

Harvard University Asia Center

Asia Beyond the Headlines Seminar Series

Transcription begins

James Robson: Okay, I think we're going to begin this morning's event. I'd like to welcome everybody. My name is James Robson and I'm the Victor and William Fung Director of the Harvard University Asia Center. And I wanted to welcome everyone to this morning's Asia Beyond the Headline Seminar Series presentation titled Implications: Regional perspectives on the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which in addition to the Asia Center is also being co-sponsored by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and The Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute, also at Harvard University.

Let me begin first by thanking Tenzin Ngodup who is the Program Coordinator of the Asia Center for all of his efforts to organize this panel so quickly. So, thank you again Tenzin. So tomorrow as everyone knows will mark the 20th anniversary of that horrific day of planes hitting the Twin Towers in New York City and The Pentagon. And that plan seems to have been hatched and planned in Afghanistan and then led to the buildup of US military in that region, the high point reaching something over a hundred thousand troops there, fighting alongside its allies and Afghan partners against the Taliban primarily. And we are also just two weeks removed from the August 31st, 2021 withdrawal of the US out of Afghanistan and there we saw the iconic images over the past weeks of planes departing from Kabul, the chaos at the airport and even people clinging to flights leaving from - to those planes leaving out of the air base there. So for some 20 years then, the US and its allies fought against and weakened the Taliban. Poured in thousands, upon thousands of troops and trillions of dollars to try to rebuild Afghanistan, train its security forces and all of that. That news is all fairly well known now. As we've seen at the end of August that effort collapsed remarkably fast. Perhaps more than most people could predict.

The Taliban is back in control of well, most of the country now as we know and much of the media focus, I think, over the past few weeks and past month, more than a month has been on the chaotic withdrawal, the attack that happened at the airport that killed US forces and many citizens, reporting on the plight of women and those who had worked for the US forces that have been trying to leave, all of that has garnered a lot of attention. While there has been some attention paid to the potential roles to be played by big players in the region like China, Russia, Pakistan and India, I think there's been somewhat less attention played to the regional impact of that withdrawal and its aftermath as we see playing out in places like Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Nepal, the Maldives and Bangladesh among other places that are implicated in these events.

So, the goal of this morning's panel discussion is to engage with some of these intractable issues in detail with an excellent panel of journalists, either based in the region who have spent much time in the region. So, the format will be that each speaker will have about 15 minutes for their opening comments and sharing of their reflections on what's happening and then we will have time for the speakers to respond to each other and also some time for Q&A from the audience. So, for the audience please use the Q&A function on Zoom and then I will curate the questions as they come in from the audience.

Okay, so let me begin by introducing our panelists this morning. The first speaker will be Shirin Jaafari who is a reporter for The World, a well-known public radio program based in the US, actually based here in Boston and is a program that literally brings the world home to people, their living rooms, their cars and it serves a wonderful role in the US for the diversity of its programming. Her reporting in particular focuses on the Middle East and Afghanistan, and most recently, through much of late July and August, she was in Afghanistan to cover the US withdrawal and did some remarkable reporting on the impact of women's shelters in addition to the larger stories. Shirin has also reported from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Before joining The World, she worked at the BBC in Washington DC. So, thank you for joining us Shirin.

The second speaker will be Shubhanga Pandey, who is the Chief Editor of the Himal Southasian, a digital publication of South Asian politics, history and culture that's based in Colombo, Sri Lanka and formerly based in Kathmandu where it moved from there in 2018. He received his BA from Williams College in 2017 and has published widely and written for publications that include the World Politics Review, London Review of Books, the Jacobin and the Caravan. So, thank you again Shubhanga for joining us as well.

Finally, the final speaker will be Nasim Zehra who is a national security specialist and prominent author and journalist. She is a senior anchor and analyst at Channel 24 in Pakistan and is coming to us from Islamabad today. As a columnist, TV host and teacher with extensive experience in the development field, she writes and lectures widely on national security and global politics. She's the author of the book 'From Kargil to the Coup' published in 2018 and she has also been a fellow and is currently an associate at the Harvard University Asia Center. She was also a visiting lecturer at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, the National University of Science & Technology, and the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. She has served in the honorary capacity in the following positions as the President's Advisory Committee on Foreign Affairs and National Security, a member of the Kashmir Committee and Pakistan's special envoy on UNSC reforms for Canada and Latin America. And she holds an MBA both from Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, a Master's degree in Law and Diplomacy from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University here.

So, welcome to you all and thank you so much for taking time to participate this morning. And I know what is still an exceptionally busy time for you all and you're reporting in different things. So, thank you very much again. So, let us begin then with Shirin Jaafari and I'll turn the mic over to you and I know you would like to share your screen, so I'll leave it to you.

Shirin Jaafari: Yeah, thank you so much James for this introduction and thank you everybody for taking the time to join this discussion today. I'm excited to share with you some of what I've been working on and just talk a little bit about Iran and Afghanistan. Can you see my screen now?

James Robson: Yes

Shirin Jaafari: Okay, perfect

James Robson: Very clear

Shirin Jaafari: Awesome. So, I'm going to talk about Iran and Afghanistan and there are obviously several different aspects that we can get into but I'm just going to highlight a few. Obviously the two countries have had long historical ties. They share language and culture and they also share about 600 miles of border. And with that kind of long border, there comes economic ties, trade, migration and security concerns. I want to go into each of these aspects a bit deeper later but before I do that I just want to add that even with all the ties that Iran and Afghanistan have, Iran and the Taliban do have major differences - most importantly, ideologically. Iran is a Shia majority country and most of Taliban are Sunni and they follow the Diobandi Hanafi school of Islam. So, there is a distinction there. But Iran has always had a pragmatic relationship when it comes to Afghanistan. On the one hand, it was involved in the Bonn agreement in 2001 which set up the Afghan government and you know, it had relationship with the US supported government in Afghanistan. But we know that it also had some, you know, relationship and back and forth with the Taliban.

One important moment in Iran-Taliban relations was in the 1990s when the Taliban carried out an attack on Iranian diplomats in a city called Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan. 11 Iranian diplomats were killed and that sort of soured the relations and the two sides even almost went to war. But then later Iran and Taliban shared one major goal, right. It was to mainly undermine US presence in Afghanistan. Remember that Iran, after 9/11 saw itself surrounded by US military in Afghanistan and in Iraq. So you know, that was part of its thinking as things moved on.

