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Afghanistan: geopolitics and short-term scenarios

Speakers: **Barnett Rubin | Shukria Barakzai | Victor Ângelo | Cátia Moreira de Carvalho**

Chair: **Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro**

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On this webinar, **Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro** chaired a discussion about the short-term scenarios for the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan, together with the researcher **Barnett Rubin**, women's rights activist and former Afghan diplomat **Shukria Barakzai**, former UN deputy Secretary-General **Victor Ângelo**, and the researcher **Cátia Moreira de Carvalho**.

In August 2021, foreign military presences withdrew from Afghanistan, including the U.S. and NATO, after 20 years in the country. On that same moment, the Taliban took over the capital Kabul and established a new regime in the country. Two months have passed and, amid their efforts to consolidate power, the Taliban are now faced with a set of problems from the emerging threat posed by the expansion of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) to the dire humanitarian crisis ravaging the country and the massive flow of qualified Afghan people out of the country. How is the Taliban expected to manage the current situation and what short-term scenarios are envisaged for their regime?

Shukria Barakzai starts of the discussion claiming that during the 20-year Afghanistan Republic (2001-2021) the country underwent a massive change that is now being receded by the Taliban regime. After all these years, the Taliban did not adapt nor reformulate their political agenda which is now causing the young Afghan generation to flee the country. All women's rights and liberties that had been conquered throughout the years are now being curtailed by the new regime, such as the possibility of women to go to school and university, appointing women to public positions, and allowing women to walk alone in the streets. Moreover, since the Taliban regime was not elected by the population, it doesn't feel responsible for the Afghan people. The constitution that was temporarily established - the one from the Kingdom of Afghanistan of 1964 - is not being implemented, nor is the agreement signed by the U.S. and the Taliban in Doha, in 2020. Today, there isn't any entity, leader, nor body accountable for the rights and demands of Afghans.

In response to the previous statement, **Barnett Rubin** states that there are different currents of thought within the Taliban. On general terms, there is the current supporting the diplomatic and official arrangement, and the other current which is in favour of a military confrontation and fighting approach. Nevertheless, the Taliban were willing to negotiate a peaceful withdrawal of foreign troops and the establishment of a new governing arrangement for Afghanistan if President Ashraf Ghani hadn't left the country in 2020 without notice. When the U.S. and NATO evacuated their troops from Kabul, the Taliban easily took over the city. That situation also facilitated the rise of the fighting-prone and more orthodox faction within the Taliban, namely the Haqqani Network, who came to form the incumbent government. Some liberties and rights have been curtailed, especially concerning women's rights, but most of what is happening in Afghanistan right now, namely men and women losing their jobs, comes from the fact that this country is one the poorest and aid-dependent in the world. Afghanistan's economy is on the verge of a complete collapse and is risking full starvation of its population. The international

community, through the UN, have been gathering financial and humanitarian support to Afghanistan, but it would be important to cancel economic sanctions that have been imposed to the Taliban regime. Another point worth mentioning is the internal opposition to the Taliban regime. According to **Rubin**, there is the civic opposition, which is led by women in the cities; the armed resistance in Panjshir, led by the Afghanistan National Resistance Front (NRF); and the opposition from the ISKP, a terrorist group operating in Afghanistan.

Victor Ângelo takes his large experience working for the UN to clarify that this organisation can play a double-sided role: the humanitarian and the reconstruction/development. Regarding the first, the UN is preparing and already delivering humanitarian assistance. Although the humanitarian appeal launched by the UN Secretary-General to the international community has already gathered one billion dollars, this money has not yet been disbursed. Besides the money pledged, the UN also needs to ensure that the money will be correctly applied and distributed by the Taliban regime. Regarding the second role, the one concerning the future and long-term reconstruction and development of Afghanistan, **Ângelo** mentions the extension until March 2022 of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). There is no clarity, however, about what UNAMA should be doing, besides some coordination of the UN presence in the country, which for now is summed up to the humanitarian assistance. The international donor community has been raising doubts about the duration of the humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, taking into consideration that the country lacks a functioning economy which might perpetuate that assistance. The big question is how to move from a war economy that was half-dependent on foreign assistance into a self-sustained and durable economy.

