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Afghanistan: current situation and short-term scenarios

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On this webinar, **Teresa Almeida Cravo** chaired a discussion about the political and social situation of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign troops from the territory, together with the researcher and former Afghan diplomat **Omar Samad**, Human Rights activist and former chief of cabinet of the EU Special Representative to Afghanistan **Ayscha Hamdani**, retired Portuguese General **Carlos Branco**, and Portuguese war journalist **Pedro Caldeira Rodrigues**.

In February 2020, the Trump administration and the Taliban signed the US-Taliban deal in Doha, Qatar, setting the foundations for a peace settlement in Afghanistan. In August 2021 the United States concluded a long process of withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan. Other foreign military presences followed suit and in a short period of time the Afghan military was dismantled. The Taliban seized the moment and took over the capital - Kabul - and overthrown the Afghan government. What caused this fall of Kabul so unexpectedly quickly and what will be the main challenges facing the country now?

From **Omar Samad's** perspective and understanding of the situation, even though the oust of the Afghan government was pointed as an envisaged outcome considering the events of the past two years, nothing predicted that Kabul would be taken over so quickly by the Taliban. In Samad's opinion, this abrupt overthrown could have been avoided if there had been a political settlement between all Afghan political parties, namely the Taliban and the representatives of the Republic of Afghanistan that was set up after 2001. This political settlement should have led to the voluntary step down of Ashraf Ghani, president of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, in February 2020, Ghani left the country without notice on the same day when the political settlement was being discussed between the U.S. and the Taliban, excluding any participation from the Afghan government in the deal. His departure created a political vacuum in Afghanistan, which was later broadened by the escape from the country the day after by the two vice-presidents Amrullah Saleh and Sarwar Danish. That vacuum was peacefully filled by the Taliban, who were in fact positioned in the surroundings of the city of Kabul waiting for the deal to be signed in Doha.

Carlos Branco, on his term, takes a step back on time to explain previous events that led to the oust of the Afghan government and the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. In **Branco's** words, the downfall of the regime started years ago when the Taliban started to establish contacts with tribal elders from all over the country resorting to a varied sort of methods, namely bribing, harassment, and persuasion. Another explaining factor was the widespread corruption among the Afghan military. Lower and middle military ranks claimed for many years the poor and irregular payment of their salaries, which spread the feeling of disenfranchisement among the soldiers and lack of motivation to fight against the Taliban on the field. The combination of these factors in a system composed of kleptocratic leaders dictated the short life span of the Afghan regime.

In respect to the current security situation, **Carlos Branco** identifies several problems. First within the Taliban. This is not a homogenous group and at the present moment there are three sub-groups that stand out: one led by Abdul Ghani Baradar, who conducted the negotiations with the U.S.; other known as the Haqqani network; and a final one led by Mohammad Yaqoob, the son of Mohammed Omar, founder of the Taliban. The dynamics among these three groups will shape Taliban's response to the current situation. **Branco** also highlights internal resistance as a problem. The province of Panjshir, in the north of Afghanistan, is stage to the uprising against the Taliban from the Afghanistan National Resistance Front (NRF). The NRF embodies in fact what is left of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and of the military alliance of former Northern Alliance members, an anti-Taliban force. Nevertheless, the province of Panjshir will suffer the same level of hardship as the rest of the country, and since they are enclosed by the Taliban, its capacity to endure is uncertain. Another problem is the external support these parties may receive. To the present moment, Pakistan has been supporting the Taliban, through the Haqqani network. China has also kept a close eye on the situation because of the presence of Uigur movements in the northeast region of Afghanistan and the high risk of terrorist contamination.

Teresa Almeida Cravo broadens the discussion to include the regional dynamics shaping the situation in Afghanistan and the position of the global powers. What role is being played or can be played by Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan?

