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## *Report – In-House Meeting*

### **Dr Barnett R. Rubin**

Senior Fellow at Center on International Cooperation, Non-Resident Fellow at Quincy Institute and a leading expert on Afghanistan and South Asia

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*Rapporteur: Arhama Siddiqa*

*Edited by: Amina Khan*

The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) had an In-House meeting with Dr Barnett R. Rubin, Senior Fellow at Center on International Cooperation, Non-Resident Fellow at Quincy Institute and a leading expert on Afghanistan and South Asia.

The distinguished guests included: Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI; Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG ISSI; Ms Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, Ambassador Tariq Azizuddin; Ambassador Masood Khalid; Lt. Gen. Sabahat; Mr Hassan Khan; Ambassador Ayaz Wazir; Ambassador Aziz Ahmad Khan; Admiral Tahir; Mr Taimur Shamil; Mr Oves Anwar and Mr Hashim Pashtoon.

The topic on the agenda was the evolving situation in Afghanistan.

In his welcome remarks, Ambassador Chaudhry said that the most burning topic for the region is Afghanistan and there is a feeling that the new political reality in Afghanistan is not being accepted by the world. The humanitarian situation is dire and there is an economic collapse happening as well, he said.

He said that the Sanctions on Taliban go back to 1999 and were separated from the sanctions on Al Qaida and were based primarily on terrorism, drug trafficking and destabilization of Afghanistan. However, now these sanctions are a part of the US law. So, there are legal sides to dealing with such entities due to the sanctions imposed on them. He said that sanctions are enacted on the target and they are told the conditions for the removal of sanctions.

According to him, the sanctions on Taliban are not just a legal but a political matter in Washington and the Taliban are hated and feared in US and Europe. As a matter of fact, he said, President Joe Biden cannot bear more pressure so there's no talk about lifting Sanctions although there has been an agreement, and the Taliban have agreed not to let the soil of Afghanistan get used against any other state. The US has agreed to making diplomatic efforts in order to lift the sanctions and the agreement also talked about the establishment of an Islamic state after the Doha agreement, he said.

He further remarked that the United States has not made any diplomatic efforts to help lift the sanctions on Afghanistan because of the timing. The police force and army evaporated even

before the Taliban takeover and although what the Taliban agreed to regarding Al Qaida in the Doha agreement was good enough to make the US sign the agreement, it does not meet the conditions for sanctions.

According to him, it has been established that Al Qaida and Taliban have helped each other and they refuse to break tied and it is simply not possible for the government of the United States to have good relations with any entity involved in the 9/11 attacks even if there is no current threat. The Taliban have never been willing to openly cut ties off with Al Qaida for three major reasons, he said, firstly, there is a sense of Islamic solidarity between the two and secondly, Al Qaida provided assistance to the Taliban which helped them in their fight against the United States in Afghanistan. Finally, both the Taliban and Al Qaida are part of the larger Jihadi international community.

Dr Barnett remarked that anything involving sanctions can take up to months and even years. Afghanistan, he said, does not just need humanitarian assistance, it needs a functioning economy, a working government and foreign relations. There are some efforts being made by the UNDP and other organizations in order to work towards the solution of these issues, he said.

The Afghans are famous for their coping mechanisms and their sources of income which they will use in case assistance is not provided, he warned. In addition, he said, the Taliban are collecting more revenue than previous governments so the pressure is building for something to happen. Political talks to get the economy working on a small scale are starting and it is expected that Europe will open up a political office in Kabul. The United States may also do so but there are limitations when it comes to recognition of the Taliban government, he said.

Ambassador Aizaz said that there is certainly no appetite to aid the Taliban. However, people do want to help avert the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. In response, Mr. Barnett said that it is important to note the facts that there is no alternative Government to the Taliban and the only resistance against them is Daesh which the Taliban are dealing with. There is no anti-Americanism among the Taliban, according to him and the relations of Afghanistan with Pakistan regarding the Durand Line are changing. The people of Afghanistan were not anti-American until the sanctions were imposed, he said.

Answering a question regarding the Jihadi elements among Taliban, the Taliban are getting donations from the Persian Gulf and others, he said. The older generation of the Taliban is not flexible and it is more cultural than religious. He remarked that there is no reason for the US to consider Al Qaida as a security threat in Afghanistan and they are not following the Bin Laden strategy anymore. He further said that the Taliban have had a very successful regional success and diplomacy and that the Taliban's sole current objective is to make themselves secure in Afghanistan.

Regarding Pakistan's role, he said that US is not happy about CPEC and Pakistan's relationship with China. He talked about United States' Build Back Better for the World program which China does not see as competitive.

Regarding the problem of drug trafficking, he said that the people of Afghanistan have to be able to financially sustain themselves in order to tackle this issue, which is currently not the situation. He mentioned that a few groups from amongst the Taliban were heavily investing in trafficking drugs to Iran. Later, he discussed the issue further along and its possible solutions.

Answering a question regarding a possible Cold War between China and United States, he claimed that it is indeed a real danger and that neither side's leadership wants to get involved in such a situation. According to him, the Taiwan issue could serve as a driving factor in this scenario but the major catalyst in the US-China rift is the South China sea issue. Moreover, trade is also complicated as China is becoming stronger, he remarked. He further said that Quad is not a good idea as it is creating blocs. Although China is asserting its global presence, the escalation of the situation is almost under control.

He underlined that climate change and the Afghanistan issue are two areas where China and United States can and should cooperate. He mentioned COP 26 where the two countries cooperated on the climate issue.