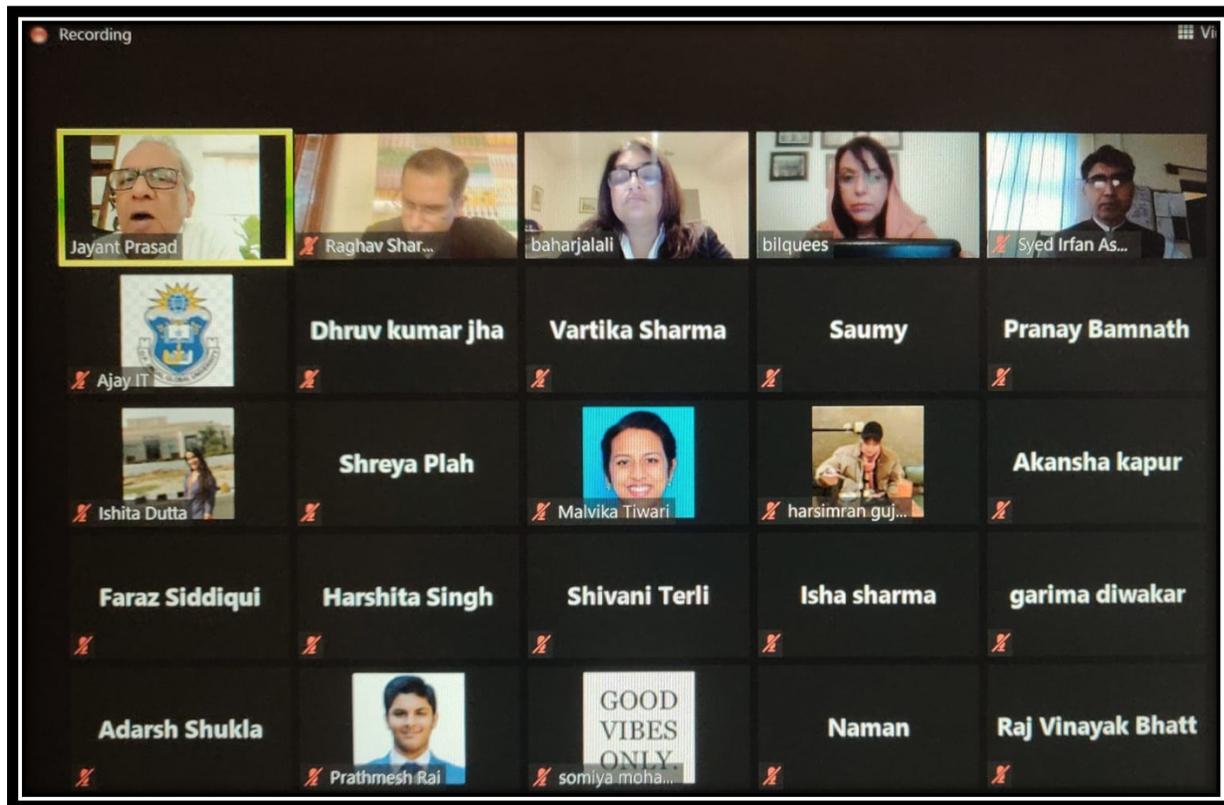


AFGHANISTAN FROM BONN TO DOHA: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD?

27th August 2021

-Report by Saloni Mishra and Zain Lookmanji



Welcome Remarks

Bilquees Daud, *Lecturer at the Jindal School of International Affairs*, introduced the panelists from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India to reflect on the journey from Bonn to Doha. She begins by contextualizing the tragic times in which Afghanistan is operating. She states how the US government and its allies have given up on their moral principles and left Afghanistan. This acute disregard will undoubtedly pose severe repercussions around the globe.

She rightly asserts the significance of bringing diverse voices from India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan while foregrounding the question of “What challenges are ahead?”

Such heterogeneous narratives highlight the decolonized narratives surrounding the current happenings and aid us in comprehending the situation more comprehensively. In late 2001 as the last vestiges of the Taliban's emirate were vanquished. Many believed that Afghanistan was turning a

corner. However, this euphoria did not last long, and by 2004-05, the Taliban had made a comeback.

