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## *Report – Panel Discussion*

# **“Conversations on the Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: US 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 Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: US Role in Afghanistan’ which is the seventh in a series of conversations CAMEA is having on Afghanistan – under its ‘Conversations on the Evolving situation in Afghanistan’.

The distinguished speakers included: Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Dr. Elizabeth Threlkeld, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center, Dr. Anatol Lieven, Senior Research Fellow on Russia and Europe at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Mr. Shehzad Qazi, a public opinion researcher based in the United States, Mr. Faiz Zaland, Professor in Kabul University, Mr. Tameem Bahiss, Analyst specializing Afghan and Pakistani affairs and Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors ISSI also participated in the discussion.

During her opening remarks, Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA said the situation in Afghanistan has drastically changed, with the Taliban takeover of the country, followed by the complete withdrawal of US forces. The US departure has left many questions unanswered, where its implications are yet to be fully felt in the region and beyond. Although the Taliban appear to have achieved their goal of expelling foreign forces, however, the real test for the Taliban has only just begun, which is certainly not limited to the capture of power, but it is more about legitimacy, recognition, acceptance, and performance. Even within the confines of the current Taliban dominated setup, recognition for the government now may not depend on inclusion, but whether they can deliver in terms of governance, foreign relations, human rights and more importantly CT assurances. Domestically, a lot will depend on how the group formulates its policies towards Afghan institutions like the army, police, bureaucracy etc. While we are all aware of the role the US has played in Afghanistan over the past two decades, the current policy appears to be determined by recognition of the group as the de facto government of Afghanistan, as stated by Secretary Blinken. While it remains to be seen how the relationship will evolve, it is necessary for Washington to remain engaged with the group.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, while expressing his views stated that since the US has withdrawn from Afghanistan and the government has collapsed, there has been a debate about the hasty US withdrawal. President Biden has defended the US decision to

withdraw and rejected all the related criticism. He further said that there have been attempts to scapegoat and malign Pakistan in this regard. Ambassador Chaudhry was of the view that there are a couple of things that the US will have to address, which include, how far it holds itself responsible as it cannot absolve itself. The US has not achieved the entirety of its objective of creating a liberal democracy. He also said that if the situation deteriorates and non-state entities take over, in that case the US objective will be totally finished, therefore the US must honor its commitment. He also said that it is for the US to engage, incentivize and provide humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people.

Dr. Elizabeth Threlkeld, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center in her remarks stated that there are multiple views about the situation, however, for twenty long years; the US was not appreciated for the role it was playing. She further said that it is important to note that there is a silver lining as the US interests are largely aligned with regional powers, although there may be differences in how they must be achieved. She said the world community wants a middle ground for engagement as it is difficult to have carrots and sticks both. Moreover, she said that the US has three key interests, which are mainly, preventing terrorist attacks, stability in Afghanistan and the prevention of negative fallout in case the situation worsens; like refugee influx. And also the US desires preventing a return to the 1990s era. She was of the view that US must ensure that the Taliban deliver, however, the Taliban seem to be resorting to their old ways.

Dr. Anatol Lieven a Senior Research Fellow on Russia and Europe at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, while expressing his views said that movements of Afghan resistance have really proved true while looking at the situation in Afghanistan. He said that the middle way to engage with the Taliban is that money and recognition both have to be offered. He further said that there are different levels of recognition and the US needs to work through the region, which is not about moral commitment but self interest as the threat of terrorism and civil war also loom in the present situation. He said that the Taliban will need a number of modern technocrats as well as create a cultural space. Moreover, he said that the Taliban appear to have learned the lessons of 9/11 and there is a significant chance of achieving goals of the international community pertaining to the Taliban if they work together with the international community.