Okay, so where are we today. Earlier this summer as it was becoming clear that Taliban was going to sort of win the war in Afghanistan, Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif invited Taliban leaders to Iran and they met in Tehran - the capital. And that was kind of shocking to a lot of Afghans because they saw the Iranians giving even more legitimacy to Taliban and you know, taking pictures with them and sort of receiving them in the heart of the country. But even before that, there is evidence to suggest that Iran hosted some Taliban members and allowed them to travel back and forth freely between Afghanistan and Iran. In 2017 for example, US Army General John Nicholson told the Congress that Iran provides support for the Taliban in order to undermine the US in Afghanistan. And Afghan officials have also said in the past that Iran provides weapons and some financial assistance to the Taliban. Now, obviously the Taliban have taken over, taking power in Afghanistan and Iran will likely work with them to ensure its own interests. So what does the Iran-Afghanistan relationship look like on the ground?

So, earlier last month actually, I was in Afghanistan and I went to a city called Herat. It's in the western part of the country and very close to the border with Iran. It's about an hour drive to the border. Herat was until recently an important economic hub. We have to see how that changes or not, and it's the third largest city in Afghanistan. When I was there, Taliban had just taken over the border crossing with Iran - the Islam Qala border crossing and they were making their way to the city, towards the city. And here I am interviewing a group of militia fighters who had come to Herat to resist the Taliban. These men came from all over the country, excuse me and they were responding to a call put out by a former Mujahideen Commander called Ismail Khan. And he had called people to come and join him, take up arms and fight the Taliban. Some of these men are really young - 18, 19, 20 years old.

And this man for example, he told me he's never picked up a gun, he doesn't know how to fight but he's here because he wants to defend the city, he wants his sisters to be able to go to school and he didn't want Taliban to come to Herat. Interestingly, after the Taliban took over Herat, Ismail Khan, the former commander went across the border to Iran and that's where he is and this is according to Afghan media reporting. Meanwhile, as the fighting was getting even more intense in and around the city, you know, it was impacting a lot of families and a lot of them had become displaced. So I had the chance to speak with some of them. And some of these women told me that their husbands are in Iran because a lot of Afghans go to Iran to work and send money. This is how they support their families. This woman, her name is Nagina. This is her seven-month-old baby Ibrahim and she told me that her husband was working in Iran as a laborer, day laborer and when the Taliban came to her village, she was on her own basically. And then she said, thankfully there were other women in her neighborhood whose husbands were working in Iran and they all sort of got together and formed this group and left the neighborhood and came to an area on the outskirts of Herat city and that's where I met them. So, you know, again economic relations with Iran... this is an important income for families in Afghanistan and now we have to see how that is going to impact the income of these families, the changes in Afghanistan.

Also, something that we see right now is the banking system is not functioning as it used to be. So, you know, how are these families going to survive? This woman already told me that her son wasn't taking her milk and then she didn't have enough food to give him. So, there is a chance of a lot of malnourishment. The humanitarian situation is definitely something that we should look at. She told me that she's just living in the outskirts of Herat city with the help and support of some generous people who are living in the area. And that's a common story that we hear in a lot of places outside of major cities. So looking ahead, what are Iran's interests in Afghanistan? First and foremost Iran wants to make sure that trade continues because Iran's economy relies on that trade. Iran exports things like food, electricity, fuel to Afghanistan and it needs that income because it's suffering from the economic sanctions that the US has imposed. Another interest for Iran is keeping the Islamic State in Afghanistan at bay because the Islamic State as we know has been carrying out attacks and has been sort of operating inside Afghanistan. So how is the Taliban going to, you know, reign the Islamic State in. The main thing is that Iran doesn't want insecurity on its border and the Islamic State is a major part of that.

And to achieve that goal, I think it's safe to assume that it will cooperate with the Taliban. They are the force in charge now in Afghanistan. But we still have to wait and see how exactly that relationship is going to form because we are also hearing support from the Iranian, some Iranian officials for the resistance movement in Panjshir for example. And for example, the former Foreign Minister recently said that Taliban is making a mistake by not including different voices in their government and it should have an inclusive government. So, there are some criticisms that we are hearing from the Iranian officials about the interim government that Taliban has put in place. But I think at the end of the day, we are going to see again another pragmatic approach because of the things that I mentioned - trade, security, basically major interests that Iran has in Afghanistan.

One other thing that I will point out, a lot of countries neighboring and others, they might wait and see how the Europeans and how the US will interact with the Taliban government before taking any definitive approach because they might not want to be on the, you know, they don't want to be on the wrath of these countries because they might

have implications for their relations with them. Taliban, they haven't governed in the past two decades and they know how to fight. They've been fighting. Now they are in charge of some 38 million people. A lot of the technocrats, a lot of the people from the former government in Afghanistan have left because they either feared for their safety or they didn't see a future for themselves in Afghanistan. So Taliban doesn't have that resource and we'll have to wait and see how that plays out for them. I will stop here and I'm happy to continue the conversation later. Thank you everybody.

James Robson: Wonderful. Thank you very much Shirin. I'll let you close your slides. Wonderful. Next we will hear from Shubhanga

Shubhanga Pandey: Hi, can you all hear me.

James Robson: Yes.

Shubhanga Pandey: Okay, so I basically want to focus on the implication of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in Nepal. But also, I think we'll make some observations on how it might affect relationship with Sri Lanka and the Maldives. And I want to kind of organize my observations around two things - one is to kind of see the kind of material implication, in terms of you know links between people and trade and labor and economies, that's not a lot. And then from there move on to one might call more ideological or kind of how you know, how the narrative is being shaped elsewhere in South Asia. And how it's being read and how it might eventually impact foreign policy and for understanding of geopolitics. So, beginning with Nepal. The immediate thing in the aftermath of the fall of Kabul for Nepal government was to basically, you know, kind of secure its nationals in Kabul and see what it could do for them. So, the numbers aren't all that clear. It goes anywhere between fifteen hundred to two thousand to twenty thousand but there are, I think, it's likely to be on the higher side because there have been tens of thousands of Nepalis who've worked in Afghanistan, mostly in security services, in defense contracting firms, you know, which basically provides services to embassies to international aid organizations.

So, they've been a big kind of part of the labor supply in this conflict economy. And about a thousand, thousand five hundred of them are actually directly involved with foreign embassies and international aid agencies, so those are also some of the better paying jobs, more secure and those are the numbers that are more kind of clear. So when the Nepal Foreign Ministry came out with a statement, you know, immediately after the fall, kind of seeking international support in getting those fifteen hundred out, it actually referred to those numbers that they were more certain about. It's likely, it's actually ten times the number, the actual number of Nepali nationals in the country because there's also you know various informal routes that people end up there through. And so those people are actually at greater risk. So about nine hundred Nepalis have already, actually been rescued. Eleven, I think actually landed just this morning after the resumption of flights.

