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## *Report – Panel Discussion*

# “Conversations on the Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: The Concluding Session”

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) held a Public Talk to conclude the series of conversations on “The Evolving Situation in Afghanistan” which was initiated in June 2021. The series included perspectives from Pakistan, Qatar, Middle East, US, Europe, China, Uzbekistan, Russia, Iran and Turkey.

Senator Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar was Chief Guest at the occasion, Ambassador Ayaz Wazir was the Keynote speaker and other distinguished speakers included: Ambassador Aziz Ahmad Khan, former Ambassador of Pakistan to Afghanistan, Dr. Murat Aslan, SETA Security Researcher and Faculty Member of Hasan Kalyoncu University (Turkey), Dr. Marvin Weinbaum, Director, Afghanistan and Pakistan Studies, Middle East Institute, Mr. Hashim Pashtun, Advisor for Research Analysis to the Kabul Institute for Peace and Ambassador Khalid Mahmood Chairman BOG, ISSI. Speakers from the various conversation series also took part both physically and virtually.

During her opening remarks, Ms Amina Khan, Director CAMEA stated that CAMEA at ISSI has been holding a series of conversations on the evolving situation in Afghanistan, since June 2021, where the evolving situation in Afghanistan along with the role of important stakeholders has been discussed at length. The series included perspectives from Pakistan, US, China, Russia, Iran, Qatar, Iran, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Middle East and Europe. While discussing the key takeaways from the series, she said that consensus for deeper and meaningful engagement with the Taliban is necessary, which does not necessarily mean recognition but is pertinent, to prevent the imminent humanitarian crises.

Pakistan, being the immediate neighbor, will remain a pivotal player in Afghanistan and has an important role to play, whose policy now appears to be guided by a regional approach. Consensus, pertaining to the unfreezing of Afghanistan’s assets, and for the sanctions regime need to be reconsidered. Moreover, international donor agencies will have to play a more significant role in terms of delivering aid to the country.

During a recorded message, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, commended CAMEA for a diligent effort to understand the perspectives of different stakeholders for peace and stability in Afghanistan. He said that the conversations included perspectives from the United States, Europe, Central Asia Republics, Qatar, Turkey, Iran and perspectives from

Pakistan as well. He said that every stakeholder has to play its part to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan and also highlighted that the Taliban would have to honour their commitments and fulfill the demands of the international community. Moreover, regional countries would have to step forward to stabilize the situation. The United States should remain engaged with the Taliban to find ways for peace and stability in Afghanistan. He stressed that every stakeholder is aware of the fact that instability in Afghanistan will result in chaos and civil war in the country. It is important to stay engaged with Taliban and accept that they are a political reality in Afghanistan he stated.

Senator Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar said that Pakistan has to be more pragmatic rather than being apologetic due to its relations with the Taliban. He stated that at this stage the challenge is to tackle the situation in Afghanistan which has emerged after the irresponsible withdrawal of the US from the country. Afghanistan is a shared responsibility. Individual Afghans should not suffer. He said that everyone should understand that a stable Afghanistan is in the interest of everyone, not only Pakistan. He highlighted that if the situation in Afghanistan escalates, there will be a huge refugee influx and economic migrants will be a real point of concern for everyone including Pakistan, Iran and Europe as well. He suggested that we should start from the acceptable regime in Afghanistan if not the recognised one because we have to at least start from somewhere. Common Afghan people should not be punished and they must be given their basic rights. Peace in Afghanistan is necessary to maintain the peace in the region because instability in Afghanistan shall also spill over elsewhere.

He pointed out that there are people who like and those who dislike the current arrangement and system in Afghanistan, but from what can be seen, there is no other system that can replace the current one. He further stated that there is a politics of existence in Afghanistan and Pakistan should initiate the regional process for the recognition of this regime and it is getting late because individual Afghans are suffering. At this stage we need to have an honest conversation rather than a clever conversation, he said.