Mr. Faiz Zaland, Professor in Kabul University in his remarks said that the US withdrawal was hasty and achievement regarding democratizing Afghanistan was not institutionalized. US invested in people instead of institutions in its attempt of democratizing Afghanistan. He said that if US does not have any, it must create leverages over Taliban and it can be done by engaging with the group. He also said that Sanctions on Taliban mean sanction on the women and children of Afghanistan. He further said that stability will be the key to success in Afghanistan and also stability in the region. He was of the view that the withdrawal was not hasty, but instead the decision made by President Ashraf Ghani was flawed as he was unable to evaluate the performance of his own government regarding the peace process.

Mr. Tameem Bahiss, Analyst specializing Afghan and Pakistani affairs while expressing his views said that engaging with Taliban and keeping Doha agreement in place will have value in keeping Taliban accountable. He said that one core interest of the US is ensuring that its influence in the region does not die with withdrawal from Afghanistan. The US's current approach of imposing sanctions is counter-productive. The better option is to clearly communicate with the Taliban regarding its realistic demands. All the steps of the US regarding Afghanistan must be clear and realistic. The Taliban have a clear ideological red line which the US must know that Taliban are not willing to compromise. He also said that in order to keep the Taliban accountable, the US must continue engagement which will also help in engaging a broader alliance. He also said that the world has no option but to accept the Taliban and engage with them.

Mr. Shehzad Qazi, a public opinion researcher specializing in crisis and transitional countries based in the United States, while expressing his views stated that the US does not have a fully developed Afghanistan policy right now. He said that the administration is focused on immediate goals such as safe passage of US citizens who were left behind, providing limited amounts of humanitarian assistance, and of course monitoring ISIS-K as it looks to formulate its so-called "over the horizon" counter terror policy. He further said that with the myriad domestic challenges that the administration is trying to overcome, including stabilizing the economy and passing major economic legislation this year, the short term outlook for Afghanistan includes a lot of uncertainty via US interests and actions. Events more than a fully formulated policy will dictate US next steps there he said.

An interactive question and answer session followed the discussion. The questions revolved around the overall analysis of the situation as well as engagement with the Taliban. In response to a question about the willingness of the US to engage with Taliban despite many of its members on the sanction list, Miss Elizabeth Threlkeld said that the US treasury department has made certain exemptions for organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to the group as an effort to get ahead of an imminent humanitarian disaster that can be faced in Afghanistan. She was of the view that making such exemptions will weaken the stick portion of the leverage debate as it becomes more challenging to use money to try and hold Taliban externally. Furthermore, she said that being the de facto ruler of Afghanistan Taliban are able to influence the area where the foreign assistance goes as they are able to draw legitimacy from it to a certain extent. Therefore, she said the Taliban will benefit from the assistance despite attempts to insulate from them. Responding to the US engagement with Taliban, Professor Anatol Lieven said that the US would be much more cautious about aid to Afghanistan but it would not obstruct others from helping Afghanistan as long as their actions do not conflict with the American interests.

When asked about the lessons learnt by the US, he said that the Congress should properly interrogate the American generals about the misinformation given to the Congress over the years as repeatedly revealed by SIGAR. When asked whether Taliban can proved to be trustworthy partners or not, Mr. Tameem Bahiss said that the world can trust Taliban as it does not have any other option. At the moment, the Taliban are in power and running the country, and they have already been trusted by the US in regards to the counterterrorism obligations which were in the Doha agreement.

Talking further about the evolution of the Taliban, Mr. Bahiss was of the view that the group has evolved but there are some issues that cannot really go the way the world wants them to. He said, for the last twenty years Taliban have been propagating their Emirate against the Afghan elites. Therefore, the world cannot expect the Taliban to come up with an inclusive government and include those people whom it has been fighting for years. Moreover, the group is also afraid of facing the backlash from inside. He further said that the group is evolving step by step as they are not acting like the way they did in the 1990s. Similarly, the announcement of the second interim cabinet was more inclusive rather than the first one he stated.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors ISSI also participated in the discussion and while expressing his opinion stated that one thing is certain that the world has come full circle and Taliban are back in power in Kabul. He said the question arises that is the US is going through the last phases of its American century which is the very large question. Moreover, he said that one thing that everyone agrees on is that the credibility, reputation and reliability of the US have been severely dented.