So, I think that was one of the major concerns. The, I mean, at the more kind of human level the other concern is what happens to all those people who are either there because the jobs might no longer remain there. I was reading a report this morning where you know some of the people who came back were wondering if there might be possibility to

go back in the next two-three months once the situation stabilizes. Now you know, it isn't clear if the same kind of defense firms will actually be able to operate there in the new situation but I think they're expecting the aid agencies - basically humanitarian organizations to be the potential employers. So that's really the biggest implication. I mean Nepali workers, you know either hired by some kind of imperial force whether it be the British empire in the 19th century, they've been in Afghanistan since I think 1830s or late 1840s at least. And so I mean within the Nepali public sphere, there is a certain kind of understanding about their presence and links in that way. But beyond that, I think, beyond that it kind of again goes down to a kind of narrative that is already there internationally on US foreign policy and geopolitics. In terms of trade there's very negligible relationship. I think last year they might have exported about 150 dollars worth of goods. So you know, it's quite negligible. If you look at other countries that I'm looking at, to Sri Lanka and Maldives, it's even less. So Sri Lanka I think has an embassy which is actually manned by a non-national. The actual embassy or relationship is looked through the Sri Lankan embassy in Iran. And trade wise or you know in terms of labor linkage, there's not really so much. So, in terms of the material links, I think, mostly it's Nepal's workers who are either there or who've come back.

In some ways, the more interesting implication is what might happen in terms of public perception about how this event is being looked at from within the Nepali press or in Sri Lankan press. In Maldivian press it's difficult to say. In the last two, three years some of the better independent English language media has actually closed down. So we don't really know a lot except from, you know, the occasional kind of quote from a former president and we're kind of limited to that. So I'll briefly go over how it's being talked about in Nepal and you know the ways in which, kind of the narrative is being shaped or is shaping politics in Nepal. I'll begin by observing that at this moment in terms of US-Nepal links right now, it's at an interesting point because there's a lot of controversy surrounding the Millennium Challenge Corporation grant that the Nepal and US signed back in 2017. Now because it has to also be ratified by the Parliament, there's a lot of actually, protests going on in Kathmandu right now.

And so, if one wants to kind of get a sense of how, you know, the withdrawal is being seen in Nepal, it helps to kind of get this sense that even if there aren't real kind of material or you know direct linkages, it's indirectly shaping the way how US is being perceived in the country at the moment. So, for a lot of people it's... and it's not very different from the way it's being talked about elsewhere. It's kind of being seen as a, you know, as a result of what would happen if you grow too close a relationship with the US for example and the kind of political, within the political spectrum, there's a kind of polarization based on what kind of politics you're more keen on. On whether you see this as a kind of failure of the international liberal order or kind of the perils of international humanitarian order or would you see it as okay this is just another kind of step towards the rise of authoritarian governments around the world. So it's kind of divided in that way.

I would say it's true also of how it's being read in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka also had its own kind of controversy associated with the same Millennium Challenge grant and it actually, despite having signed the grant, it never got to the Parliament. It was actually cancelled and suspended. So, a lot of people in Nepal actually also look at Sri Lanka and see that this could be a potential way to go. But in Sri Lanka also, I think the kind of perception is shaped by those same kind of domestic, political divisions. So, in some way what's happening in Afghanistan and what might happen actually in the next weeks and months

will probably be read through domestic, political interests. And unfortunately what you see is a lot of kind of reporting and stories that we read in domestic media in these two countries and these are also because of kind of financial reasons. We can't have reporters and their... well now it's also because of security reasons but you know over the last several years, most of the reporting on these countries in the domestic media has been shaped by however it's being reported in the West or by kind of forces that might be challenging the western kind of narrative. So, people might pick stories from RT, they might pick it from BBC, they might take it from Global Times. So, those are the kind of coordinates that kind of shape the conversation which is slightly unfortunate because then it's not regional or it's not really looking at more regional trends in a clear way.

So, I think in terms of public perception that's mostly true both of Nepal and Sri Lanka. And finally just to touch on how it might shape both these countries' energy or political relationship, I think part of it is kind of outside the power of some of these major countries, you know for example, I was reading someone comment that because the US is no longer in Afghanistan, it gives them more policy space to interact with countries in South Asia. And the assumption is that because you're no longer in Afghanistan, you can manoeuvre much more freely in your relationship with Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and I mean it sounds commonsensical but it isn't really clear how that operates because to some extent the relationship between the US and these countries were not always shaped by what was happening in Afghanistan. And especially in the last 10 years I think, it's been fluctuating in a completely different way, you know, especially given the rise of China. So the fate of let's say the US's relationship with Nepal or Sri Lanka or the Maldives and the fact and the assumption that it might be easier to kind of now maneuver because of their withdrawal, it's probably not true and it's also kind of outside their control.

I mean just the way, for example, how the debate on MCC has been going on in Nepal and there can be an interesting debate on the economics of foreign aid and its political implications. But at the moment it's kind of, you know in a bizarre kind of level where people are talking about the presence of American boots on the ground. You know it's been completely manipulated by fake news and all kinds of things. And I don't see that really decreasing anymore, especially given how sophisticated a lot of... various kind of actors are in kind of shaping this opinion. Much of which is again implicated in domestic politics. So I think what is quite unpredictable about I think US' kind of relationship with these particular countries going ahead is that it will largely be again determined by the play of domestic forces. And even something as strategically, one might say, clear cut as the US-China rivalry in Nepal and Sri Lanka actually might be less under the control of these two countries. And one might have to, kind of look at specific domestic, economic and kind of political issues to figure out which side might appear to have a greater say, going ahead. But yeah, I think I will end there.

James Robson: Great, thank you very much Shubhanga. Sorry about the connection breaking down a little bit there. You can turn your video back on now. I think it should be stable enough and maybe for when we begin the conversation. So, we will now turn the mic to Nasim.

