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Report – Round Table

“Afghan Situation and the Regional Plans for Peace-Building”

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Introduction

Following the withdrawal of US and NATO Forces, collapse of Ashraf Ghani's Government and the Taliban coming into Power with the emergence of new terror elements such as ISIS-K and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. In fact, terrorism in Pakistan, which has been on a downward trend, is on the rise again, and according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, by the end of September 2021, 67 terrorist attacks in Pakistan had killed 329 people, more than the total number of victims of terrorism in 2020, especially in August and September. There is a sharp increase in terrorism along the Afghan border. The geopolitical importance of Afghanistan has become central to the regional and international stakeholders' debates on the future of intra-Afghan, regional and international peace and stability paradigms.

Concerns of current pertinence such as the deteriorating humanitarian and economic crises within Afghanistan which could lead to a visible influx of refugees and rise in terrorism incidents within the region and re-emergence of illicit narcotics outflows, harshening of border control policies by Afghanistan's neighbours and the decentralized border management policies of the Taliban authorities, lack of inclusivity within the Taliban government and the violation of women and human rights present as some of the key challenges for peace-building.

It is in this context that this seminar was organised in collaboration with the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS)

Director's Note Following the withdrawal of the United States-led international forces from Afghanistan, and the sudden collapse of Ashraf Ghani's Government in August 2021, which propelled Taliban to power. With this development, new dynamics have emerged not only inside Afghanistan but across the region also.

Peace and security in Afghanistan and the region are at crossroads. At the same time, the efforts for peace-building and provision of much-needed humanitarian and emergency relief must be expedited. These efforts will play a crucial role in preventing fusion of terrorist groups and deny space to trans-national terror organizations like ISIS-KP in Afghanistan.

Current deteriorating humanitarian situation and deepening economic crises in Afghanistan could lead to a visible influx of refugees, rise in terrorism incidents within the region, re-emergence of illicit narcotics outflows, and tightening of border control policies by Afghanistan's neighbours.

These scenarios get complicated with the emergence new challenges such as ensuring inclusivity within the Taliban government and the respect of wider human rights for peace-building.

It is in this backdrop that this policy dialogue titled "Afghan Situation and the Regional Plans for Peace Building" was co-organized by China-Pakistan Study Centre (CPSC) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), Embassy of Republic of Korea, and Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS).

The inaugural session of the Dialogue comprised of esteemed speakers:

DG ISSI, Amb. Aizaz Ahmd Chaudhry served as a member of the Foreign Service of Pakistan for 37 years, rising to the rank of the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan for over three years;

Ambassador of Republic of South Korea, H.E. Suh SangPyo, who served in various positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Korea, including Director, Multilateral Economic Organizations Division, Dean of Education and Training, Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA), and Director, Economic Organization Division, International Economic Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT); and President IFANS, Amb. Youngju OH, who is a seasoned Korean diplomat and holds extensive experience in multilateral intuitions like the United Nations (UN).

The other panellists included Ambassador Zahid Nasrullah, DG Foreign Service Academy Pakistan,; Mr. Lee Kyung-Chul, South Korea's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan,; Ms. Amina Khan, Dir. CAMEA-ISSI; Dr.Jang Ji-Hyang Senior Fellow at The Asan Institute for Policy Studies Korea,; and Ms. Noriko Yoshida, UNHCR Representative.

The discussion mainly focused on deteriorating humanitarian and economic crises emerging from Afghanistan. The regional implications and solutions for this precarious situation were also discussed.

Plenary Session

Opening Remarks

Amb. Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry DG ISSI, delivered opening remarks. He began by saying that the peace and stability in the region hinges upon the direction of peace and stability in Afghanistan. He was of the view that Korea and Pakistan have much in common since both are interested in economic growth while, at the same time, Islamabad has a great deal to learn from success stories of Seoul. He touched upon the importance of understanding the dynamics of Afghanistan's evolving situation and its implications on the region.

He emphasised that humanitarian and economic crises must be dealt with in an-all-comprehensive manner. Without overcoming these two challenges, peace in Afghanistan would always be a distant dream said DG ISSI.

Whether international community wishes Taliban to deliver their promises depends on the intent of the international stakeholders. He suggested that the international community keep the channels of communication open with Taliban for a positive and fruitful results in Afghanistan.

Welcome Remarks

H.E. Suh SangPyo, Ambassador of Republic of South Korea, gave his welcome remarks. He appreciated the efforts of the embassy, IFANS, and ISSI in organizing such a timely event. He said that given the uncertain dynamics of peace in Afghanistan, the regional situation could have larger ramifications.

He also lauded the role of Pakistan government in facilitating the new Afghan government. Islamabad also played a proactive role in facilitating regional dialogue on Afghan peace and reconciliation process.

He particularly thanked the Pakistani government in successfully evacuating the Korean citizens from Afghanistan.

