

AFGHANISTAN UNDER THE TALIBAN: UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF THE REGION

5th May 2022

-Report by Zain Lookmanji, Mrinalini Srivastava and Harshit Sharma



The Centre for Afghanistan Studies (CAS) hosted a panel discussion on Afghanistan on the 5th of May 2022 with three eminent speakers from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Dr. Raghav Sharma, Director, CAS chaired the discussion.

Event Description: In the eight months that followed since the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on the 15th of August 2021 the Taliban have emerged as the most dominant force but clearly not the most legitimate force in Afghanistan. This is seen in mounting evidence of active and passive resistance to Taliban rule.

The country has been pushed to the brink with the past threatening to overshadow the country's future. As the Taliban 1.0 masquerade as the Taliban 2.0, seeking to turn the clock back in time, the everyday lived experiences of Afghans are characterized by economic collapse; one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes of modern times; a dismantling of hard-won rights and freedoms; mutilation of Afghan cultural and national heritage and a straining of the social fabric. Ironically as Afghanistan's neighbours sought to re-package Taliban 2.0 as 'grassroots liberators' and as symbolising 'breaking the shackles of slavery', more than half a million Afghans responded by seeking to flee the country. Most of Afghanistan's neighbours have closed their borders to Afghans

escaping economic collapse and spectre of persecution as they seek to curry favour with the Taliban in a bid to secure their perceived interests.

To understand the unfolding developments which will impact Afghans foremost but will most certainly leave an impact on the region at large we are joined by eminent voices to share views from the inside and outside.

Welcome Remarks: Dr Raghav Sharma, Director, Centre for Afghanistan Studies



A very good evening. On behalf of the Centre for Afghanistan Studies I would like to extend a very warm welcome to our three panelists from Ms. Horia Mosadiq from Afghanistan, Dr. Syed Irfan Ashraf from Pakistan and Ms. Ruchi Kumar from India. We are extremely grateful that you have taken time out to join us for today's panel discussion on Afghanistan which is taking place at a juncture as events in Afghanistan recede from the larger public memory, overshadowed by the tragic events in Ukraine. In fact, the response of the international community to the events in Ukraine makes for a stark contrast with the disgraceful and chaotic disengagement with Afghanistan. It's a reminder of the starkly unequal world we live in.

As the Taliban swept across Afghanistan, swiftly eclipsing its political and military landscape, triumphantly proclaiming that 'war is over in Afghanistan'.

After nearly four decades war may have ended but 'peace' remains elusive. The Taliban have emerged as the most dominant force in the country, but questions abound concerning their legitimacy. The exclusionary character of their interim government; the repeated non-violent mobilization and protests against Taliban's policies that sought to be snuffed out through coercion;

germination of several armed resistance fronts across the country; the Taliban's predatory policies towards historically marginalized and persecuted groups like the Hazara's; revenge killings against former soldiers, government officials as well as civilians in areas considered to be sympathetic to armed resistance have cast a dark shadow on the groups legitimacy. Events over the last eight months have demonstrated the Taliban's inability to reconcile with Afghanistan's dramatically reconfigured socio-political landscape. As Taliban 2.0 seek to consolidate their hold over power their actions would be discerned, particularly by marginalized social groups in light of Afghanistan's larger, checkered historical context.

The rise, fall and the rise of the Taliban over the last two decades has been closely intertwined with the changing regional dynamics. If the geo-political calculus of Rawalpindi was seminal to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid 1990's, the events of 9/11 would trigger a dramatic reconfiguration of the geo-political landscape with Beijing, Rawalpindi, Moscow, and Tehran finding a congruence of interests in the US led 'war on terror' which saw a swift toppling of the Taliban. However, this proved to be a fleeting affair that unraveled, giving way to a seemingly improbable alignment between the Taliban and Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Rawalpindi. Buoyed by a growing weariness with the US led intervention and a growing disjuncture between the interests of Washington and key players in the Afghan theatre allowed room for strategic maneuver between the Taliban and Moscow, Tehran and Beijing. They projected Taliban 2.0 as 'grassroots liberators' who ended 'foreign occupation' and would bring peace and serve as a bulwark against the *Daesh*- projected as the principal security and ideological challenge. The Taliban too embraced these actors in a bid to diversify its basket of diplomatic and political options and shore up prospects for garnering international and domestic legitimacy. Noteworthy in this context are the contradictions that underpin this mutual embrace given how uneasily the domestic politics of these players sits uneasily with the Taliban's worldview.