Nasim Zehra: So, good morning, good evening, good afternoon depending on where you are. I'd like to thank the Center for putting this together, for inviting me to come and speak on the subject. Indeed in Pakistan we are, if I would say, hugely consumed with the

developments in the last, of the last few weeks. Our engagement and our involvement with Afghanistan goes back 42 years Soviet invasion onwards. I don't want to take up much time but a couple of things - one, Pakistan and Afghanistan share a 2,700 kilometer border. You know the people living on both sides of the borders are related, belong to the same tribes. We have, on the one hand, passport which is used to visa in passport, on the other hand there are documents which are simpler which allow people who travel on a daily basis between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many people would travel from the main border which is Torkham into Afghanistan. And then we have six trading routes between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Six functioning trading routes. One is Torkham, the other major one is Chaman. And after the Soviet invasion when the entire western world largely and a lot of muslim countries decided to launch, what I would call, an international jihad, Pakistan was central and key as was the United States, as was Saudi Arabia, as was UK, Egypt et cetera. And then as a consequence of the war that continued and in fact never ended, the war that began in 79, the resistance that began in 79, consequence of that was three million plus refugees moving into Pakistan.

Pakistan is the country after Afghanistan which has had the most significant impact of this four decade long war. Obviously the people of Afghanistan have suffered the most. They've been displaced and you know, they've suffered in every possible way you can think of, which you know society that are people that are living through four decades of war, civil war et cetera. And so as a neighbor which was not just a neighbor but where three million plus Afghans came and settled down and by all accounts, by all UNHCR accounts and independent observers, Pakistan received the refugees as if they were their own people. It's not just a foreign policy issue but one that is very closely intertwined with all dimensions of state and society, ranging from economy, security, humanitarian, trade, regional connectivity.

So you start with the late 70s and you start with the resistance, the Mujahideen which then ends up obviously with the exit of the Soviet union. When there is infighting amongst the Mujahideen, the resistance then acquires a different dimension and those of you who are familiar with the history, you will know that the emergence of the Taliban was as a consequence of one madrasa which was in Gandhara from where one student was kidnapped. It's been written by people like Ahmed Rashid et cetera whose book 'Taliban' I'm sure anybody who is interested in the subject must have read. So, that's when the Taliban emerged, that's when Mullah Omar emerges as a force to contend with and to contest the lawlessness et cetera that follows once the Mujahideen begin to take control. And when the Taliban emerged and Taliban are noticed and Mullah Omar is noticed as you know as individuals there and his followers, young boys, young followers as a force that can actually contest the Taliban, um the Mujahideen.

You then see from Pakistan and that's the time when Pakistan under Benazir Bhutto decides to start the revival of the silk route and Pakistan's convoy traveling from Pakistan through Afghanistan and into Central Asia when it's attacked and the Taliban who are then you know not such a big force, they come to secure a word of the attack, the Mujahideen attack and then you know, the criminals who were at that point flourishing in the region. Pakistan recognizes then the power of the Taliban and after that indeed Pakistan developed a relation with the other countries like the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE et cetera. And so Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban then obviously grows with Pakistan, ends up in 1990s. Taliban then begin to gain control of Afghanistan,

begin to gain support of people within Afghanistan and a lot of them and their families move into Pakistan and not just support of, you know, humanitarian support or refugee support, indeed there is then links with the Pakistan ISI as there were links with the Mujahideen and you know in any insurgency neighboring countries and countries with this kind of relationship, you will have engagement by these bodies. So whether it was CIA, whether it was MI5, whether it was ISI, since the whole movement was developing in Kandahar and support from Pakistan as was it getting support from Afghanistan itself, from different areas in Afghanistan. And as the Taliban then evolved into a force to contend with, and they end up taking control of Kabul in Pakistan. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE end up being the three countries that recognize the Taliban.

And then, I mean it's a long story, the Taliban rule then was nothing less than a horrific period where everything that was humane, that had to do with rule of law, that had to do with freedom, that of religion, of media, of politics, all of that basically was crushed and yes, they were able to disarm. And UN reports talked about the Taliban de-weaponizing the area, putting an end to poppy crop and the details et cetera everybody knows about. And then of course, 9/11, the tragic 9/11 developments take place and the US then decides to come and attack Afghanistan. And after the attack, then comes the Bonn agreement and when the Bonn agreement is signed and the Taliban are obviously defeated, countries like Pakistan... and the next setup is worked out. Pakistan is one of those countries, and some other experts at that point kept arguing that, kept advocating that the Taliban should be included in any future setup because they were a force. They were a force, they had a support base as well and if war and conflict had to be avoided then it was best to include the Taliban.

In fact not only Pakistan, I remember, when president Hamid Karzai took over, he was the first, he had the first government. He set up the first government after the Bonn agreement. On arrival in Afghanistan, his first statement was that we will, that my government will engage with the good Taliban and I remember a state department spokesperson or somebody making the statement that 'No, that's out of the question. No engaging the Taliban.' And subsequently, obviously once the Taliban were kept out of the fray, we know what happened in 20 years. He was a UN envoy then on Afghanistan, he subsequently in his interview with Barbara Crossette, New York Times said one of the cardinal blunders we committed was to keep the Taliban outside of the fray. However, that's all history now.

Now what happened on the 15th of August as some of the panellists have already mentioned, it was a bit of a shock for everybody, including the United States. But shock it was because it happened so fast and yet now what is very interesting is that the Chairman of the Joint Chief Admiral Mike Mullen or whether you read or hear what Nick Carter, the Chief of the UK forces now talks, who's been involved with Afghanistan a lot or whether you read what the marines are saying, some of the US marines are saying or what even some of the US politicians are saying or some of the columnists are saying, I mean the interesting thing is in the US, everybody is saying, a lot of the people are saying. Well, the surprise is that people aren't because this was inevitable. And when they say it's inevitable, Admiral Mike Mullen, he said in one of the recent interviews, he said that this was absolutely inevitable and he gives credit to the present President. He says that President Biden was very keen during President Obama's time, when he was arguing that we should pull out, we shouldn't deploy so many troops there, 40,000 plus. But he said, at that point I didn't agree with that and I realized that I was mistaken and I just want

to quote him, 'This Afghan government needs to have some legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The core issue is the corruption. It's been a way of life for some time and it's just got to change. The threat is every bit as significant as Taliban.' This he said in a senate hearing in September, 2009 and then Senator Lindsey Graham who was there, noting that Taliban were gaining ground because of this corruption, this is 2009. Now I'm quoting Senator Graham he said, 'We could send a million troops and that wouldn't restore legitimacy in the government.' And he asks this of Admiral Mullen and Admiral Mullen replies, 'This is correct.' So, I think it's interesting that now we have, you know, after the event, things that were said 10, 11, 12 years ago, now people in positions of authority or were in positions of authority are now acknowledging. And I think the topic is you know what is the issue of US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