Ambassador Ayaz Wazir in his remarks said that what Afghanistan needs is permanent peace and stability, not any proposals or advice. The main responsibility, he said, goes to the Taliban who have taken over the entire country. He further remarked that in the 1990s, certain regions

were out of the Taliban's jurisdiction but this time they have the entire country under them. He explained that the internal problem is that the Afghan nation is divided into two groups as earlier; one group takes over and the other fights in resistance. He further remarked that this is the opportunity for the Taliban to establish law and order in Afghanistan. He said that the Taliban have evolved and the situation is quite different this time and are not the same group that we saw earlier so the situation is not as bad, females are working but maybe not doing what the West wants them to.

Regarding the inclusive government, the Taliban claim they are inclusive but according to the West, they are still lacking. He said that the Taliban need to integrate the entire nation like it was around 40 years ago and have to be more approachable and accommodating to restore the confidence of the people who are escaping or not willing to engage with the Taliban. He also said that no government or system of government anywhere in the world can accommodate all oppositions although the Taliban can surely make progress in terms of inclusiveness. He concluded by saying that if we fail to help the Taliban to get rid of the problems in Afghanistan, the organisations like Daesh will spread and harbor terrorism throughout the region. So, whether we like it or not, we have to engage. Hence, we need to seriously consider recognizing the Taliban government, he said.

Ambassador Aziz Ahmad Khan said that the Taliban are here to stay so we should acknowledge this fact and proceed accordingly. He stated that since he had interacted with the Taliban in the 90s, he feels that there is a change in the behaviour of the Taliban and has evolved. He said that previously their behaviour towards women was different but now they are allowing them to go to school and work. However, at the same time including women in administrative positions will be difficult but women who were working previously have been asked to retain positions.

He went on to say that according to the Taliban, inclusive means ethnically inclusive, not absorbing opposition. He mentioned that the Hazaras have accepted the Taliban since they know that the Taliban will accommodate them. To make the Taliban fulfill their commitment, the international community needs to interact with them because the Taliban will not accept any kind of coercion. According to him, less noise will make the Taliban easier to deal with. He went on to say that we should all let the Taliban move slowly, stay engaged to see their progress and tune

our policies accordingly. He concluded by saying that at present, there is a serious food crisis and the people of Afghanistan are going to suffer if not provided with timely aid.

Dr. Marvin Weinbaum said that the latest developments in Afghanistan have raised concerns for the regional as well as the international community. He said that Afghanistan is drawing attention due to the massive numbers of refugees which have already crossed six hundred thousand. The numbers trying to escape Afghanistan are gaining momentum and the pressure on the Pakistan border is increasing, he said. He further said that the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan can turn into a tragedy and 90% of the Afghan population will be in poverty. He remarked that the humanitarian assistance might come too little and too late and that shall be doom for regional trade. Moreover, this carries implications for the global community as well. He mentioned that the destabilisation of Afghanistan will allow terrorist groups to use Afghan soil for terrorism.

He said that it is a reality that the Taliban have never been pragmatic and have never shown willingness to engage and are strictly ideological which is often ignored. Dr. Marvin further said that Afghanistan is in the least integrated economic region of the world. Every neighbor of Afghanistan is concerned that the Afghan interest might go against theirs and in this regard, he said, Pakistan has greater stakes in Afghanistan as compared to any other country in the region. What is happening in Afghanistan should stay there and no country wants the problems from Afghanistan pouring into their state, he concluded.

Dr. Murat Aslan said that Afghanistan has become a key concern in the past three months. He said that there are two approaches towards Afghanistan; one is related to the concerns of the international community and the other is towards the internal concerns. He said that most countries in the west view the Taliban as a terrorist so they need to change their approach towards the Taliban. He said that Afghanistan is important for the peace and stability of the entire region but mainly for Pakistan. While talking about the refugees he said that immigration from Afghanistan is currently manageable.

The West wants the Taliban to be tolerant. While talking about the internal concerns he said that the internal problems are much more challenging. He further mentioned how there is no human capital in Afghanistan as most of them are either hidden or have escaped. There are some groups,

he said, who might reorganize themselves and later start a resistance against Afghanistan. The Taliban are short of capability and money and there is a need for economic development. He concluded by saying that there is an inconsistency regarding expectations of the international community and the ground realities of the Taliban.