On the threat posed by the ISKP, **Cátia Moreira de Carvalho** starts by explaining that this terrorist group is a branch of the Islamic State who is active mainly in Afghanistan. The Khorasan Province specifically refers to the historical region extending across parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran. The ISKP emerged in 2014 with the defection of Tehrik-i-Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and Taliban fighters who were operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In January 2015, the ISKP was officially established, and Hafiz Saeed Khan was appointed emir of the group. Due to their historical and cultural connections, the ISKP easily recruited fighters in Pakistan and in Afghanistan. Since its establishment in 2015, the group has tried to expand their territory control and for that it has been using violent means against Afghan military forces, the Taliban, and international forces led by the U.S. In order to safeguard their interests, however, they also accommodated their enemies in their operations. For example, the ISKP has carried out joint attacks with the Haqqani Network which is part of the Taliban. While the ISKP lacks the capability, coordination, or local support to control significant parts of territory in Afghanistan, they have the ability to conduct individual attacks, such as the attack they have carried out in the Kabul airport in August 2021 that killed almost 200 people. As a branch of the Islamic State, ISKP maintains contact with the Islamic State leadership in Iraq and in Syria, but it also retains a degree of freedom in the conduction

of its operations in Afghanistan. On **Moreira de Carvalho's** understanding, the ISKP poses an eminent threat to the safety of Afghans and to the security of the Taliban government. It is plausible to assume that the ISKP will likely have periods of great violence, but their success will depend on how the Taliban will handle this threat.

Following the previous statement, **Shukria Barakzai** recognises the existence and risk posed by the ISKP in Afghanistan, but she also stresses that the group has never showed willingness to be a part of a political settlement or political arrangement in the country. In that way, they are not fighting with the same objective as the Taliban fought for 20 years until they got back into power. Their primary objective is to establish connections with international terrorist networks and exert influence on a transnational dimension. They will rather overcome their ethnic and cultural differences to align their efforts in their fight against the West. For these reasons, the ISKP is not an existential threat to the survival of the Taliban regime, but it is something the current government must equate while managing the security landscape of Afghanistan. Moreover, even though the ISKP hasn't claimed political ambitions in Afghanistan, it doesn't mean that they won't change course in the future, just like the Taliban did after the Civil War in 1989.

Barnett Rubin furthers the discussion to include a broader picture of the security landscape of Afghanistan. In his words, throughout this country's history, the central governments have only managed to exercise control over the capital city Kabul. The government, historically speaking, has never had even an administrative presence in the villages. They normally resorted to local leaders of the villages to ensure some kind of monitoring. This meant that the security of rural parts of Afghanistan, which comprises most part of the territory, were responsibility of the local leaders. During the past 20 years, the U.S. and international forces brought security to the major cities and to some rural areas where the population for ethnic or political reasons was in support of the republican government, but they also brought tremendous insecurity and huge numbers of civilian casualties to rural areas where the Taliban were based, particularly in southern Afghanistan. When the Taliban took power, the security landscape changed upside down, because the urban centres now felt oppressed by the incumbent government. Additionally, the rural areas also experienced a tremendous change with the end of the war on their own territory. In this sense, there are parts of the country where the situation is significantly better because the Taliban have ended the war. On **Rubin's** perspective, ISKP is the biggest direct military political threat to the government, but not to the Afghan people. Right now, the collapse of the former government and of the economy constitutes the biggest danger to Afghans well-being and survival. On the part of the international community, the possibility of overthrowing the Taliban regime will only open space for a more conservative and illegitimate government to be formed. What the international community should do instead is to engage with the parts of the Taliban government who are more willing to collaborate, who happen to be the most moderate faction. Moreover, the scope under which the humanitarian assistance is being shaped should be guided by the principle of delivering basic needs and services to Afghans while supporting the Taliban as little as possible.

Victor Ângelo continues discussing the role the international community can play in tackling the humanitarian crisis ravaging Afghanistan. He agrees with Rubin's statement that the biggest threat to the Afghan people is the collapse of the economy, which might happen any time soon. On the international scene, Mario Draghi, the President of Italy, has called an extraordinary meeting of the G20 to the 12th of October 2021 to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and, most importantly, how much can the G20 members pledge for humanitarian assistance. As far as it has been shared, G20 members are willing to provide as much humanitarian assistance as needed but they are not keen to contributing to development assistance. This is also the position being taken by other European countries, where the main objective of that humanitarian assistance is to keep Afghan people on their home territory and avoid migrations to neighbouring countries and ultimately to Europe.