I think people like us especially in Pakistan as I said, we've gone through this, we've been part of this. For better or for worse, Pakistan committed blunders. Pakistan also suffered and Pakistan, I think, can also take pride in terms of some of the support it gave and I would add, also committed blunders. And it is on record that in 2010-2011, Pakistan continuously argued and advocated and publicly as well that this has to be settled through dialogue. This has to be settled. War is going to be... is going to give no solution, provide no solution. But now, after as I said, after the event from within the ... you know, like the setup, the political setup was corrupt, was not limited et cetera and for those who are interested, I'd suggest there's a study by scholar Gilles Dorransoro. He wrote a report for the Carnegie Endowment in Washington and in 2009, he writes a report called the Winning Strategy of the Taliban, in which of course Pakistan's support identified but what is critical is that the Taliban as an insurgency are developing a parallel administrative system. They are addressing the issues and concerns of the people of Afghanistan. So, which is obviously not to say that Taliban did not have major opponents and as we see today, when we come to the present, we can discuss that a bit as well. So this is really... The other big blunder was this building up of ANA - The Afghan National Army.

Nasim Zehra: The other big blunder was the building up of the ANA, the Afghan National Army, and a lot of US marines are talking about it now, and I'm sure you've been watching videos, etc. where they're saying that we were trying to raise an army in our own image. We were giving all the technology, we were giving them intel, we were doing all of this. But they had no cause to fight for, there was no leadership that inspired them, and hence, you see what happened in the month of August. The other interesting thing is that, if you read reports, you'll realize that the Taliban, using local religious leaders, were actually sending small groups of people to meet core commanders in different districts. And that's how the army just basically dissolved into nothing, and as we know, that this was not a battle pitched in some places, there was resistance obviously, as in the Panjshir valley, the battle was actually fought, but by and large, we saw what happened. So, as the U.S has exited, really, in the way that it exited, but we are all focusing on the exiting. I mean, I'm not saying us here, but generally because of the dramatic way in which, you know, this is unheard of, people tying themselves, hanging on to the wings of a plane, and obviously, tragically dying, and then what happened at the airport. That whole way of handling a situation is just mind-boggling. Is this a first world country? I don't like these 'first world, second world' labels, but is this an advanced country? Is it a country that comprehends, that thinks things through and just to make that announcement? So that is going to be a very sordid chapter for the U.S, how do you explain it in the history books, how was this done, and why was it done the way it was done. But indeed, the decision by President Joe Biden made a lot of sense, as did the decision that the former President Donald Trump made. So, while the decision to leave made sense, how they left will always be a big question. But, more importantly, what is important for the U.S, who pushed

this war on for ten years , when President Joe Biden said in his August 30th speech, this is not about Afghanistan, this is about how the regime change doesn't work, how going and trying to put together a nation state in our own image doesn't work, and I think it was a state department spokesperson who said from now on, diplomacy is going to lead U.S policies. So, let's hope that that's the way it's going to be, because I think in Cuba, as we speak, after Fidel Castro and that period, having all that resistance from Cuba, and the pressures and sanctions from the USA, I think again, does the dynamic of that relationship again seem to be one of the sanctions, etc. So what is the learning for the U.S going to be, for Pakistan and for us in this region, obviously these are very critical questions because Pakistan has been through its interaction, its relationship with the U.S over the last 70 years, and it's been up and down. Pakistan should take responsibility for the decisions it makes, this view of sounding like a jilted girlfriend or somebody of being abandoned, I don't think that's an immature government, you make a decision, you take responsibility. So obviously, I'll now come to Pakistan, but for the united states, it's been an unmitigated disaster and debacle to be there for 20 years, and what do you get out of it? And what are the statements that you're making now? and why was this blindfolded trajectory being followed, although it contradicted anything which was halfway viable or sensible, both in terms of security or in terms of development? and what state has been built? I mean those people who the U.S had decided to defeat, they are now in power. So where are we now in terms of Pakistan, Afghanistan? Obviously the relationship that Pakistan had with the Taliban, it's evolved over time. I think, as our earlier panellist Shirin was very correctly saying, that there's been a relationship by all the neighbours. If you look at what Russia's relationship with the Taliban was in 2014 and 2015 was, they were dropping arms along the border so that the Taliban could get weapons. Iran has always wisely adopted pragmatic policies containing the fallout and moving ahead for its own benefit. Pakistan, I think, has learned some lessons the hard way, the pointless thing of going for strategic depth or putting your own favourites etc, but it's clear that that doesn't work. And let me quickly add that there are a non-stop talks. I think initially the discussion was all around about how Pakistan has won, how Pakistan has managed this, but I think anybody who understands terrain, insurgency, legitimacy, people support, etc. will understand that obviously Taliban, there was something that was going for them within Afghanistan, that they were able to finally take control. I again repeat, that Pakistan has a relationship with them, but it's one that has gone through a difficult period as well, and Pakistan will obviously have to be in Afghanistan under the Taliban and the 31 people in the interim government are people with their own mind, and I think that it is certainly not going to be a two-front situation for Pakistan as it was previously. And previously I think under President Ghani anybody who's interested should read some of the interviews that General Nick Carter, the UK General, has given, in which he explains in detail how, for the last two years, Pakistan was trying very hard to gain the confidence of President Ghani etc. But that's another debate discussion I can respond to in the Q&A. So right now where are we in terms of Pakistan and Afghanistan? After the 15th of August onwards, Pakistan has played a very key, very central role in evacuation. Pakistan's airline has been involved, Pakistan's personnel have been involved, thousands of people were given visas. In fact, one of the first lot of people that came from Afghanistan into Pakistan on the 15th of August, were all the people who were in the opposition, who were key people from President Ghani's government also moved to Pakistan. Pakistan flew them to Islamabad, those of them who had expressed interest and were concerned about their own security. So, whether it was Ahmed Shah Massoud's brother Wali Massoud, or several other people, and the speaker of the assembly and many other names, they were flown into Pakistan. So Pakistan from day one tried to demonstrate that it's not about any favourites. Pakistan has learned, I repeat, the hard way, that ultimately any nation will look at its own interests first as it should. So Pakistan has been involved in evacuation, Pakistan has been providing the

humanitarian bridge, and also, right now as we speak, it's interesting the way discussions have been going on about refugees and it's a bit perplexing. At one level, obviously, people...

