



**COSATT-KAS  
WEBINAR**

JULY 16, 2020

**'Afghanistan:  
The Way Forward'**

## **Executive Summary:**

Afghanistan has been a playground for great power competition. Four decades of war, thousands dead, billions of dollars spent yet a lingering conflict has led to unspeakable tragedy and suffering. A humanitarian crisis has led to millions without basic health care, safe drinking water, adequate food or sanitation. The entire societal fabric has been torn apart while Afghanistan stands at a critical juncture today. As domestic power dynamics become acute, external actors need to coordinate and collaborate rather than engage in zero-sum games. The priority should be national unity, building of strong democratic institutions and establishing enduring peace and stability. With these objectives, COSATT-KAS organized a webinar on July 16, 2020 on 'Afghanistan: The Way Forward.' Heads of think-tanks of COSATT member institutions along with Afghan experts participated in the webinar. Directors of the KAS Political Dialogue Asia Programme and KAS Afghanistan office spoke on the occasion. They highlighted the need to keep our connection to Afghanistan open, the communication lines with our Afghan experts strong despite of the changes coming in the next few months and years.

Two main lady speakers of the webinar- from India and Pakistan respectively, analyzed how Afghanistan will look like in the post withdrawal of US troops that will be followed by withdrawal of European troops as well. They described the challenges of women during this difficult situation of COVID-19 and also about women empowerment and gender mainstreaming. The Taliban has assured during recent negotiations that women will be given respect and adequate space in the future political arrangement but this promise has little credibility in the background of their past actions. New generation of Afghanistan desires democratic freedom. But in the rush for a pull-out, the US maybe ignoring a lot of these issues. Adequate global attention too will not be there for Afghan matters as the world is grappling with managing the pandemic. Consequently, the entire world will pay a heavy price if there is a reversal of gains and subversion of the democratic process. The international community needs to ensure that the democratic experiment is nurtured and retained. For having an inclusive peace process, more Afghans need to be on board the peace process negotiations.

The responsibility shifting from the international community to the regional countries cannot be ruled out in the post-withdrawal phase. Afghanistan's contemporary politics turned a new leaf with the signing of the peace deal but the real challenge will be from now on. It will require sustained engagement with all stakeholders with each side flexible for a compromise.

### **Mr. Christian Echle**

It is good to have a COSATT workshop today through the zoom platform. It is this new normal that we have to get adapted to. We met last time in Colombo in early March and had made big plans for 2020 which were somewhat ambushed by the COVID epidemic.

I am thankful to COSATT for following our suggestion to look more into Afghanistan. I am happy to have our KAS Afghanistan office involved. It is one of the two KAS offices that we have in South Asia. I would like to briefly speak about our efforts to involve Afghanistan in our work and also some of the plans that are down the road. We had our Directors' meeting last week via zoom. We discussed Afghanistan in particular. First and foremost, we have to mention COSATT which has been conceptualized around the idea of bringing together experts, academics, and think-tankers from South Asia to talk about regional integration. And Afghan representatives are regularly at the table putting Afghan perspectives on every topic that we discuss ranging from - SAARC, Belt and Road Initiative, countering terrorism, or migration. So, in all of these topics, Afghanistan is playing an active role.

We also have another vibrant platform 'Asian Women Parliamentary Caucus' (AWPC) where we involve female parliamentarians from Afghanistan along with others in our discussion.

There is a recent video on 'Crisis, Pandemic and Gender Equality' that we did to highlight the situation of women in particular in the context of COVID-19 in different countries through the parliamentarians who are part of AWPC.

The whole video series is also in our Facebook page and all of you are welcome to watch the stories from parliamentarians who come from South and Southeast Asia. They describe the challenges of women during this very difficult period of the pandemic and also about

women empowerment and gender mainstreaming. There are other projects also such as the counter terrorism dialogue where we involve participants from Afghanistan.

Therefore there is a strong push from the part of KAS to strengthen regional integration so that it helps Afghanistan especially in the background of the recent developments in the country.

Our regional participants from Afghanistan have discussed and debated on how Afghanistan will look in the post-withdrawal of US troops that will be followed by withdrawal of European troops as well. In addition, there will soon be a new KAS Programme focusing on Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia which will have a strong focus on security. Therefore, looking ahead, we are very much interested in the perceptions of COSATT experts from neighboring countries. How we can keep our connection to Afghanistan open, the communication lines with our Afghan experts strong despite of the changes we see coming in the next few months and years. I am also looking forward to Ellinor's additional comments and her remarks.

