



## CONFERENCE RAPORTEURS' REPORT

13<sup>th</sup> MP-IDSA SOUTH ASIA CONFERENCE

*Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Implications and Way Forward*

16–17 December 2021 (Online)



**Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA)**

1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg  
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi–110010

December 2021

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## **OBJECTIVE OF CONFERENCE**

As per the Concept Note, the objective of the 13<sup>th</sup> MP-IDSA South Asia Conference was to seek answers to the following questions and dwell on the possible way forward on Afghanistan:

- 1. How is the situation in Afghanistan likely to pan out in the immediate to short-term?**
- 2. Given the growing pulls and pressures, both within and from outside, will the Taliban be able to hold itself together and provide a stable and effective national leadership?**
- 3. How are other Afghan political actors likely to respond to the return of the Taliban in Kabul?**
- 4. How are regional and extra-regional countries looking at the return of the Taliban and its implications for the security landscape in and around the 'Heart of Asia'?**
- 5. In the absence of national reconciliation, how effective and sustainable will the economic and political incentives be in transforming the Taliban, from an armed proxy jihadi network into a moderate, broad-based and independent governing authority?**
- 6. What does the return of the Taliban bode for Pakistan in the long run?**
- 7. The Taliban 2.0 (as the new pseudonym goes) is being pushed to an ostensibly more moderate position by the more virulent Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) group and its affiliates. In this context, how is it likely to affect the ideological underpinnings of the Taliban and their unity?**
- 8. What is the way forward, in terms of available policy options for the region and the wider international community to deal with the developing situation in Afghanistan?**

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## CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

### 13<sup>th</sup> MP-IDSA SOUTH ASIA CONFERENCE

## **Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Implications and Way Forward**

Day One: 16 December 2021

### INAUGURAL SESSION: 10:00 AM – 10:30 AM (IST)

- **Welcome Remarks**

Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA

Release of Special Issue of MP-IDSA *Journal of Defence Studies* on  
“50 Years Later: 1971 India–Pakistan War”

### SESSION ONE: 10:30 AM – 12.30 PM (IST)

#### *Return of Taliban: A Critical Analysis*

Chair: Amb Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA

Speakers: 15 minutes each

- ***Return of Taliban and What It Means for Afghanistan and the Region***  
Mr Lotfullah Najafizada  
Director, TOLO News
- ***The Taliban’s Immediate Future***  
Mr Abubakar Siddique  
Editor, RFE/RL Prague
- ***Afghanistan Heads Towards Uncertainty***  
Amb Shamsheer M. Chowdhury  
Former Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh
- ***Extreme Prognosis for an Extreme Region***  
Dr Ayesha Siddiq  
Research Associate, SOAS, University of London
- ***Working With or Around the Taliban***  
Mr Obaidullah Baheer  
Lecturer, American University of Afghanistan, Kabul

### **Q&A Session**

## **SESSION TWO: 6:30 PM – 8.30 PM (IST)**

### ***Perspectives on Afghanistan***

**Chair: Amb Ashok Sajjanhar**, Member, MP-IDSA, Executive Council

Speakers: 15 minutes each

- ***The Future of US Policy in Afghanistan***  
**Mr Michael Kugelman**  
Deputy Director & Senior Associate, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC
- ***Afghanistan's Security Crisis and the Region***  
**Dr Nilofar Sakhi**  
Senior Fellow (NR), Atlantic Council, Washington, DC
- ***Central Asia's Approach Towards Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan***  
**Mr Bruce Pannier**  
Central Asia Correspondent, RFE/RL, Prague
- ***The Central Asian States versus New Afghanistan***  
**Dr Irina Zvyagelskaya**  
Head, Centre for the Middle East Studies, IMEMO, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow

### **Q&A Session**

**Day Two: 17 December 2021**

## **SESSION THREE: 10:00 AM – 12:30 PM (IST)**

### ***Regional Perspectives***

**Chair: Amb Rakesh Sood**, Former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan

Speakers: 15 minutes each

- ***Social Engineering of Afghanistan Revisited***  
**Prof Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour**  
Distinguished Fellow, Institute for Political and International Studies, Tehran
- ***Taliban Victory in Afghanistan – The Impact Upon Pakistan***  
**Prof Pervez Hoodbhoy**  
Islamabad-based Physicist and Writer
- ***Afghanistan's Road to Peace and Development***  
**Dr Wang Shida**  
Deputy Director and Associate Professor, Institute for South Asian Studies, CICIR, Beijing
- ***Return of Taliban and Reversal of Women's Rights in Afghanistan***  
**Dr Bahar Jalali**  
Visiting Professor, Loyola University Maryland
- ***Central Asia, Taliban and the Regional Security***  
**Dr Akram Umarov**  
Fulbright Visiting Scholar, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- ***Taliban 2.0: A View from Russia***  
**Dr Alexey Kupriyanov**  
Head, Group on South Asia and Indian Ocean, IMEMO, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow

### **Q&A Session**

## **SESSION FOUR: 2:30 PM – 4:30 PM (IST)**

### ***Way Forward in Afghanistan***

**Chair:** Amb Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA

**Speakers:** 15 minutes each

- ***Afghanistan and South Asia: Two Different Futures***  
**Prof C. Raja Mohan**  
Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore
- ***A Long, Violent, Road Ahead for Afghanistan***  
**Mr Mahendra Ved**  
President Emeritus, Commonwealth Journalists Association, New Delhi
- ***The Peril of Legitimation***  
**Prof Ajay Darshan Behera**  
Director, MMAJ Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia
- ***The Way Ahead in Afghanistan***  
**Dr Ashok K. Behuria**  
Senior Fellow & Coordinator, South Asia Centre, MP-IDSA

### ***Q&A Session***

## **VOTE OF THANKS**

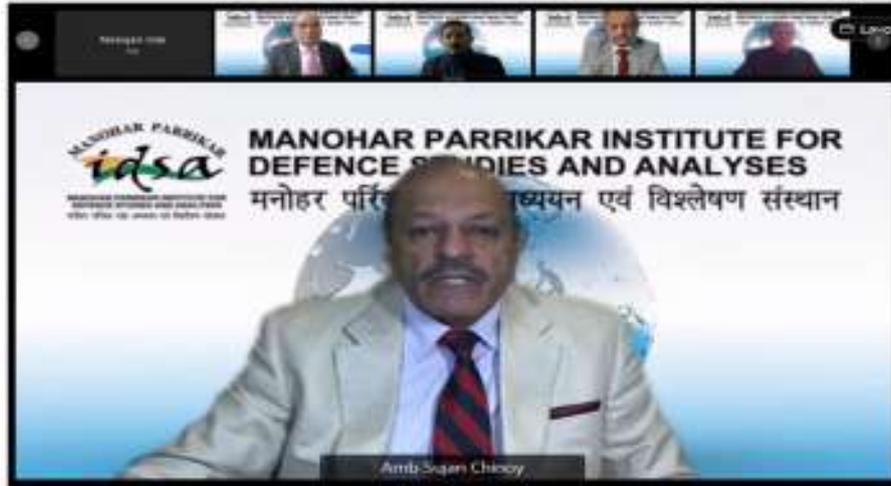
**Mr Vishal Chandra**, Conference Coordinator

## CONFERENCE RAPORTEURS' REPORT

DAY ONE

Thursday, 16 December 2021

### INAUGURAL SESSION



The MP-IDSA organised its 13<sup>th</sup> South Asia Conference on the theme “Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Implications and Way Forward” on 16–17 December 2021. The two-day international conference, held in an online format, was inaugurated by **Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA.**

Welcoming the distinguished participants, who had joined from across the world, Amb Chinoy provided a brief background to the MP-IDSA South Asia Conference, a key calendar event that the Institute had been hosting since 2007. He noted that over the years, the South Asia Conference has acquired a unique stature as an important Track-II initiative, bringing together academics, experts, policymakers, practitioners and media representatives to discuss issues of common interest and concern.

Introducing the conference theme, Amb Chinoy observed that Afghanistan stands at a new inflection point. Developments in Afghanistan have a broader ramification for the region and beyond. The return of the Taliban has been widely viewed as a defeat of the United States (US) and failure of the 20-year-long international effort to bring democracy and peace to Afghanistan. Taliban have claimed victory. Yet, there is no gainsaying the fact that the US and its allies have shed much blood and treasure over the past two decades. Not all of that was in vain.

Amb Chinoy posited that the Taliban will have to make adjustments and accept the new realities. Failure to do so would imperil the Taliban’s rule, perhaps lead to popular unrest in the future, and most certainly, deny the Taliban the full legitimacy they seek in the international community.

