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Report – Panel Discussion

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

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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: Russia's Role in Afghanistan,' a fifth in a series of conversations CAMEA is having on Afghanistan – under its Conversations on the evolving situation in Afghanistan series.

The distinguished speakers included: Ambassador Omar Samad, Non-resident Senior Fellow Atlantic Council; Dr. Alexander A. Kornilov, Prof. Dr. at Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod, Head of Region Studies of Foreign Countries; Dr. Nigel Gould-Davies, Senior Fellow for Russia and Eurasia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS); Ambassador Qazi M. Khalilullah, Executive Director Centre for International Strategic Studies Sindh (CISSS) & Former Ambassador of Pakistan to Russia; 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 with the US withdrawal, the real test for Afghanistan 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. This is a historic opportunity for all Afghans to come together and work for the future of Afghanistan. Despite previous differences, regional stakeholders, including Russia are coming out of the woodwork to assume a more substantive role in the future of Afghanistan. Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, and the Central Asian nations appear to have a common (regional) vision for the future of Afghanistan, which entails regional ownership, recognition of a negotiated settlement with the Afghan Taliban as a key component, inclusive political set up, as well as curbing transnational terrorist groups, the illegal flow of arms and trade. Needless to say, in such trying times, Russia's role has been revitalized as a supportive regional actor highlighting Moscow's keen involvement in the peace process and its desire to showcase itself as a leading player and advocate for peace and stability in the region.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad said that Russia has been striving hard for a peaceful Afghanistan and a bit of congruence exists between Russia and all regional countries in their approach towards amnesty in Afghanistan. Though the Taliban also have given assurances to accommodate the other political and ethnic groups, to respect the human rights including rights of women, and to

prevent Afghan soil from being misused by militant and extremist groups to commit terrorism against any other country, he outlined. He pointed out that the challenges have however, only begun and we have yet to see to what extent will the Taliban live up to their commitments. It appears at the moment that all regional countries, including Russia are in a 'wait and see' mode, but the Russian analysts are indicating that if the Taliban Honour their commitment Russia would be open to recognition. He added that a similar sentiment also has been received from China. He assessed that there is a degree of consensus among regional countries that a regional approach towards the current situation in Afghanistan might be better.

Dr. Alexander A. Kornilov that the highest political, diplomatic and defence leadership of Russia is convinced that Afghanistan cannot be conquered and the imposed Western democracy has failed in the country. He mentioned that the Taliban have taken over the control over Afghanistan and Russia considers the group as a reality in its future policy towards the country. He added that Russian leadership has concerns over the criminal elements and terrorists, which were released in a large number from Afghan prisons particularly during the military advance of the Taliban. He specifically pointed out that Russia is not interested in the disintegration of Afghanistan. Officials in Russia have made it clear that if the Government in Afghanistan partners with regional countries, it will be able to counter all external and violent threats within the country. The sooner the Taliban form a government, the easier it would be for the group to communicate with other countries. Hence, in this regard, they should make a framework that ensures regional security.

He was of the opinion that the Taliban evolved and could the Taliban prove to be a reliable partner of Russia In the Afghan context, Dr. Alexander said that it is too soon to say something about the expected change in the Taliban, because they are yet to be seen in the light of their assurances and actions regarding peace and stability in Afghanistan. As the group has learnt from the past, therefore, Russia hopes they will continue to behave positively. He added that the Taliban themselves need to unite their factions as a unified force. Therefore, Russia adopted a 'wait and see' policy towards the Taliban as potential partners in the Afghan context. He also pointed out that Qatar and Turkey will now be actively and deeply involved in the process in Kabul. In the current circumstances, Russia underscores that the future government in

Afghanistan must be representative and inclusive, which must be sustainable for a certain period without facing any major internal political threat.

Given the Indo-Russian strategic partnership how can he analyse India's role in Afghanistan particularly in current circumstances where the Taliban will have a major say in the future political discourse in Afghanistan, Dr. Alexander said Indo-Russian partnership will remain at its place, but in the current situations, there is now more cohesion and trust between Russia, China and Pakistan. Further, Russia considers Pakistan as an important country and would like to make the Troika-plus format functional for adopting maximum cohesive response towards the situation in Afghanistan. Moreover, the geo-economic visions of these three countries are more aligned with regional connectivity, regional economic partnership and reconstruction in Afghanistan. So, India is not seen as a close partner with regard to the current situation in Afghanistan.

While responding to the question about what the time frame Russia is willing to give to the Taliban to deliver on particularly in terms of the pledges the Taliban made regarding counter-terrorism assurances and making sure that Afghan soil will not be as a safe haven for transnational terrorist groups, Dr. Nigel Gould-Davies said that the Taliban ruled Afghanistan in an extremist way in the 1990s. It was a very difficult time and radiated various problems in Central Asia. Russia being a near neighbour of Afghanistan is rightly concerned about the evolving situation in Afghanistan. He said the recent fall of Kabul was different from the past and this time, the Taliban are seen as a stabilizing force. He pointed out how right before the fall of Kabul, Russia conducted joint military exercises with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan at the Afghanistan border- a posture that had different meanings for different actors. In this regard, he said the Taliban must not look beyond the borders of Afghanistan and with respect to foreign forces; they must be assured that there will be no interference.