Furthermore, an endurance of a seeming alignment of interests between the Taliban and key regional actors will be put to test as Afghanistan finds itself amidst an unprecedented economic collapse; humanitarian crisis; confronts security and ideological challenges; grapples with questions concerning the ruling group's legitimacy; coupled with schisms within Taliban ranks. These developments will impact the region in a myriad of ways. Moreover, the challenge at hand for regional actors will be amplified by the need to manage perceptions domestically as they repackage the Taliban as well as among perceived constituencies within Afghanistan given their long history of support to an array of social groups in Afghanistan that was predicated along sectarian, religious, cultural and/or ideological lines. Thus, the appetite for *schadenfreude* in regional capitals over the humiliating retreat of the US has been whetted as concerns mount on managing the consequences of a post-American Afghanistan.

I would like to call on our first speaker for the evening, Ms. Horia Mosadiq who will throw light on some of the issues that have been flagged with respect to the changing contours of Afghanistan’s socio-political landscape.

Ms. Mosadiq is an eminent journalist and human rights activist who has worked with a number of organisations including Geneva Call, Safer World, Amnesty International, UNICEF and the UNDP to name a few.

18.40-19.00 IST: “Taliban 2.0 vs Afghanistan 2.0”

Ms. Horia Mosadiq, *Human Rights Activist, Journalist, and Political Activist*



Ms. Mosadiq opened her remarks by drawing attention to the historical context against which the Afghan conflict has played out. As Russia invaded Afghanistan back in the late 1970s, many Afghans fled, and joined the militant ground. As such, many of them were located in Afghanistan, alongside *shia* fighters. Eventually other nations such as the US started to support these groups through financial support to Pakistan. Thus, the west was supporting *jihād*.

The level of atrocities committed nowadays in Afghanistan are the same as those committed in the 70s. According to the *mujahideen*, anyone who worked for the government, they were considered to be Communists. Many Afghan intellectuals were executed. This is not to say that the Russian puppet government was not doing this; extrajudicial killings were rampant, and freedom of expression did not exist.

The only reason why Afghanistan defeated Russia at the time was by convincing Afghan people that Islam was in danger under the communists; it was at this time that the foundations for a violent and intolerant Afghanistan were laid. The people were radicalised in refugee camps, with radical textbooks issued by American universities.

After the *mujahideen* came into power, there was a civil war. But they saved some mullahs from bandits in Quetta, becoming very popular with many Afghans, also claiming that they would begin a peaceful transition of power.

However, this was not to be the case; violence along ethnic lines escalated, and the horrors of war raged on, even further, such as the massacre of Hazara Kabul. Many rights, such as freedom of expression, movement, and women's rights were all curbed. A harsh version of *sharia* was imposed; all television and entertainment were banned, except for religious content and propaganda of the Taliban.

Then, 9/11 happened, which brought Afghanistan back into the limelight; although *Al Qaeda* and Osama Bin Laden were not in Afghanistan, the Afghan people were forced to suffer. They were tortured, killed, arrested, and so on.

It was at this point that the US came to support the same warlords that destroyed Afghanistan in the previous decades; the US also imposed new rulers in Afghanistan like Karzai and Ghani, who were US citizens, and were not truly chosen by any Afghans. It was all an extension of western hegemony in the guise of democracy.

There was never any reconciliation or justice for the crimes suffered by Afghans for the past 32 years. However, the international community largely ignored the plight of Afghanistan, because in the words of the UN Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi: "we cannot sacrifice peace for justice".

The international community was only interested in quick fixes, such as Ghani; this is what led to the problems that Afghanistan now faces today. When the peace deal was signed in 2020 between the US and the Taliban, that was the death knell for Afghanistan, as Ghani and the US cut a deal with the Taliban, and the country was more-or-less handed over to the Taliban with no governmental resistance.

Now the rights of the average Afghans are gone, as bad as it ever was during the communist regime. This is what the Afghan people were warning the international community of for years that would happen.