The Doha deal initiated by the Trump administration only added greater political heft to the Taliban, offering very little in return to the US and undermining the Afghan government. Tardy implementation of what was an agreement by the Biden administration in total disregard of existing realities on the ground contributed significantly to the unraveling of the Afghan Republic and the unfolding of human tragedy yet again in Afghanistan. As the Taliban now take charge of the country, this seminar discussion brings together voices from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to try and understand what factors brought Afghanistan to the current point and the key challenges that lie ahead for the country and the region. How do Afghans see and respond to this unfolding human tragedy? Moreover, what are some of the ways to respond to the emerging challenges?

The Centre for Afghanistan Studies (CAS) organized a virtual panel discussion on the 27th of August 2021 with eminent panelists from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India to discuss the ongoing situation in Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover and its potential implications on international relations and the South Asian region. This report encapsulates some of the key points put forth by the speakers.

Remarks by Moderator

Professor Raghav Sharma, *Associate professor and Director of the Centre for Afghanistan Studies*, moderated and further accelerated the session. He also substantiated how the US and its allies have mercilessly sacrificed the principles of human rights and women's rights, and Afghanistan will suffer long-running consequences due to the same.

The screenshot shows a Zoom meeting interface. The main window displays a presentation slide titled "What fuss about Timings!". The slide content includes:

Getting some time would have made possible for the U.S. a smooth, if not graceful, transition of power to avoid this ongoing chaos.

Over 50 high-level official meetings have been held so far including the U.S. resident addressing the public and CIA chief's visit to Kabul, asking the Taliban to give the US more time for securing operations.

It's astonishing how every issue with the Afghanistan withdrawal is under a microscope when the war itself didn't get 1/10th the scrutiny. Selective emphasis is how consent is manufactured.

The slide also features a tweet from Secular Talk (@KyleKulinski) with the text: "It's astonishing how every issue with the Afghanistan withdrawal is under a microscope when the war itself didn't get 1/10th the scrutiny. Selective emphasis is how consent is manufactured."

Below the main slide, a navigation bar shows "Slide 8 of 10" and a thumbnail gallery of 10 slides. The 8th slide is highlighted.

On the right side, a vertical list of participants is visible, including Jayant Prasad, Raghav Sharma, baharjalali, bilquees, and Syed Irfan Ashraf.

Opening Remarks by the Three Panelists

11:45-12:00: Ambassador Jayant Prasad

The seminar was commenced by *Ambassador Jayant Prasad, the Director-General of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses and India's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Algeria, Nepal.*

The Doha agreement, meant to bring peace to Afghanistan, is conceptually incorrect. The leader of the Taliban said it was an agreement for the US to leave Afghanistan; both protagonists struck a deal because they had a shared goal. The Afghans and Americans never interfered with each other after that. However, the USA blindsided the Afghans, which was a big mistake – there should have been security guarantees and allowed for an intra-Afghan dialogue and worked to guarantee this.

The situation in Kabul is confusing; the pullout of American troops and contractors was a show of incompetence. Yesterday's [26th August 2021] troop bombings killed many people, and Biden has

already absolved the Taliban of any involvement in the crime. There is very little reliable info coming out of Kabul, and it seems only foreigners are being allowed into the airports, and Afghans are being stopped and turned away. Some unconfirmed visuals of the Taliban beating up people trying to go to the airport have also resurfaced because of the extreme brutality practiced by their forces. Allegedly it was not the Taliban who turned around Afghans from the airport, but rather the Americans who were turning people away.

There is no sign of an Afghan government in place. They stated that after the American withdrawal on the 21st, there would be a new government. However, almost nothing has happened other than two ministers being announced (Finance minister, *Gul Agha*, and Cultural Taliban spokesperson, *Zabihullah Mujahid*) are permanent ministers. However, interior and defense ministers are just *acting* ministers and are not permanent. It seems like some power play behind the scenes led to their appointments.

It is unclear how the government will be composed and who will be in it. However, the Ambassador suggests that because of the need for development and overseas help, the Taliban will make it a governmental priority to present a more moderate face, owing to their need for foreign relations.

Afghanistan desperately needs billions of dollars of development assistance. The same will be impossible if they fail to show moderation in their rule and international relations. If they fail to accomplish this and rule like extremists, they can have no foreign relations, and Afghanistan will have no future whatsoever.