He further observed that the so-called interim government of the Taliban disregards the minorities, women and the democratic forces. The members of the Taliban cabinet are anything but moderate, and are known offenders of human rights. The international community that was rooting for an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led system is now clamouring for an inclusive government in Kabul. He stressed, "India is a stakeholder in Afghanistan's destiny. We have no choice. Our historical ties with Afghanistan and geographical proximity put a special responsibility upon New Delhi".

Referring to the Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan, issued at the end of the regional meeting held recently in New Delhi, he said that it was broadly on anticipated lines. There are several elements that clearly draw upon the language of the UN Security Council Resolution 2593 of 30 August 2021, adopted under the rotational presidency of India. These cover condemnation of terrorist attacks, emphasis on preventing the use of Afghanistan's territory for sheltering, training, planning or financing any terrorist acts, protecting the rights of women, children and minorities and providing humanitarian assistance.

Amb Chinoy stated that the newer elements in the Delhi Declaration pertain to call for collective cooperation against the menace of radicalisation, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking in the region. He described it as a remarkable common cause that was forged precisely because Pakistan was absent from the table. It is well-known that all the participating countries have been challenged by one or more of these scourges.

With the Taliban now at the helm in Afghanistan for nearly three months, Amb Chinoy asserted that the most urgent task before the global community today is the provision of humanitarian assistance in an open and transparent manner. The return of UN and aid workers to Afghanistan will permit not just the monitoring of the distribution of food aid and other assistance, but may also help to check the excesses committed by zealots and criminals on vulnerable sections of society.

He further asserted that the situation in Afghanistan has major implications for India. The threat of a spill-over of malevolence radiating out of Afghanistan into Kashmir cannot be taken lightly. The priority, however, is to preserve the goodwill earned by India among the people of Afghanistan over many years, through capacity-building and high-impact developmental projects at the cost of billions of dollars. This is reflected in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remarks at the G-20 Summit in October in which he alluded to the "friendship that the people of Afghanistan have for India". In fact, both at the G-20 Summit and the SCO Summit held in September, Prime Minister Modi unequivocally indicated India's readiness to deliver humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people in an unhindered manner. The silver lining is that the Taliban are open to the idea of Indian assistance. India, like others, is keen to ensure that assistance flows to the people of Afghanistan through the UN.

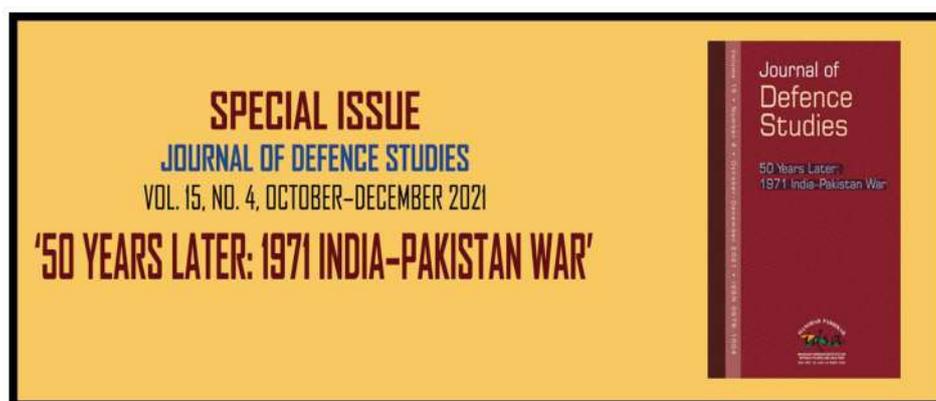
In this regard, India has committed to provide 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat, essential life-saving medicines and COVID vaccines to the Afghan people as humanitarian assistance.

Hopefully, Pakistan will realise that it is its moral duty to facilitate such assistance by India to the Afghan people.

Amb Chinoy further stated that Prime Minister Modi himself has given fresh impetus to the regional dialogue and efforts to build lasting peace and security in Afghanistan. While receiving the participants attending the Delhi meeting, he had succinctly outlined four key aspects that require focus: the need for an inclusive government in Afghanistan; a zero-tolerance stance about Afghan territory being used by terrorist groups; a strategy to counter drugs and arms trafficking from Afghanistan; and, addressing the increasingly critical humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. A proactive approach has enabled India to actively contribute to the task of building a regional consensus on the future of Afghanistan. Amb Chinoy observed that it is up to the Taliban to ensure that their regime becomes a responsible one, in tune with the expectations and aspirations of the Afghan people and the global community.

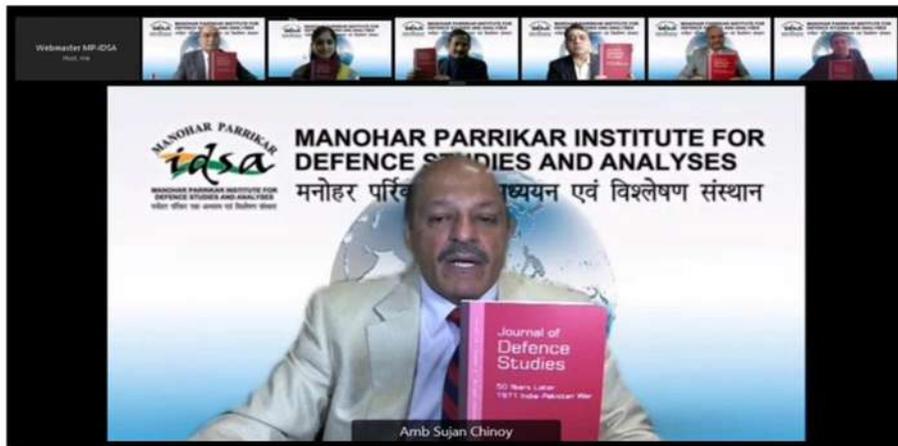
Amb Chinoy concluded his inaugural address with a note of optimism that the discussion that would follow in the two-day conference would deepen the understanding of the common challenges that Afghanistan and the region faces, and also provide suggestions on what the global community should do to ensure a better future for the people of Afghanistan.

### ***Release of Special Issue of MP-IDSA Journal of Defence Studies on 1971 War***



Immediately after the Inaugural Address, **Amb Sujan R. Chinoy** released the **Special Issue of MP-IDSA *Journal of Defence Studies* titled “50 Years Later: 1971 India–Pakistan War”**. While releasing the Journal, he noted that the commencement of the 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the MP-IDSA South Asia Conference coincided with *Vijay Diwas* (Victory Day). On this very day, 50 years ago, India fought for a just and humanitarian cause, and defeated a state that was responsible for the reprehensible genocide of innocent Bengalis in erstwhile East Pakistan. The war led to a stunning and comprehensive defeat of Pakistan, and saw the birth of a new nation—Bangladesh.

Amb Chinoy stated that the 1971 War represented one of the most significant events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It paved the way for the fullest realisation of the aspirations of the people of Bangladesh. Until then, they were suppressed and denied equitable resources by West Pakistan. The laudatory progress of Bangladesh in every sphere of socio-economic activity thereafter, as indicated by its human resource index, is a clear reflection of this reality.



In this backdrop, Amb Chinoy noted that the special issue of the *Journal of Defence Studies* has been conceptualised with a focus on military aspects of the 1971 India–Pakistan War. The war was not fought in isolation and, hence, other factors of significance have also been covered in the special issue.



The session ended with Amb Chinoy thanking the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Journal of Defence Studies*, the Deputy Director General, the Editorial Committee, the Guest Editor and the Associate Editor for putting the Special Issue together in time for *Vijay Diwas*. He also announced that the MP-IDSA flagship journal, *Strategic Analysis*, too will be bringing out a Special Issue on a similar theme shortly.

## SESSION ONE

### RETURN OF THE TALIBAN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The first session of the 13<sup>th</sup> South Asia Conference sought to critically review recent developments and existing ground realities in Afghanistan. There were five presenters on the panel, who provided a comprehensive account of the factors behind the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021, its implications for the international community and how to salvage the war-torn nation from further catastrophe. The session was chaired by **Amb Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA.**



**Mr Lotfullah Najafizada (Director, TOLO News, Kabul)** began his presentation, titled “Return of Taliban and What it Means for Afghanistan and the Region”, by thanking India for being supportive of Afghanistan through thick and thin, especially in the last 20 years as a promoter of peace, tolerance and democracy. India’s contribution to Afghanistan’s progress and transformation is something the Afghan people deeply appreciate. On 15 August, Afghanistan turned a page in its history. Unfortunately, there was a series of mistakes that led to the full military takeover by the Taliban, which has spurred the popular perception that it was the end of a very long effort to achieve a political settlement to the Afghan problem. The takeover was not necessarily the result of the Doha Talks or the US–Taliban deal.