After the withdrawal of the U.S. military troops from Afghanistan, we should look at the countries that decided to stay, keeping their diplomatic representations in the country, as noted by **Pedro Caldeira Rodrigues**. China, Russia, Iran, India, and Pakistan will certainly play an important role in the unfolding of the situation. Russia, specifically, in 2018-19 set an agreement between the insurgents and official representatives of the Republic of Afghanistan, in which the Taliban committed to not moving forward on the military conquest of the country. On 18th March 2021, Russia's minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov, held a meeting of the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation with representatives from the U.S., China, and Pakistan, where all parts agreed to participate in a coalition provisional government. This special interest from Russia comes from the risk of destabilisation of the Central Asian republics, namely Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kirgizstan. In these negotiations, the Taliban have stated that they would refrain from attacking any neighbouring country and that is why Russia considers the Taliban the most capable force to counter the Islamic State's expansionism in the region. In return, the Taliban can acquire its long-needed international recognition from Russia.

Concerning Iran, **Pedro Caldeira Rodrigues** affirms that this country has similar interests to those of Russia, mostly because of the threat posed by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), operating in the border region of Iran, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. This threat holds a special risk of turbulence in the region given ISKP's Persian heritage and its connections with the northwest part of Afghanistan. In this environment, Iran

pledged military support to Kabul in its efforts to defeat the ISKP. This puts Iran at a crossroads, because its Shiite regime is supporting the Sunni Taliban who, by their term, have close ties with Saudi Arabia, which happens to be the regional competitor of Iran. Now regarding Pakistan, due to a border line issue, it has endured a tension relation with Afghanistan that will probably continue, since the Taliban have already claimed sovereignty over that territory.

The rights of women in Afghanistan have come to the fore once the Taliban took power in August 2021. The protection and safeguard of their rights and needs ignited a huge debate on the global public opinion and many human rights organisations fear that women may suffer disproportionately from this power transition. In this sense, **Teresa Almeida Cravo** asks how can women maintain some of the rights and liberties that they gained in the period of the Republic of Afghanistan (2001-2021) and how responsive will the new government be to their needs and pleas?

Ayscha Hamdani stresses that the current media spotlight on Afghanistan has contributed to the acknowledgement that Afghanistan is an extremely poor country. Although the overthrow of Kabul was to be anticipated, people could not believe that after two decades of international assistance and democracy the Taliban would be back in power one of a sudden. And in that way, panic quickly spread among the population and among the international community. Shortly after Kabul was taken over, the population started to experience a shortage of food, of cash, of scratch cards and absence of medical services. Many people are trying to flee the country, while chaos pervades everywhere. Contradictory reports from the population are emerging. Some say that the Taliban have not yet forbidden or oppressed any previously established rights and social conquests, and others report that men have been missing and women can no longer go outside alone. Right now, we are seeing different versions of the Taliban and different types of behaviours depending on where we are in the country. On the press conferences where international media is present, the Taliban align their agenda and discourse with the ones of the West, but when we hear stories from Afghan people living in the country, the reality is quite different.

Teresa Almeida Cravo adds to Hamdani's intervention questioning this incongruous position of the Taliban. Why are the Taliban eager to show a different image to the outside? Are they trying to avoid becoming a pariah state, and that explains, in part, why they are being so vocal about ensuring women's rights?

To **Ayscha Hamdani**, the Taliban have a bad reputation worldwide and it is obvious that they are trying to present a new image to their international peers. Moreover, this bad reputation is equally shared by the Afghan population. In fact, when the Taliban took control of the country in 1996, they removed and prohibited much of Afghanistan's traditional culture and customs, generating general discontent among the population. So, throughout the years, the Taliban have been adapting their discourse, narrative, and image in accordance with today's progressive ideas and demands. It is important,

however, to follow closely Taliban's decisions and measures in the next months to assess if they comply with what they are saying. In **Hamdani's** opinion, the discussions on the future of Afghanistan should not centre on the Taliban, but instead on the urgent need of finding a leadership that can ensure Afghanistan's and Afghan's sustainable future.

Much of the discussion in media and public opinion outlets have been around the impact that the withdrawal of foreign troops from the territory and the dismantling of the Afghan military has had on the succession of events that took place shortly after. **Teresa Almeida Cravo** asks what are the other options now that foreign military presences are out of the country? Is the military the only force capable of facing a Taliban government?

