

**Report of the Roundtable on
Envisaging a New Chapter for Afghanistan:
Appraisal of Challenges and the Way Forward**

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- Lieutenant General (Retd) Dr Muhammad Zahid Latif Mirza HI (M) (Retd), Former Secretary, Defence Production.
- Ambassador (Retd) Riaz Muhammad Khan, Former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan.
- Dr Ashfaq Hassan Khan, Principal and Dean, NUST School of Social Sciences & Humanities (S3H) & Director General, NIPS. Mr Zahid Hussain, Journalist & Security Analyst.
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Executive Summary

NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS) organized a special roundtable on the evolving situation in Afghanistan on Thursday, August 26, 2021. The roundtable brought together eminent experts and senior analysts to appraise multiple challenges emanating from the fluid state of affairs in Afghanistan. The deliberations of the roundtable dealt critically with the following aspects: the implications of the victory of Afghan Taliban for Pakistan and regional stability; the fallout of the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces; the challenges stemming from the poor governance infrastructure of the country; the prospects of stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan; the role of countries like Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian Republics; the establishment of peace and stability in Afghanistan; and its potential for regional integration, connectivity, and development. The deliberations stressed an overall collaborative approach in dealing with the new Afghanistan setup. This report is a substantive critical account of the deliberation based on the considered views of the experts put forward during the roundtable.

The following recommendations emerged from the deliberations of the roundtable:

- i. Pakistan should not be too vociferous about the situation in Afghanistan. It should rather maintain a balanced and nuanced narrative about the developments in Afghanistan. It should avoid giving the impression that it is taking the lead in matters related to the situation in Afghanistan. Pakistan should support Afghanistan meaningfully if and when such a request is officially made by the new Afghan political dispensation. The need to organize official conferences on Afghanistan should be driven by the principle of minimalism. Moreover, Pakistan's official narrative on Afghanistan should also be driven by the same principle.
- ii. The expectation of the immediate settlement of bilateral issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan should be readjusted. The new Afghan setup should be given a breathing space till the situation inside Afghanistan is stabilized, following which bilateral issues can be tabled in an appropriate and mutually acceptable manner.
- iii. Calm and detached reflection, based on the realization of critical geopolitical dynamics, should determine the issue of the official recognition of the new

Afghan setup. This evaluation should further consider the manner and the extent of Taliban's fulfilment of the pledge of forming an inclusive and representative government. Practicing caution and maintaining good momentum, Pakistan should neither be the first nor the last to recognize the new political dispensation as and when it takes shape.

- iv. Pakistan should coordinate its efforts for the stabilization of Afghanistan with other countries in the region like China, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian Republics. Pakistan should continue to urge the international community to engage with new Afghan setup in a constructive manner without repeating the errors of the past or without nursing any grievance about the past. The United Nations should be requested to coordinate a major relief mission for Afghanistan.
- v. Pakistan should also make a well-coordinated plan to attend to the new surge of Afghan refugees if the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates. Pakistan can host new Afghan refugees in the camps on the Afghan side of the border and seek to provide all possible refugee assistance in those camps.
- vi. Pakistan should undertake a comprehensive review of its Afghanistan policy with input from all concerned domestic stakeholders. It should convene, if possible, an all-parties consultative conference. Pakistan should further undertake an internal alignment and coordination of its initiatives related to Afghanistan so that all relevant agencies and departments of the government are on the same page. Once the situation in Afghanistan is relatively stabilized, Pakistan should also mobilize the private sector to participate in rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.
- vii. There is a need to promote trade, economic, financial and cultural interdependence with Afghanistan. Transport connectivity should also be a priority. Attention should be paid to formulating bilateral understanding on transboundary water management. If possible, special border economic zones should be set up on a pilot basis in one or two locations to allow greater economic interaction between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan should also promote educational and health cooperation with Afghanistan. After peace is established and if the request is made by the new Afghan government, Pakistan can consider training Afghan police and military personnel in future. In time, the offer of training can be extended to include capacity building in education, health, media, agriculture and industry.

- viii. Pakistan should not underestimate the potential of India to undermine Afghanistan's stability and development. India's emboldened actions due to its strategic partnership with the U.S. and the former's ostensible engagement with Iran must be duly monitored in the best interest of regional peace and stability. India may try to court the new Afghan setup with the promise of aid and development. Pakistan should be prepared for any such eventuality.