The Taliban must be held accountable but no one is willing to do this. Western diplomats are only shedding crocodile tears; no international institution be it the United Nations or the International Court of Justice or whoever, no one truly cares about Afghanistan. Many of the sanctioned Taliban members were removed from the sanctions list in 2020, and they were allowed to run free in Afghanistan.

19.00-19.20 IST: “A Pyrrhic Victory for Pakistan: Implications of the Taliban’s Return for Pakistan”

Dr. Syed Irfan Ashraf, *Journalist and Assistant Professor, University of Peshawar*



Dr. Ashraf began his presentation by responding to the question posed by Dr. Raghav Sharma at the outset, ‘Was it [Taliban’s] a pyrrhic victory for Pakistan? Dr Ashraf began by acknowledging that it is a complex issue. He said that there is nothing special about the Taliban except a belief in their ignorance. Responding to a previous panelist’s remarks, he said that the Afghan Taliban was never a Pashtun militant movement, and we need to deconstruct their emergence. He raised the question, ‘How does militarisation of the Afghan border take place?’ It started with the absence of democracy and the disappearance of civil society. Generally, it is believed that the Taliban’s coming to power has completed Pakistan’s project. However, the Taliban’s victory began when the United States of America started attacking only *Al-Qaeda* post the 9/11 attacks. That is how the Taliban started becoming a dominant force in the region. And it was due to this that the Pakistan military could take advantage of the Taliban. Therefore, it would be better to call it Pakistan’s military victory.

He kept emphasising the point that the Taliban's victory was not sustainable as they only knew how to fight but had no idea of ruling the land they had conquered. Unless the Taliban converts its military will to political will, it cannot rule. Therefore, it will constantly need the support of Pakistan's army to rule the land. Due to the Taliban's rule not being sustainable, it poses a problem for Pakistan as well. He said,

“Since 15th August 2021, more than 250 terror attacks have taken place on the Pakistan side of the border”. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claims to have killed more than 200 personnel of Pakistan,”

he also added. As a repercussion, the Pakistan army started bombing the Afghan border. Furthermore, he did not see any difference between 'Good Taliban' and the 'Bad Taliban'. He thinks both are on the same page.

The other challenge he drew attention to was that of the black economy, which according to him, is not small. And it is in the interest of Pakistan's army and Taliban that it keeps running. Most of the money earned through it goes to re-invigorating the military. Therefore, it is essential to stop this black economy from breaking the backbone of the militancy. This is pertinent also because attacking terrorism violently will breed even more terrorism. However, if we focus on other things to weaken them, they will do something destructive for themselves. "Militancy", in his words, "is always destructive". In his concluding remarks, he again emphasised a worrying situation on both sides of the border. "The region", he stated, "is on a suicidal path".

In responding to the question asked about the intent of China in the region, Dr Ashraf replied that it is not Pakistan but China that may reap the maximum benefits from the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. However he pointed out that China is not blind to the security situation, so it would not be very confident about investing in Afghanistan. However, he also stated that the future is full of uncertainties and admitted that no one quite knows what precisely may happen in the future. On the question of Pakistan supporting the Haqqani network in Afghanistan, he said,

“Pakistan supports Taliban but at the same time, cannot tolerate any Pashtun movement. Nobody wants stability in Afghanistan, maybe except China. Stability in Afghanistan is a danger for many countries, including the United States of America.”

19.20-19.40 IST: “‘Wait and Watch’: Time for a Reset in India’s Afghan Policy?”

Ms. Ruchi Kumar, Independent Journalist, Special focus on Afghanistan



Ms. Kumar spoke primarily about India's role or lack thereof in the emerging situation in Afghanistan. She started by describing how up until recently India was deeply involved in Afghanistan in the developmental, infrastructure, and educational sectors. This was evident from the fact that India was the largest regional donor to Afghanistan. India had put in considerable efforts in establishing its soft power and did so successfully over the years.

She went on to explain that the main motives behind these efforts were maintaining strategic influence and having a strong ally in the region. She said that it was unclear why this foreign policy had changed. India stopped being a part of the discussions and negotiations about Afghanistan altogether. At first it seemed like an ethical decision as Afghans themselves didn't have a seat at the table but India was not willing to make a commitment as to where it stood till the very end. It seemed to have no plan and no foresight.