12:00- 12:15: Syed Irfan Ashraf

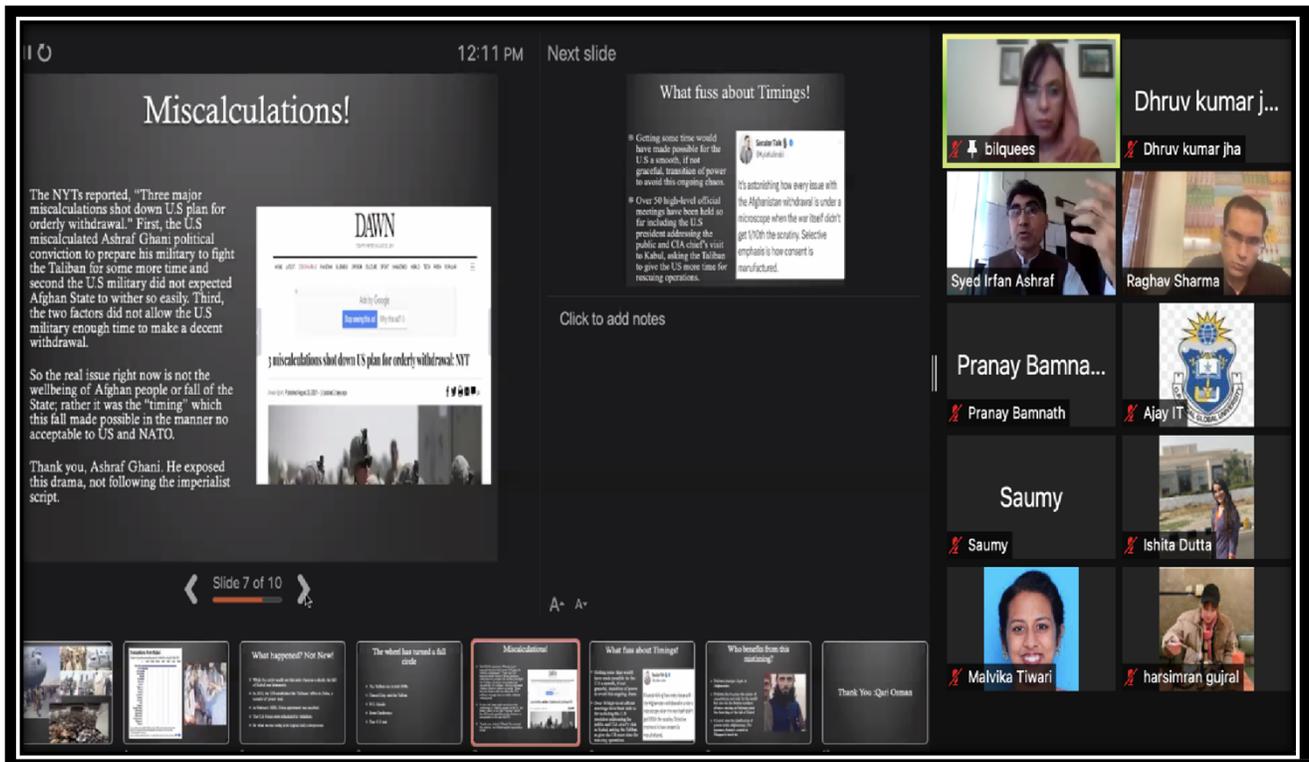
Professor Syed Irfan Ashraf, an Assistant Professor at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Peshawar, says that this is no surprise, what has happened in Afghanistan, that the writing has been on the wall for almost 20 years.