Envisaging a New Chapter for Afghanistan: Appraisal of Challenges, and the Way Forward

1. Introduction

The world witnessed a sudden turn of events over the month of August 2021 in Afghanistan with the rapid collapse of the Afghan Army, the unceremonious ouster of its government, and the Taliban returning to power after nearly two decades of conflict. Chaos ensued as American diplomats and development officials were being evacuated from Kabul by the U.S. military, and as thousands of Afghans were attempting to flee. This resulted in heartbreaking scenes of mayhem from the Kabul airport, with some Afghan people even attempting to cling to the wheels of the departing aircraft.

The final U.S. troops departed Afghanistan on August 30 shortly before midnight local time, ceding the country to Taliban's control ahead of the U.S. President Joe Biden's August 31 deadline - and nearly twenty years after the United States first invaded the country. The international community has expressed concerns over the alleged violations of women's rights, and the World Bank moved to stop its financial support to Afghanistan over concerns about the Taliban's treatment of women.

However, over several interviews and press conferences, the Taliban have reassured the world powers and a fearful population that they will respect women's rights, forgive those who fought them, and ensure Afghanistan does not become a haven for terrorists. This shift in the political climate of Afghanistan will have implications all across the region. The Troika Plus on Afghanistan, which includes Russia, the U.S., Pakistan, and China, has been engaged in efforts to prevent Afghanistan from slipping into another civil war. Russia, China, and Pakistan have criticized the U.S. for hasty withdrawal and failure to bring about peace in the war-torn country.

Pakistan has also received its fair share of criticism from the West for allegedly empowering the Taliban and playing a role in destabilizing the former Afghan government that collapsed so ignominiously. Pakistan has been a vital stakeholder in the Afghan peace process, and the state's policy on Afghanistan has remained consistent over the years, the essential feature of which remains that Pakistan does not support any warring factions in Afghanistan. We are yet to see how events fully unfold, and what the future of not only Afghanistan but rather the entire

region will look like in another, say, 5 years. As for Pakistan which has a 2640 km-long border with Afghanistan, peace and stability in the region are mutually beneficial. Pakistan has no ambitions to be a hegemonic power in Afghanistan or in the region for that matter; it only desires to live peacefully next to Afghanistan with brotherly relations built upon socio-cultural and religious affinities and ties of kinship between the two Muslim countries. This makes Pakistan the strongest partner for peace in the region.

2. Opening Remarks

Dr Ashfaque Hasan Khan, Principal and Dean NUST School of Social Sciences and Humanities (S3H) & Director General NIPS

A dynamically changing environment is taking place across the northern border of Pakistan. The withdrawal of the U.S. troops, the resignation of the Afghan government, and the Taliban rising to power raises many questions and deep concerns for the region. Pakistan is a major stakeholder in the Afghan peace talks, and any turmoil in Afghanistan would directly affect Pakistan. This also puts Pakistan in the spotlight of national and international attention.

There is quite a lot of curiosity around what Pakistan's final policy will be regarding difficult issues like the influx of Afghan refugees and recognizing the Taliban government. Moreover, there is an ongoing discourse in international electronic and media as well as social media in which Pakistan is being blamed, wrongly though, for the current situation in Afghanistan. Even in the past, Pakistan was wrongly fingered as providing a haven for the Taliban fighting against foreign forces.

On the contrary, Pakistan has consistently attempted to explain to the world the truth of the situation, that is, it was one of the major victims of cross-border terrorism by terrorist groups enjoying sanctuary in Afghanistan. War on Terror led to suicide attacks on Pakistan's armed forces, law enforcement agencies, and general public at large, which killed more soldiers and civilians than the U.S. lost in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

Apart from the loss of life, the collateral damage to the economy and society of Pakistan is around USD 123.13 billion. The need of the hour is for the international community to view things in a proper perspective, and work sincerely for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

3. Panel Discussion

3.1. Pakistan's Response to the Situation in Afghanistan

Ambassador (Retd) Riaz Muhammad Khan, Former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan

The current scenario in Afghanistan presents a critical predicament for Pakistan. It is dismal to remain in a situation where Pakistan has always remained a target of accusations for the chaotic situation in Afghanistan. The challenging situation in Afghanistan, in particular, and world politics, in general, is evolving at a fast rate. It was but natural that Pakistan was affected by the ripple effects of the crisis and conflict in Afghanistan. Pakistan's Afghan policy can no longer afford to be kneejerk and ad hoc.