Mr. Hashim Pashtun said that Afghanistan is on the verge of one of the biggest humanitarian crises and it has to be averted as soon as possible. Additionally, the regional and global powers are expecting the current Taliban Government to respect social justice, inclusivity and to make sure that the Afghan land is not used by any terrorist group against any foreign country. He stressed that to resolve these issues and reach a mutual consensus, such conversations are crucial. He went on to say that we have managed to have some great takeaways from these dialogues and this can help in creating an environment of mutual agreement of the key stakeholders towards a greater goal of peace and prosperity.

The talk was followed by a discussion in which speakers from the various conversation series also took part.

Mr. Wang Shida, Deputy Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) said that number of the events are taking place in Afghanistan and it is the first time in the past twenty years that a central government in Afghanistan has been established without any foreign interference. He also mentioned that this time the Kabul regime has strong influence and control over the ruler areas. While talking about the recognition of the regime in Kabul he said that countries are adopting the policy of wait and see but Pakistan has adopted very positive policies and it is not asking for too much and not giving too much. He stressed that at this stage engagement with the Taliban is necessary. About future engagement with the Taliban, he mentioned four important points- humanitarian assistance, unfreezing of assets by the United States, Taliban should make moderate policies because it will help create a favourable environment for the Taliban regime to develop the economy and lastly counter-terrorism assurances must be ensured.

Ahmad Shah Durrani, author of 'An Outside the Box Look at Afghanistan: New Ideas for Lasting Peace and Stability' during the discussion said that we have to be cognizant of the fact that when a political position is made there are several elements that we should look at which

are the result, intention and side effects of this position. When we look at the current situation, the world cannot impose its conditions on the Afghan government and the Afghan people. Because traditionally whenever there are sanctions and pressures on the government the ordinary people suffer. So if a humanitarian crisis erupts more than 24 million people in Afghanistan will suffer. He said that the US should be mindful of the fact because if Afghans are not provided with assistance at the right time Afghanistan will become a safe heaven for terrorist organizations.

Ambassador Omar Samad, Non-resident Senior Fellow Atlantic Council stated that Afghanistan is in a transition period. There are many lessons to be learned from the past and there are several opportunities for peace, stability and political and social cohesion. He agreed with other speakers that averting the humanitarian crisis is a key priority and this should not be delayed. He highlighted that since the Taliban are in power now they should honour their commitments and they need to represent the Afghan society in a better way in which all the Afghan factions are included.

Dr. Akram Umarov, Senior Research Fellow – The University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Tashkent the Taliban need to demonstrate more unity and consolidation amongst themselves. Talking about the issue of recognition of the Taliban he said that not only international but internal recognition of the Taliban is also necessary because it will help the international community to understand that they are real representatives of Afghan society. He stressed that at this stage prime focus of the Taliban should be on garnering support from the internal community and international community.

Mr. Hashmat Moslih , an independent political analyst with a special focus on Afghanistan was of the view that the international community is using assets and sanctions as leverage against the Taliban although Afghanistan was facing a humanitarian crisis pre-Taliban takeover but now the situation is getting worst. He highlighted that the organisations like ISKP are emerging and it will be a real test for the Taliban regime.

Mr. Tameem Bahiss was of the view that several Afghans have left the country after the Taliban takeover resulting in brain drain from Afghanistan which is a major concern and creating capacity issues. He believes that Political and economic assurances are required to retain people

who are leaving Afghanistan. Moreover, the international community is very reluctant to cooperate with the Taliban.

Mr. Arash Yaqin, National Security Analyst with a focus on South and Central Asia was of the view that swift takeover by the Taliban has surprised everyone. He said that it is too early to expect from the Taliban that they deliver on their commitments because the Taliban have evolved from what they were previously, now they are adopting new ways to run the country and they are more open towards the world and it is an opportunity for both Taliban and the international community to engage.