The screenshot shows a Zoom meeting interface. On the left, a slide titled "Miscalculations!" is displayed. The slide contains three bullet points: 1) "The NYTs reported, 'Three major miscalculations shot down US plan for orderly withdrawal.' First, the US miscalculated Ashraf Ghani political conviction to prepare his military to fight the Taliban for some more time and second the US military did not expect Afghan State to wither so easily. Third, the two factors did not allow the US military enough time to make a decent withdrawal." 2) "So the real issue right now is not the wellbeing of Afghan people or fall of the State; rather it was the 'timing' which this fall made possible in the manner no acceptable to US and NATO." 3) "Thank you, Ashraf Ghani. He exposed this drama, not following the imperialist script." Below the text is a screenshot of a DAWN news article with the headline "Miscalculations shot down US plan for orderly withdrawal: NYT". To the right of the main slide, a smaller slide titled "What fuss about Timings!" is visible, containing two bullet points: "Getting some time would have made possible for the US a smooth, if not graceful, transition of power to avoid this ongoing chaos" and "Over 50 high-level official meetings have been held so far including the US president addressing the public and CIA chief's visit to Kabul, making the Taliban to give the US more time for rescuing operations." Below this is a tweet from @SaeedTahiri: "It's astonishing how every issue with the Afghanistan withdrawal is under a microscope when the war itself didn't get 1/10th the scrutiny. Selective emphasis is how consent is manufactured." The Zoom interface includes a top bar with "26" and "12:08 PM", a "Next slide" button, and a "Click to add notes" button. At the bottom, a navigation bar shows "Slide 7 of 10" and a row of slide thumbnails. On the right side, four video thumbnails show participants: a woman in a red headscarf, a woman with glasses, a man in a suit, and a man with glasses resting his chin on his hand.

Afghanistan has been thrown to the wolves, and the current generation of Afghans has very little hope for the future. But *who* threw Afghanistan to the wolves? To what extent are India and Pakistan responsible? The future of Afghanistan is a very pessimistic scenario that we all have fueled.

The USA's retreat from Kabul mirrors their fleeing from Saigon; like Hobbes' Leviathan, they crush thousands of people in their haste to run. The "elites" of Afghanistan are all leaving; who is left; who will run Afghanistan; what kind of people will be left behind. There is a significant brain drain from Afghanistan. The principal number of people fleeing Afghanistan are not people just running away but are foreign citizens who moved back to Afghanistan in the last 20 years to try and restore order to their nation and contribute to their country. Hence, all these people are fleeing from Afghanistan, accelerating an unprecedented brain drain to the country.

The wheel has come full circle: the fall of Kabul started in 2010, with the secretive peace talks in Doha between the Americans and the Taliban. The peace deal was announced in 2013 and finalized in 2020. The idea was always to give the Taliban power. Taliban's rise in the 1990s was planned, and at no point was it an unexpected rise; it was totally all according to plan, and this [their takeover of Afghanistan in 2021], too, is according to plan.



There was no spontaneity of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. The vested oil interests in Afghanistan cannot be ignored; the head of the Doha agreement was a multinational oil pipeline. The multi-corporations backed by western powers had their interests in the conflict created there.

NATO and the UN wanted to have a heavy military presence in Afghanistan, similar to in Bosnia. The USA disagreed and wanted to empower local warlords instead, which led to the quick collapse of the Afghan State, as the warlords had no true loyalty to the Republic. When the foreign forces left, they did as they pleased, aligning with the Taliban when it suited them. The USA has no interest in eliminating the Taliban, and the Taliban serves their vested interests in the region. Pakistan, too, has protected the Taliban. They served as the anvil to their hammer when eliminating Al Qaida from the region. Multiple states have helped the Taliban because they are a convenient entity.

However, there was a miscalculation. The NYT's report further explains the same, "The three major miscalculations shot down the US plan for an orderly withdrawal." First, the US miscalculated Ashraf Ghani's political conviction to prepare his military to fight the Taliban for some more time. Second, the US military did not expect the Afghan State to wither so quickly. Third, the two factors did not allow the US military enough time to make a decent withdrawal. So, the real issue right now is not the well-being of Afghan people or the fall of State but rather the timing which made the fall possible in a manner not acceptable to the US and NATO. Ashraf left early and exposed the Americans' strategy to evacuate slowly from 6 months to a year, transitioning power gracefully. Since he left so early, the Taliban are unprepared to form a government. Getting some time would have made it possible for the US a smooth if not graceful transition of power to avoid chaos. Over 50 high-level official meetings have been held so far, including the US president addressing the public and CIA chief visiting Kabul and asking the Taliban to give more time for rescuing operations.