It is high time that we developed short-term, mid-term, and long-term responses for Pakistan to counter the challenges that will stem from the precarious situation in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, the Taliban have won the war with their determination and valor. They have come back after 20 years with more power, proficiency, discipline, and astuteness in their leadership. The U.S. has indeed suffered a setback in Afghanistan, but to extrapolate the decline of the U.S. from this contretemps is to make the wrong inference. Great powers don't fade away just like that. The U.S. would remain the preeminent power in the international system for a considerable time, and would continue to determine the direction of global politics. Take the example of Russia, which, since its demotion from the position of superpower in 1989, has experienced significant resurgence. Similarly, China has progressed to become the second biggest economy in the world. Suffice it to say that great powers have their own rhythm of development, possess advanced mechanisms, and enjoy great capacity to recover from setbacks.

However, the case of Pakistan is entirely different. With limited resources, its Afghan policy needs to be highly astute so that it can anticipate the trend of events rather than follow them haphazardly. This is important because Pakistan and Afghanistan may be change catalysts in regional geopolitics, but they are not capable of defining larger patterns of change by themselves at the global level.

Taliban's lightning takeover of Kabul in the absence of a planned transition will present them with a huge governance and diplomatic challenge in terms of legitimacy, public service delivery, financial support, and international recognition. In a constantly shifting current scenario, a few key suggestions are being presented here for the consideration of policymakers in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

3.1.1. Pathways to Peace in Afghanistan

1. First and foremost, the Taliban should be given space and time to work out and establish their government and stabilize the situation in Afghanistan, and introduce a form of government in consultation with all Afghan stakeholders.
2. Though the likelihood of a civil war is not very high, the main focus of the Taliban should be to avoid any action that may lead to one. The forcible ouster of the Ghani government has affected somewhat the legitimacy of Taliban. However, their treatment of their opponents so far has been more or less forbearing. They should conduct a proactive diplomacy and engage their immediate neighbors as well as the Muslim world. The Taliban are already in touch with China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran. They should also engage as many countries as possible to convey their viewpoint globally in an effective manner.
3. While a sound foreign policy and a sufficient number of international allies may be crucial in the success of a government, domestic peace and public support remain the foremost priority. Thus, the main focus of the Taliban should be to improve domestic law and order and promote peaceful pacification of opposing groups.
4. Pakistan should not be seen as playing an outsize role in Afghanistan. In this regard, Pakistan should refrain from sponsoring and organizing conferences on Afghanistan. Glib and self-congratulatory public statements by the government with regard to peace in Afghanistan should also be avoided. The world knows Pakistan has worked indefatigably for Afghan peace. Vociferous protestations about it are ill-advised.
5. Pakistan should also avoid publicly raising contentious bilateral issues like the border and TTP militants in Afghanistan with the new setup in Kabul for the time being. Any bilateral issues should be discussed away from the eye of the camera. Considering the Afghans are in the initial phases of the new political dispensation, they should be allowed time to first focus fully on their domestic problems.
6. Pakistan should generously provide humanitarian relief assistance to Afghanistan. It should also consider providing financial and technical assistance in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, as and when the need for it arises. Pakistan should coordinate its efforts with steps being taken by countries like China in providing assistance to Afghanistan.

7. Pakistan should carefully promote cooperation with Afghanistan. Extending CPEC to Afghanistan is a very good idea in principle, but it needs thorough planning in view of the critical situation in Afghanistan as well as the scale of infrastructure development involved in such an extension. It is, moreover, something that will take some time to materialize. Making premature announcements in this regard will be counterproductive. There are multiple complementarities between Afghanistan and Pakistan. We have seen how in the past these commonalities did not cut much ice with Kabul. In the new era, we should be fully aware of what shared history, culture, and border can and cannot do.

3.2. The Objectives of U.S.'s Role in Afghanistan and the Region

Lieutenant General (Retd) Naeem Khalid Lodhi, Former Caretaker Defence Minister of Pakistan

The war on terror initiated by the United States after 9/11 - 2001 has finally come to an end after two decades with no measurable gain in peace as claimed by the U.S. The motive behind this long war seems to have been the maintenance of U.S.'s global supremacy. To understand the role of the U.S., the current situation and future trajectory of Afghanistan, and Pakistan's position, it is important to remember the American interests in the region that are listed below:

1. Limit China's economic and political influence in South Asia and Afghanistan.
2. Keep Russia from accessing the Indian Ocean through the North-South corridor, Central Asia and Pakistan.
3. Condition the development of CPEC as part of efforts to limit China's influence in the region.
4. Keep an eye on Iranian nuclear activities.
5. Monitor Pakistan's strategic capabilities.