The takeover was through a military campaign and not occasioned by sustained efforts for a political settlement. This perception of a conclusive military victory has made it difficult for the Taliban to open up and bring about an inclusive government. It has also inhibited their willingness to come out with open arms or adopt an inclusive set-up. In the first 100 days, therefore, the Taliban did not come across as being very open to embracing the other Afghan people or appreciating how much the country, the society and the people have transformed in the past 20 years.

The speaker noted that the majority of the Afghans are young and barely remember the earlier Taliban regime and the atrocities it committed. Under the new Taliban regime, similar atrocities have continued—security is a big challenge and extra-judicial killings and human rights violations are on the rise. Afghanistan is also witnessing the rise in Daesh attacks, especially along sectarian lines. This is definitely not a peaceful Afghanistan. There is a sense of isolation, as the very countries who rejoiced at the US leaving Afghanistan with a bloody nose have not yet recognised the Taliban government. There are issues of inclusivity even within the Taliban. Countries including Iran have expressed their concerns about the lack of inclusivity in the new Taliban set-up. On the economic front, there is an unfolding catastrophe especially in view of the harsh winter season ahead. Taliban are failing as rulers. They have still to come up with any plan to address the basic needs of the people including salaries for government employees, teachers and health workers.

India has made commendable efforts to help the people of Afghanistan through its humanitarian aid. But as things stand today, vast numbers are still without food and millions of children remain malnourished in the war-ravaged country. Taliban regime is more about rule and control than governance and delivery. The biggest challenge for the Taliban in the coming days is to transform from an insurgency to a political group, he concluded.

**Mr Abubakar Siddique (Editor, RFE/RL Gandhara, Prague)**, in his presentation titled “The Taliban’s Immediate Future”, pointed to the impending economic and humanitarian catastrophe in the country. The Taliban are facing their own set of challenges as they have not been recognised so far by the international community. The big question is, will the Taliban remain united? There is an ongoing internal struggle between various competing factions—the present Taliban, the older guard, and the Haqqani Network, which had joined hands with them in 1996. This intense internal power struggle is likely to continue in the days to come. There is a greater assertion of the Haqqani Network within the ranks of Taliban if one considers the network as separate from the Taliban. The fact that the Taliban declared themselves as the Islamic Emirate has, by and large, alienated other constituencies—not only the minorities are feeling excluded but even the secular Pashtun constituencies are feeling left out and alienated.

The minorities in Afghanistan that enjoyed significant influence over the past few decades have been rendered isolated. They are missing from the government and are feeling powerless. The influence of the minorities (the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Hazaras) has almost evaporated. Vying for recognition, right now, the Taliban, through social media tools, is making the most of the US\$ 20 million they have received from the World Bank as part of limited de-freezing of aid. But their progress towards social transformation is rather slow. Teenage girls still cannot go to school and women have been literally left out of society, denied any meaningful social role. The Taliban are, in fact, good at alienating people instead of winning them over.



Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai suggested convening a *Loya Jirga* or some kind of deliberation that could work towards gaining recognition at least domestically. There has been some interface between the Taliban government and India over the issues of medical supplies and stranded Afghans, but the problem with the Taliban is they cannot build an independent foreign policy or engage with all the regional powers. Unless the Taliban gain some legitimacy internally, they will not receive legitimacy internationally. On the IS-K, Mr Siddique noted that that the outfit does not have an Afghanistan-specific agenda and it is therefore not likely to undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban government. Being a trans-national network, there is no way they can turn into a national resistance movement.

**Dr Ayesha Siddiqa (Research Associate, SOAS, University of London and well-known commentator on Pakistan)**, in her presentation titled “Extreme Prognosis for an Extreme Region”, observed that while the world seems worried at what is happening in Afghanistan, one must take into account the fact that extremism across the entire region is on the rise. The forces of extremism are rapidly expanding and the region, as such, is already showing similar tendencies. In Pakistan, religious forces have become far more prevalent—the recent killing of a Sri Lankan national is just one example of this dangerous extremist trend. There are questions on the capability of the international community to engage with the Taliban. Due to lack of clarity of approach, there are efforts to cautiously engage with the Taliban. Pakistan, which has been overtly supportive of the Taliban regime, has not recognised them yet. It is reluctant to do so unless big powers and its allies like the US and China recognise the new regime in Kabul.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has been doing some heavy lifting by trying to help Afghanistan on the economic front even if Pakistan’s economy is as bad as that of Afghanistan. Pakistan itself is facing the resource crunch and in helping Afghanistan it is stressing its own existing resource scarcity. One cannot see a major democracy taking shape in Afghanistan. On the other side, Pakistan has been trying to tell how the Taliban is better than al Qaeda and the IS-K.



Dr Siddiqi noted that it is naïve to expect Afghanistan to transform itself like Saudi Arabia is doing at present. The same transformation cannot be expected from Afghanistan or Pakistan, she added. Saudi Arabia has a different identity while Afghanistan and Pakistan have for long professed themselves as the carriers of culture from the Arabian Peninsula, for nearly 1500 years. The Taliban have been operating differently—engaging separately, not together with the Chinese and the Russians. As of now, there seems no coming together of global forces and there is some friction in how the international community is behaving towards the Afghan issue.

**Amb Shamsheer M. Chowdhury (Former Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh)** began by briefly discussing the significance of 16 December as a historic day and how Bangladesh came into existence after millions of lives were lost. In his presentation titled “Afghanistan Heads Towards Uncertainty”, he noted that the inclusion of Afghanistan as a member of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) was an important development and things were looking very promising then. He also recalled the visit of President Daoud Khan of Afghanistan to Bangladesh in the early 1970s. With a population of 40 million, Afghanistan was seen as contributing to regional development and cooperation. But unfortunately for Afghanistan, it has slipped into a state of perpetual uncertainty since the 1980s. Things in Afghanistan took a worse turn with the Soviet invasion and the US President Ronald Reagan aided the Mujahideen movement and later colluded with them as he thought of them as ‘enemy’s enemy’. Amb Chowdhury was of the view that it was the energy requirement that drove the US towards Afghanistan in the 1990s, as it wanted the oil pipeline to go through at any cost.

In the present context, after the military takeover of Afghanistan, one needs to understand that it is not a recognised set-up. The withdrawal was mismanaged and has left a vacuum. The Afghans are not prepared to run a country and the present dispensation is not representative of the minds of the Afghan people and does not reflect the legitimate interests of the people. Despite promises and assurances, an inclusive administrative set-up has not come into being. The role of the international community is important in this regard.

Amb Chowdhury concluded by forwarding three important points looking at the way ahead. First, it is important to monitor continuously and carefully whatever happens in Afghanistan as it has a bearing on the entire South Asian region and Central Asia as well. South Asians need to have a close understanding of the complexities in Afghanistan. Secondly, the international community must work together to save Afghanistan from a looming humanitarian catastrophe. Regional powers—China, India, Iran and Russia—must remain engaged, which will have an impact on what happens to Afghanistan’s future. Regional organisations too have an important role to play in Afghanistan’s future peace and stability. It is important to have a convergence of goals for the international community to play a constructive role in Afghanistan.

**Mr Obaidullah Baheer (Lecturer, American University of Afghanistan, Kabul)**, in his presentation titled “Working With or Around the Taliban”, noted that irrespective of the reality that the Taliban are unable to bring in a semblance of stability in Afghanistan, some caution is necessary at the moment as these are long-term goals that must not be rushed into. The Taliban may have committed certain blunders but one must understand that this Taliban is relatively new to governance. Before the fall, Mr Baheer noted, the strategy was that the patrons of the Taliban wanted to put pressure on Kabul for a democratic transition and in turn create leverages/counterweights to later urge the Taliban to behave in a certain way. The regime, however, collapsed unexpectedly and the Taliban achieved a sense of victory and pride. This has probably become problematic for the patron states. This was one reason why countries like Iran who had been supportive of the Taliban have certain reservations now. Even Pakistan keeps complaining that the Taliban government is not paying heed to its advice.



