In his answer to the question about the evolution of the Taliban as a group, Dr. Vladimir Paramonov said as Taliban have not established their government in Afghanistan, therefore, it is too soon to predict the future behaviour of Taliban. So far, Uzbekistan has adopted the policy of “wait and see”, he said.

Dr. Baktyor Mustafaev said that Uzbekistan considers Afghanistan as an integral part of Central Asia. While highlighting the role of Uzbekistan in the Afghan peace process, Dr. Baktyor said that the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev hosted a high-level international conference in March 2018 at Tashkent, where the representatives of 20 countries acknowledged the significance of peace in Afghanistan for security and connectivity in the region.

With the changing dynamics in the region, new opportunities for regional connectivity are also emerging. The recently held conference at Tashkent in July 2021 discussed the various opportunities for regional connectivity between Central and South Asia. He highlighted that Uzbekistan is interested to invest in energy, industry, transport, communication, health and education sectors of Afghanistan. Dr. Baktyor underscored that peace and stability in Afghanistan are essential for regional connectivity and it is only possible through intra-Afghan

reconciliation. It is yet to be seen how the Taliban convert their assurances into actions, he opined.

Dr. Akram Umarov said, under the leadership of former President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan was revolving around the security perspective, but the current President Shavkat Mirziyoyev is more focused towards openness, increasing people-to-people contact, maximizing cultural exchange, liberalizing the economy and enhancing regional connectivity. Dr. Akram was optimistic that the situation in Afghanistan will be settled soon, but he further cautioned, if the new government in Afghanistan fails to fulfil its commitments then there will be instability and chaos in the region. He mentioned that along with regional connectivity, the internal connectivity of Afghanistan is also imperative. After all, the responsibility came to the shoulders of regional countries to take the ownership of peace, reconstruction and stability in Afghanistan.

Mr. Ibraheem Bahiss believed that there is unity among international players as well as regional countries when it comes to ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for trans-regional or transnational terrorist groups. He mentioned that Western world did not come up with a concrete policy towards Afghanistan, except taking anchor of imposing sanctions or cutting the financial aid to the country. Therefore, all the neighbouring countries are concerned about the peace and stability in Afghanistan. At this stage, the Taliban should satisfy regional countries that they will not face any threat from Afghanistan. While commenting on the role of Uzbekistan, he said that the country is adopting a coordinated approach with the regional countries towards Afghanistan. Hence, an upward trajectory of bilateral relations is expected between two countries.

With regards to future challenges to the Taliban, Mr. Bahiss said that the Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan will face various challenges like the formation of a government, its structure and their ability to run the country. Along with this, another internal challenge which the Taliban might face will be satisfaction of Afghans with the new regime. He further mentioned that Afghanistan is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. Millions of Afghans need food and health facilities on emergency basis. The situation has been exacerbated by the US, which has frozen Afghan central bank's reserves of over \$9 billion. Similarly, IMF, World Bank and international

donors have also suspended their payments to Afghanistan. Therefore, the liquidity crisis is at its peak, he said.

Ambassador Masood Khalid stated that the current leadership of Uzbekistan is more outward-looking as compared to the past. Now, the country has the capacity to play a role in the region. He pointed out how, former President Ashraf Ghani was the first head of the state that visited Tashkent and signed a number of agreements and among Central Asian states, it is the largest electricity supplier to Afghanistan. Furthermore, both Uzbekistan and Afghanistan are landlocked countries, so, being part of connectivity projects in the region, both countries can share their dependence by offering transit facilities to the regional countries. Once peace is restored in Afghanistan, it will increase opportunities for Uzbekistan to deepen ties with the regional countries, he opined.

While talking about the evolution within the Taliban, he said that the Taliban's interpretation of Shariah is very strict, which is why it will be very difficult for the Taliban to change themselves ideologically. Therefore, a drastic and fundamental change cannot be expected. He further stated that a stable Afghanistan is in the collective interest of all the regional countries. China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Central Asian states can play an important role in developing a regional consensus. They also can influence the future political dispensation in Afghanistan to have a moderate foreign policy, he said.