U.S. presence in Afghanistan enabled the pursuit of these interests for over two decades. In such a scenario, it was obvious that peace could not be established in Afghanistan. Despite the failure to win in Afghanistan, the U.S. has been able to further its interests in the region. It has pushed back China's influence in the region by almost twenty years. The region still suffers from instability. Russia's resurgence has been affected. Iranian nuclear capability has been limited. The envisaged regionalization of CPEC has not taken place.

In addition, freezing by the U.S of Afghanistan's reserves of at least USD 9.5 billion held with the Federal Reserve has left the new Afghan setup in the lurch with and weakened its already humble capacity to function properly and undertake recovery. All this points to a difficult future both for Afghanistan and the region. The manner in which the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan took place was widely criticized even by its own allies as it could lead to chaos in Kabul. However, the new Afghan setup seems to be dealing as effectively as possible with the situation so far.

It also needs to be mentioned that Taliban's victory is not only military but also political. They have been supported by the masses of Afghanistan in their long struggle. The manner in which the Afghan cities fell to them shows that they enjoyed support of the people of Afghanistan. Had this not been the case, Taliban would have succumbed long ago. The media coverage of Afghanistan fails to show this aspect.

Taliban now need to put in place a well-coordinated, cooperative, and inclusive government focused on bettering the lot of the Afghan people. This is the only way they can close the door once and for all on foreign intervention. Pakistan, as Afghanistan's neighbor, must play its part in assisting Afghanistan in all possible ways.

3.2.1. What can Pakistan Do?

1. It is important for Pakistan to extend support to Afghanistan. Pakistan should not make haste in terms of the recognition of Taliban's government, but it also shouldn't be at the bottom of the list in recognizing Afghanistan's new government.
2. It is encouraging to note that Pakistan is planning to send humanitarian and food assistance to Afghanistan. Our commitment should be in line with our actual capacity to deliver concrete help.
3. Pakistan needs to develop and strengthen economic relations with Afghanistan and other regional countries to boost regional economic partnerships. Attention should be given to increasing bilateral trade. There is a need to prepare the government, industry, business community and economy for participating in the socioeconomic development of Afghanistan, once the immediate pressures of situation have eased off.
4. Pakistan needs to be more confident in its foreign policy and not allow the usual blame game played by some powers to dent its image and its composure.

3.3. The Fall of Kabul: The Inevitable Consequence of the ‘Forever War’

Mr Zahid Hussain, Senior Analyst

U.S.’s and Taliban’s strategies in the long war in Afghanistan were not random. They had been designed by the belligerents on the basis of their calculations of each other’s strengths and vulnerabilities. Withdrawal of U.S. troops from the war zone and Taliban’s entry into Kabul attest to the well-planned nature of these strategies. It will not be wrong to say that Taliban's takeover of Kabul was based on clear and well-designed was aimed to take effect in the long haul. Their penultimate strategic move of securing Afghanistan’s border towns before moving in to capture major cities shows that 20 years of war has turned them into shrewd strategists aware of the vulnerabilities of their adversaries. This enabled them to control the major urban centers in just 11 days.

The Afghan National Army (ANA), funded, trained, and maintained by the U.S., proved to be no match for the Taliban. The defeat of the Afghan government forces had to do more with their own internal problems and low morale than the pitched battles fought against the Taliban. One of the reasons for its sudden demise was that the Afghan government had never been an inclusive political dispensation.

Rampant corruption was another key factor that prevented the previous Afghan regime from functioning effectively. Vast differences in status between the officers and soldiers led to failure of the Afghan army to act as a cohesive fighting force. Simmering unresolved and unassimilated ethnic rivalries also explain the swift fragmentation of the Afghan forces in the face of the superior discipline of the Taliban. Poor logistics and organization limited the capacity of the Afghan army units in one region to coordinate effectively with units in other regions.

The biggest reason for the fall of Ashraf Ghani’s regime lies in its political bankruptcy resulting in zero popular support for the government in Kabul. The U.S. withdrawal ultimately pulled the plug on the regime, which had been on critical life support well before it was swept away by the onslaught of the Taliban. In short, one needs to understand that the spectacular victory of Taliban did not come against a well-organized regime which had the requisite popular support together with financial and military resources required for resisting the opponents of the regime. What the Taliban defeated was the hollowed-out travesty of governance sustained on foreign support.

Taliban of today differ from those who ruled from Kabul between 1996 and 2001. Taliban 2.0 are more sophisticated in terms of their knowledge of the mechanics of

political control and dynamics of strategy. Their diplomatic sense had been apparent during the long course of the Doha negotiations, first with the Americans and then with the Ghani government. They are speaking in terms largely understood by the world, but it remains to be seen whether or not their actions would jive with their words.

