**Report: Afghanistan at Crossroads**

Asia in Global Affairs had the privilege of hosting a webinar entitled “Afghanistan at Crossroads” on 31st August, 2021 where the distinguished speakers were Dr Raghav Sharma, who is the Director of Centre for Afghan Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs, at OP Jindal Global University, Dr Farkhod Tolipov, who is an Independent Political Analyst and Director of Knowledge Karavan, Uzbekistan and Professor Kingshuk Chatterjee, Professor in Department of History at the Calcutta University. The following is a brief account of the major arguments as presented by the respective discussants in the order of their speaking.

**Dr. Raghav Sharma** neatly delineated his talk into three parts – (i) how Afghans perceive the withdrawal of U.S. and its aftermath, (ii) challenges to the Taliban dispensation in governing Afghanistan, (iii) broader implications for neighbouring countries.

He began by reciting two powerful couplets from Afghan antiquity, poignantly capturing what had transpired in Afghanistan over the last few decades. It reflected how lovers and nations are capable of betrayal, not just in the poetic tradition but also in the ground reality. The couplets serve as a lucid commentary and insight, into the changing contours of the socio-political landscape in Afghanistan, as perceived by the ordinary citizens.

Sharma deftly contra posed the dogmatic norms dictated upon the Afghan citizens during the regime of Taliban 1.0, especially its aversion to popular Western traditions among the urban educated youth, with the post 9/11 period, where the urban centres of Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat, had transformed into the melting pots of diverse cultures. Even in the countryside, he observed, there was a rights-based-framework in the health and education sector.

At the same time, this new Afghanistan was also dotted with palatial mansions of warlords, along with the large SUVs of the Afghan elites, all of which led to a jarring contrast with the everyday experiences of the ordinary Afghans. Despite this mixed landscape of Afghanistan of the last two decades, the Taliban’s return to power has not been supported by the majority of the Afghans. Sharma reminded, that not long ago, the skies of Afghanistan resonated with Allahu Akbar, in spontaneous support of Afghan National Security forces against the Taliban.

Most Afghans, Sharma argued, perceive the takeover of Taliban, as a victory of Rawalpindi, enabled by a political system hollowed out by corruption, nepotism, devoid of effective leadership, and most important, an American betrayal. Now that the Taliban have usurped power, he posited, that their greatest challenge would be to rise up to the level of governance. Sharma discarded the argument of Taliban 2.0, as a dramatically modified, and reconfigured body. While it might have turned suave and adept at managing media and optics, the fundamental issues plaguing a heterogeneous society having undergone immense churning over the last two decades, would impede their governance processes.

Sharma adroitly posited that the resistance movements were not just confined to Panjshir Valley, but a passive resistance was also gradually observable, given how young men, women, civil society intellectuals and reporters, vehemently protested against the Taliban on Independence Day in Afghanistan (19th August). Moreover, they were not restricted to the urban islands, but also spilled over to the countryside, case in point, a string of protests, under the banner of the Afghan national flag in the Pashtun belt, where men publicly brought down the flag of the Taliban. Such an event raised the larger question of legitimacy enjoyed by the Taliban, given it is typically christened as a Pashtun-dominated force.

Sharma mentioned the new social realities, which the Taliban would have to negotiate with. This is not just confined to gender rights, but also on issues of women’s education, and its engagement with the Uzbeks who have renegotiated the old order for over 30 years. In short, the Taliban would need to overcome “the failure of the political Islam”. Sharma observed that the news reports from Afghanistan do not offer an optimistic picture, for the ground realities have no resemblance with what gets uttered in Kabul. In this regard, Sharma explains that the fears of the Afghan nationals are well founded, and rendered credible by U.N. reports among other accounts, which project how the people are being hunted down in door-to-door searches at midnight. It is grimly reminiscent of the regime of Hafizullah Amin, when people would disappear under the cover of dark.

As per U.N. reports, Sharma submitted that about 500,000 Afghans are planning to leave, most of whom are the educated and skilled youth, which would further exacerbate the governance challenges of the new rulers.

Sharma devoted considerable time to the burgeoning economic challenge, to be faced by Afghanistan. With a mounting duress, crippled banking system, collapsing “hawala” system, rising food inflation, compounded with a pandemic and a drought, the Afghans were staring at a bleak future. Needless to say, there have been widespread protests asking Taliban to provide a government, a livelihood, education and functional banks. With the exodus of skilled youth, the Taliban have mostly installed mullahs in banks and ministries, inspiring little confidence amongst the educated and technocratic class in Afghanistan, who have expressed their hesitation to serve under them.

Sharma critically analysed three possible economic pathways, which might be taken by the Taliban, in the time to come. First, Taliban could get some dole from the countries of Iran, China, Pakistan and Russia – countries which have supported and flirted with the Taliban, as their embassies continue to operate in Afghanistan. Even, Turkey might throw its hat in the ring. Second, it could supplement its efforts with their trade in narcotics, which continue to be the single largest source of income for the insurgents for over 20 years. Finally, it could permit the numerous NGOs to operate, albeit with massive tax cuts.