On the IS-K front, Mr Baheer noted that it provides a very viable alternative to the Taliban fighters—especially the ones who are disgruntled with the ways things are proceeding under the new Taliban regime. This in turn is making the Taliban more rigid on the ideological front as they fear that the IS-K would turn out to be a catching net for the defectors. Something similar had happened when the peace talks with the US were at their peak. It is happening now also when the hardline factions feel that a specific policy is un-Islamic. Unlike Saudi Arabia where there is some kind of separation of the church and the state, in Afghanistan,

the Taliban have a social contract with their cadres on whom they are heavily reliant. The morale of the state forces in Afghanistan took a hit with the repeated prediction of the impending victory of the Taliban being made by the US over a period, he said.

At the core of conflicts such as the ongoing one in Afghanistan is the constant 'othering'. The ousted regime in Afghanistan relied heavily on the dominant narrative based on the 'othering' of the Taliban as someone who acted as agents of Pakistan and were there to occupy the country. The Taliban, on their part, saw all those not on their side as those who have aligned with foreign agendas. This binary approach that the Taliban either comply with or face sanctions may not be productive. There are several levels in between at which engagement must happen. For instance, the release of funds could be subjected to specific compliances and there could be monitoring bodies on the ground as well. The Taliban are an unfortunate reality that the world has to contend with. There is negative peace in Afghanistan. The country is in a transformational stage, and the Taliban can do better or worse.

### **Q&A Session**

The Q&A session brought forth interesting remarks such as whether India's approach to Afghanistan has been far too diplomatic. Another question dwelt on the Taliban's dilemma that in order to woo the international community, they may end up losing support from their ground fighters. They could suffer a loss of cadres to other groups which have a more radical vision for Afghanistan and regions beyond. Some other queries related to the recent executions and killings in Afghanistan, how connected the Taliban top leadership is with the foot-soldiers in far-flung areas, what is the possibility of the rampant radicalism in the Afghanistan–Pakistan (Af-Pak) region impacting the Taliban narrative, etc. There were questions about the possibility of the Taliban raising a regular army and whether the Taliban would succeed in the nation-building exercise; what role will the historical Pashtun–Tajik rivalry have in the state of affairs in Afghanistan; and will problems further complicate for Afghanistan if the present economic crisis intensifies.

### **Key Points**

- One of the primary challenges faced by the Taliban is how to balance out the expectation of the Afghan people, the international community, and their foot-soldiers. The struggle is around preserving their internal unity and maintaining discipline and balancing the interests of disparate groups/factions within.
- In the existing dilemma that the Taliban seem to be facing, there could be an opportunity for countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey to pitch in and help the Taliban better understand what an Islamic Emirate should look like.

- The international community seems to be punishing the Taliban by not recognising them and, hence, not giving them aid. This is fundamentally due to some retrograde policies being pursued by the regime.
- There is some attempt by the Taliban to present themselves as different and they are active on the diplomatic front to communicate that. They do not want to be seen as being controlled by Pakistan and want to show themselves as an Afghan national organisation.
- The typical ideas of 'rationality' may not apply to religious groups like the Taliban. Such groups do not look at physical or tangible limitations in a war. There is no cost-benefit analysis as such.
- It is difficult to decide who to talk to, within the Taliban. As a result, everyone is invariably approaching the select groups— an approach that does not seem to be working and is not productive.
- One must explore the possibility that the same madrassas in the Af-Pak region which initially radicalised the Taliban cadres could now reform or indoctrinate them against what they have been preaching (to radicalise youth) in the previous decades.
- For the Taliban, the challenge is to establish control and how to push back forces that compete with them. What is encouraging is the fact that they are also engaging widely with the rest of the world and the conversation thus is not entirely negative.
- There is a general lack of consensus on Afghanistan. The US has left but Russia and China are not too keen to put all their resources into Afghanistan. The unfolding situation in Afghanistan poses a challenge to the entire world as to whether the people in that country will be left to starve. Engagement must come about even if it is to reduce the possibility of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan in future.
- When one talks about Afghanistan, one must understand that it is a country that has faced three state collapses in a century. The Taliban are not organised enough. They may not be able to fulfil the state-building objectives.
- The problem with Afghanistan is that its regional neighbours have prioritised their strategic objectives over Afghanistan's legitimate interests and state-building challenges.
- The Taliban are showing some flexibility but the question is whether that flexibility is enough. The priority must be to address Afghanistan's dire humanitarian situation and help the collapsing economy to recover.

## SESSION TWO

### PERSPECTIVES ON AFGHANISTAN



The second session was chaired by **Amb Ashok Sajjanhar, Member, MP-IDSA Executive Council**. In his opening remarks about the current situation in Afghanistan, he pointed out that, firstly, after four months of takeover by the Taliban, not a single country has recognised their government. Although various delegations have visited the country and even the Taliban have been talking to different countries, the diplomatic recognition of the Taliban is still missing. Secondly, important Taliban voices like the Doha negotiator Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and his close aide Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai have been sidelined. They have been replaced by more radical people who are now heading the caretaker government in Kabul. This is a clear indication that Taliban 2.0 is highly faction-ridden and not homogenous. Thirdly, a large number of terrorists are operating in Afghanistan. The number seems to have grown compared to what it was during the first incarnation of the Taliban. Fourthly, apart from the noise at the time of the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has remained comparatively calm. There are not so many people leaving the country as seen in the 1990s. This in no way means that the challenge has come down as many concerns still remain.

**Mr Michael Kugelman (Deputy Director & Senior Associate, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC)** spoke on the topic “The Future of US Policy in Afghanistan”. He provided a historical context of the US engagement in Afghanistan. The US policy had long been on a trajectory of retreat. The decision of President Obama to surge troops in Afghanistan in 2009 came with an announcement of phased withdrawal of troops. From 2011, the number of troops in Afghanistan decreased slowly and the US combat operation stopped in 2014. President Trump was never comfortable about staying on in Afghanistan and had appointed Zalmay Khalilzad to negotiate a deal with the Taliban. Although the withdrawal deal was a flawed one, President Biden decided to honour it, despite his differences with the previous Trump administration.



Mr Kugelman observed that the future policy of the US towards Afghanistan is all about how to handle the post-withdrawal issues. The US can have near-term, mid-term and long-term policy options vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The main near-term goal is to help its citizens in Afghanistan and make an effort to address the worsening humanitarian crisis. Addressing the humanitarian crisis through humanitarian aid and financial assistance is still at the phase of deliberations. There is no finalised policy on this issue. There are political risks if the US decides to end sanctions and unfreeze frozen assets and allow them to flow into a country controlled by the Taliban and especially the Haqqani faction. Had the Haqqanis not been dominant in this Taliban government, the US policy might have been different.

The mid-term goals will be known in a couple of months from now when the humanitarian crisis subsides a little. There is no deal that the US has signed with neighbouring countries of Afghanistan about counter-terrorism cooperation, no intelligence sharing accords to help the US in monitoring terrorist groups in Afghanistan. There might be a deal with Pakistan to continue the US overhead flight rights in its air space, because counter-terrorism activities may not be effective if they are managed from its bases in the Middle East.

Mr Kugelman was of the opinion that the long-term policy no doubt includes US engagement with Afghanistan but its interests lie beyond Afghanistan. The US is more concerned with issues such as climate change and competition with China. One reason for withdrawal was to shift its focus to more important issues like confrontation with China. But still, the considerations of counter-terrorism will continue to guide the US policy in the region. The US policy would be to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a hub of terrorism. If at a certain point there is an intelligence input that Afghan territory is being used by terrorists for planning an attack on the US, then that might bring the US forces back, otherwise, that seems unlikely.

**Dr Nilofar Sakhi (Senior Fellow NR, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC)**, in her presentation titled “Afghanistan's Security Crisis and the Region”, made it clear at the outset that with the takeover by the Taliban, Afghanistan has entered a very new phase. With most of the Taliban leaders belonging to one particular ethnic group, the system is highly totalitarian. Since no other ethnic group has a presence at the top, there will be an identity

crisis. In the face of an identity crisis, people have two choices: either they leave the country or they revolt which might eventually lead to a civil war. At the moment, the country faces a humanitarian crisis; resource scarcity is looming and the threat of migration is imminent. All this will lead to social and political instability.



She dwelt on two different categories of security crisis: traditional security threats and non-traditional security threats. When it comes to traditional security issues, the Taliban could pose a threat to Afghanistan and the region as a whole, if it has links with transnational terror groups. More power to the Taliban will only lead to radicalisation and mobilisation of others, and in this case, Pakistan and Bangladesh are going to be affected. Taliban can inspire new groups in Central Asia, especially in Tajikistan.