They are still far from enjoying full legitimacy based on the consent of broad sections of Afghan population and gaining the support from major sectors of the international community. They have also not been able to share so far any constructive vision of national reconstruction and rehabilitation. The general atmosphere of fear and uncertainty has not dispelled yet.

Needless to say, beyond the ephemeral euphoria of victory, lie real challenges of governance, administrative organization, reconstruction, development, poverty alleviation, and the establishment of a functional government and economy. Taliban will be tested on the basis of their ability to deliver. Their real struggle has not ended but just only begun.

3.3.1. Looming Challenges for Taliban

1. The divide between leadership and the general public is a major challenge for the Taliban in governing the country. Afghan Taliban have a specific ideology and particular worldview. The real problem is the gap between fighters on the ground fighting for twenty years and the leadership of the Taliban. We can witness a clear generational change among Taliban and in Afghanistan during the last two decades. The new generation of Afghans is connected to the world by means of ICTs and social media, is politically aware, and will not be supine, if their collective aspirations for progress, freedom, and security are not fulfilled under the Taliban. The new setup will need to engage this youthful constituency meaningfully through dialogue rather than coercion. Social conservatism, especially in the absence of development, will be a standing cause of friction. Urban-rural disparities will further add a complex dimension to the challenge of providing gainful avenues for the utilization of the energies of young Afghans. Gender relations will also need to be tackled smartly by Taliban, if they hope to gain domestic and international acceptance.
2. Taliban would have to clamp down on the terrorist groups present inside Afghanistan since the time of the previous Afghan regimes. As part of the Doha deal with the U.S., they would have to follow through on their commitment not to allow the planning or execution of any act of terrorism from Afghanistan.

3. Another big challenge for the Taliban is to form an inclusive government. It must be mentioned that they have their own ideas about what constitutes political inclusion which may not agree with the international community's definition of inclusiveness. Taliban may not have changed in terms of their ideological conservatism. They would also be tested in how they deal with the renegade province of Panjshir, but it seems that force will decide the issue in the end. However, one can hope that there may not be violent reprisals after the province has fallen to Taliban.
4. Financial and economic straits of Afghanistan would perhaps form the biggest immediate challenge for Taliban. This challenge would only be met with the cooperation and assistance from other countries. It would be a major turnaround if Taliban can manage to overcome their economic woes largely indigenously.
5. While Taliban as well as Pakistan and China have been forthcoming about the potential of regional connectivity, it remains to be seen what concrete measures would be taken in this respect.

3.4. The Future Course of Pak-Afghan Relations

Lieutenant General (Retd) Dr Zahid Lateef Mirza, Former Defence Secretary of Pakistan

The current situation in Afghanistan is indeed highly precarious. After decades of war, it is plain that no one knows how peace and stability would be established in the country even if Taliban rule decisively. There are too many variables for anyone to feel comfortable in the thought of the restoration of peace after lengthy conflict. Even though the U.S. has withdrawn, yet one finds it hard to believe that they will not return at some future date in some form. Any future engagement or involvement of the U.S. in the country could be potentially troublesome.

It remains to be seen if the Taliban and the U.S. will coordinate their counterterrorism efforts. If global terrorist groups continue to operate from Afghanistan, the U.S. drone strikes are a high possibility, and it is not difficult to see that any strike gone wrong could heighten the tensions between the U.S. and the future Taliban government. Peace does not seem to be likely in the short term at least. Afghanistan won't become peaceful until regional and international players do their part.

Troublesome regional powers like India would not cease fomenting trouble in Afghanistan and the region at large. Indo-U.S. strategic partnership will certainly

encourage India to find ways to regain at least some of the ground they have lost in Afghanistan. Pakistan would also have to deal with the widespread resentment in Afghanistan, which stems from Afghans' perception of Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan's internal matters.

Security spillovers between Afghanistan and Pakistan could prevent the development of peaceful and friction-free relations between the two countries even under Taliban. The issue of terrorism from Afghan soil could also estrange the two neighbors despite their good intentions.

The possibility of Afghan-Iranian rapprochement would also be a challenging factor in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Increased leverage of Iran over a future Taliban government may not be appreciated in Islamabad. As for Pakistan, it needs to ask itself if it has the requisite resources in terms of planning, strategy, and financial leverage to deal with the challenges emanating from the situation in Afghanistan.