He stressed that the current humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is of grave concern to the world. This could lead to a possible resurgence of the terrorist outlets. The United Nations

Secretary General also expressed his concern in the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. International society including Korea has extended humanitarian assistance to Kabul.

Congratulatory Remarks

Amb. OH thanked the ISSI, Korean Embassy and IFANs for arranging such a timely event for an exchange of views on the developing situation in Afghanistan. She termed it a topic of mutual interest for both the institutes.

She underscored that Afghanistan has been a matter of global concern. The severe economic crises, looming refugee crisis, the need for humanitarian assistance make the concern grow ever more. Tackling the pressing humanitarian crises can never be more emphasised.

Pakistan is playing a positive role in the developing situation and it will continue to do so given its geographic proximity.

She suggested to engage in more events like this for other areas of mutual concerns for IFANS and ISSI.

Theme I: Afghan Situation and Regional Plans for Peace Building

First speaker of this session was Amb. Zahid Nassrullah, DG FSA. He thanked all the organizers for inviting him to the dialogue. Recalling his diplomatic assignments in Seoul and Afghanistan, he stated that the topic of the roundtable discussion is truly a matter of extreme importance. However, he said, concerted and sincere efforts are needed to bring a long-lasting peace in the region and Afghanistan in particular.

Stressing upon Pakistan's decades-long efforts in Afghan peace and reconciliation process, he was of the view that peace in Pakistan is linked with peace in Afghanistan. Islamabad shares border with Kabul. It hosts a large number of Afghan refugees. It is Kabul's major trading partner. It has an open negotiating forum with Afghan regime i.e., APAS. Instability in Afghanistan, Human trafficking, and narcotics trade have severe implications for Pakistan. Therefore, peace in Pakistan is inextricably linked with peace in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has long been warning all the regional stakeholders of the inability of the previous Afghan government. Post-US withdrawal, the sudden and unpredictable fall of Ashraf Ghani Government proved Islamabad's point.

Pakistan maintains that continuous engagement and practical efforts are needed to carry the peace mission forward. Otherwise, the results could be disastrous. On the other side, the new interim Afghan government also needs to install moderate elements in order to ensure peace and stability.

On the topic of bringing ethno-political inclusivity in the government, this will be a task that would take time. This was a challenge for the previous government, so it is for the new one. Given the ethnic diversity and the damages that the decades of war inflicted upon Kabul, this challenge stands as a natural hurdle.

To infuse liquidity in the financial system is a good development. Netherlands and other countries are working with UNAMA even without the help of the Kabul government.

However, new innovative solution must be put in place specially to avert a human catastrophe in Afghanistan.

Mr. Chul was the second speaker of this session. He highlighted the Korean efforts in the Afghan peace and reconciliation process but he categorically stated that the individual Afghan efforts in bringing peace cannot be substituted with the Korean assistance and help. Seoul's efforts were mainly focused on countering efforts. The US withdrawal has created a security vacuum in the country, which is being filled by the new security arrangements among regional and international stakeholders. There is consensus on bringing an inclusive government in Afghanistan.

It is inspiring to see the key stakeholders such as Pakistan, US, Russia, and China in Troika. The four countries conveyed great messages to the Afghan government and the world at large.

Arms embargo and other sanctions measures are a big impediment in the Afghan government functioning normally. At the other side, the Taliban must ensure the world that they have changed. Korea has provided intangible assistance incusing hospitals and training centres in Afghanistan for the locals. Seoul is also working with international humanitarian assistance

organization in providing relief to the Afghans. In this bigger context, Korea is looking forward to work with Pakistan.

Ms. Amina Khan was the next speaker in this session, she said that with every passing day Afghanistan is inching closer to humanitarian crises and its economy is moving in a downward spiral. The humanitarian aid promised by the regional countries is certainly not enough to sustain the Afghan population. International community is going to engage the Taliban through Doha whereas, regional countries have been engaging directly with the Taliban. Therefore, at this point the group may not be directly looking for recognition but rather engagement and engagement does mean de facto recognition. Domestically, the group is struggling to consolidate the power, stabilising Afghan institutions such as the bureaucracy, the army, the police etc. As the Taliban inherited weak institutions and fragile economy. International reports highlight that more than 40% of Afghan GDP was always dependent on international aid prior to August 15. 60% of Afghan population is at the brink of food emergency.

Financial sanctions on Afghanistan are seen as a major cause which paralyzes Afghan economy. In such circumstances it is pivotal for the international community to move away from politics and push toward a collective effort to ensure that the Afghan state does not collapse. Now, if the Taliban are not able to consolidate its power and position, there is fear that transnational terrorist outfits could take advantage of the situation. The biggest threat to Afghanistan is domestic constraints such as economy, humanitarian crisis and emergence of transnational terrorist elements on Afghan soil. In this regard, engagement is primary to tackle all these challenges collectively and work toward stabilizing Afghanistan. Afghanistan's collapsing economy is heightening the risk of extremism. Washington has greater responsibility to provide much needed assistance to avoid state collapse. Afghanistan should be viewed as an international issue and there is a need for realization of shared responsibility to deal with the Afghan issue.