The non-traditional security issues facing Afghanistan include lack of human capability, lack of technical support and lack of rule of law. The fact is that in the last four months Taliban has failed to provide a governance system. This would lead to people creating their own security systems. Many groups have emerged to pose a security threat to the new set-up. This situation could eventually lead to the emergence of a fragmented and armed society. So, the lack of good governance can create a lot of security issues. The non-traditional security issues also include local grievances like the suppressing of women rights, detaining and beating of journalists, and rampant poverty and starvation. Another dimension of non-traditional security is linked to the financial crisis faced by Afghanistan under the Taliban. Since the Taliban government is still facing a crisis of recognition and are unable to generate sources locally, the drug trade will likely witness a boom and more people will join the jihadist groups for financial gains.

Security is the main concern for countries in the region. For instance, China would not like to have a situation in Afghanistan that would pose security challenges to its mega projects in Pakistan. China will always try to protect its economic projects. Russia will try to limit the spillover to the Central Asian states and Iran also would want better treatment of Hazaras and end of the drug trade. For these interests, all three might build an alliance. Although an alliance between China and Russia seems unlikely, but given their common concerns and interests, they may as well build an alliance at least to mitigate the threats emanating from Afghanistan.

**Mr Bruce Pannier (Central Asia Correspondent, RFE/RL, Prague)** began his presentation, titled “Central Asia’s Approach Towards Taliban-controlled Afghanistan”, by dwelling on the history of Central Asia’s relationship with Afghanistan. None of the Central Asian states is comfortable about Taliban gaining control in Afghanistan, he pointed out. The speaker felt this could be because of their experience with the first Taliban rule. The speaker focused on events of 1996 when the Taliban first came to power and back then, most of the Central Asian states, excluding Turkmenistan, panicked.

Turkmenistan maintained a neutral stance in 1996 given its policy of neutrality; it was mainly focused on its economy and acting as a transit country for energy projects like the TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) pipeline. Like the rest of the Central Asian states, Turkmenistan did not recognise the Taliban government but had a Taliban representative office in Ashgabat mainly for the TAPI pipeline. In 1996, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were alarmed by the Taliban’s rise and movement towards the Central Asian borders. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as bordering states of Afghanistan, were hostile to the Taliban and assisted anti-Taliban groups like the Northern Alliance. They were warned by the Taliban at the time. Foreign fighters participating in the Tajik Civil War were left with no space in the society after the peace agreement was signed, and they ended up forming terror groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).



The Taliban always had contacts with the IMU and ensured its revival in Central Asia, which led the Central Asian states to focus on their own internal problems rather than Afghanistan. After 9/11, the US intervention in Afghanistan benefitted the Central Asian states, particularly since the threat from both Taliban and IMU was eliminated. There was a disconnection of some sorts between Afghanistan and Central Asia after the Taliban came to power, but over time, the connections revived mainly after various ADB (Asian Development Bank) and BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) projects were initiated with an eye on improving regional inter-state connectivity.

Mr Pannier added that various initiatives were taken up at the time including the construction of railway and electricity lines and other development projects and that there is still hope of projects continuing particularly the Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan based projects. Except Tajikistan, which refuses to engage the Taliban, all other Central Asian states have adopted a stance similar to the one adopted by Turkmenistan vis-à-vis the Taliban in the 1990s. This is mainly in the hope that the Taliban would not allow any movement of Central Asian militants from Afghanistan to Central Asia. The speaker ended with the idea that the Taliban would not like to have any hostile neighbour. They are likely to keep away from issues that bother the Central Asian states, though this is not likely to work in the long term.

**Dr Irina Zvyagelskaya (Head, Centre for the Middle East Studies, IMEMO, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow)** began her presentation, titled “The Central Asian States versus New Afghanistan”, stating that with the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, there are no winners in Central Asia. At the same time, some countries believe that they have better prospects for developing relations with the new government in Afghanistan if the conditions set by the international community are met. Some countries look like losers because of their problems on the border.



The issue with the Central Asian states is that they are placed at the heartland with no access to the sea, and in this sense, Uzbekistan is one country which has always seen Afghanistan not as a problem but as an opportunity. It was one of the few countries and the only Central Asian country that started talks with the Taliban in Doha. They believe that there is some common ground to resolve the issue of connectivity. However, at the same time, there are genuine concerns that radical elements within Uzbekistan can become active. Tajikistan, on the other hand, is a loser. It shares a long border of 1,350 km with Afghanistan and it is not as fortified as the one with Uzbekistan.

The problem for Tajikistan is that the north of Afghanistan is still unstable and the question of who fights against whom remains. What makes the situation worse is that there are a lot of highly radicalised elements in Tajikistan who are willing to leave their country for Afghanistan, and if they stay on, they will only undermine the stability of Tajikistan. This is

the real threat to the country. The favourable thing for Tajikistan is the presence of a Russian base that can counter any threat emanating from Afghanistan, including threats to Russian interests. Other Central Asian countries like Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan also see Afghanistan as an opportunity. Although all except Tajikistan are ready to talk to the Taliban, they are not in a hurry to recognise their government.

### **Q&A Session**

In the Q&A session that followed, the speakers answered the questions posed to them, ranging from regional security in the wake of the Taliban takeover to Pakistan's collaboration with the Taliban and its impact on India. Talking about the sudden withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, Mr Kugelman said that the withdrawal was executed badly and that very few in Washington had anticipated that the Taliban will take over with the US troops still there. Everything has collapsed so swiftly and there is a lot that remains unknown. The IS-K is carrying out attacks almost every day and the thing to watch out is the presence of foreign terrorists in Afghanistan. Although the US wants to move away from Afghanistan to areas where China is more active, it cannot afford to allow Afghanistan to become a safe haven for foreign terrorists either. About Pakistan's collaboration with the US, he said that there might be some agreement between the two sides but Russia and China will not put pressure on Pakistan over this issue.

On the question of Pakistan's challenges after the takeover, Dr Nilofar opined that there is a feeling in Pakistan that they are strong enough to manage the internal security threats posed by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). About the threats that Taliban-ruled Afghanistan poses to India, she said that friendly relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban is not favourable to India as the Afghan territory might be used against India. Commenting on key concerns before the Central Asian countries, Mr Pannier pointed to the possible return of the Central Asian fighters from Afghanistan as a security challenge. On China's possible military presence in Tajikistan, Dr Irina said this is unlikely for two reasons: first, there is already a Russian base in Tajikistan, and second, it is not in line with China's Central Asia policy.

### **Key Points**

- All countries are going forward in a circumspect manner and are taking small steps watching how things evolve and pan out in Afghanistan.
- The Taliban takeover may inspire jihadists in other neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh.
- The US–Pakistan deal is possible for the continuation of the US overhead flight rights in Pakistan's air space.
- Pakistan's strong influence over Afghan Taliban may not be favourable for India.

- There are no winners in Central Asia after the Taliban takeover but still most of the countries in the region look at Afghanistan as an opportunity and hope for better prospects to engage Afghanistan.
- There are apprehensions in Central Asia that the radicalised elements who fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan might return and pose internal security challenges.

**DAY TWO**  
**Friday, 17 December 2021**

**SESSION THREE\***

**REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

The third session of the South Asia Conference discussed the Pakistani, Chinese, Central Asian, Russian and Iranian perspectives on the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The session was chaired by **Amb Rakesh Sood, former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan**.

**Prof Pervez Hoodbhoy (Islamabad-based Physicist and Writer)**, in his presentation titled “Taliban Victory in Afghanistan–The Impact Upon Pakistan”, deliberated on how Pakistan sees the Taliban victory in Afghanistan and its impact on Pakistan. According to Prof Hoodbhoy, there was euphoria in Pakistan on the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan. This sense of triumphalism continues in Pakistan. There is a feeling that the Taliban assumed power, not as part of a negotiated settlement, but as an out-and-out victory. At the same time, there is a recognition of the fact that there is a certain geopolitical cost incurred by Pakistan in the victory: there is a souring of Pakistan’s relationship with the US. As a response, Pakistan has decided to strengthen its relations with China.

There is hope in Pakistan that China will bring stability to Afghanistan by removing poverty and strengthening institutions inside Afghanistan, taking advantage of the mineral resources in the country. However, there is inhibition on the Chinese side to invest in the mining sector or any other project given the instability in Afghanistan, which is unlikely to end soon.

Despite the geopolitical implications, there is no rivalry between the US and China in Afghanistan. There is a tacit agreement between the two big powers on Afghanistan. From the Pakistani perspective, this is a welcome development, according to Prof Hoodbhoy, as the big power rivalry in the region is not in Pakistan’s interests.