3.4.1. Confidence Building Measures between Pakistan and Afghanistan

1. For Pakistan to tackle the current situation, it is of the utmost importance to rebuild people-to-people contacts on the basis of mutual confidence, help and respect between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Removal of suspicion and the establishment of trust in the bilateral relationship with Afghanistan would be a big achievement for Pakistan.
2. Multiple elements of Pakistan's foreign policy need to be aligned properly. We should not commit more than we can realistically achieve or deliver. Our words should be less than our actions. Big words without matching actions can prove to be quite embarrassing. We should focus on increasing trade-based complementarities with Afghanistan. We should be concerned more with creating positive interdependence between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
3. Pakistan should focus on helping Afghanistan with capacity building and technical assistance required to run the government effectively. For instance, giving computers or office equipment to Afghans for office use would be more beneficial than talking in grand strategic terms all the time. The educational and health cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan should be deepened. Pakistan is great at conceiving plans but poor in executing them. Innovative and effective institutional mechanisms are needed on urgent basis to handle the critical situation in Afghanistan and the complex evolving regional situation. Business as usual will only blindside us in the end.

3.5. Taliban and the Evolving Geopolitical Dynamics

Professor Nazir Hussain, Dean of Social Sciences, University of Wah

The victory of Taliban in Afghanistan has upended the conventional geopolitical situation in the region. It, therefore, raises some pertinent questions that need to be addressed carefully and deeply. It needs to be determined how the Taliban have managed to design their strategy and plan their moves masterfully. In this regard, it would be interesting to investigate the sources of their political acumen and diplomatic suavity.

It also needs to be asked why the U.S. left behind massive amounts of arms and weaponry. Given the time it had had since Doha deal in February 2020, it made more sense to dispose of the military equipment and weapons rather than leave them behind in a country known for its chronic conflict. One hoped that the experience of the Soviet withdrawal and its aftermath would prove instructive for the U.S. These caches of arms will contribute to further instability in Afghanistan. It is difficult to say how, but arms always find their way to groups who practice violence as a way of life.

It also needs to be asked how the Taliban will finance their new government. It is clear that they lack any viable financial and economic capacity to run the country. It also seems doubtful that the U.S., U.K., and E.U. would bail them out. That leaves China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran.

Would any of them agree to take on the massive responsibility of bankrolling the future Taliban government? It is clear that Pakistan may not have the necessary finances to spare. Iran would not agree to help the Taliban out unless the latter substantially changed course to suit Iranian geopolitical ambitions.

That leaves China and Russia. Given the history of China's cautious engagement with the Taliban, it is still unclear if they would inject massive cash into Afghanistan. They may promise some assistance but it may not be sufficient to meet with all the shortfalls of the Afghan state and economy. Russians may help but only nominally. It is not clear yet what benefit do they stand to derive from a stable Afghan government. The World Bank and the IMF would not move in to help out Afghanistan as long as they do not get the green light from Washington. This means that during the first few months or even the first two years the future Taliban setup would be in dire straits financially and that Afghans will be tested severely.

Another round of conflict may also not be ruled out. We do not know yet who the belligerents will be, but the fluid situation in Afghanistan will tempt troublemakers of one brand or the other. Granted that the Taliban of today are significantly different from those of yesteryears, yet they are still Taliban, so setting too much store by their capacity to solve things through dialogue and negotiation may mean disappointment in the end.

Despite providing sanctuary for four decades to millions of Afghan refugees and assisting them in every possible way, Pakistan is still blamed for the situation inside Afghanistan. There is no guarantee that this state of affairs will change substantially under the new Afghan setup.

It is possible that before long, once the Taliban have formed the government and become entrenched in Kabul, the traditional misgivings about Pakistan's good intentions that have influenced the past governments in Kabul will also affect Taliban 2.0.

Pakistan should be aware of the potential for competition with Afghanistan, because Taliban would not subordinate the national interests of Afghanistan, and it is likely that their pursuit of what they perceive to be Afghanistan's national interests will be more intense and focused than the previous regime.

Pakistan should remember that the dependence of Afghanistan on Pakistan will never mean for Taliban the subordination of Afghanistan's national interests. It also needs to be remembered that economic interdependence hardly ever means strategic concerns have become irrelevance. Deep cognizance of this possibility will allow Pakistan to deal with the future challenges effectively. Pakistan should attempt to craft a policy that allows both the countries to pursue their interests in a convergent manner as much as possible.

4. Concluding Thoughts

Brigadier (Retd) Amir Yaqub, Direction Operations & Collaboration, NIPS

The present situation is undoubtedly critical for Pakistan and demands careful steps. There are a lot of pressures on Taliban's leadership to win support and acceptance from the Afghan public as well as from the international community. For instance, the pressure of forming an inclusive government comes predominantly from the international world. However, it must be kept in mind that the prospective inclusive government in Afghanistan will be based on the Taliban's definition of an inclusive government. Shariah is the central component

of Taliban leadership and narrative. Any notion of inclusiveness will be invariably conditioned by this central feature of the Taliban's worldview.

