



Heart of Asia Society

د آسیا زره ټولنه - جامعه قلب آسیا

BEYOND THE INTRA-AFGHAN DIALOGUE: REGIONAL DIMENSIONS OF AN END STATE TO THE AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

Heart of Asia Society Policy Alternatives Series
Policy Alternative No. 1

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August 23, 2020

For more information on this publication visit www.heartofasiasociety.org

**Published by the Heart of Asia Society (HAS)
Kabul, AFGHANISTAN**

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INTRODUCTION

The war in Afghanistan has complex regional and international dimensions. In the last four decades, the country has suffered external interferences and proxy wars that have led to perpetual instability and undermined efforts to build a lasting peace and consolidate state authority. This Policy Alternative assesses the regional dynamics, views, and interests with respect to the Afghan peace process. Specifically, it discusses the state of regional consensus on a possible end state to the peace process both in terms of the form and content of a future government and its foreign relations in the currently unfolding post-US withdrawal scenario. Though much of the discussion on the end state has been left to the intra-Afghan negotiations, choices on future trajectories are likely to have implications for countries with direct material and normative interests in Afghanistan.

Given the existing rivalries, divergent views, and clashing interests among countries in the region, peace-building in Afghanistan has become a matter of geopolitical balancing. Who gains what from the Afghan peace settlement, and how, constitute the main issues in the international politics of negotiating peace in Afghanistan. Amid intensified national, regional, and international efforts to put an end to the current conflict, the prospect for peace in Afghanistan depends on regional consensus to support the peace process as much as it depends on actual progress in the intra-Afghan talks. As Afghans begin to negotiate a peace deal, regional agreement on the modality, quality, and international relations of the future government of Afghanistan is an essential component of the peace settlement in Afghanistan. Such an agreement should first and foremost recognize a legitimate role for a democratic and sovereign Afghanistan in the regional and international system, and help it stay free from geopolitical competitions to enable its potential for regional stability and economic connectivity.

Building on extensive expert discussions held between May and August 2020 by Heart of Asia Society (HAS) among a core group of scholars and former diplomats from the region,¹ this Policy Alternative unpacks critical issues concerning regional dynamics of the peace process in Afghanistan. Analysis of regional trends and developments as well as the views expressed at discussions held by HAS indicate that while all countries in the region express an eagerness to see a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, a regional consensus on more substantive issues concerning the future form of the Afghan government and its international relations is far from resolved. This Policy Alternative maps the regional dynamics concerning the Afghan peace process and provides a set of recommendations on how to strengthen the ongoing efforts toward building a strong regional consensus, and consequently a regional agreement to ensure sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

¹ The discussions were organized together with New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC) and the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Doha (CHS).

THE STATE OF REGIONAL CONSENSUS ON PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

The signing of the Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban on February 29, 2020 marked a significant step toward a political settlement in Afghanistan and was welcomed by most countries in the region. Though it was not party to the agreement, the Afghan Government supported the implementation of the terms of the Doha Agreement concerning, among other things, the release of up to 5000 Taliban prisoners in exchange for 1000 Afghan security personnel that were in Taliban custody.

As part of a lengthy diplomatic effort prior to, and since, the signing of the Doha Agreement, the US has sought regional support for the peace process, including through bilateral and trilateral consultations with China and Russia to form a ‘big power consensus’ on the Afghan peace process. The US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation has closely engaged with Pakistan, a key player in the Afghan peace process, including within frameworks that have involved big power consultations, such as last year’s four party meeting of the US, China, Russia, and Pakistan in Beijing.²

The Afghan Government has also increased efforts to cultivate regional support for an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process. It has increased its efforts to engage with Pakistan and other neighboring countries including via bilateral talks at leadership levels to discuss peace and regional economic cooperation. In its turn, Pakistan has also stepped up its efforts in the peace process, including by appointing a special envoy for Afghanistan to lead that country’s efforts. The region as a whole has demonstrated a high level of interest and support for a political settlement to end the conflict in Afghanistan. Several countries in the region and beyond have offered to facilitate the intra-Afghan dialogue.