Pakistan's stance on Afghanistan is clear that there can be no solution to the Afghan issue unless there is a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. Since the Taliban took over, Pakistan's policy toward the group has been guided by a regional approach. This entails an inclusive set up, respect for human rights especially rights of women and ensuring the Afghan soil is not used against any other state. With the previous regime, bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan had

been remained limited and always viewed through security lens. Hope are high that the bilateral relations can be broader with the new regime in Kabul to other aspects which includes trade and border management and sigh strategic partnership agreement.

Dr. Jang Ji-Hyang, in her remarks said that the tipping point that led to the collapse of Afghan government was wide spread of corruption and lack of transparency which nourished dissatisfaction among Afghan population. The peace negotiations led by the US with the Taliban where Ashraf Ghani regime was excluded had down to bottom his government's moral. Today, witnessing instability in Afghanistan is mainly due to the Taliban leadership inability to consolidate power and resolve their internal divisions. The Taliban leaders is losing its control under the pressure of its lower ranks who are more inclined toward militancy and radicalization. Leadership of the Taliban including the deputy prime minister, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, whom Pakistan, China, Turkey, Russia and Iran mentioned a target of support is now losing his control of the organization.

Following the fall of Kabul, Al-Qaeda and IS-K took safe haven in Afghanistan. These extremist Jihadist groups are even competing among each other. Jihadist groups are reviving in Afghanistan which is increasing the instability inside and outside Afghanistan. Iraq and Syria became strong hold of IS in 2014 to 2017. Now, ISIS is shifting toward Afghanistan to jump over the opportunity of security vacuum emerged after the withdrawal of the foreign forces. If IS-k get strong hold in Afghanistan, it would not pose threat only to the Afghan people but could become a source of instability for the whole region.

Greater responsibility lies on Afghan Taliban to walk with the talk and fulfil their commitments of inclusive government, respect for human rights and disconnected themselves from terrorist elements. S. Korea is a democratic country and we need to take care of our domestic audience in order to take any decision while dealing with the Taliban regime.

Theme II: Addressing the Humanitarian Crises in Afghanistan

Ms. Yoshida was the speaker of the second session. She talked about humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and its cross-border movement on Afghan population. She maintained that Afghan crises have severe implications for the neighbouring countries especially Pakistan.

In this regard, Pakistan's efforts on the political, diplomatic, and humanitarian fronts are commendable and need to be supported. Islamabad is hosting a large number of refugees for many years. It has adopted a very positive and inclusive approach towards Afghan refugees as they have access to health facilities and even allowed them to open bank accounts. We welcome the recent opening up of Torkhum and Chaman border for the Afghans.

Stability in Afghanistan will have long-term positive implications especially for the people of Afghanistan. Talking about the humanitarian assistance reaching to Afghanistan, she said that the UNHCR is working hard with the Afghan government and other international organizations to provide relief to the conflict-stricken people.

Afghanistan is experiencing a humanitarian and displacement crisis. Of the 665,000 Afghans who have been newly displaced inside the country in 2021, 80% of whom are women and children. Families speak of having had to flee at a moment's notice, even when faced with the risk of improvised explosive devices and attacks by armed groups as they fled. This year has seen the highest number of conflict-related casualties on record.

Afghans already constitute one of the world's largest refugee populations worldwide. Some three-quarters of Afghan refugees are hosted in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, with more than 2.2 million registered in the two countries. Another 3 million people were already displaced inside the country before new fighting broke out this year.

Afghanistan's children are growing up amid this crisis. Some 65 per cent of the Afghan people – in and outside of Afghanistan – are children and youth, anxious about their future in the face of insecurity and economic challenges.

The resilience of Afghan families is being stretched to breaking point. The situation in Afghanistan was already complex, and failure to resolve the current instability will lead to new displacement.

Together with partners, UNHCR is committed to staying and delivering amidst the deteriorating situation and growing displacement, as long as we have access to populations in need. We have activated our emergency response to protect the most vulnerable and assist newly displaced

Afghans with life-saving shelter, food, water, and core relief items, both within Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries.

We have continued to carry out protection activities, including border monitoring, case management and psychosocial support. UNHCR has also continued its regular community programming in Afghanistan, including the building of schools and other key infrastructure providing healthcare, water and energy. These have reached more than 1.3 million people this year.

She insisted upon the need to continuously support the Afghan people in these trying times.

She concluded her talk by praising Pakistan's role in hosting Afghan refugees and overall facilitating the peace and reconciliation process.

Her remarks were followed by a brief interactive Q&A session which was moderated by Dir. CPSC Dr. Talat Shabbir.