



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

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

Report – Panel Discussion

“Conversations on the Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: Europe’s Role in Afghanistan”

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Rapporteur: Sarah Akram

Edited by: Amina Khan

The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) held a Panel Discussion on 'Conversations on the Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: Europe's Role in Afghanistan' which is the sixth in a series of conversations CAMEA is having on Afghanistan – under its 'Conversations on the Evolving situation in Afghanistan'.

The distinguished speakers included: Mr. Graeme Smith, former Senior Consultant on Afghanistan at the Crisis Group, Ambassador Nadeem Riyaz, former Pakistan Ambassador to Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia & current President Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Mr. Daud Khattak, Managing Editor, Radio Mashaal (a Pashto language unit, broadcasting to regions on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border), Dr. Christian Wagner, Senior Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), and Mr. Sangar Paykhar, founder of Afghan Eye podcast, freelance journalist & commentator on Afghan affairs. Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI and Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG, ISSI, also participated in the discussion.

During her opening remarks, Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA said although the Taliban gave assurances that they would work towards the formation of an inclusive political set-up, the interim government is anything but inclusive. However, even within the confines of a Taliban dominated set-up, a lot will depend on how the group delivers on governance, foreign relations, CT assurances, as well as human rights. If the Taliban fail to deliver, it risks losing support and recognition needed by the group to legitimize its rule. Hence, Taliban should work towards a future inclusive government. She further said that Europe has been a key player in Afghanistan, being the second largest political, economic and security contributor, making Afghanistan the largest beneficiary of EU development assistance. Apart from fearing the loss of gains made during the past two decades, in the light of recent developments, key concerns for Europe revolve around instability, terrorism and increased migration. Moreover, Europe's engagement, recognition, funding, and cooperation with the Taliban will be conditioned upon the group meeting its commitments.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that Europe has always been a very important player in Afghanistan, and that he has always believed in the resilience of the European continent as it

has been at the centre of human and intellectual evolution. However, In Afghanistan Europe took a backseat and let the US lead the show. Hence it is important to see what kind of role Europe now intends to play in Afghanistan in terms of providing assistance be it economically or regarding bringing peace and stability to the country. It is important to see how Europe looks at the situation and whether it has those kinds of stakes in Afghanistan's stability.

Mr. Graeme Smith said that a lot of us are hoping for a political setup in Afghanistan but unfortunately it ended up with a military takeover of the country. The new interim government in Afghanistan is presenting various challenges for European policymakers. Providing economic assistance and avoiding economic crises is the key concern of Europe right now. He mentioned that there is a real trust deficit between Europe and the current Taliban government in Afghanistan. He stated that the future of Afghanistan is still unclear; however, there is hope that the Taliban will help international organizations continue their work and projects in Afghanistan. He said we are still in the very early days and we still have to wait for what comes out of Afghanistan. It is the matter of survival of over 18 million Afghans. Hence, international community must come forward and play its due role before the events move towards chaos. He also said that policy is made by actors at the highest levels who were interested in supporting the republic. Talking about the present takeover he said that a new interim government that describes itself as working on the emirate model that completely rejects western democracy and that has no intention of holding elections, and has a very different idea about women's rights, then it should be known that it will be more difficult to muster European support and dollars.

Ambassador Nadeem Riyaz said that the Taliban's takeover of Kabul happened without firing a single bullet and that they did not face the necessary resistance which the international community expected they would face. He also said that the people did not oppose them, even if they did not support them. Their establishment of an interim government in Afghanistan means the group is now organized. The Taliban has transformed from what they were 20 years ago. They now have the capability to deliver and govern and should not be treated as an isolated entity by the international community. Talking about Europe's concerns, he said that the influx of refugees is a serious concern for Europe because it will create instability in terms of security and, more specifically, with regards to harboring terrorism. In order to bring stability to Afghanistan, it is important to engage with the Taliban, and allow them to govern according to

the people's wishes. He said the group needed to be given a chance to deliver. He stressed that Europe should play a key role in ensuring the well-being of the people of Afghanistan and engaging with them. There is a need to find a middle ground where neither party suffers. Furthermore, engaging with Afghanistan is not only in the interests of the region, but also the world at large. He further stated that with the enormous amount of mineral wealth which Afghanistan has, the enormous resources which it has, means that in the rebuilding process of a country there are umpteen roles which every country can play. But in order to reach that level where you can even try to think of playing a role you first have to get the element of stability in that country and that element of stability can only come with an engagement.

Mr. Daud Khattak, said that Europe has been a major ally of the US in the post 9/11 era, and it now has serious concerns about the future of Afghanistan. These concerns will guide the role of Europe in Afghanistan in the future. After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, Europe's immediate concern is how to ensure women's rights, human rights and freedom of the media, which evolved over the last twenty years. Moreover, now after the takeover, women journalists are sitting at home and some of the male journalists are also not coming forward and are in hiding. The safety and security of vulnerable Afghans is also an important concern along with an emerging humanitarian crisis in the country. He believed that Europe would be interested in avoiding a civil war in Afghanistan as well as Afghanistan becoming a sanctuary for terrorist organizations. He said the Taliban have to prove themselves as a successful political entity that can run the country in the long run. He also highlighted that the threat of terrorism is a key concern in Afghanistan. Regarding an international CT framework, he said the Taliban would not agree to have a CT mechanism with European countries, because they remained part of US/NATO coalition forces which the group opposed. While stating the concerns, he also said that although the Taliban have stated that they will not allow their territory to be used against anyone; however they did not state that they will sever their ties with Al Qaeda.