While the existing interest has created momentum for the peace process, the proliferation of actors involved or willing to play a role has complicated the scene. Regardless of the intentions, the multiplicity of actors and diversity of visions could be difficult to manage, if not outright counterproductive to achieving regional consensus. An assessment of existing views in the region shows that Afghan peace talks have become subject to bilateral competition between certain actors who want to improve their regional standing and leadership power by playing a more active role on the Afghan peace process scene. For example, there has been a competition between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over facilitating the Afghan peace talks.³ While Qatar has indicated that it is up to the Afghan parties to decide where to meet, they have been anxious about the potential of other states in the Gulf to ‘hijack’ the initiative, such as when the UAE hosted a meeting between the Taliban, the Afghan Government, and Afghan civil society activists in Dubai in December of last year.

Despite the shared interest in a stable Afghanistan, the regional context for the peace talks in Afghanistan remains complicated. In an environment where the role of any single country is subject to geopolitical competition, the perception that any country is seeking a disproportionate role in the Afghan peace process is likely to increase anxiety levels among competitors. The US’s focus on Pakistan, for example, has led to a sense of marginalization

2 Iran was also invited to the meeting, but the country declined to participate, noting that the meeting was organized in the absence of the Afghan Government. See the Four Party Joint Statement on Afghan Peace Process, accessed 14 August, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/four-party-joint-statement-on-afghan-peace-process/>.

3 Youssef Igrouane, “US-Taliban Peace Talks Heighten Tensions Between Qatar and UAE,” Inside Arabia: Voice of the Arab People, March 25, 2019, <https://insidearabia.com/us-taliban-peace-talk-heighten-tensions-qatar-uae/>.

for India. Iran, on the other hand, has felt pushed to the margins of the regional consultations on Afghanistan by the US's leadership of the negotiations with the Taliban, as well as its efforts for regional and international support for the peace process. Both India and Iran have extensive interests in Afghanistan. Despite having significant contacts with the Taliban, Iran has criticized the Doha Agreement and the lack of a roadmap for peace or an inclusive government in Afghanistan. Like Iran, India has expressed support for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but has avoided establishing contacts with the Taliban, which it sees as a proxy group of Pakistan.

A deeper assessment of the views and interests in the region indicates that a regional consensus on more substantial aspects of peace in Afghanistan is largely non-existent, which undermines prospects for a sustainable peace settlement. A key issue is the end state, in particular the regime type and post-peace regional and international alignments with Afghanistan. The end state can be discussed in terms of two substantive matters: first, the modality of the future government in terms of the choice between a regime modelled on the Islamic Emirate, which the Taliban set up after taking power in Afghanistan in 1996, espousing a harsh interpretation of the Sharia Law, and an Islamic Republic based on the existing constitution that recognizes democratic principles, including universal and fundamental rights and freedoms for Afghan citizens as well as Islamic principles; and second, the future government's foreign relations, particularly the role of the US in post-peace Afghanistan and Afghanistan's regional alignment amid competing structures and agendas. It is imperative that choices on both issues are made by Afghans themselves, and yet, given the complex regional environment, a regional consensus on choices in these areas is fundamental to the question of lasting peace in Afghanistan, and there are divergent opinions in the region regarding both matters.

THE END STATE: MODALITY OF THE FUTURE GOVERNMENT

While some Western countries, including members of the European Union, have declared that the Taliban's Islamic Emirate is unacceptable to them,⁴ views in the region are less uniform. As a matter of diplomatic norm, most countries have stated that the choice on the form of the future government should be left to the Afghans to make. However, some countries have also expressed strong opinions about the end state of the peace process in Afghanistan. For example, Iran has strongly supported the current constitutional order and expressed both publicly and in closed-group discussions its objections to a model of governance inspired by the idea of an Islamic Emirate.⁵ Iran has emphasized an inclusive government and protecting the gains and achievements of the last two decades in civil society.