Afghanistan has been left to the wolves, and now they will be left to the drones. What was surprising was not that the Taliban took over; the surprise was the pace of collapse. We desperately need to ask important questions like, who benefits from all this? Who is in charge of Kabul?

12:15-12:30: Dr Bahar Jalali

Dr. Bahar Jalali, *an Afghan-American academic and an Adjunct Professor at the University of Maryland Global Campus* states how the current issue is about Afghan identity and sovereignty. This is not a civil conflict, as Biden put it, but a violent invasion. Ghani's government was a kleptocracy, but the Taliban is a foreign invasion; it is an invasion by Pakistan. The faulty literature is astonishing; the scholarship on Afghanistan is underdeveloped, but many myths need debunking in the current scenario. In this section, some of the significant prevailing misconceptions will be discussed and debunked.

The US-led intervention was seen by many Afghans as a rescue movement and was overwhelmingly embraced by the people. This was not an imperialist war; this was the right war.



The American-led intervention after 9/11 was seen by most Afghans as a rescue mission because most of the Taliban are Pakistani; they are products of Pakistani military intelligence and madrassas. It is not an essentially Afghan movement. The post 9/11 intervention was not imperialism because the Taliban government had no popular support. It was not an Afghan government, so the US's intervention in the 2000s was not seen as an unpopular intervention by most Afghans.

The second myth is that the nation-building in Afghanistan failed; there was never a goal for nation-building; in fact, they said (Bush) that the plan was never rebuilding. There was never any actual goal in mind for rebuilding; very little of the money given for Afghanistan went to the government. Most

of the money went to the military and private military contractors. There was never nation-building; there was militarization. There was a period of political engagement and participation in the 2010s, which was probably the best time for the State in recent history; it will be very hard for the Taliban to govern the country because they are so massively unpopular with the Afghans, and anyone with a little education is leaving the country. The Taliban on TV claiming moderation is a total myth; they go door to door and execute prominent dissenters.

In truth, America has failed the Afghan people; the term “graveyard of empires” used by Americans is nothing but propaganda to try and justify their failure in the region; Afghanistan is not ungovernable. It is that the Americans have failed in their governance. We are now seeing in Afghanistan is not a civil conflict; instead, it is an invasion by Pakistan through their use of proxy warfare via the Taliban that they have helped engender.



The idea that defeat was inevitable is nonsensical, the Taliban are not Afghani, and this is not a fight for their homeland. They emerged in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. They have no popular support; the only time Afghans have joined them is when the government did not help them. Even though an intellectual, Ghani was a disappointment, did not create a competent government, and surrounded himself with yes men. There are theories that Ghani cut a deal with the Americans to leave, but no one knows.

There is much infighting among the Taliban. Unlike 20 years ago, the Taliban is desperate for international recognition and assistance. Based on their behaviours in the last ten days, it will be challenging for them to get any foothold in the international community.

It is not 2001 anymore; the Taliban are dealing with a changing world and a changed Afghanistan. This was a 21-year war, so many countries entered Afghanistan with several objectives in mind, and there was a lack of vision and strategy in total. Afghan women were exploited as propaganda to mobilize support for the war against terror in Afghanistan. We should listen to the Afghan people, but right now, their voices are not being heard in any forum other than social media, such as Twitter. Pakistan has an obsession with having the strategic deftness to control Afghanistan to maneuver against India. Their obsession means they have no problem with using and sponsoring terror to achieve their goals. Sanction Pakistan is what Dr. Jalali and many other Afghans are saying. This is a highly vulnerable time for the global community, and its effects will spill over other nations.

“The world is just realizing what we have known forever.”

12:30- 1:25: Discussion

After the opening remarks by all the panelists, the webinar moved to discuss the questions posed by the attendees. While answering Dr. Jalali’s question, Professor Ashraf pointed out the presence and significance of the regional and national dynamics. The Pashtuns of FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) are concerned over Afghanistan, and we cannot ignore this. We cannot ignore the role of other states like China and Russia; we cannot ignore the actions of the Afghan warlords. India is the only democratic force in this region left. Regarding PTM (Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, a human rights movement in Pakistan), the Pakistani government blames RAW for supporting them against Afghanistan, so their disagreements with the Taliban are seen through that lens by the Pakistani government.