Dr. Christian Wagner, spoke about the reaction of Europe at three different levels: immediate pertaining to refugees, midterm, regarding the humanitarian crisis and long-term which revolved around the recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. He mentioned that a huge refugee influx (which is already anticipated) will be a serious concern for Europe. He believed that discussing cooperation at this stage is very difficult because presently Afghanistan is in

desperate need of large scale international support to run the country. If Europe does not recognize the Taliban, it will weaken the European position, he said. While talking about the long term concerns of Europe, Dr. Wagner stated that Europe has learnt lessons from this failure of the US in Afghanistan and they will think before indulging in such kinds of interventions again. In the future Europe has to adopt different defense and security policies compared to the past. He suggested that Europe should set up its own rapid crisis force to deal with such crises which are independent of US influence. He also said regional countries including Europe should ensure that there is no civil war in the country and focus should be on developmental issues. He also said that he has not seen clear figures on the amount of refugees and that the Torkham border is frequently opened and closed so therefore a clear picture is not available. He also stated that the European countries have a keen desire to support the Afghan people and not the Taliban as such.

Mr. Sangar Paykhar said that at the moment, majority of the European countries are anti-immigrants, however, European countries cannot afford an unstable Afghanistan because it will ultimately cause a refugee crisis in Europe. However, he stated that on the one hand, European countries are concerned with conflict in Afghanistan because that may result into more refugees on the other hand they are providing a platform to a fringe group currently in Afghanistan that wants to start a civil war in the country. This particular group has obviously in their statements numerous time referred to Afghanistan as a country that basically needs to be split apart based on ethnic lines so this is a formula for a further disaster as this could lead to ethnic cleansing in Afghanistan which could lead to a civil war that might last for decades. In order to understand what is happening now in Europe is that on the one hand there is a lot of soul searching about what is our role with regards to human rights and women's rights in Afghanistan and what is our role as an ally of United States in participating in these ventures. On the other hand internally in Europe you see a growing sentiment among Europeans against more immigration more people from Islamic countries settling here in this country we see many economic challenges in Europe.

An unstable Afghanistan is not in the interest of the European countries. He highlighted that any civil war would be another disaster that might last for decades. Europe should adopt a realistic approach towards the current political dispensation in Afghanistan instead of being idealistic. In order to be more responsible and avoid any further conflict in Afghanistan, they need to seek a

more diplomatic approach, and they should make sure that individual Afghan does not suffer. He said that Afghanistan has immense potential, and therefore should remain engaged with Afghanistan. Speaking about the Taliban, he said while the group has not changed fundamentally, it has evolved.

An interactive question and answer session followed the discussion. The questions revolved around the overall analysis of Europe's role in Afghanistan, about the evolution of the Taliban, and among others, regarding engagement with the Taliban. Responding to a question regarding the evolution of the Taliban as well as engagement with the Taliban, Mr. Graeme Smith stated that there has to be a meeting sort of midway somewhere between the expectations of European donors and the expectations of the Taliban. It remains to be seen really what sort of government the Taliban want in the near future. He also said that there has to be a modus operandi regarding working together. Regarding the delivery of humanitarian aid, Mr. Smith was of the opinion that we can move on to maybe a more expansive idea about what humanitarian aid can be whether there for example might be some development assistance that can fall under the humanitarian umbrella. For instance, Afghanistan purchases a lot of its electricity from outside the country, so assistance for making sure that generating stations function smoothly, keeping the lights on is also a kind of humanitarian assistance, more so development assistance. While answering a question regarding expectations and the timeframe the Europeans are willing to give to the Taliban to deliver on their agenda, one of the panelists, Dr. Christian Wagner was of the view that we may see a certain setback in our engagement but yes we will focus on the development issues and the concerns about terrorism about drug trafficking, about civil war remain and it is also in the interest of the neighboring countries that there is no civil war in Afghanistan and of course this also gives a certain common interest between our dealings with Afghanistan and our cooperation with the neighboring countries. Responding to another question regarding whether the Taliban have changed or not, and the common areas of engagement between the European countries, Mr. Daud Khattak stated that we are witnessing a changed Taliban but the situation in the 1990s was different and post 9/11 saw a new generation of Afghans due to which the Taliban have also exercised restraint. Dr. Sanghar Paykar, while answering a question regarding the evolution of the Taliban, was of the view that after twenty five years, the Taliban are more mature as a movement.

In his concluding remarks, Chairman Board of Governors, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood stated that Europe has been part of the US's military presence and development aid for more than 20 years. Concerns of Europe are the evacuation of the remaining Europeans in Afghanistan and preventing the influx of refugees. There is a growing feeling in Europe that they cannot just depend on US stewardship in undertaking military operations. Provision of humanitarian assistance must not be made conditional on how the Taliban behave. He said there is a need to avoid any action, even unwillingly, that can prompt a civil war in Afghanistan. We have to show patience and time for things to work out in Afghanistan, he said.