India's view is similar to Iran's, but the assessment is more focused on the geostrategic implications of an Islamic Emirate. Given Taliban-Pakistan relations, India finds its interests threatened not just by the Islamic Emirate, but by any model of government in Afghanistan in which the Taliban could see themselves in the leadership role. Although as a democracy, India is naturally supportive of a democratic system in Afghanistan, it is concerned more about the strategic outcomes than about normative choices. A former Indian diplomat

⁴ General Secretariat of the Council Delegations, EU Ministerial Council Conclusion on Afghanistan, Brussels, May 29, 2020, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8223-2020-COR-1/en/pdf>.

⁵ Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran Abbas Araghchi, interview by Yaser Abrar, Tolo News, July 19, 2020, accessed August 14, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tG_L2kHCsl.



argued that Afghanistan has been an Emirate in different periods of its modern history, including as a monarchical system run by Emirs in the 19th century. The question now, though, is what the idea of an Emirate entails. India has been Afghanistan's strategic partner and has consistently supported the current constitutional government in Afghanistan.

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have not yet expressed a clear view; these were the only countries that recognized the Taliban's Islamic Emirate before it collapsed as a result of the international intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. Influential circles and institutions in these countries have also been deeply involved in supporting the Taliban politically and financially, as well as ideologically, and there is no sign that positions in these countries regarding the end state in terms of government modality have shifted in any substantial way. In fact, a revival of the Islamic Emirate that allowed the Taliban leadership roles in Afghanistan would provide maximum political space for these countries' roles in Afghanistan's affairs.

China has reportedly expressed its support for the Islamic Republic model. A statement in June of 2020 attributed by the media to the Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan stated that the Islamic Emirate is not acceptable for China.⁶ Such a position makes sense, given that China's foreign policy norm of the 'three evils,' i.e., terrorism, extremism, and separatism, goes against the extremist ideology of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. Much more significantly, in a statement the Afghan Foreign Ministry released on August 20 following a phone call between the acting Afghan Foreign Minister, Muhammad Haneef Atmar, and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister was quoted as saying, "peace in Afghanistan must be durable, comprehensive and prevent another war, and such peace is only possible under the framework of the Constitution and the Islamic Republic system."⁷

Russia has rejected the idea of an Islamic Emirate. In the Joint Statement on the Signing of the US-Taliban Agreement, Russian and the American representatives stated that, "the international community will not accept or support the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan."⁸ The views in Central Asia, however, are unclear. Like China and Russia, some Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, have established extensive contacts with the Taliban and have hosted talks on the Afghan peace process among countries in the region and Taliban delegations. Ideologically, they are expected to oppose the idea of an Islamic Emirate or any model of Islamic fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan. At a practical level, however, Central Asian states, as well as Russia and China, seem to be concerned not so much with the normative choices, but with their security interests in Afghanistan and assurances to prevent international jihadists' threats to these countries from Afghan soil. That has been a key justification for Russia's engagement with the Taliban.

Given this diversity of views in the region, a regional consensus on the end state in terms of government modality faces geostrategic challenges. Regional countries often see normative issues through a strategic lens. For example, given the region's strong authoritarian structure, support for a liberal democratic system in Afghanistan is expected to be low. Yet, even the government in Iran sees its interests best defended under the current democratic constitutional order in place in Afghanistan.

6 Islamic Republic News Agency, June 7, 2020, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.irna.ir/news/83812892>.

7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Afghanistan (mfa_afghanistan), Twitter post, August 20, 2020, accessed 20 August 2020, https://twitter.com/mfa_afghanistan/status/1296129888768925697.

8 US Department of State, Joint Statement on the Signing of the US-Taliban Agreement, March 6, 2020, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-signing-of-the-u-s-taliban-agreement/>.