Ashraf Ghani, too, wasn't an expression of Afghan will; who put him there? He is the scapegoat. Bush Jnr. is also the scapegoat for America. When in 2009, Obama introduced the idea of exit, there was never any talk of a roadmap, there was just talk of getting out of there. The collapse of the Afghan army began with the leaving of American contractors from Afghanistan. The narrative surrounding Afghanistan being the graveyard of empires is a western fallacy. There is a narrative in America and Pakistan that Afghanistan is governed by primordial tribal loyalties; totally wrong. State building in Afghanistan failed because the vast majority of the money went to the PMCs, who lined their pockets; nothing went to the Afghan government. The trillion dollars just went to soldiers and contractors. There is much window dressing being done by the new rulers in Afghanistan.

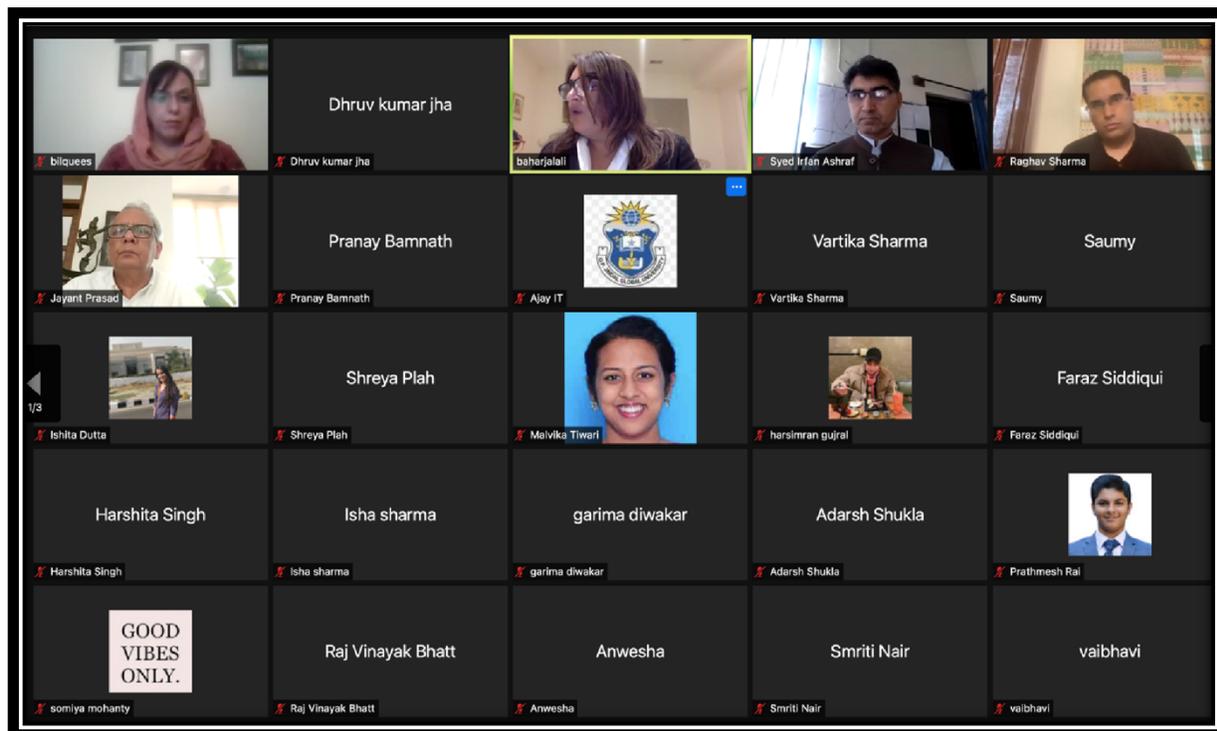
Rather than affixing blame, we must contextualize the intervention and actions of all countries and dynamics. Our approach and analysis should be comprehensive and in several contexts. We should not forget that the effects of this conflict are incredibly adverse on Pakistan as well.

Questions from the audience:

What role do you think the UN has in this whole situation? What suggestions do you have?

Ambassador Prasad: **I**t is expected that the UN's actual contribution will be zero. The P5 (Permanent members of the United Nations Security Council) agreed that America should leave Afghanistan; China and Russia are already engaging with the Taliban. If the P5 has no intention of combating the Taliban in any meaningful way, then how can we expect the UNSC or any other UN body to intervene in any meaningful way.