Omar Samad states that any possible future for the Afghanistan must include the Taliban. In fact, that has been one of the major mistakes of foreign leaders while discussing possible solutions and future scenarios for the country. The Taliban are part of Afghanistan; they have been in the country for several years now, from 1996 to 2001 they held power, and when the Afghan Republic was set up, the Taliban were completely pushed out of Afghanistan's political and social structures. If the then Afghan government and U.S. leaders have invited the Taliban to the table and held discussions with them, the situation wouldn't have escalated to the current level. Concerning the Taliban's political programme, it is still too early to assess if their agenda as changed and if the measures they have announced will actually be implemented. There is an information war going on right now, all sides are using propaganda and the situation is truly confusing.

On Afghanistan's fragility, **Omar Samad** attributes responsibility to the way the implementation of the Afghanistan Republic in 2001 was portrayed. According to Ashraf Ghani, the President back then, the economy was stable, the government held control over all the territory, society had opened to global mainstream social and cultural trends, and the military was well-equipped and well-trained. Nevertheless, this portray would be soon revealed as a house of cards. Over 20 years, the international community allocated 3 trillion dollars to the development of Afghanistan. Never in world history, such a big amount had been attributed to the development of any country. This explains why Taliban's took over came as a huge surprise to both the international and Afghan's population. This raised many questions of what went wrong during those 20 years and why we ended up in this situation. On a brighter note, however, Samad points out that since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, the number of deaths from the war between the Afghan government and the Taliban decreased from an average of 150 per day to almost zero per day.

What can the 20-year intervention in Afghanistan tell about the U.S. or Western-led global interventions? How did they unfold in other parts of the world, asks **Almeida Cravo**.

To answer this question, **Pedro Caldeira Rodrigues** mentions a documentary made by Al-Jazeera that tells the history of Afghanistan. The documentary shows that, since the fall of the monarchy in 1973, Afghanistan has been experiencing political and social turbulence until today, with several political killings and coups d'états. It shows in deep

detail how both the Soviet- and U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan unfolded and it concludes that neither intervention achieved their intended outcomes because they couldn't win the support of the Afghan people, especially in the rural areas. As regards the U.S. specifically, they have an extensive legacy of interventions that date back to the expansion of their own national territory. This interventionist trait was only exacerbated after the Cold War, where the U.S. embarked on an endeavour of interventions worldwide to safeguard or restore democracy in a set of countries. This endeavour failed in all countries it has been applied in, namely Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and it has proved the U.S./Western model of interventionism a failure.

Almeida Cravo furthers the discussion on the U.S./Western-led interventions by reflecting on how much Western media has focused on the shame upon the way Western forces left Afghanistan and how that withdrawal will inevitably lead to the loss of some social liberties, especially women's liberties. In one sense, the media portrays the U.S./Western intervention as an imposition of its liberal agenda, but on the other they also claim that Afghan people wanted this change all along.

In **Ayscha Hamdani's** perspective, throughout the 20-year intervention, Afghanistan has positioned itself as a victim. It is important that Afghan leaders recognise that the Taliban have been part of the country for a long time now. This past 20 years generated, however, a highly educated and qualified part of the population that are now leaving the country, which spreads the uncertainty of who is now capable of filling public administration and government seats. This situation obviously compromises the future of Afghanistan. It is yet to be seen if the Taliban will in fact appoint women to public and political positions and capitalise on this highly qualified segment of the population to set in motion their seeming progressive agenda.

Carlos Branco stresses that the political agenda of the Taliban is still very uncertain. Nevertheless, the new Taliban regime will not implement a centralised state such as the one of the Republic of Afghanistan in 2001, instead it will be something resembling a loose confederation. But, regardless of its configuration, the Taliban government should now focus on the successful management of the humanitarian crisis pervading the country, and not on the international recognition of its regime. Afghanistan has suffered from cyclical droughts, which has hindered agricultural productivity, and after the power transition, it has been experiencing shortage of food, cash, and healthcare supply. The international community should be now focusing on how it will address this humanitarian crisis. In the short-term, on the 15th of September 2021, the United Nations will hold a conference in Geneva to collect financial support to Afghanistan. This conference will happen on the same day when the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) comes to an end. Its possible renovation and extension should be used as an entry point of dialogue with the Taliban government to foster Afghanistan's development. Although humanitarian assistance should preserve its political neutrality, in this specific case, **Branco** defends that it should be used as a means to promote the development of Afghanistan and moderate Taliban's position.