Barnett Rubin adds a final contribution to this point. The majority of the employees in the education and health sectors are women. There was a public meeting held by women teachers and women healthcare workers in Kabul asking for the restoration of funding to the education and healthcare systems. By not funding these two systems, we are directly depriving women of their main sources of employment and also depriving them of education and healthcare services themselves.

Russia has supported the Taliban in the past and they even attempted negotiations to find a peaceful solution for Afghanistan. China has also played a role not just in the economy of the country but also in its support to the Taliban. The Taliban may find in these two regional powers their source of recognition. **Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro** asks what do the Taliban have to do or concede to obtain this additional level of recognition? Especially when these two countries are geographically closer to Afghanistan and hold closer ties with this country's neighbours.

On 17th September 2021, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) held a meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, mentioned **Victor Ângelo**. Three major points came out regarding this organisation's position on Afghanistan: allow the Taliban to establish an inclusive government; human rights should be respected; prevent terrorist activity in the Afghan territory. This official position from these countries indicates that they might recognise the Taliban regime in the future and plan a greater humanitarian and development assistance package to the country, even though nothing has been announced yet.

Barnett Rubin steps in and comments that the fact that the U.S. and Europe have had troops in Afghanistan for 20 years has distorted their geographic perception of where Afghanistan actually is. Many Western media outlets and think tanks include Afghanistan in the Indo-Pacific region, when this country is a landlocked Asian continental country. For this reason, Afghanistan is more focused in cooperating and aligning itself with the SCO and specifically with Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China which happen to be the most influential in the country right now. And of the three points outlined in the SCO's

statement, mentioned above, the inclusiveness one is the most prominent. For SCO members, Afghanistan may only achieve sustainable peace if it accommodates in its governmental structure representation of all ethnic groups composing the Afghan society. Despite this clear position, SCO members will not recognise the Taliban regime individually, at least not before they have all aligned their positions and statements regarding Afghanistan.

Victor Ângelo fears that the current spotlight on Afghanistan will soon fade away and that the international community will likely label it as a failed state, pushing it out of the humanitarian agencies' radar.

Cátia Moreira de Carvalho recalls that for a long time the Taliban were against the internet, but right now they are making great use of the virtual world to spread disinformation. And this disinformation campaign has been trying to show a moderate and progressive image of the Taliban when, in fact, they haven't been implementing that agenda in the country. This will have a negative impact on the perception the international donor community will have on the new government and, more importantly, it will affect the donor's willingness to disburse great amounts of humanitarian assistance to the country.

Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro redirects the discussion to the matter of inclusiveness in the Taliban regime. As it has been shown in this webinar, the Taliban are not a homogeneous nor coherent political group. There are several currents of thought within them, some more moderate, others more conservative and fighting-prone. What is hindering the Taliban government to become inclusive? Is there reluctance from any specific group within the Taliban? Can the regional powers push for inclusive governance?

In this case, **Barnett Rubin** believes that the main concern of the Taliban leadership is not how they would govern Afghanistan but how they will maintain the unity of the group itself and maintain the loyalty of their fighters. And about whether the Taliban are adopting an inclusive government, the assessment depends on what one defines as inclusiveness. If we look at inclusiveness as something restricted to the Taliban, then we may say that there are some factions within the Taliban who are extremely dissatisfied with the current configuration of the government.

Shukria Barakzai asserts that Afghan people should not be punished by the Taliban regime. Afghanistan is facing a huge economic crisis that is putting in risk the well-being and survival of the Afghan people, be in the rural or urban areas. Afghanistan is facing an alarming situation and the international community should take action as quickly as possible. Local NGOs should coordinate efforts internally to manage and deliver the humanitarian assistance to the population. **Barakzai** also calls attention to the illegitimacy of the Taliban regime. In her words, when the U.S. initiated a round of negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, that led to the U.S.-Taliban agreement in 2020, the international community, including the UN, legitimised and recognised the Taliban. And

the question of legitimacy is not only important in its external dimension, but also on internal matters. Even though the Taliban government lacks popular legitimacy, since they weren't democratically elected, they are now in power in Afghanistan. So, for the Afghan people, it is now vital to think of ways to make this new regime accountable for its people. How can Afghans push for a more progressive agenda? How can they safeguard and protect their civil rights? How to ensure that human rights will be preserved? All this while accounting for the regional powers' position. China will certainly further its relations with Afghanistan due to its greed for natural resources, but also due to Afghan's connectivity in Central Asia. Iran will carry on supporting militarily the Taliban, while Pakistan will maintain its support as long as it can extract benefits from that relation. **Shukria Barakzai** emphasises that the current situation in Afghanistan is not the responsibility of the Afghan people. It is, instead, the result of four decades of using Afghanistan as the playground of international powers.