There is a need on the part of the international community to engage the Taliban. In this regard, the freezing of almost USD 9.5 billion of Afghanistan's reserves by the U.S. is counterproductive. These funds should be provided to the Taliban upon the formation of a reasonably inclusive government.

Pakistan's decision to provide immediate humanitarian relief, and food and medical assistance to Afghanistan proves the former's unflinching sincerity to the people of Afghanistan, and its earnest commitment to regional peace and stability. Pakistan's efforts in calling upon the international community to arrange humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people is a further validation of its sincerity.

In its future engagement with Afghanistan, the U.S. should not repeat the mistakes of the past. The U.S. as well as its NATO allies should commit to Afghan reconstruction, and provide funds generously to mitigate the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan in immediate terms.

Pakistan should continue to be supportive of the new Afghan setup. Internally, Pakistan should aim to make policymaking regarding Afghanistan as inclusive as possible. This inclusive policymaking should seek multi-partisan input from all political parties. There is no harm in convening an all-parties conference on the new situation in Afghanistan to determine the basic features of the long-term Afghanistan policy. This policy should naturally include the broad outline of the economic, financial, trade, political, diplomatic, security, and cultural engagement with Afghanistan.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from the experts' deliberations during the roundtable:

- i. Pakistan should not be too vociferous about the situation in Afghanistan. It should rather maintain a balanced and nuanced narrative about the developments in Afghanistan. It should avoid giving the impression that it is taking the lead in matters related to the situation in Afghanistan. Pakistan should support Afghanistan meaningfully if and when such a request is officially made by the new Afghan political dispensation. The need to organize official conferences on Afghanistan should be driven by the principle of

minimalism. Moreover, Pakistan's official narrative on Afghanistan should also be driven by the same principle.

- ii. The expectation of the immediate settlement of bilateral issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan should be readjusted. The new Afghan setup should be given a breathing space till the situation inside Afghanistan is stabilized, following which bilateral issues can be tabled in an appropriate and mutually acceptable manner.
- iii. Calm and detached reflection, based on the realization of critical geopolitical dynamics, should determine the issue of the official recognition of the new Afghan setup. This evaluation should further consider the manner and the extent of Taliban's fulfilment of the pledge of forming an inclusive and representative government. Practicing caution and maintaining good momentum, Pakistan should neither be the first nor the last to recognize the new political dispensation as and when it takes shape.
- iv. Pakistan should coordinate its efforts for the stabilization of Afghanistan with other countries in the region like China, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian Republics. Pakistan should continue to urge the international community to engage with new Afghan setup in a constructive manner without repeating the errors of the past or without nursing any grievance about the past. The United Nations should be requested to coordinate a major relief mission for Afghanistan.
- v. Pakistan should also make a well-coordinated plan to attend to the new surge of Afghan refugees if the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates. Pakistan can host new Afghan refugees in the camps on the Afghan side of the border and seek to provide all possible refugee assistance in those camps.
- vi. Pakistan should undertake a comprehensive review of its Afghanistan policy with input from all concerned domestic stakeholders. It should convene, if possible, an all-parties consultative conference. Pakistan should further undertake an internal alignment and coordination of its initiatives related to Afghanistan so that all relevant agencies and departments of the government are on the same page. Once the situation in Afghanistan is relatively stabilized, Pakistan should also mobilize the private sector to participate in rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.
- vii. There is a need to promote trade, economic, financial and cultural interdependence with Afghanistan. Transport connectivity should also be a

priority. Attention should be paid to formulating bilateral understanding on transboundary water management. If possible, special border economic zones should be set up on a pilot basis in one or two locations to allow greater economic interaction between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan should also promote educational and health cooperation with Afghanistan. After peace is established and if the request is made by the new Afghan government, Pakistan can consider training Afghan police and military personnel in future. In time, the offer of training can be extended to include capacity building in education, health, media, agriculture and industry.

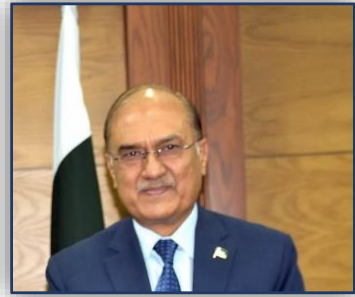
- viii. Pakistan should not underestimate the potential of India to undermine Afghanistan's stability and development. India's emboldened actions due to its strategic partnership with the U.S. and the former's ostensible engagement with Iran must be duly monitored in the best interest of regional peace and stability. India may try to court the new Afghan setup with the promise of aid and development. Pakistan should be prepared for any such eventuality.