Teresa Almeida Cravo steps in the conversation to question if the separation between humanitarian aid and development cooperation is that strict. In fact, the West has been known for instrumentalising the former to achieve its development cooperation goals. The balance between what the Taliban can use from humanitarian assistance to maintain its popular support and what the international community can offer to the Taliban can become a tricky case for mediation.

Carlos Branco's response underlines that the humanitarian assistance is to be led by the United Nations, and not by any individual country, but this obviously has constraints since the U.S. play an influential role in the UN, the World Bank, and the IMF. To the present moment, the U.S., the EU, and other countries have pledged a certain amount of financial support to Afghanistan, based on conditions that try to favour the moderate group within the Taliban. The international community should follow this track of supporting the moderate group, if it wants to achieve sustained peace and development in the country.

To **Omar Samad** there are three possible scenarios on the table: the first is a full engagement and recognition of the Taliban; the second is a semi-engagement and recognition; and the third is isolating Afghanistan by denying any type of engagement or recognition. Both the Taliban and the previous regime are not beholden to Western finances nor assistance. In fact, they have several other options, non-Western options, to which they can resort to, such as China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and, the Central Asian republics. And more interesting, these other options do not push for any particular political agenda, contrary to the liberal one imposed by the West. The Taliban regime can also make use of its connections with global Islamic networks, from Morocco, to Indonesia, to Malaysia. These connections can grant the Taliban donations and financial support. Another source of income for the Taliban will be the tax reform - *ushr* - that comes from the transition to an Islamic state which raises taxes on everything that a person owns or produces. As it has happened during their previous regime, the application of the *ushr* will be particularly profitable due to the drug trade (mostly opium) in Afghanistan.

Almeida Cravo introduced two questions from the audience: (1) Imagining an expansion and spread of ISKP in Afghanistan in the coming years, will the U.S. equate a new intervention? (2) Even though the Taliban have taken back control over the Panjshir region, will the Northern Alliance resist and carry on with the civil war in the medium and long run?

According to **Carlos Branco**, the U.S. must cooperate with the Taliban to fight the ISKP. This is so because the first has the military technology and the expertise, and the second has the knowledge and intelligence data about Afghanistan's society. Even if the U.S. decides to eliminate the ISKP, it will not do so at the expense of invading Afghanistan. The operation to defeat Al-Qaeda that led to the assassination of Osama bin Laden did not imply the invasion of any country. In respect to the situation in Panjshir, **Branco** states

that there has been much extrapolation and exaggeration about the Northern Alliance when in reality they don't have military capability to take back Kabul.

Omar Samad adds that when it comes to counterterrorism, U.S. leaders feel that they have done what they could, and they don't see any terrorist threat coming from Afghanistan right now. Moreover, the Taliban are deeply committed to curbing ISKP's expansion because they see each other as rivals - their idea of an Islamic state differs significantly. Also, the Taliban have never attempted any sort of transnational connections, always focusing on Afghanistan solely. Concerning the second question, **Samad** explains that the resistance from Panjshir was the last attempt from the remnants of Ghani's government to preserve the previous regime. To the present moment, the Taliban seem to be in firm control of all the territory of Afghanistan.

After 20 years of intervention, **Ayscha Hamdani** believes that it should be clear for the West by now that the progressive agenda and liberal values they have presented to the Afghan people are not everyone's values. It is crucial to listen to the Afghans, especially those living outside the capital city Kabul. There, one may find a big portion of the population who support the Taliban and who recall with joy the Taliban regime of 1996-2001. Back then, there was no corruption, contrary to what followed during the Afghanistan Republic.

Hamdani furthers her point on the results and outcomes of the 20-year external intervention to say that Afghanistan still lacks its own industry, its infrastructure, and many basic public services. **Omar Samad** continues Hamdani's statement by underlining that the outcome of that intervention is very shallow and fragile. When the Afghanistan Republic was implemented in 2001, the government decided to establish democracy and a market economy, and to build-up a new civil society and several critical infrastructures throughout the country. On the democracy side, the intervention has been a complete failure. This is not to say that Afghan people do not identify with or do not want democracy in their country, but instead it means that the governing elites failed on their mission of building a credible democratic system and of establishing a cohesive bond between the governing sphere and the population. The Afghani people were being governed by externally imposed unelected leaders. The same happened with the implementation of a market economy, the construction of infrastructure, and the promotion of a civil society. On top of this, during those 20 years, this endeavour to create a new country from scratch also generated division and discontent among the Afghan people, especially the rural population, who became excluded from this new project given their traditional and conservative values. This part of the population, who already shared ethnic affiliations with the Taliban, consequently aligned with them.