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\* **Prof Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour**, Distinguished Fellow, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), Tehran and **Dr Bahar Jalali**, Visiting Professor, Loyola University Maryland could not join the session due to technical issues. The title of Prof Sajjadpour’s presentation was “Social Engineering of Afghanistan Revisited”, and that of Dr Jalali was “Return of Taliban and Reversal of Women's Rights in Afghanistan”.



Prof Hoodbhoy argued that the Taliban, who are trained in Pakistani madrassas, are greatly reliant on Pakistan. People in the Pakistani establishment see this as an opportunity. Now, Afghanistan is seen as the fifth province of Pakistan. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was seen advising the Taliban about how to run society and how to organise themselves. However, Prof Hoodbhoy expressed his doubt about Pakistan having the required expertise to assist Afghanistan on governance issues. He also highlighted the cultural differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan and said that the non-Pakhtun Pakistanis will not be welcomed in Afghanistan. He argued that it would have been easier both for Pakistan and Afghanistan if the Taliban had shown a desire for change. The attitude of the Taliban on important issues like education would inevitably have an effect in Pakistan, according to him.

Discussing the impact of the Taliban victory on Pakistan, Prof Hoodbhoy noted two severe consequences: (1) the reinvigoration of jihadi groups within the country; and (2) the general emboldening of religious parties in Pakistan. He pointed out that despite the sectarian differences with the Taliban, all the religious political parties in Pakistan are getting euphoric. There is a radical shift towards the right within Pakistan. A severe consequence of this development in the school curriculum is already visible.

The Taliban victory is also going to exacerbate the ethnic dimension. Prof Hoodbhoy argued that although the Durand Line has been accepted as a national boundary, there are linkages between the Pashtuns living on either side of the Durand Line. There is a fear in Pakistan that the flow of Afghan refugees into Pakistan will strengthen the Pashtun nationalism within Pakistan. Pakistan hopes that a friendly Taliban government would consolidate the national boundary. Pakistan is also hoping that the Taliban will be able to modernise under Pakistani tutelage.

According to Prof Hoodbhoy, helping the Afghan people bypassing the Taliban is a serious moral problem. This is the biggest problem now emanating from Afghanistan and it is a challenge for the world to act before it becomes a catastrophe.

**Dr Wang Shida (Deputy Director and Associate Professor, Institute for South Asian Studies, CICIR, Beijing)**, in his presentation titled “Afghanistan’s Road to Peace and Development”, said that with the retreat of the US and the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) military forces in August this year, a new phase of history has begun in Afghanistan. It has finally restored Afghan national sovereignty after a long gap. The Taliban have now formed a central government without the help of external influence and external control. It is a major event not only for Afghanistan but also for the entire region.

Dr Wang was of the opinion that in the foreseeable future, no major power would be able to intervene in Afghanistan and thus there are ample opportunities for the Taliban regime provided it learnt the right lessons from its previous rule from 1996 to 2001. According to him, the ethnic dynamics in Afghanistan is such that no one ethnic group can monopolise power and form government without the resistance of other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. He argued that there are several prerequisites for the government in Kabul: (1) Political reconciliation with different ethnic groups to avoid domestic opposition and formulation of a composite government including members from all communities; (2) The government must include technocrats to improve governance in the country; (3) The Taliban must give up terrorism and try to focus on moderate Islam; (4) They should not allow their territory to be used by other terrorist groups; (5) They must implement mild and moderate foreign policies; (6) They must work with the neighbours and create a conducive atmosphere for its domestic development; and finally, (7) Afghanistan must work with major countries to achieve stability.



According to Dr Wang, the main problem for the Taliban is that the geopolitical conditions around Afghanistan have undergone dramatic changes. The US dominance in Afghanistan has been completely broken. However, the US will try to continue to play a role. In this context, regional countries will have to raise their voice. But unfortunately, the regional countries do not have a consensus on issues pertaining to Afghanistan. Internal problems in some of the regional countries may also create a fresh challenge for the Taliban. In this context, he argued that the UN Security Council members along with the regional countries must try to influence the Taliban to have a smooth transition from chaos to governance.

Focusing on China’s Role in Afghanistan, Dr Wang mentioned that China played an important role by hosting meetings between Afghans and the international community to discuss issues

of concern. However, the Afghan issue cannot be resolved by any foreign country. The Afghan people need to find political solutions among themselves. He also stated that China would like to play a role in the economic field. Nonetheless, he mentioned that China did not take up several projects in Afghanistan because of security issues. Once the country gets stabilised domestically, and also its relationship with other countries including the US gets normalised, China will have the potential to invest in projects in Afghanistan. He pointed out that China had provided security assistance to the Ashraf Ghani Government and would like to provide security assistance to the current Kabul regime as well, but how the China–Afghanistan security cooperation under the current dispensation would take shape, is difficult to fathom as it is still a work in progress.

**Dr Akram Umarov (Fulbright Visiting Scholar, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)** shared his perspective on “Central Asia, Taliban and the Regional Security”.



Dr Umarov emphasised the point that even though the Central Asian countries have different perceptions of the Taliban and follow different approaches towards the Taliban regime, there is a common understanding on the expectations from Afghanistan, and those are: (1) restoration of security and stability in the country; (2) reduction of drug trafficking; (3) deal with the terrorist groups originated from Central Asia and active within Afghanistan; (4) ensure that weapons left by the US do not fall in the wrong hands and get smuggled to Central Asia; (5) retain and revive trade relations that existed between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan before the US withdrawal; (6) provide transit facility to continue the connectivity projects between Central Asia and South Asia; (7) go for internal legitimacy to get international recognition and hold internal discussions among various factions within the Taliban to come to a common understanding on foreign policy and governance issues to get international recognition; (8) address Central Asian concerns about the Taliban regime (as to what extent the Taliban is independent and free from external pressures in decision making); (9) improve on issues of governance; (10) focus on de-securitisation to avoid showing its military might unnecessarily; and finally, (11) find out solutions for the immediate problems the country is currently facing.

**Dr Alexey Kupriyanov (Head, Group on South Asia and Indian Ocean, IMEMO, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow)**, in his presentation titled “Taliban 2.0: A View from Russia”, argued that Russia viewed the situation in Afghanistan based on three imperatives: (1) stable and calm Afghanistan, where there is no war and no flow of refugees to Central Asia; (2) no presence of the United States and NATO in the southern border; and (3) prevention or reduction of drug trafficking from Afghanistan.



Dr Kupriyanov mentioned that Russia would be more amenable to working with a friendly and moderate government in Afghanistan. The Ghani Government was anti-Russia, and therefore, Russia could not rely on his government and also could not fully explore the idea of establishing contacts with anti-Taliban resistance groups. In that context, Russia has no other alternative but to have a working relationship with the Taliban. However, Russia remains sceptical about the Taliban’s capability to fulfil its obligations and responsibilities effectively. It is due to a lack of confidence in the Taliban regime that Russia continues to regard the Taliban as a terrorist organisation.

However, in the emerging geopolitical scenario, post-US withdrawal, Russia is trying to have an understanding with the Taliban to keep the threat of terrorism at bay. The Russia–Taliban relationship, in Dr Kupriyanov’s view, is pragmatic. Russia will not recognise the Taliban regime in its current form but will continue to invite the Taliban for talks and also provide necessary economic aid. He further argued that in the Russian political discourse, there is a perception that with some support Taliban may be able to form a working system of government and bring stability to Afghanistan.

As the distinguished speaker from Iran, **Prof Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour**, could not join the session due to technical issues, other panellists and some MP-IDSA scholars shared their perspectives on the evolving Iranian approach to Afghanistan under the Taliban rule.

**Dr Akram Umarov** stated that the relations between Iran and the Taliban have completely changed in the current scenario, compared to the relations in the 1990s. Because of a common enemy, Iran was fine with the fact that the Taliban could defeat the US and the Western forces. However, at the same time, there are apprehensions on both sides that

tensions could escalate as there are issues between Iran and the Taliban. In the current scenario, Iran, like any other neighbouring country, is looking for stability, predictability and credibility in Afghanistan. However, Iran is concerned about the Taliban's approach towards the Shia and Hazara communities in Afghanistan. It is looking for more positive developments in Afghanistan, and therefore, using the Hazara militants against the Taliban is not a policy of the current Iranian dispensation.

According to **Dr Deepika Saraswat (Associate Fellow, West Asia Centre, MP-IDSA)**, the current dispensation in Iran is following a policy of "strategic patience" and watching how the Taliban are consolidating themselves and how they are looking at Iranian concerns about the Shia Hazara minority, and also the security of the border since Iran shares a 1,000 km long border with Afghanistan. Iran is also very much concerned about drug trafficking, smuggling and refugee issues. Dr Saraswat argued that Iran would not like to be caught in sectarian quagmires at the moment.