#### **Dr. Shanthie D' Souza**

A lot has been happening in Afghanistan after the signing of the peace deal in February in Doha. President Trump has called for the withdrawal of the American troops and that itself has generated anxiety not only within Afghanistan but also throughout the region. It's unfortunate that most of the recent initiatives in Afghanistan are on American time-table rather than on the Afghan time-table. President Trump is focusing only on the November election and bringing back troops to demonstrate some kind of success. To have a more inclusive peace-process, we need more Afghans on board. Even the Afghan national government was not on board initially. Later, they were involved but more symbolically rather than substantially.

And this leads to a fundamental question of where Afghanistan stands in the post-withdrawal of US troops. There is fear that this kind of scenario may push the country back towards the early 90s. This is happening at a time when the mostly young Afghan society might not be prepared for such kind of peace deal. I am specifically saying this in the context of the way the entire peace process has unfolded in the country.

The key concern here is about the externally mediated peace deal which might not be acceptable to Afghans across the political and social spectrum of their large country.

Instead of helping build institutions, the international community will be bringing people from outside and putting at risk all that has been achieved in the last decade. There is even a risk of a reversal of gains and subverting of the democratic process.

I see some issues that come up when we look at the Intra-Afghan dialogue which is necessary for things to move. For having an inclusive peace process, we need to have more Afghans on board. And we do see that the intra-Afghan dialogue has not been able to move because there have been such differences within Afghanistan. When one looks at reconciliation efforts or the peace process with the Taliban, there is a danger of an externally mediated deal being forced upon the Afghan society.

The second issue is the Afghan government itself which needs a lot of support to stand against the pressure it is facing from within the domestic scene. So, instead of focusing on building institutions with its nascent democracy, it will now start bringing elements from outside the political spectrum. This will indeed be very challenging. Therefore, I think there is a danger of pushing through a deal at a time when Afghanistan may not be prepared.

The third fact is how do you get to reconciliation inside Afghanistan? Is the Taliban an acceptable force to all sides inside Afghanistan? If not, how do we bring about that kind of acceptability? The real challenge is that whatever achievements have been made in the last 19 years will just flounder away in a hurry to have a peace deal and prepare the exit for US troops.

I see this eventuality because ideally in a normal peace negotiation you have a ceasefire plus you do have a trade-off between negotiating parties. We don't see that here at all. All through the peace process, there is no mention of a 'ceasefire'.

There are certain achievements made by women, and youth of the country. We don't want regression to take the country to an era when Taliban would not even let women

step out of their houses. The attack on a maternity hospital recently reminded us of that era. This is not acceptable to anybody within or outside Afghanistan.

As members of the international community, we have a responsibility to persuade the Afghan government not to hurriedly accept the deal but build credible institutions by which we can have a long lasting conflict resolution.

As we all know, Afghan society has made progress and no one would like to see Afghanistan go down the road of the 1990s. Afghanistan has tremendous potential and talent within itself but it is unfortunate that some in the international community feel that it is a laboratory where they can try all types of experiments. That's not going to provide any viable solution. I feel everyone has a responsibility to build up a society that protects women, youth and minority groups.

#### **Prof. Salma Mallik**

Thank you for having me and Shanthie - two women talking on Afghanistan. An important point that comes while discussing the withdrawal scenario of foreign forces from Afghanistan is as to where do the women stand? Taliban has reassured during recent negotiations that women will be given respect, adequate space in the future political arrangement. However, will it actually translate into reality, is a big question.

One may term it a fault of geography, and regardless of the course of history, they term the Afghan-Pakistan border as an artificial construct. But as per legal norms, despite common culture and shared population groups, the borders are here to stay and have been sanctified. But still, this space reflects the common ethnographic reality that Afghanistan and Pakistan share with each other. Afghanistan's contemporary politics turned a new leaf with the signing of the peace deal happening on a leap year. What comes out of this peace deal is fascinating:-

For the US, the peace deal technically means bringing closure to its long term engagement in Afghanistan, reminiscent of the 1980s, when the Soviet Union signed the Geneva accord at the end of its long engagement in the country. Like this treaty, the Geneva accord did not cover all the anomalies resulting in more problems for a post conflict Afghanistan specifically as well as the region in

general. Consequently, the entire world paid a heavy price for this error to date.

The February deal having several positives such as seeking intra-Afghan dialogue so to maintain an Afghan led process, as well as the eventual pull-out of the American troops but the main deal is all about President Trump wanting to show some solid pre-election achievement to his people and flash the deal as his magnum opus when it comes to US's Afghan policy.