Thereafter, Sharma reflected on the broader implications of the Taliban takeover, for India. The buzz in the social media pages in Pakistan, was that this was Rawalpindi’s gift to New Delhi. However, the larger issue of a hasty American withdrawal and their lack of understanding of India’s terror concerns fort the region, would surely have an impact on the Indo-U.S. relations. Questions would emerge on, how seriously should India, take the American strategy on Indo-Pacific or its views on China, for most have deemed the American retreat as a sell-out to Rawalpindi.

As the Taliban broke open the high-security prisons of Bagram, releasing a large number of jihadists, Sharma cautioned India’s strategic community of Taliban’s close ties with Al Qaeda, and proximity to the Haqqani Network, the latter notoriously dubbed as a veritable arm of the ISI. Moreover, the Haqqani Network, for the longest time, has functioned as the hub for outreach and coordination of regional and foreign terror groups like JeM and LeT. Thus, it was no coincidence, that JeM chief Masood Azhar was seen in Kandahar trying to solicit support for their activities in Kashmir in such a volatile environment.

As India follows the developments in Afghanistan from the side-lines, it has been losing ground for quite some time now. India’s recent visa policy, has only added to the growing chasm between what it aspires to achieve, and what it can achieve, leading to significant disappointment and disenchantment among the Afghans.

Sharma argued that Afghanistan has always been dotted with the presence of diverse Islamist groups, most active in the northern pockets. Their over-reliance on Pakistan for sanctuary, money and wealth, calls for a potential spill-over of radicalism and refugees in Central Asia. In this regard, the probability of Taliban acting as a bulwark against newer threats, like ISIS-K, also got mentioned by Sharma.

With a firm conviction, Sharma maintained that Pakistan would face a serious blowback in the form of reactionary groups like TPP, other than getting used as an area of “reverse strategic-depth” by the Taliban. It would also be interesting to observe, how Iran and Pakistan would tackle the rapid influx of refugees to their territory.

Finally, Sharma noted that a Talibanised Afghanistan has the potential for attracting reactionary elements, to get enmeshed in its domestic politics, in the long run, sending strong reverberations around the world. Thus, what unfolds in Afghanistan, will not be confined to its territory. The world must be prepared for an uncertain and turbulent time in the near future.

**Dr. Farkhod Tolipov** provided an insightful perspective on Afghanistan from the standpoint of Uzbekistan. He argued how the Uzbek position vis-à-vis Afghanistan had always hinged upon the geo-political context in the latter. He deemed the attitude of Uzbekistan towards Afghanistan during the ruling period of Islam Karimov as Uzbekistan 1.0, characterized by a strict isolationist position. The political office was inclined to see the territory of Afghanistan as a source of threat. However, such a position was not by accident, for ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, an independent Uzbekistan had a troubled trajectory in the realm of security. It had faced numerous terror attacks, wherein the insurgents penetrated the Uzbek heartland from Afghanistan, through channels in Tajikistan and Kirgizstan.

While such a cautious Uzbek position hindered effective cooperation between the two countries, there was an emergence of certain economic initiatives and trade proposals advanced before Afghanistan ever since the 1990s, although they remain mostly on paper till date.

In stark contradiction, Tolipov argued, during the ruling period of Uzbekistan 2.0, Afghanistan was perceived not as a source of threat, but as an area of opportunity. Through certain formulations, greater emphasis was given on trade, cooperation and construction of railways. In this regard, Tolipov mentioned the inking of their most ambitious geo-economic project – a railway project of the century – which was supposed to pass through Mazar-i-Sharif, Karachi, Kabul, with a link to India. Herein, Tolipov categorically mentioned that Uzbekistan 2.0 did not deny the threats and terror propensities from Kabul, but adopted a more pacifist and hopeful stance, in a bid to placate the insurgents and open up more opportunity. In fact, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Uzbekistan, met the members of Taliban on numerous occasions, with a hope to sustain the channel of communication and dialogue.

Thereafter, Tolipov examined the Tashkent Conference of 2018, where one of the important agenda was to address the Taliban question, with several instructions of quelling terrorism, cooperating with the civilian government in Kabul, all with the single agenda of peace-efforts in the volatile landscape. Tolipov argued that while Uzbekistan has done its bit, the current scenario of a hostile Taliban takeover, has shed a new light on the old challenges, only bigger in level and scope.

Tolipov enumerated the reasons behind the same, with great dexterity. During 1996-2001, there was a civil war between the Northern Alliance and Afghanistan, with the former acting as a buffer between Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, this time, there was an unprecedented retreat, a surprising surrender of the Afghan National Security Forces, leading to a Taliban walkover. Needless to say, there have been rumors of a potential collusion between like-minded groups hell-bent to ensure the victory of Taliban.