Ambassador Masood Khalid said that we must keep in mind that Uzbekistan is part of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Greater Central Asia Initiative of USA (C5+1) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Keeping in consideration the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, Russia has assured its CSTO allies that the security threat to these states would be neutralized and also strongly oppose American presence in the Central Asian region. Hence, these factors will have their considerable impact on the foreign policy of Uzbekistan towards Afghanistan.

While responding to the question about how does Pakistan view Uzbekistan's role in Afghanistan, Ambassador Masood said that Pakistan's vision of Central Asia consists upon five strengths, which include political, trade & investment, energy & connectivity, security & defence, and people-to-people ties. He underscored that CPEC projects also have potential to

attract Uzbekistan and Afghanistan to develop their stakes for connecting themselves with the larger markets. He appreciated the evolving trilateral mechanism between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan, which have the potential to create a win-win situation for three countries. He gave another example of deepening ties between three countries, which have agreed in February 2021 for constructing a railway line to connect Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul and Peshawar.

In response to the question about the evolving situation in Afghanistan and the possible role of the Taliban, Dr. Akram Umarov said that it is very difficult to predict something about the uncertain situation in the country. Although, the unified force of the Taliban overthrew the government of President Ghani and forced the foreign forces to leave the country, the main challenge still exists i.e. to form an inclusive government and govern the country in accordance with the expectations of the Afghan nation. He introduced another scenario in which the Taliban could adopt a moderate strategy to run their future government instead of imposing a Shariah law or adopting a Western democracy.

Mr. Ibraheem Bahiss was of the opinion about the Taliban and their key role in the future political set up in the country. He said, two factors played a significant role in changing the behaviour of Taliban. One factor is that Afghan society has relatively become urbanized, educated and cognizant of modern social construct of reality, which cannot remain silent or live under suppression. Another factor is the legitimacy from the international community and the Taliban cannot deny this reality. So, it is up to the Taliban on how they take this historic opportunity for leading the country towards peace, stability and prosperity.

While responding to the question about Uzbekistan's recognition of the Taliban is limited to the response of regional countries, Dr. Baktyor Mustafaev said that Uzbekistan has supported the idea of an inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan. In the past, foreign intervention, less representative regimes and corruption were main reasons behind degeneration of state institutions. The Taliban have emerged as an alternative dominant power in Afghanistan, so the regional countries should adopt a common approach towards the Taliban as a group. They should work together to bring some kind of joint projects related to infrastructural development and reconstruction in Afghanistan, he said.

Dr. Shahid Hashmat took part in the discussion and added that peace and stability in Afghanistan only could come when the Taliban get control over the internal affairs of the country, acquire international recognition and receive financial assistance from the international community. Otherwise, the situation would not be satisfactory and may lead towards a new chaos in the region.

Dr. Akram Umarov talked about the possible role of US in Afghanistan. He assessed that US would depend on the regional countries for making its role acceptable to the Afghanistan. Therefore, it established the quadrilateral diplomatic platform (US-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Uzbekistan) for regional cooperation with the two important and immediate neighbouring countries of Afghanistan. Mr. Ibraheem Bahiss was of the view about the significance of Doha process, he said that the dominant role of Taliban in Afghanistan has made it less relevant in the current circumstances, but still there is a hope that the group will form an inclusive government in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that the international recognition of Taliban depends on the form of government that the Taliban establish in Afghanistan. It is for sure that no country wants to intervene in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan, but all want to play a supportive role for peace and stability in Afghanistan as it is in their best interest. He also said that a major concern for the neighbouring countries was a possible influx of refugees. So far, this fear has not materialized but it remains a concern as the situation is yet not clear. However, the need of the hour is an early return of peace and stability in Afghanistan and to that end, there is a great responsibility and role of the neighbouring countries.