And the Taliban's behaviour is one that is highly questionable, and it does invoke fear. But compared to 1996, I think that there is also a major change, but not enough. No matter what, how this whole situation will evolve, Afghanistan, the people of Afghanistan have to be given an environment within Afghanistan that they can live in Afghanistan and that there's not going to be another huge round of refugees. So, for example, Pakistan borders, there is no amassing people, independent people who are in Afghanistan, there are international media teams there, nobody will tell you that there are people running towards the border to cross over into neighbouring countries. That is not the case. In addition to that, there's been a humanitarian crisis, there's been a shortage of food, there's been a shortage of funds. And this is a one-year old issue. There's been drought, there's been famine. And the UN secretary general said that there are about 60 million people in Afghanistan, sorry, 60% people, another 38 million who are getting just two dollars a day. And in addition to that shortage of food, etc, there's no question of anybody recognizing Afghanistan right now. But most of the countries unlike in the 90s, in 1996 we saw that the western countries, etc, most of the countries were refusing to give any support to Afghanistan, even humanitarian support. But now it's very different, because the humanitarian crisis has been there, a shortage of food, etc, it's been there and it predates the Taliban. So right now Pakistan has been involved in setting up a humanitarian bridge in five different cities of Afghanistan. There are goods that are going through by road from Pakistan into these five cities which includes Kandahar, Kabul, Herat etc. and Pakistan has stand-by airplanes in case the humanitarian workers need to be evacuated. ICRC is arriving in Pakistan very soon to start its operations from here, so Pakistan is providing the base and facilitating as much as is required on the humanitarian front. As we know, there is a humanitarian conference, a major conference on the 13th, it's a high-level ministerial event where the UN secretary general will be there on Monday to address this humanitarian issue.

So, that's on the humanitarian front, and Pakistan was the only embassy that was functioning on the 15th of August as well, and three to four thousand visas were given on a daily basis. Most of the international workers, organizations, media, plus those afghans who had the papers, etc. to travel outside of Afghanistan, they also came to Pakistan. In terms of the borders, I think Pakistan has a fence, and Pakistan is very clear that you know this fence was raised in the last 4-5 years when the whole question of terrorism and people crossing over was concerned. That fence is intact, there are six border crossings right now, of which the two at Chaman and Torkham are used. Trade continues, I mean, the trading hasn't stopped, to the extent that the activity is continuing in this current situation. In addition to that, I think that a very important development that has taken place is that there is right now a group of neighbouring countries, not just neighbouring countries, but countries who share borders with Afghanistan, so Uzbekistan, China, Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, these are the countries which have set up a platform and they've already, in the last 8-10 days, they've had two rounds of meetings. First with special envoys, and now the foreign minister's meeting that took place three days ago, and they're talking about, and this is really the carrot and stick approach. While on the one hand they're saying that there shouldn't be an external interference and Afghanistan should be allowed to evolve independently, and there should be peace and security, but at the same time these countries are emphasizing that it should be inclusive and it should be an open government which grants rights to its people, and that the neighbouring countries will work to promote peace and security, and two other issues that are important for the neighbouring countries, these six countries. One is terrorism. So every country in this group has concerns about terrorists emerging from Afghanistan,

so whether it is Daesh, ISIS, ISIS-K, whether it is East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement, whether it is TTP, every country is threatened because there are those who've been attacking and conducting terrorist operations and are inside Afghanistan. So these countries have decided to work collectively to get Afghanistan and the Taliban to address this issue. And finally what has been important in the region for the last 4-5 years, and Pakistan especially has been focusing on that, is regional connectivity, so Afghanistan into Central Asia and similarly for all the other countries in the region, Afghanistan is a pivot there, so to ensure that activity continues, so the effort and the emphasis right now is to ensure that some degree of normalcy continues and that the lives of the people of Afghanistan are not disrupted to a point that they want to leave Afghanistan. I mean, there are human rights issues and issues that people in the media, etc. are facing and those have to be addressed and those countries are in addition to the troika plus in which there is China and Russia and U.S and Pakistan, which are also working along the same lines. I guess I can go on and on, but I've taken up a lot of time, let me just say that in terms of Geostrategic situation that we now have, the Taliban coming into Afghanistan does influence in some ways the Geostrategic situation, U.S for now is out of a very pivotal Geostrategic area and it has never been in the last many decades. It is out of the area for now, but as we speak, for example, day before yesterday the CIA chief was in Pakistan. So it's not like all contacts have been disrupted. There is engagement and also I have been speaking to EU representatives based in Pakistan. There is now some thinking that they will go back and start, because most of the embassies are shut down, that they are going to go back into Afghanistan and start some work. Recognition is premature, but again, going back to what my colleague Shirin said earlier, on that most of the countries are going to adopt a pragmatic approach but I think that we will hear more and more about human rights and about including women, and the interesting thing is that the Taliban are already saying that this is an interim government, we are going to come up with a new constitution and a new government. So Taliban seem to want more time it seems, the countries in the region are willing to give it more time. But as we know IMF especially who has had 5 or 6 billion dollars in frozen Afghan money, so Afghanistan needs funds. I think, by and large, it's a work in progress. It's certainly not 1996. It would be very well if they were to do that. I mean let me add here, that, obviously they've won a war. Because once the dialogue was started between the U.S and the Taliban in Doha in February 2020, ever since I think Taliban knew that ultimately they were going to be the winners. And they've managed to do that but at the same time they may have taken control of Afghanistan, but now the question of running Afghanistan and how will they govern Afghanistan, those are the questions that some of the 32 people who are in the government understand. But after 20 years of fighting, they are not going to instantly turn around and become a great governing team. I think it's going to take time, and the world has to decide how much time they're willing to give, and that if you do, and I think this is a thinking in many of the western countries as well when I talk to people, that if you don't engage the Taliban, then what? I mean, then what do you do? 20 years of the world's most lethal war machine has demonstrated that you can't defeat it, right? And the lesson that the countries in the region mercifully have learned is that within the region, if the countries don't coordinate and cooperate amongst themselves to deal with Afghanistan, you will have another round of proxy war. Because what happened in Afghanistan was inside but the battle, the mentors of the fighters from outside and the proxy.....