On **Cátia Moreira de Carvalho's** stance, the relationship between the Taliban and Al Qaeda is strong and long-lasting. In fact, it dates back to 2001, when the Taliban offered refuge to Al Qaeda members after the 9/11 attacks against the U.S. Moreover, in the agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban in 2020, the second has bound to prevent any kind of terrorist activity from Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Victor Ângelo complements the previous statements by noting that Al Qaeda has lost strength and territory over the past years and if one thinks closely, this terrorist group has not perpetrated any major attack in any Western country for many years. In fact, the Taliban agreed with the U.S. to prevent Al Qaeda from attacking Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries because Al Qaeda doesn't have the capacity to do so right now. Even in West Africa, this terrorist group is losing ground every day to the Islamic State. And as far as Europe is concerned, it is nowadays much better prepared and equipped to contain the threat Al Qaeda may possibly pose.

Ângelo adds a special comment to Barakzai's previous statement about the legitimisation and recognition of the Taliban by the international community. In his perspective, when the EU or the U.S. initiated dialogue with the Taliban, it didn't mean recognition of the group, but instead it revealed a realistic approach from these two Western powers based on operational needs.

Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro recentred the discussion on the current opposition to the Taliban regime, be it the civic resistance from urban women, the ISKP, or the armed resistance in Panjshir. Hypothetically speaking, if the Taliban are unable to maintain power in Afghanistan, which would be the possible future short-term scenarios? Would any of these opposition groups be able to take over?

Barnett Rubin recalls that the Soviet Union conducted at least eight offensives against the Panjshir valley during its occupation and always failed to conquer that region. The Taliban also failed to do so during its first time in power (1996-2001). This time, the

Taliban conquered the Panjshir valley region in just a few days. This means that the Taliban do have some strengths to carry on. Besides, if international powers have been negotiating with them, it is because they exert control over most part of the Afghan territory and so they hold some bargaining power. This also indicates that none of the above opposition groups constitutes an alternative to the current regime. Former diplomatic representations in Afghanistan and former Afghan officials have been, nonetheless, trying to establish some kind of government or national authority in exile. If these efforts follow a consistent path, this governing body may serve as a rallying point for Afghans against the Taliban inside Afghanistan. Moreover, the Afghan people have not been showing much appetite for a violent transition of power, nor for any kind of external intervention for that purpose. Afghans have had enough of bloodshed and external interventions that only devastated their country.

On the possibility of replacement, **Shukria Barakzai** asserts that if the Taliban hold elections, then a change will come. But this is not a predictable path that will follow. One thing is certain, however, that Afghans are done with bloodsheds, wars, or any other type of conflict. The result of four decades of fighting has been a destroyed country, desperate people, an insecure environment, and an economic crisis. As it has been highlighted before, one must find a way to make the Taliban accountable and transform it into an inclusive government. Sooner or later, Afghanistan should be ruled by elected leaders. And only that may lead the current situation of Afghanistan into a better one in the near future. For the present time, there are political leaders, such as Abdullah and Hamid Karzai, who are capable to build an inclusive government by gender, religion, ethnicity, and so on. Despite this, **Barakzai** envisages a pressing risk of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for international terrorist networks.

Victor Ângelo aligns with the previous statement and reinforces the idea that the current situation in Afghanistan needs to be solved by the Afghans themselves. The only solution for that is to promote inclusiveness and dialogue among Afghans, including the Taliban. Additionally, Europe doesn't envisage any political alternative to the Taliban right now, which obviously compromises any attempts of inclusiveness within the Taliban government.