As a result, 'phased' withdrawal has now become 'hasty' compounded by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Presidential elections are just months away. Unfortunately, there is still a big glitch in the Afghan dialogue about the prisoners' swap. The moment the prisoners' swap issue is also handled to the best of Taliban's desire, I think it is going to be sufficient for the American leadership to wash its hands and pull-out.

In such a scenario, I see several developments taking place:- The Taliban at the moment enjoy not only a solid territorial occupation but this territorial occupation has also lately been expanded. Since March, Taliban have been peacefully encroaching into territory which they did not previously possess, with the US forces not raising any objection, as the latter does not want any unnecessary troubles. They remain the most consolidated militant group with territorial gain as well as a military power.

Unfortunately for the Afghan regime, many in the national security force at the local level habitually leave their jobs and do not stand as a strong line of defense against the Taliban. As mentioned, it is partially habitual, given the mercenary nature of many in the ANSF, and also that they find the Taliban extremely formidable.

Consequently, this could even result in the ANSF taking sides with the militia or with one tribe or another. Not only does this aspect depict a lack of professionalism, but it is also the biggest hurdle in ushering peace and stability for the Afghan government. It needs to build a solid line of defense for itself from and against Taliban. So far, this line of defense is the foreign troops that are not going to remain there for long, especially the American troops.

Americans are cognizant of the fact that the Taliban might take over Afghanistan but what happens once they leave Afghanistan is not their concern. As a result of this approach, the secular and liberal space that they had created over these many years, is going to suffer a setback.

How does this impact Pakistan? Foremost, Pakistan is encouraging Taliban not to create problems inside Afghanistan. But will they listen? I don't find them dependable because over the years, Taliban by themselves have become an autonomous force that contrary to the popular opinion, they don't feel the need to listen to anyone including Pakistan anymore. They are looking at their self-interest; and should no longer be perceived as a small, compliant militia force. In fact, they were not a small militia force during 9/11 either but it was still attributed that they would listen to Pakistan. This new generation of the Taliban is an autonomous, independent generation that has weak roots with the Pakistanis. They may listen to Pakistanis, their elders may listen to Pakistani security, analysts or establishment people out of respect or out of some affinity. But they decide for themselves as the situation has altered a great deal.

For Pakistan, the main issue is Afghan soil being used against its security interest. As all of you are aware, Pakistan hosts a very large number of Afghan refugees. There has been a very strong constituency in Pakistan that has been pushing for the Afghan nationals to go back to their own country. Unfortunately, this is the second or even third-generation Afghans being born in Pakistan. They could again be caught in the crossroads of regional politics.

Another important question is how does this new and vibrant civil society or the youthful, educated Afghans relate with Taliban who have their own version of running a state? This is again something that the Americans or the West is purposely not looking into. The US simply wants to withdraw. Their only end-goal at the moment is somehow to initiate the intra-Afghan dialogue and wash off their hands without giving much thought to the ground realities or the sufferings of the young, vibrant society.

Another question pertains to what kind of a political arrangement are they going to have? How is security

arrangement in the post-withdrawal going to be worked out? Are we going to integrate Taliban militia into regular security forces? With news regarding non-payment of monthly salaries to regular soldiers, they are in a desperate financial situation. Furthermore, they fear for their security and this highlights yet another important dimension to the conflict; that is of informal political economy that feeds and strengthens conflict constituencies.

Pakistan has always been given a bad name for all the wrong things happening inside Afghanistan. Please also bear in mind that if anything goes wrong in Afghanistan, Pakistan is directly hit by it. So, it is in our best interest to have a stable and secure Afghanistan and an Afghanistan that can look after itself.

Of course, we are always there and the Pakistani leadership has time and again assured that we want a stable, prosperous nation for the Afghans run by the Afghans.

Pakistan needs to have a more pronounced non-security centric perspective and approach when it comes to its Afghan policy. We have a very security-centric perspective of Afghanistan. If Pakistan aspires to have a long-lasting relationship with Afghanistan, there is a need to develop multidimensional diplomacy focusing on the people and building of the institutions. Pakistan is and will remain committed to the institutional and people centric development of the Afghan state and society, an area that is not fully explored and exploited as it should be.

Last but not least, I would say there has been a generational leap when it comes to Afghanistan, Pakistan, or regional dynamics. The actors have changed - from the Soviets to the Americans but unfortunately, the approach that has been taken when it comes to withdrawal is extremely ad hoc as it was then as it remains at present. There is no talk about the re-integration, there is no discussion about development and demobilization. In fact, I conclude on a rather pessimistic note that I don't see prospects of Afghanistan going in a liberal way because now the Taliban have been legitimized by the international community as a force in Afghanistan that can actually lead the future direction of the country.