Dr. Nigel Gould-Davies voiced his scepticism about how stable the Taliban government would be in the backdrop of reports of violence coming out from Afghanistan. He pointed out that the Taliban remained a banned organisation in Russia even though Russia is one of the first countries whom the Taliban have invited for the inauguration of their new government. As the Taliban are establishing their relationship with regional countries, it is hoped that Afghanistan will not face isolation and will come out from all crises.

Dr. Omar Samad said that Russia's position towards the Taliban can be categorised into two phases. In the first phase, Russia adopted an anti-Taliban stance and supported the international community over sanctioning the regime in Kabul during the 1990s. The second phase can be further categorised into three phases. In the first phase, it supported the American War on Terror and remained in doubt about the future of American stay in Afghanistan. The second phase started from 2008 and ended in 2014, when the Russian leadership assessed Obama Administration's policies of drawdown of troops as an indication of withdrawal as President Obama also announced the year 2014 for leaving the country. The third phase started from 2014 onwards, when the Russian leadership realized the military potential of the Taliban, the level of public support to the group particularly from the rural areas of Afghanistan and the multiple initiatives of the peace process in Afghanistan. Further, Taliban's increasing contacts with regional countries totally changed the perception in policy circles of Russia and finally the country also engaged the group and held a number of meetings at Moscow. It might be an interesting indicator that Russia was also recalibrating its position when the government of Ashraf Ghani was involved in corruption, mismanagement, and bad governance which eventually led Russia to open its doors to the Taliban.

Dr. Omar said Russia wants inclusivity in the future government in Afghanistan and does not want the Taliban to monopolize power. He also pointed out that increased coordination between all stakeholders is a positive development. However, whether this can be consolidated will depend on how the Taliban run the country and whether they will be open to broad-based solutions. He was of the view that if the Taliban failed the credible expectations of the regional and international countries, the fall-out will result in the suffering of all the neighbouring countries, including Pakistan.

In his response to the question about providing humanitarian aid and developmental assistance to Afghanistan, Dr. Omar said that poverty and food crises are huge challenges for the Taliban and how the international community will tackle these challenges would be interesting. There should be regional mechanisms in place as well as qualified individuals who can advise the government in this regard. It is also important to not fall back on the previous system of the 90s where Afghanistan was an NGO-run government. The needs and expectations of the people are now different, he said.

While responding to the question about how optimistic he is about the assurances and actions of the Taliban, Dr. Omar said that the Taliban have learnt many lessons from their past experiences and they have had a very painful struggle coming into power again. They are local actors, who know the fault lines of Afghanistan particularly its ethnic diversity and the diverse aspirations of the people of Afghanistan. So, they are expected to behave positively as they are giving assurances to all stakeholders both inside and outside of Afghanistan. Hope they will establish a cohesive, representative and inclusive political set up in near future.

Ambassador Qazi M. Khalilullah shared his personal experience and said that Russia was nowhere in Afghan affairs in 2016, but later on, it emerged as an important player in the peace process. Then, the China-Russia-Pakistan trilateral summit increased the role of Russia in the core issues of the Afghan peace process. Over a period of time, the format was expanded and it included Central Asian states, the US, Iran and India. Then, it made efforts through the format of Troika and included Pakistan in the Troika-Plus format for consolidating the overall international peace efforts for Afghanistan. He added that Russia, China and Pakistan remained at the same page during all these rounds of talks. In addition to these formats, Russia also hosted meetings of different Afghan factions in Moscow. Very soon, it realized that only the Taliban had the capacity to align their efforts with Russia for compelling the US led military alliance to leave the country.

Ambassador Qazi was of the view that Russia knows that events in Afghanistan have a deep impact on neighbouring countries which makes the latter immediate stakeholders of peace in Afghanistan. This is also a primary reason that has led Russia to view Pakistan as a very important country, including it in all important meetings held regarding the future of Afghanistan. He added that Afghans must be allowed to govern their affairs and Afghan soil will not be used against any country and both Russia and Pakistan are hoping that the future Afghan government should be inclusive, without any external involvement. He stressed that the Taliban need the help of regional countries and should be provided due humanitarian assistance.

Ambassador Qazi M. Khalilullah stated that Pakistan's agenda has always been peace because of its long border with Afghanistan due to which events in Afghanistan have affected almost all walks of life in Pakistan. The country has hosted over 3.5 million refugees for decades and over

20,000 people cross the border on a daily basis. So, there are a lot of expectations from the Taliban in the short span they have taken over. Hence, it would be prudent to wait till they announce the form and structure of their government. This time, the Taliban are in a better position to formulate and implement their policies, as opposed to the past.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that if the Taliban implement their assurances regarding respecting human rights and making an inclusive government in Afghanistan, then the country and region will enjoy peace and stability. He said that Russia has three key concerns; apprehension of extremism and terrorism, the possible flow of refugees, and drug trafficking. Taliban have to fulfil their commitments about an inclusive government. He said Russia has adopted a dual approach, one of which is a diplomatic approach and the other which encompasses securing the borders of Central Asian Republics with Afghanistan by conducting military exercises. He went on to say that one cannot ignore the plight of Afghan people who are asking for assistance. If trillions of dollars can be spent on war, a few dollars to help Afghan people will not be a difficult task. It is the collective responsibility of the international community to help Afghans, he said.