Afghanistan urgently needs a political settlement among its various political forces as much now as it did before the Taliban took power, says **Barnett Rubin**. To this end, the 20th of October meeting in Moscow will be a crucial step in this process. Russia, even before the U.S.-Taliban negotiations in 2020, had already initiated dialogue with the Taliban aiming at creating a regional platform centred on Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and China. This platform succeeded in the beginning, which resulted in its expansion to the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, and the participation, at a low level, of the U.S. It stalled during the Doha negotiations, but now it may find the opportunity to be relaunched. In **Rubin's** view, this regional platform can be the vehicle for the establishment of a political settlement in Afghanistan.

Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro shifts the conversation to the potential impacts of Afghanistan's regional powers appetite for this country's natural resources and geopolitical position, especially China's interest. For instance, there has been some rumours about the opening of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline, which was originally negotiated when the Taliban were first in power. Is it possible that through economic engagement the Taliban will be forced to become more inclusive and open to its external neighbours? Or will the Taliban capitalise on its neighbours' interest to search for international recognition?

According to **Barnett Rubin**, the Chinese are not eager to get involved in a difficult situation inside Afghanistan just because they want to have access to its natural resources. China has many other places where it can, and is already doing, extract the natural resources it needs. So, Afghanistan is not a priority to China because of its natural resources, and China will not hasten any type of economic agreement without solid guarantees from the Taliban government. Above all, the Chinese want to show that they are more competent and careful than the U.S. or the Soviet Union.

Victor Ângelo agrees with Rubin's statement and adds that the Chinese are particularly concerned with the Pakistani corridor (from China to the Indian Ocean) because of Pakistani Taliban active presence in the country. The only concern of China is that the Taliban government do not attack Pakistan or harm the Chinese interests in Pakistan. They want to make sure their investments in Pakistan are safe. That is Chinese's first priority as regards their relations with the Taliban. Right now, they don't consider Afghanistan safe and stable enough to ponder any type of future investment in the country.

Barnett Rubin also mentions that China has been decreasing its investments in Pakistan due to security concerns, let alone going to Afghanistan. But on a contrary trend, China has signed a long-range cooperation agreement with Iran because it considers this country safer than Pakistan.

Shukria Barakzai calls everyone's attention to the importance of Afghan illicit economy, which revolves around the drug trade of opium. The drug trade is not only central to the global drug trafficking, but it is also very profitable to Afghanistan. Besides this, Afghanistan is a mineral-rich country and a place of connectivity in Central Asia. To all this, **Barakzai** defends that China has major plans for Afghanistan and that is why it is currently the biggest humanitarian assistance donor to the country and was the biggest provider of COVID-19 vaccines.

Going back to the opium's trade in Afghanistan, **Cátia Moreira de Carvalho** states that during the first Taliban ruling of Afghanistan (1996-2001), the trafficking of opium increased, and it is expected that it will follow the same trend in the next years.

Barnett Rubin references recent research conducted by David Mansfield on the opium trafficking in Afghanistan that indicates that the drug economy of Afghanistan, which comprises much more than Opium itself, is seven times larger than it has been estimated before, and it includes marble, talc, timber, emeralds, and lapis-lazuli. The main issue on this is that the drug economy is solely based on cash, and since Afghanistan is running out of cash, it might compromise the future of the illicit economy in Afghanistan. The only exception would be the use of Pakistani rupees, which have been widely used in Afghanistan recently.

If the illicit economy is that big in Afghanistan, could this be one way of the Taliban to sustain the country's economy in the short-term, asks **Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro**.

The drug economy of Afghanistan, which is actually an industry, is run by businessmen, emphasises **Barnett Rubin**. And most of those businessmen live outside Afghanistan and run their businesses independently from Afghan political authorities. In practical terms, these businessmen need full access to the roads connecting the transformation sites to the borders of the country, and they will pay whoever grants them this access, be it the Taliban, rural leaders, or the North Alliance. The illicit drug economy of Afghanistan is privately owned and separate from the national economy.

Cátia Moreira de Carvalho adds that under the Taliban rule the use and consumption of any type of drug is forbidden by law. In fact, they have been persecuting drug-users in Kabul.

On the final remarks, **Victor Ângelo** states that Afghanistan's opium industry represents 80% of the world's total production, but it only contributes 12% to the country's national GDP. Moreover, the drug industry of Afghanistan doesn't grant access to the Taliban government, nor does it bring revenues for the country's economy.



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INFO@CLUBELISBOA.PT

Rua S. Nicolau, 105, 1100-548 Lisboa | +(351) 213 256 302

www.clubelisboa.pt