## **Comments and Questions from the Participants:-**

### **Hamidullah Arefi:**

I would like to congratulate COSATT and KAS for this timely webinar. I agree with both the speakers that there has been a generational change in my country. I am associated with a government newspaper and I have seen how society has changed in the past decade. I feel, that the Afghan government and the Afghan national security force is capable of taking the country forward even the post-withdrawal-phase. But we need financial and logistics support. We need support from our neighboring countries. Actually, the neighbors should join hands in order to assist Afghanistan.

### **Prof. Rasheeda Didi:**

Speakers mentioned about a number of civil society organizations (CSOs) active in Afghanistan. I am curious to know would the Taliban accept the activities of the CSOs?

### **Dr. Ellinor Zeino:**

Prof. Salma mentioned that Pakistan's interest and desire is to see a stable and prosperous Afghanistan. But there are debates on what should be the end state? Is it an Emirate or is it a democratic republic? What is Pakistan's viewpoint on this?

### **Prof. Suba Chandran:**

The speakers spoke about the 'Afghan Peace Deal'. These are three crucial words. I would argue that there is no 'Afghan', no 'peace' and no 'deal' in this. It's just that the US Presidential election is drawing near and the US wants to leave. The Taliban wants to come to power. By not talking and discussing among ourselves, both India and Pakistan have committed a mistake and have out-sourced our Afghan policy to outside powers. If India and Pakistan can work together, South and Central Asia will be connected.

### **Maj. Gen. (retd.) Dipankar Banerjee:**

COSATT needs to be commended for organizing this webinar where I see representation of most countries of the region. When the world is shut down due to the pandemic, our mind should be open to new ideas. US is thinking of a dis-engagement and a pull-out after nearly two decades of this ordeal without any clarity on the 'end state' of Afghanistan or any planning for the future. Unfortunately, Afghan friends need to be aware of the

fact that the world is far poorer today than before the pandemic. Adequate global attention too will not be there for Afghanistan issues.

### **Dr. Mallika Joseph:**

Post 9/11, when South Asian countries brought in Afghanistan into SAARC as an 8th member, we had hopes that Afghanistan would emerge as a land-bridge between ourselves in South Asia and Central Asia and also Iran. We have failed Afghanistan. After all these years, we have still not moved away from the Indo-Pak debate.

### **Response by Dr. Shanthie:**

Pakistan has to play a more constructive role to help Afghanistan be stable and secure. The international community needs to ensure that the democratic experiment is nurtured and retained. The new generation of Afghanistan desires democratic freedom. Unfortunately, there is no indication that the Taliban has snapped links with international terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda. There are too many zero-sum games being played out. At the moment, the vicious circle is such that political instability and terrorism have led to the mushrooming of an informal economy dependent on drugs and narcotics. This has led to smuggling and funding of terrorist groups which then again leads to fueling of the insurgency.

There is no doubt that there needs to be trust between India and Pakistan to help Afghanistan.

### **Response by Prof. Salma:**

We are good at forming new organizations but these institutions do not function. There is a dire need for an effective SAARC or other such organizations that play a lead role to resolve conflicts. Pakistan has no real say and therefore no preference of who should be ruling Afghanistan. Certainly, like every other country, we would also like the Kabul regime to be friendly with Pakistan.

### **Dr. Ellinor Zeino:**

#### **Concluding Remarks**

Thank you for this invitation to speak at this webinar. Our Afghanistan office has been focusing on regional consensus and trust-building. One of our main activities last year was trying to bring the regional perspective together to build some kind of a consensus in alignment of regional countries that have a stake in the peace process.

I think as Salma just mentioned, we need a consensus of the region.

I will try to briefly summarize the political discourses that I have been witnessing here in Kabul, on the peace process since one and a half years. Sometimes, it's very hard to follow up with all the discourses going on because they are very diverse and at parts even disconnected - lacking coordination. And this is one of the main challenges at present when it comes to starting intra-Afghan negotiations or getting the peace process on track.

The COVID crisis has hit Afghanistan very seriously. It could be one of the worst affected countries in the region, even in the world. The Afghan government is caught between managing the humanitarian crisis as well as the up-coming peace negotiations.

On the other hand, the pandemic has not served as an advantage to either side. So, both the Taliban and the security forces of the government have been equally hit by this crisis brought by the pandemic.