### **Q&A Session**

During the Q&A session, a whole lot of issues related to Pashtun nationalism versus Islamist identity, Pakistan's approach towards the non-Pashtun minority, the possibility of Pakistan's direct military intervention in Afghanistan in a situation where it is felt that the Taliban are under duress, and the role of the Haqqani Network in mediating between the Pakistan Government and the TTP were also raised.

- It was argued that due to conflicting identities among the ethnic groups, Afghanistan is not united despite having a common Islamic identity. At times, ethnic and tribal identities became predominant over the Islamic identity. So, Pakistan using the Taliban to popularise the Islamist Pashtun identity to counter Pakhtun nationalism may not work.
- There is very little chance that the Pakistan military would put its boots on Afghan soil.
- Pakistan is not in conflict with the Afghan Taliban over the unmet demands.
- The Taliban will continue to face problems primarily because of their position on governance and other issues. The contradiction of a terrorist organisation forming the government and trying to get legitimacy, and also in the process trying to keep links with its old jihadist friends, is the dilemma the Taliban would be facing in the coming days.
- The internal contradictions within the Taliban could grow with time and create a destabilising situation in Afghanistan.
- Without a charismatic leader, the Taliban may face a major crisis in the months to come.

## SESSION FOUR

### WAY FORWARD IN AFGHANISTAN



The last session of the conference was chaired by **Amb Sujjan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA, and subsequently by Maj Gen (Dr) Bipin Bakshi, Retd, Deputy Director General, MP-IDSA**. In his opening remarks, Amb Chinoy pointed out that each session of the conference touched upon new points about Afghanistan and the evolving situation, and one common issue that stood out was the looming ‘humanitarian crisis’. Although the international community agrees that humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan would take priority, he emphasised that it should get through in a transparent manner. Another broad point that emerged in the conference, Amb Chinoy added, was the “uncertainty surrounding the Taliban regime” in Afghanistan. He pointed out that the Taliban are not able to make the transition from a violent insurgent group to an acceptable member of the international community. Further, he pointed out that the speakers also highlighted that the Taliban was a faith-based organisation. If they remain violent and intolerant, they will continue to invite the ire of the international community and if they were to become benign, they will equally be condemned by more radical factions and groups like the IS-K that believes that the Taliban have gone soft on Islam.

Amb Chinoy argued that the civil war cannot be ruled out as the US left Afghanistan under military pressure and without achieving their aims and objectives, and added that the US will not interfere in Afghanistan ever again unless their homeland is threatened. He was of the opinion that Pakistan will continue to support the Haqqani Network in order to get rid of the TTP. If Pakistan makes the Taliban more Islamist, then there will be greater radicalism in the region including in Pakistan, and if they make the Taliban more nationalist, they will run the risk of awakening Pakhtun nationalism, thereby threatening the Durand Line with Afghanistan. He also emphasised that the primary objective for India remains to build on the goodwill that it has with the people of Afghanistan.

**Prof C. Raja Mohan (Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore)** spoke on “Afghanistan and South Asia: Two Different Futures” and looked at the longer-term consequences of what is happening in Afghanistan for the South Asian region. He underlined that there could be two different futures from the choices that get made in Afghanistan. He talked about three broad themes of consequence for the Subcontinent as a whole: first, what will be the nature of the social and political organisation in Afghanistan? He underlined that the Taliban are not just forming another government in Afghanistan, they are also changing the flag, wanting to change the constitution and the name of the country; and therefore, what they are talking about is the restructuring of the state in terms of their own ideological vision. The dual question for the world is whether it will be an undiluted affirmation of their ideological positions or it will be an incremental pragmatic adaptation to the real world. If the Taliban give up too much of their ideology, then there will be attacks from within and if they stick to their ideology, then there will be problems with governing Afghanistan itself. The IS-K is already saying that the Taliban is not pure enough. Therefore, the choices that the Taliban make in terms of how they want to proceed will have consequences for Afghanistan itself and in turn on the region.



The immediate consequence will be the nature of the religious and political structure that the Taliban want to bring, which may envelop Pakistan as well. The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, who is otherwise seen as a symbol of modernity, today talks about organising Pakistan on Islamic lines, making it a ‘Riyasat-e-Madina’. The Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) comes from a far more right-wing flank that is demanding things that are increasingly becoming difficult for the Pakistan state to accept; nevertheless, it has already started conceding to the demands of the TLP through secret deals. This amplified dependence on ideology in Pakistan has increased with the coming of the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

The second is economic development. What kind of economic model Afghanistan will develop? Afghanistan has very little internal resources to build a modern economic society. Historically, Afghanistan was always a weak state, so the choice is either to turn towards the Western world or China. There is a naïve belief that the Chinese money will simply transfer into Afghanistan, but the reality is that it will also need international support. To get international assistance, Afghanistan needs to fulfil certain conditions.

The third is regional security. What happens to the security in Afghanistan will have consequences on the whole region of the Indo-Gangetic plains. Then the question is what kind of a vision the Taliban have for the longer-term security of the region? Does it want to be subaltern to Pakistan or an independent autonomous actor? Today, they are putting pressure on Pakistan to allow Indian wheat to move overland. Pakistan's conception of Afghanistan has been that it should be a protectorate of Pakistan. It wants Afghanistan to be a security buffer, but can this be sustained? It depends on the position the Taliban government takes vis-à-vis Pakistan and choices they make in terms of regional security configurations.

From an Indian perspective, an autonomous Afghanistan would be of great value. He pointed out that the contradictions between Afghanistan and Pakistan will not be resolved anytime soon, which gives room for engagement between Delhi and Kabul. But the dependence of Afghanistan on Pakistan under the Taliban is also real; so, how it plays out will have a critical impact on the nature of the regional order as a whole. But if Afghanistan chooses the Chinese capital, it will connect the country with its projects like the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), rather than a horizontally connected Afghanistan that is linked to Iran, to India, and linked to the West in a broader sense.

Many realists would say that the nature of the internal regime is not important. As long as Afghanistan does not host and export revolutionary groups, there will be far less international criticism of its structure and make it easier for countries to work with the Taliban. However, the longer-term consequences will bring back the historic and geographic contradictions that exist between Kabul and Rawalpindi, as well as the links between Kabul and Delhi, and the nature of the relationship across this vast region.

**Mr Mahendra Ved (President Emeritus, Commonwealth Journalists Association, New Delhi)**, in his presentation titled “A Long, Violent, Road Ahead for Afghanistan”, pointed out that 24 years have passed and so much has changed, but how much has changed within the Taliban is the question. Many who were part of the Taliban 1.0 are seen as softliners today, and they have given birth to hardliners that are calling the shots in Taliban 2.0. He added that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan is one of the most shocking events of this year. Whatever may be the flaws, Afghanistan did witness a semblance of democracy during the civilian rule but now there is no news of what will be the use of the infrastructure built by the international community, including several reconstruction and development projects carried out by India.

Mr Ved argued that among the hardliners, the position of the Haqqanis seems to be the strongest as they control key ministries in the Taliban government. They are not likely to obey any undertaking given by the Taliban negotiators in Doha. The world community is pledging the Taliban to make their government inclusive, by involving ethnic minorities and women in the governance. Afghanistan is a deeply patriarchal society and whatever changes the

Taliban are promising now will be cosmetic. There is going to be a long wait-and-watch until the Taliban regime can formally be recognised by the international community.

He further argued that the international community should put and maintain the pressure on the Taliban government the same way it did on Pakistan to do more to fight terrorism. Pakistan is a common factor as a facilitator in Afghanistan. For now, the Afghan economic condition demands urgent relief, the Gulf nations and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are expected to contribute to the economy to avert a humanitarian crisis. Pakistan has set a relief fund to get donations from the national and international community but it is not clear how it will be passed on to the Afghan people. There is a possibility that it might get diverted into other directions. The onus is on the world community to save the Afghans from their miseries.

Mr Ved also argued that the challenge before India is how to deal with the Haqqanis who have a record of acting as Pakistan's proxy and attacking India's interests in Afghanistan. He underlined that whether or not Pakistan gains strategic depth, it will certainly gain commercial gains in Afghanistan and regain the market lost in the past to China and India. In this regard, he emphasised the significance of the Chabahar Port and related projects.