Dr. Jalali: **T**he UN must not accept the Taliban as a legitimate sovereign government. The UN must appeal to all countries not to accept the Taliban as a reasonable government force and engage with them. The new Taliban is most definitely not any different from its previous composition.



What does the future hold for the people fleeing from Afghanistan? What will happen to them in the oncoming days? To what extent are countries being open to refugees?

Dr. Jalali: **W**hat will happen to the Afghans who cannot leave? They will not have any future at all; two generations of progress are lost in this takeover.

Ambassador Prasad: **T**he collapse was preordained and structured. From the day the contractors were taken away by Biden, the military and consequently the country collapsed. We need to highlight the myths like Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires. Myth: Afghanistan is driven by primordial loyalties, and they do not know how to build and operate a government. Nation-building was never a priority, and most money was spent on contractors and their troops. There is a massive difference between the ground reality and what has been promised, lots of window dressing done by new rulers of Afghanistan.

As countries evacuate their citizens from Afghanistan, what will happen to those people left behind in Afghanistan? How can the international community help these people?

Dr. Jalali: **R**ight now, if the Taliban rules in their fundamentalist manner, they do not have much future. All gains made in two generations are lost, and all growth achieved in the sphere of women's rights are lost. The global community can help by refusing to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. The international community must be firm in their refusal to deal with them unless they can prove that they somehow are a fair government that helps the Afghan people, but this is unlikely. It seems that the quality of life for those living there will be terrible.

Ambassador Prasad: **I**ndia should resume the student visas and help Afghans leave the country for security reasons.

Should the international media be held responsible for not reporting on the State of the Afghan people and the violently imperialistic regime?

Prof. Ashraf: **Y**es, the global media has definitely had a hand to play in the narrative that has been attached to the State. The Pakistani government is apprehensive about the PTM and other Pashtun movements.

When we blame one State or one industry for the state in Afghanistan, we forget the evils of colonialism, which was the first cause of all this; what is the difference between colonialism then and now?

PTM is an alternative to the Taliban. He concludes his claim by mentioning that this question will be discussed in exhaustive detail in his upcoming book, *The Dark Side of News Fixing*; expect to see

it on shelves shortly. It is the first such book published in the region that deals with this issue so thoroughly.

Due to the lacking of response from the Indian government, do you think India has lost any of its relevance in the region? Has India lost their influence in the region now?

Ambassador Prasad: India is not effectively giving out e-visas to people in Afghanistan, even to our people working in Afghanistan in official capacities. The visa regime needs to be properly operationalized as even people who studied and worked in India for a decade are not being offered visas. On the other hand, other countries are offering them the same. India needs to get their act together, or they will end up squandering all their goodwill with the Afghan people.

China is looking to invest in Afghanistan, and the Taliban will likely accept any investments from China; but what do the Afghan people think about the Chinese? Are they apprehensive about their economic overtures?

Dr. Jalali: Given the close relationship w/w China and Pakistan, there will likely be an enormous amount of resistance to Chinese influence in Afghanistan by the Afghan people because it would be seen as an extension of the Pakistani agenda within Pakistan. It will be better seen after the 31st, but for now, it seems that any Chinese influence will be in furtherance of the Talibanization of Afghanistan.

Ambassador Prasad: In Afghanistan, the two countries that really call the shots are America and Pakistan, with America on the downturn, and China on the ascendancy. It is currently looking like China is not going to be fully able to exploit Afghanistan at this juncture.

As a concluding thought, Prof. Raghav Sharma highlighted that China had had one of the best relations with Afghanistan. Take a more measured approach because public memory is very short, and people tend to forget the history of the Taliban. The Taliban has become better at managing optics and media representation. India has been poor in operationalizing the visa program and needs to be more creative about the problems.

Following this long and engaging round of questioning, Ishita Dutta ended the session by thanking all those present. Certainly, this panel discussion contributed valuable insights from specialists who have outstanding expertise in international politics. Thus, it was surely a delight for the Centre for Afghanistan Studies to host them in this mutually engaging session on the eventuality of Afghanistan.