James Robson: Okay, just so we have time to bring Shubhanga and Shirin back into the conversation. I think you know Pakistan presents probably a huge amount of really interactable questions that you've touched on, so many of those. I'd like to first of all thank you, and also thank the audience. The connection was in and out, but I didn't want to interrupt because of the richness of what you were saying, but I think there were certain points when it dropped out a little bit, so thanks for everybody being a little patient with these distant connections. One of the

benefits of doing something like this is we can bring people in from Pakistan and Sri Lanka. But there's just a little bit of uncertainty about that, so. Let's bring Shirin and Shubhanga back in here. One of the real focus of this has been on the regional perspectives, but in Nasim's comments, and also Shubhanga and Shirin, both of you also were situating even those regional perspectives in the context of larger issues and players in the region, so we can't ignore the fact that all of the regional implications here are tied up with relationships with Russia, with China, and also I was going to think a little bit about the relationships, or where India perhaps plays a role in this too, or how that may become a tricky relationship vis-a-vis the U.S as well. So we have a few questions from the audience as well, but maybe perhaps let Shubhanga and Shirin respond a little bit as well, and Nasim, just to that issue as well, of these other players in this, I mean, we know that China for example, has already started to think about the way that the Belt and Road might move through Afghanistan rather than just Pakistan, and what does that mean economically. So there's a number of overlapping issues that many of you have discussed in terms of refugees, disruptions of labour. Even more interesting is, I didn't know the full extent of the amount of movement of what we might think of as day labour just back across these borders, that seems to be a very interesting story in all of this as well. So maybe first we'll bring Shirin and Shubhanga to maybe comment as well, and then Nasim as well. Shirin, you want to go first?

Shirin Jaafari: Absolutely. So, in terms of everybody, all of these countries are trying to figure out what this new administration is going to be like, and where does their interest fit in that new scenario in Afghanistan. So, I think it's a little bit too early to say what the role of each of these countries are going to be in Afghanistan, considering that everything has shifted, there are new people in charge and, one thing I will say though, the one thing that has changed drastic drastically among so many other things is the security situation. For example, if you have a company in one of their provinces in Afghanistan, before you were constantly worried about the security of your employees, are they going to be safe? Are they going to be able to travel from this city to another city? What is going to happen to their safety, given the war? At least for this moment, who knows what's going to happen later, but right now the fighting in terms of the bombings and all of that has stopped. Maybe there is some insecurity in terms of thieves and so on, but the major security concerns are a little bit alleviated at least for now. So, that could spare more investment, you could see a lot more countries investing in Afghanistan and hopefully, eventually improving this situation, because with more investment comes more prosperity. So that's something that I wanted to highlight in terms of how different countries are thinking about that. China obviously has its eyes on Afghanistan.

James Robson: Yeah. Shubhanga?

Shubhanga Pandey: Yeah, I just wanted to add to that point about how countries in the region might be responding to the uncertainty. To some extent, countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, might wait a bit longer and base their responses on how India might respond and how China might respond now. Indian response obviously was interesting. I think the envoy in Qatar had talks with the top Taliban official in their Doha political office, but even within India I don't think the direction is all that clear. I mean, there was a conversation I was listening to between two, I would say, relatively hawkish analysts who, one of whom was accusing the other of appeasing the Taliban by having a talk in Qatar. So because of the political situation in India it's also, even for traditional conservative and quite militaristic forces, to deal with at a very clinical level is not easy, given the kind of right-wing shift the politics has gone. There's elections in Uttar Pradesh coming up, which is probably at this moment the most politically active state moving in the rightward direction, so that might determine certain things, how other opposition parties

might be wanting to push the government in one direction or the other. There was an interesting comment in Sri Lanka also. The former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was known for being a bit cavalier at times, went ahead and gave an interview to The Hindu I think, saying that Sri Lanka should not recognize the Taliban. So again, I think I'd mention that a lot of this is also not really related to material realities but signalling and trying to see how others might respond to that and unfortunately, sometimes it's that terrain that we have to kind of read signals off and rely on those actors to kind of come out and say things.

James Robson: One thing that really struck me in your comments Nasim, one thing that you mentioned in particular, was the flight of some of the opposition figures into Pakistan that really, because this seems to really present, you know, Pakistan seems to be really caught in a pickle here in many ways, walking a very fine line let's say. So if you accept those opposition figures, I think many assumptions are that there will be a kind of a Pakistan supported Taliban in many ways, which would seem to run counter to that kind of giving a place of refuge for those opposition figures, so, how do you think Pakistan is going to negotiate that kind of tricky position that they're in, in terms of its representation to the rest of the world in trying to maintain the kind of stability that other players in the region really would like to see come out of, I think that's the biggest worry, obviously, the ongoing instability, ongoing fighting, potential for more terrorist activity or drug trafficking, other types of things that might come into this void. Do you have some thoughts on that? And then if you don't mind, I'll throw in a question from the audience that you might be able to answer at the same time, it's somewhat related, and this is from somebody who's logged on who says that "Do you believe that the public opinion of the Afghan nationals that have been persuaded towards an anti-Pakistan narrative by previous governments, might be moulded into a pro-Pakistani narrative with the new Taliban regime?" So in other words, what's the kind of perception between the two countries as well. So if you wouldn't mind responding to those it would be great.

Nasim Zehra: Okay, a couple of things. I was asked to also comment on Bangladesh, and I don't know when my voice just disappeared, and I don't think I was able to, and I was asked by the organizers. So, let me just add very quickly on Bangladesh, I don't think I'm doing justice to the subject, but I think right now as far as trade is concerned, those are not issues that I've addressed. Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina, since 2009, has had zero tolerance for terrorist groups and extremist groups and one of the biggest concerns that they now have, and they have articulated is, what will the main opposition, which is called Hefazat-e-Islam, which controls the madrasas, etc. in Bangladesh, what will they feel? Will they feel empowered, will they feel influential? So I think from Bangladesh's point of view, this is one critical question, and that's the question that not only Bangladesh, but a country like Pakistan, any country in the neighbourhood will feel, and which is why it is important to put pressure on the Taliban to move in a direction which has got nothing to do with the 90s and which has to be forward-looking and more, I mean it's a combination of obviously the culture there and culture in some tribal areas in Afghanistan, in the rural areas in Afghanistan, plus the ideology of the Taliban and how they see religion. So that's a challenge that will continue and that's one of the things that this group of six that has been initiated and all the countries are members, Pakistan hosted the foreign minister's conference two days ago which is a virtual conference and this is now going to become, I'm told, a kind of a permanent platform, and as far as the concerns of these countries, don't forget it's not as if these countries have woken up to a relationship with Afghanistan suddenly. This kind of relationship with Afghanistan, and also on the Taliban front, I think Shirin was saying that things are going to be more secure because relative to what you've seen in the past, even if by numbers you will see that the kind of incidents of violence that would take place in Afghanistan pre-august 15, it's reduced, but in addition to that,