**Prof Ajay Darshan Behera (Director, MMAJ Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi)** spoke on "The Peril of Legitimisation". He pointed out that it is difficult to predict the developments post-August 2021 when the Taliban took over Afghanistan. It is a catch-22 situation. One of the most important questions that have to be addressed and dealt with is, can the Taliban be removed by force? And if not, then the next question is, how to deal with the Taliban. Since the takeover, better sense has prevailed within the international community and it has come to the consensus that there is a need to engage with the Taliban, and at the same time, there is no need to recognise the Taliban government in haste. One thing both the international community and India need to keep in mind is that there is no short-term solution for Afghanistan, this is a long-term game. He pointed out that regional security has completely changed with the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, which suggests that the region and the wider international community will have to be in this situation for a fairly long time.



Dr Behera underlined that initially there was a hope that there will be internal resistance to the Taliban. But unfortunately, there is no resistance to the Taliban now and they have overtaken the country and are more in control than in the 1990s. The question is, what should be the role of the regional powers given the fact that many of them have not accepted the Taliban regime. It is the role of the international community and regional powers to ensure that the economic conditions in the country do not deteriorate to a point where it starts impacting the security situation in the region. He argued that the Taliban may have sent some positive feelers by engaging in talks with the US in Doha but ideologically they have not changed. There is no clarity on their version of an inclusive government. The question then is, how long the Taliban will be able to rule the country. Is this going to be an illegitimate government not accepted by the people? He argued that the Afghan economy has structural issues and it will not be able to get out of the trap and remain dependent on aid for a long time. He concluded by saying that recognising the Taliban government gives credence to Pakistan's strategy, therefore delegitimisation of the Taliban regime is very important to delegitimise other terror groups, emanating from Pakistan.

**Dr Ashok K. Behuria (Senior Fellow & Coordinator, South Asia Centre, MP-IDSA)** spoke on the topic "The Way Ahead in Afghanistan". He discussed three possible options about how to approach the Taliban regime: first, to accept and engage; second, dissociate and disengage; and finally, stay indifferent. Going from bottom to top, he underlined that staying indifferent might make things worse and added that earlier the world remained indifferent to Afghanistan after the Soviet pull-out and unfortunately, it became the nest of terror with Osama bin Laden migrating to Afghanistan and making his base there and it was followed by 9/11. Going over the second postulation of whether one should reject the Taliban, he underlined that this may not also be a very good idea. What is considered illegitimate, many in Afghanistan might consider legitimate. The US after fighting the Taliban for 20 years, now recognise it as a reality. Today, irrespective of the terror tag on the Taliban, China, the US, Russia and Iran consider it as an alternative now.

Dr Behuria pointed out that by 2018 most of the countries had decided to engage with the Taliban for peace in Afghanistan and that the Taliban and the Afghan people are resilient enough to persist at a subservient level, even if the world refuses to engage them. However, disengagement is fraught with problems, especially when many powers in the world are recognising it as a force to reckon with, if not as a government. To accept and engage, he held, might be the most viable option as of today more than before, especially in the wake of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. He held that the international community must help the Afghans in this hour of crisis.

Dwelling on the conservative outlook of the Taliban, Dr Behuria held that if one were to look at other Islamic neighbours of Afghanistan, like Iran and Saudi Arabia, the world has recognised them even if they are pretty conservative in their outlook. Therefore, ignoring Afghanistan simply because it is not as resource-rich as the conservative countries in the

Middle East and because it wants to set up an Islamic Emirate, is not logical. He argued that if the world has engaged conservative regimes elsewhere, why not Taliban in Afghanistan? In a country like Afghanistan, the Taliban enjoys legitimacy and the majority of Pashtuns want them. At present, when Afghanistan is at a crossroads, and its neighbours are not seriously thinking about its future, it is imperative to stay engaged with Afghanistan and both ensure and enable an inclusive government. He was sceptical about the effectiveness of sanctions and boycotts on the behaviour of the Taliban. He was of the view instead that the world should find a way to engage and pressurise the Taliban at the same time to shape Afghanistan in a more acceptable way. At present, he pointed out there is no external (international community) or internal consensus (within Afghanistan) on how to take Afghanistan forward, which is making the matters worse.

### **Q&A Session**

Key observations made during the Q&A session are as follows:

On prospects of Taliban incorporating the ethnic minorities in their government, it was stated that Pashtuns are the single largest ethnicity in Afghanistan but not the majority. Uzbeks, Hazaras, Tajiks and other groups are significant minorities and they historically lived in the northern regions of Afghanistan. It has to be noted that Afghanistan is an inward-looking society and it has not been able to fully integrate its minorities. There have also been tensions along sectarian lines, between Sunnis and Shias.

The issue of security along the northern borders, including the Wakhan Corridor, was discussed in the context of the Tajik position vis-à-vis the Taliban and reports and speculations about China building a base in Tajikistan close to the Afghan border. It was stated that the rise of the Chinese power and what it does to historic arrangements that were there in the Subcontinent is something that needs to be looked into. The Chinese role has to be seen in the broader context of undefined northern frontiers between Kashmir and Afghanistan and Central Asia.

On the issue of encouraging the Taliban to get down to the basics of governance and economy, it was stated that there is no easy way for the Taliban regime to secure the legitimisation of its rule in Afghanistan despite the many conjectures and theories. It is basically an insurgent group that has taken over power and does not have a roadmap for governance. That is why the Taliban government does not talk about its governance system, except for talking about an Islamic regime. The question now is, what are the governance structures that need to change under the Taliban rule? The fact is that most of the educated people required to support governance have left the country, so how the Taliban will replace them has to be seen. As far as the economy is concerned, it will be a 'war economy' for a long time to come. To what extent or how long can the international community provide humanitarian aid is another crucial question because until and unless there is an internal mechanism to deal with the reality, things will not change in Afghanistan.



In response to a query regarding the process of legitimisation of the Taliban that would be acceptable to the international community, it was stated that legitimisation is a very vague term. For the Indian strategic community, the question is how the internal contradictions play out and how India protects its interest in Afghanistan. India's core interest in Afghanistan is that the latter does not become a reservoir for Pakistan-supported terrorism against India. Today, the Taliban are reaching out to India. The Taliban have their own agency and the idea that somehow the world can persuade them to behave in a particular manner is very ambiguous. The focus should be on understanding the structural changes taking place in Afghanistan and how it is playing out. There is a need to distinguish between diplomatic posturing that governments do and strategic questions. There is a need to focus more on what is doable rather than getting into the question about the nature and the legitimacy of the Taliban. If one talks about legitimisation by the rest of the world, China and Russia are very close to accepting the legitimacy of the Taliban in Afghanistan and are ready to do business with them. The question is whether they will do it formally. There is going to be a lot more twists and turns in the way the Taliban would behave.

On the TTP unilaterally calling off the month-long ceasefire with the Pakistan Government, and its impact on the future of peace talks, it was stated that if one looks at the literature available on the TTP, one finds that the TTP and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Afghanistan (TTA) are very similar. The TTP says that the Pakistan Army is *wajib ul qatl* (it is legitimate to kill them) and that they do not deserve to be where they are today; and thus, the TTP continue their fight with the Pakistan Army, much like the TTA was fighting the Afghan National Army (ANA). There is also a possibility that the TTA and the Haqqani Network are trying to mediate between the Pakistan Army and the Pakistan State. The success of the TTA in Afghanistan has emboldened the TTP, which is a conglomerate of 30-plus groups. Therefore, the rejection of the ceasefire earlier agreed to by the TTP should not come as a surprise. Also, in future, there is a possibility that the Pakistan Army might be able to turn the attention of certain groups within the TTP towards India but even then, there will be elements that will keep fighting the Pakistan Army.

On Afghan Taliban making overtures towards India, it was stated that the Taliban want autonomy from Pakistan, the end of their isolation, and also freedom of action to stabilise their regime. They are trying to reach out to whoever they can, in whatever form they can. In this context, there is a need to analyse and focus on the new facts, the new dynamics that are shaping the region, the contradictions within, and the room for India to protect its interests from worst possible outcomes in Afghanistan.

**Vote of Thanks:** *The 13<sup>th</sup> MP-IDSA South Asia Conference concluded with the Conference Coordinator, **Mr Vishal Chandra**, delivering the Vote of Thanks. He expressed his gratitude to the distinguished speakers and participants, session chairpersons, and the Director General, the Deputy Director General, the South Asia Centre Coordinator, and the Scholars and Members of the Institute for enriching the conference deliberations. He thanked the Rapporturing and Tweeting teams, and the Webmaster and the IT Cell, the Conference Cell, and other Members of the Institute's Administrative Staff for their valuable assistance in organising the two-day international conference. He also announced that an edited book, comprising of papers to be submitted by the conference speakers, will be brought out subsequently.*

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