With total chaos in Kabul, the people are rapidly fleeing to adjacent countries in a bid to escape the wrath of the Taliban, whose name has been enlisted in the U.N. list of terrorist organizations. The bomb explosion in Kabul airport, killing about 13 Americans has simply added to the nightmare. Under the new regime, Afghanistan will be a powerful magnet for terrorists from all corners of the world.

Tolipov captured how Uzbekistan had never faced any massive inflow refugees, during Taliban’s first rule, due to the Uzbek political premier’s refusal to accept them. However, this time, they faced a unique category of refugees, in the form of military officers of Afghanistan, who crossed over to the border without permission. The refugee crisis, sparks mixed reactions among the Uzbek society and polity, with apprehensions and logical fears amongst the populace, of a potential spillover of extremism and terrorism into Uzbekistan.

Tolipov categorically touched upon the geopolitical implications of the U.S. withdrawal in Central Asia. Any form of U.S. based deployment in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, to weed out any potential threat, has evoked strong responses from Russia. In fact, an opposite signal of the Uzbeks joining the Russia led CSDO, has been conceptualized. While Uzbekistan has never been a part of any military bloc, the current context has made such an eventuality of them joining the CSDO quite likely.

Tolipov posited that, at such a critical juncture, the unity of Central Asia was needed more than ever before, with a more coordinated policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan being of utmost necessity. The avowed goal should be to foster stable and prosperous conditions, favorable to the Afghan peace process, with an inclusive political system, that respects the fundamental rights of all Afghans.

In closing, Tolipov underscored the importance of India, as a crucial partner to the Uzbeks, in resolutely fighting and condemning terror in all its form and manifestations, as a part of its strategic partnership. He earnestly hoped that the United Nations adopts a principled, strong and decisive stand on the unfolding crisis, for the panacea would depend on a more active U.N. led process in Afghanistan.

**Professor Kingshuk Chatterjee** captured how the degree of stabilization, we had become accustomed to in Afghanistan was largely hinged upon the United States, which in turn was always in a funny dilemma in the 21st century – Damned if you do, damned if you do not. He argued, how many critiqued the American adventurism, when they moved into Afghanistan, as a kneejerk response to the events of 9/11, the same hubris questioned the rationale behind their swift withdrawal after two decades. Chatterjee noted how the 2,500 lives, the Americans lost, hogs all the limelight, while 100,000 Afghan lives are seldom talked about.

As the U.S. got entangled in its longest war, one always felt that the right side was winning, while the wrong side was losing. But, contrary to popular perception, Chatterjee argued that the Taliban enjoyed a considerable degree of legitimacy among the Afghans, primarily due to their efforts in fighting an overbearing foreign military presence. For Afghanistan, he posited, conflict was the prevailing normal, hardly addressed in the international discourse.

Chatterjee staunchly believed that the Americans did not create the problem, for then, their withdrawal would have solved the same. Instead, he maintained that U.S. aggravated the scale of the problem. Speaking on the issues of resistance movements, he argued how Indian and international media had largely pinned their hopes on the Panjshir Valley, in the northern region. However, the pioneers of the Northern Alliance – a buffer against the Taliban – Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ahmad Shah Massoud were no longer in the scene. The latter having passed away, while the former, too old to fight. Dostum in his prime, had forged the remnants of the Afghan airforce, and harnessed it in the military landscape. However, it is still to be seen, whether the second-generation leaders of the movement, are adequately trained in combat, and are firm enough to stand up to the Taliban. Hence, while an effective resistance might be unlikely in the immediate landscape, it would surely mature in the long run.

The Taliban, Chatterjee argued, neither has any bureaucratic personnel, a standing army, or financial resources, to consolidate its position in the Afghan polity. The only means through which, it could buy some time, in staving off any resistance, was by effectively accommodating the provincial leadership and adeptly distributing the resources among the landholdings. This, he submits, would be tough in the absence of stabilization. The Americans had pumped in 2 trillion USD to help Afghanistan settle as a normal economic bloc, but with no avail. One might broach the possibility of China, filling the void, but other than its limited financial powers relative to the U.S., the PRC never ventures in politically unstable theatres.

The ramifications of the crisis on Kashmir, Chatterjee noted, seemed to be the only question bothering the Indian strategic community. While, in 1990s, the surplus from the resources handed over to Pakistan by the U.S. to create the mujaheedin, was used to foment militancy in Kashmir, such an eventuality of someone paying the bill seems unlikely in the current geopolitical context. Similarly, the chances of Kashmiri militants crossing over the border for military training, does not seem to be a realistic perspective. In this regard, he talked about Pakistan facing a great blowback, especially due to the ties forged between Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and the Haqqani Network, over the last ten years.

In closing, he captured that the political landscape in Afghanistan is not at cross-roads but in a minefield. With regional instability, and revival of terrorism, unending conflict seemed to be the direction, it is heading towards.