Profiles of Panelists

Lieutenant General (Retd) Naeem Khalid Lodhi

Lieutenant Gen Naeem Khalid Lodhi (Retd), HI (M), is a decorated officer of the Pakistan Army. He is a defense analyst as well as works as a consultant and advisor in an engineering firm, H-Cube Pvt. Ltd. He began his career graduating with a Bachelor in Civil Engineering and then went on to achieve a Masters in International Relations. He is a graduate of Command and Staff College, Quetta and National Defence University, Islamabad.

General Lodhi served as the Defense Secretary of Pakistan in 2011, and remained the Chief Executive and Managing Director of Fauji Fertilizer Co. Ltd. He also commanded the Corps of Engineers. On 27 June 2018, General Naeem Khalid Lodhi was made Minister of Defence (Pakistan) in Care-taker Government before the upcoming general elections of Pakistan.



Ambassador (Retd) Riaz Muhammad Khan

Ambassador Riaz Mohammad Khan worked as the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan from February 2005 to April 2008 and served in the Foreign Service of Pakistan for 40 years. He was also the additional Foreign Secretary responsible for international organizations and arms control and disarmament issues from 1998-2002, Foreign Office Spokesman 2000-01, and Director-General responsible for Afghanistan and Soviet affairs from 1986-92. He performed as Leader of Pakistan's delegation to the 62nd session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. Other achievements among his roles include a member of Pakistan delegation to Pakistan-Afghanistan Proximity Talks in Geneva from 1982-88 and special envoy for back-channel diplomacy with India from 2009-13. Mr. Khan's published books include "Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism, and Resistance to Modernity", "Untying the Afghan Knot: negotiating Soviet



withdrawal", and co-authored "Yellow Sand Hills: a study of Chinese Commune". He has also contributed to research journals and local and international press.

Lieutenant General (Retd) Dr Zahid Latif Mirza

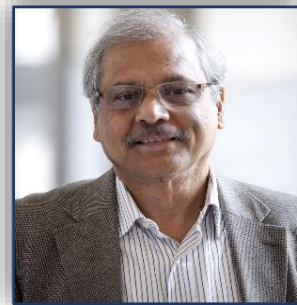
Lt. General (Retd) Zahid Latif Mirza is a graduate of National Defence University Islamabad, Command & Staff College Quetta and Peoples Liberation Army Command College, Nanjing, China. He is also an alumni of Near East South Asia Centre for Strategic Studies, Washington D.C., and Cranfield University, U.K. A scholar at heart with a PhD (Diplomacy) from Peking University. Also holds MPhil degree in Peace and Conflict Studies, winning Chancellor's Gold Medal. Coupled with it, he has four Master's degrees including: (1) Defence & Strategic Studies; (2) Political Science; (3) History; and (4) War Studies. His service in military is a rich blend of command, staff and instructional experience with deep understanding of handling peace and conflict issues. His areas of expertise include Conflict Dynamics of South Asia, Afghanistan, Counter Terrorism, National Security and Foreign Policy. He retired from Army in January 2018 from his last assignment as Commander Army Air Defence Command.



Mr Zahid Hussain

Zahid Hussain is an award-winning journalist, writer, television commentator, and analyst. He is a correspondent covering Pakistan and Afghanistan for The Times of London and The Wall Street Journal. His work has included assignments for Newsweek, the Associated Press, The Economist, and several other international publications. Mr Hussain is the author of the books "No-Win War", "The Scorpion's Tale", and "Frontline Pakistan: The struggle with militant Islam".

He also writes regularly for the Pakistani daily newspaper Dawn and the magazine Newline.



Professor Nazir Hussain

Professor Nazir Hussain is the Dean of Social Sciences, University of Wah. He has served as a professor of International Relations at Quaid-i-Azam University's School of Politics and International Relations. He graduated from Punjab University with a bachelor's degree in Political Science and History. Professor Hussain's prominent publications include "The U.S. Smart Power Strategy and Implications for Pakistan's Security", and "The U.S. Exit Strategy: Impact on War on Terror in Afghanistan". He has a Masters in Defence and Strategic Studies, and Ph.D. in Political Science. His research interests include The Gulf/Middle East, CBMS, and Security issues.