Then, we have a problem with the Doha Peace Agreement that was signed in February. I say problem because it was a bilateral agreement. Now we have to get this bilateral approach into an intra-Afghan approach. There we have all types of obstacles from troops withdrawal to prisoner exchange because it was dealt or agreed between the United States and the Taliban without any involvement of the Afghan government. And Taliban leadership demands literal implementation of this agreement. So, this is one of the obstacles for not having started the intra-Afghan negotiations yet.

Then, as we have been organizing Chatham House format dialogues with different stakeholders including voices that's close to the Taliban, I have perceived the following in the past weeks and months. When it comes to the rhetoric of Taliban leadership, I have realized that there has been a re-framing of their demand of an Islamic Emirate when they address the international community. They have been trying to reframe it as though they are in the government in order to show some compromise, in order to start the intra-Afghan negotiations. However, we have to also observe: what is it really about? Is it only about the nomenclature? Or is it also about substance-this is what we still do not know.

So, what are the current debates and discourses that I have been hearing here in Kabul on the peace process?

Let me be brief:-

We have on one hand the Afghan government and I mean particularly President Ghani and his affiliates. What I see in their network is a kind of state of denial that the international forces will pull out by next year. I still think they believe in the guarantees that the international community gives them. They have trust in the agreement that was given to Afghanistan by the international donor countries by 2024. They kind of rely on this hence have no interest in a rushed peace agreement. They have no interest in quick starting of Intra-Afghan negotiations and a quick agreement. Because first of all, President Ghani wants to complete the second term of his presidency. Then most likely he will not be politically engaged when it comes to a constitutional amendment and an interim government will be formed.

And when you look at the wider foreign policy elite in Kabul they say that they want to preserve the Islamic Republic. They still say Islamic; no one questions the Islamic character of the Constitution. But what they say is that there will be no peace in Afghanistan under an Emirate that does not respect the diverse ethnicity of Afghanistan. Of course, they demand a sovereign state, and they certainly demand Afghanistan to be free of foreign interference. That includes not only the withdrawal of the troops but it also means getting rid of foreign fighters and any sanctuaries. They would also like to promote a new foreign policy approach that is based on a multi-alliance structure and non-alignment. It means they want to keep their country out of any regional or international conflict in the future.

I hear rising voices of non-organized civil society which are comprised mostly of younger people and they want a different republic but they want to do it in a non-ideological way. Let's say they were born during or after the Mujahedin war or civil war and they have experienced both wars. So they are today seriously anxious they will lose their achievements and their freedom. They are seeing and are believing the United States, ready to sacrifice the achievements for the sake of a peace deal or the upcoming US elections.

Even when you look into the talks, the Taliban leadership will be fine in giving some counter-terrorism guarantees

and once they take over, the Americans won't really care what will happen. So, there is this growing concern. Some voices even demand a second resistance movement-second liberation movement just in case the new Taliban government endangers their liberty and their freedom. And this time they say the liberation movement will be Afghan owned. This has been a buzzword, used by all stakeholders. There is anxiety that the term 'Afghan ownership' which every side uses might be used for forgoing the issues of human liberty, democracy and freedom.

So, how to go further now? How to imagine a new Afghanistan? The one thing that I have learnt having lived here for one and half years is that there is no shared Afghan memory of all the grievances and historical events that the people have been through. Every person here has gone through the critical historical moments in a very different way and possesses experiences depending upon what conditions that person has been living in. So, there is no collective Afghan memory. This makes it difficult to building up a joint common Afghan nationality or national identity. On the other hand, the positive aspect is that there is no secessionist movement going on inside Afghanistan. All ethnic groups still believe that Afghanistan should be kept as a unified country because splitting the country will be at the disadvantage of everyone. This is at-least one positive thing we have to up-keep for the future.

And now the question really is, and I want to conclude with this: how can we get a stable and sustainable peace in Afghanistan that is promoted, supported not only by Afghan stakeholders but also from the regional countries and from the wider international community? I also think of a shift of responsibility from the international community to the regional countries and this is why I find today's initiative useful: here I see many important regional countries in one panel. I definitely think this is something that we have to continue. This is also what our office has been working a lot in the last year and we still continue on this track.

### Webinar Participants:-

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Mr. Hamidullah Arefi, Editor, Kabul Times, Kabul

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Maj. Gen. (retd.) Dipankar Banerjee, Member, Forum for Strategic Initiatives, Delhi

Amb. (retd.) Amar Sinha, former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan

Amb. (retd.) Dr. Shambhu Ram Simkhada, former Nepalese Ambassador to UN-Geneva

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