Carlos Branco agrees with the previous statements and adds a new point on the demonisation of the Taliban. It is common to devalue and downgrade the opposing side in a conflict, but this is a blatant mistake that compromises sustainable cease-fire and peace agreements. The West's perception of the Taliban has always been based on

propaganda and biased information. Their political agenda has never been taken seriously by the governing elites nor external forces, and this enabled the Taliban to profit from the West's misperceptions.

On the regional dimension, **Pedro Caldeira Rodrigues** states that India was the first regional contributor when the Afghan Republic was implemented, and it is now also withdrawing from the country. Regarding China's interests in Afghanistan, they are mostly focused on the threat posed by the possible interference with Uigur's Muslim population in China. Nevertheless, on economic terms, China has been active in Afghanistan through the extraction of raw materials and the establishment of a direct connection between China and Pakistan, passing by Afghanistan. Regarding Turkey, before the Taliban took over Kabul, President Erdogan offered to control the airport of Kabul over the U.S., but this proposal was later refused by the Taliban.

Setting a final tone to the webinar, **Almeida Cravo** asks what are the general consequences of the U.S. and West's political defeat in Afghanistan? How will this negative image of the U.S. and NATO impact these organisation's future external actions? Is the West losing power internationally?

On **Carlos Branco's** perspective, U.S.'s and NATO's ambitions in Central Asia are now frozen and will remain that way for the coming years. This opens space for the Taliban to consolidate their power in Afghanistan and reinforces the idea, mostly shared among non-Western powers, that the Taliban are the only capable entity to stabilise Afghanistan right now. On China's side, the Taliban are seen as the guarantors of peace and that way they enable China to intensify its exploration of copper in Afghanistan - the second biggest reserves in the world - and hydrocarbons. The outcome of the intervention in Afghanistan will have direct impacts on how NATO operates and how it plans its external interventions. The European countries have run tired of playing the role of the 'deputy sheriff'; they now want to take the lead.

Pedro Caldeira Rodrigues calls attention to Biden's official declaration justifying the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. On that document, President Biden declares that the U.S. have not been defeated because they left in Afghanistan 300.000 Afghan National Security Forces trained and equipped by the U.S. to fight the Taliban. They played their part in ensuring that after the withdrawal, the Afghan government would be able to hold on, even if that didn't occur.

Ayscha Hamdani puts things differently by saying that the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops were not a matter of win or defeat. If we look back 20 years, the Western intervention in Afghanistan was never guided by clear objectives or indicators, its results and outcomes were never assessed or scrutinised, and now that they left, Afghanistan remains an extreme poor country. All the social achievements were conquered at the expense of civil society and non-governmental Afghan organisations, and if people are

now trying to flee the country, it is not because of the Taliban, but because there are no future or basic conditions for anyone to stay.

Omar Samad shares his personal experience living and working in Afghanistan. In the 1980's, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, during the Cold War, the U.S. invested what has been the largest amount of money and resources so far to defeat and expel Soviet forces from the country. When the U.S. achieved its goal of defeating Soviet troops, they didn't set negotiations between the parties nor tried to agree upon any type of peace agreement. This resulted in a civil war between internal fractions that lasted until 2001 and allowed the Taliban to rise as a powerful group among the Afghan population. **Samad** reflects upon how the way the U.S. is structured and functions as a country influence and impact its conduct outside, especially on its external interventions. The U.S. solely operates on the basis of money and on the basis of what is or can be profitable, and if one applies that to the Afghan case, it will explain that the U.S. endured such a long war because it was profitable. In fact, most part of the American establishment wanted to maintain U.S.'s presence in Afghanistan, and no one really believed that President Biden would stand up to this current. But, on **Omar's** view, Biden's decision came from his personal, visceral understanding of the situation in Afghanistan, which he had accompanied since the 1980s through the lenses of the several political positions he occupied throughout.



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