even 6-7 years ago, look at the reports coming out of different U.S agencies, they would say that 60 percent of the territory is controlled by the Taliban, and the Taliban were actually providing security to a lot of, whether it was international agencies or commercial organizations, they were being paid to provide security. So Taliban have been kind of in a way doing that kind of activity and the neighbouring countries are, it's not like Taliban suddenly landed from mars. They are people that the neighbouring countries have engaged with, know of, and now the hope is that they will conduct themselves in a responsible manner. In terms of what you said earlier, you mentioned CPEC and OBOR, Belt and Road initiative, again let me say this that Talib, even under President Ashraf Ghani , so this whole discussion had started and the Chinese have been involved with the Afghan government. If you look at the Chinese investment in Afghanistan, irrespective of the government, has been made clear, and in Pakistan one of the ports that is being constructed, dry port Rashakai, which is a few miles away from Torham border, the Chinese are planning to make investments there too for exports into Afghanistan . The potential is huge, and if there is peace and security, and I again repeat, coordinated effort with the countries, there is competitiveness amongst the countries, naturally, but at the same time it's enlightened self-interest. They all realize that no peace no security in Afghanistan means no real progress for these countries in the region. And on the question that was asked, I think that narratives are built partly on some reality and partly, yes, in this hybrid war etc. It's almost amusing that two days ago in the last hold out in the Panjshir valley, when they were defeated, two main Indian channels showed videos of Pakistani, supposedly they said Pakistani F-16s came and participated on behalf of the Taliban and attacked the resistance there, and then they showed that this F-16 crashed. And within India, to give credit to some people who like to look at facts, they came up with those videos and they said- "Look, this is fake stuff, because these are actually US F-16 crashing in different places, and one was a UK F-16 crashing". So, you do have that also going on, right. A constant, as I keep saying, some of the blunders that we made, but I mean ever since things have changed to a great extent. Yes, Taliban are our friends but they are Afghanistan's friends first. And so I think that changing the narrative, and reducing the anti-Pakistani feeling which does exist to some extent, I think it will really depend on how Pakistan also now conducts itself . And there is enough evidence that Pakistan gave those here with every possible detail etc, and it was accepted that India had opened a two-front situation in the last 3-4 years especially, and Pakistan and India were both fighting the battle on one territory and hopefully that will end now and Pakistan's thrust more on humanitarian, etc. and security in a way that works for Afghanistan and Pakistan and trade etc, things will be better. You can't just suddenly change the narrative by a magic wand, your actions and things have to be done.

James Robson: Great, thank you Nasim. If everybody could hang on, I know we're at 10:30 now. If you wouldn't mind just a final question, and it leads off, if you have just a few minutes longer, just because it was something that is implied I think in Nasim's response, and I'd love to hear Shirin and Shubhanga also just very briefly respond to, which is, to say that when we think about the implications in the regional perspective here, we've been speaking a lot about the kind of movement out of Afghanistan, let's say, in terms of refugee impact, economic concerns, ideological, political concerns, but what about, and this is largely based on a question that came in, but I've slightly modified it, which is to say, in what ways might some of the players in the region bordering Afghanistan try to help improve the situation in Afghanistan with the government and its people, particularly in terms of either humanitarian ways and things like that. Some of you have alluded to this a little bit in some of your comments, but if you had anything further to say on that, I think that would be an appropriate place for us to draw this to a close. Begin with Shirin.

Shirin Jaafari: Yeah absolutely. So yes, as much as Iran's economy in some extent wants to continue economic ties with Afghanistan, so it wants the trade to continue, but the refugee situation is something that it wants to curtail or limit somewhat, not stop but limit it to some extent. So it has some leverage on the new government, it can say, let's negotiate about these terms that are our interest but also we know what your interests are, and let's negotiate and come up with a conclusion that works for both of us. And in those negotiations there can be some elements that will help the Afghan people. I am not expecting the Iranian officials to raise women's rights, or issues like that, but for example the humanitarian situation, the refugee situation could be something that they raise as they're going about in these discussions.

James Robson: Great. Shubhanga, any final comment from you on that?

Shubhanga Pandey: Yeah, just to build on that point, and you know to some extent, it's also the kind of thing that certain countries, either neighbouring or those not neighbouring can do, which is to also push their governments to try to issue visas for people who might want to travel to their countries for example. I mean, some days after the fall of Kabul, I think the Indian government came out saying they changed their visa regime as it related to Afghanistan to kind of enable quicker visa issuance, and based on what I've been reading recently that hasn't really gone forward, and not many people have actually received a visa. So I think some of these kind of direct material things that people can do, and that governments can do. I think this might apply to, you know, not the larger population but there might be specific groups of people communities, and it's still a developing situation, we don't know how the economy will turn out in the next few months, how the resources will be distributed around the country. So I think from a long-term perspectives, governments that might want to even for their own strategic reasons, continue maintaining linkages, and for a country like India for example, not that this whole narrative about it's Pakistan's win and it's India's loss, which is again something that has been generated in Delhi more than elsewhere. There are things that you can do to support Afghan people in an economy that that might also be strategically useful. I don't think we can be more utopian than that at the moment.

James Robson: Great. Well, thank you very much Shubhanga, Shirin and Nasim, for participating in the conversation today. I think we're in that very a sort of odd period here too where there's so much that's evolving on a day-to-day, actually an hour by hour basis. I for one, have been very frustrated by some of the international media coverage of what's happening, and some of it's understandable, just the difficulties actually, and I'm sure Shirin could say a lot about this, of reporting from the region and all of that, so it makes it all the more important I think to have this opportunity to have people speaking to us and informing us, that are much closer at hand, that have had access, and also Shirin spending so much time in the region over the last weeks and months, and hopefully getting back sometime soon. This is going to be a very important period to really pay attention to and watch as things evolve because the issues as we've seen today, there are the regional implications of those but there are much larger geopolitical issues that are at stake here, that are extremely complicated and tragic at a personal level too, I have to say, that it is hard to strip away and think of only the big ideological issues without putting the real lives back into the picture here and getting those stories out and about the real situation on the ground is I think extremely valuable so, thank you all and thank you to the audience for attending but also for being patient as we dealt with a little bit of the connectivity issues, which are inevitable sometimes with these connections from around the world, so we appreciate your patience on that. So thank you all again for participating. Please keep us informed, and we look forward to

learning more from you in the future about these issues and what's going to evolve in Afghanistan in the next weeks, months and years, so thank you.