She drew attention to the cancellation of visas by the Indian government. Even students who had received Indian scholarships didn't receive visas or had their visas cancelled. The foreign policy towards Afghanistan, she said, has been left dead. This is dangerous for India for two primary reasons. First, Afghanistan was one of the most important and perhaps the only ally of India's in the region. It's the only country in the region with which India has no ongoing conflict. The second reason she gave was the fact that Afghanistan is an incubator for insurgencies, support for which comes from countries like Pakistan. This obviously a huge security concern for India. India not paying attention to the ideological empowerment of groups like the Taliban in the region is truly

dangerous, she said. The truly appalling reality according to her is the lack of Indian reaction with Afghans, not the Taliban.

Talking about what India should be doing, the speaker emphasized on the need to support humanitarian efforts. In its support India should remember that Afghans should be at the forefront of the demands from and negotiations with the Taliban. She reiterated the importance of international allies backing Afghans. They need to support and make space for the mobilization of women and other marginalized groups in Afghanistan.

She explained how India's foreign policy had previously taken a pretty stable approach. India had gone from playing a politically and socially active role in Afghan politics to not even issuing visas to Afghan allies. India should also think about supporting a political opposition that is mobilizing in the country. Not the militant opposition, but a political opposition that is inclusive of civil society, women and minorities in Afghanistan. She added how India needs a stable, strong and democratic government in Afghanistan for its own self interests.

Talking about the Taliban, she said that they are not a legitimate force. Sovereignty in Afghanistan needs to come from the people. Taliban cannot by any stretch be considered as representatives of the Afghan people. She also added that the Taliban are not allies of the Pashtuns either. They have been rampantly killing rival Pashtun leaders in Kandahar. She said that the Taliban has been commodifying the suffering of Afghans. She also expressed hurt as an Indian when news broke out about the Taliban occupying the parliament in Afghanistan as it was built by India and locals referred to it as the Indian Parliament.

19.40-20.25 IST: Discussion

Urban/Rural divide in Afghanistan, especially when it comes to their acceptance of governments as legitimate. There has always been a divide, however, when they had their first elections in 2004, people from all over the country even from the most rural parts voted. It is not about the legitimacy; many people even in the urban parts had their fingers cut off if they voted for the wrong person. The politicians themselves are not helping their people. However, people in the rural areas are the ones who suffered the most, including from all the insurgency and counter insurgency. Because of this, legitimacy in the eyes of the people is hard to earn in general, not necessarily because of a rural urban divide.

Why is Pakistan not recognising the Taliban as a legit government? In 1992, when the mujahideen came into power, Pakistan still did not recognise them as the government. However, Pakistan is a crafty nation, so she believes that something is cooking. There is something much deeper going on rather than Pakistan simply not recognising their government. After all, Imran Khan used his

personal influence to get the US and Iran to support the power-sharing agreement with the Taliban in Doha.

Are other nations engaging with them? In Doha, the Taliban are like celebrities, every diplomat there wants to speak to them; there is no argument to be made that other diplomats are not engaging with them. However, the Taliban are not really listening to anyone that engages with them, rather they keep lying to the world. Every Afghan knew that the Taliban had not indeed changed, however everyone in the west wanted to believe it, because it was convenient to them. The Taliban have never helped the people of Afghanistan nor the Pashtun people. They simply exploit.

In response to the question posed by one of the participants, “Should everybody look at Afghanistan from their own interests only or from a more humane perspective?” Dr. Ashraf categorically answered that we should all look at the situation from a humanitarian perspective. Dr Ashraf categorically answered that we should try to understand this conflict from a humanitarian perspective. He said, “Instead of promoting discourses like my state is right and your state is wrong, we should develop this lens where we could just see this as a humanitarian conflict and connect with people not the state”. He again emphasised that the Taliban’s army is inorganic and its rule non-sustainable. Therefore, it is not very hard to defeat the Taliban. “We know we are right, but we do not have the will maybe”, he added.

Prepared by-

Harshit Sharma, Research Intern, (M.A. [DLB]), JSIA

Mrinalini Srivastava, Research Intern, (B.A. [LLB]), JGLS

Zain Lokmanji, Research Intern, (B.A. [LLB]), JGLS