THE END STATE: GEOPOLITICAL BALANCING

Regional views about future international relations of Afghanistan are also diverse. While some countries such as China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan ask for responsible withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, their views differ on other aspects, such as the future role of the US in Afghanistan. The assessment in China indicates that despite unprecedented tensions in China-US relations, Afghanistan is the one place where the two countries can work together. According to a Chinese scholar, China would not have a problem with an American counter-terrorism unit remaining in Afghanistan. Iran, however, has completely opposed any US presence in Afghanistan and has publicly asked for a complete but responsible US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Russia also wants the US to leave Afghanistan. Although US presence in Afghanistan in the last two decades has helped Russia's security interests in Central Asia, Russia has developed a deep sense of mistrust with the US forces in Afghanistan in recent years. Other than the global dynamics of the US-Russia relations, this deepening mistrust may be a result of the preponderance of security and intelligence focus among Russian officials who determine Afghan policy. Russia has accused the US military of relocating ISIS forces to destabilize the northern provinces of Afghanistan.⁹ In return, the US has accused Russia of arming the Taliban against the US and Afghan Government forces. However, despite current challenges in relations between the two countries, Russia is likely to agree on a role for the US in post-peace settlement Afghanistan if it is assured of the US's intentions and scope of activities, particularly given that Russia is not envisioning itself in the role of security provider in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal.

Central Asians, on the other hand, would like to see the US remain in Afghanistan. Like Russia, China, and others in the region, Central Asian states have played the role of security consumers in Afghanistan, where the US presence has helped their own regional security significantly. Central Asian states see cooperation with the US as beneficial and want to play the role of a strategic bridge between the US, Russia, and China in Afghanistan. Countries in Central Asia have increased efforts to strengthen initiatives involving cooperation with the US in Afghanistan. For example, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have proposed including Afghanistan in C5+1 and the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).¹⁰ A trilateral cooperation framework involving Afghanistan, the US, and Uzbekistan and another involving Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and the US are some of the newest agendas to strengthen US relations with the region.

Amid differing views in the region about the US role in Afghanistan, a regional consensus on the end state in Afghanistan essentially becomes an issue of geopolitical balancing. The end state in terms of the foreign policy of the future Afghan government is not limited to relations with the US, but also concerns balancing relations between India and China, India and Pakistan, and Iran and the Gulf states. Some former government officials in the region have been explicit about making the peace settlement about geopolitics. Reflecting on the Doha Agreement, Mohammad Reza Bahrami, Iran's former Ambassador to Afghanistan, tweeted that, "the future of Afghanistan will be one of the deterministic factors for regional

9 Joseph Trevithick, "Russia Claims US Coalition 'Mystery Helicopters' Supplying Arms to ISIS in Afghanistan," The Drive, February 20, 2018, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/18647/russia-claims-us-coalition-mystery-helicopters-supplying-arms-to-isis-in-afghanistan>.

10 United States Institute of Peace, "Afghanistan's Peaceful Future: Support from Central Asia," July 24, 2020, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/events/afghanistans-peaceful-future-support-central-asia>.



balance of power.”¹¹ The views in other countries are not fundamentally different in this regard.

While all of the existing regional dynamics are crucial, some, like Pakistan-India relations, have been central to the question of long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan has had a longstanding concern over Afghanistan-India relations, as the country has often portrayed these two neighbors as natural strategic allies, partly given that both have territorial claims against it. This has indirectly linked peace in Afghanistan to peace in Kashmir. Regional discussions demonstrated that Pakistan wishes to bring to the fore the issue of Kashmir in regional consultations about the Afghan peace process, while India argues that the intra-Afghan negotiations need to be firewalled from other regional issues. The question of balance concerns not only bilateral relations. Multilateral alignment has been equally challenging for Afghanistan. In the last five years, while it has signed a bilateral security agreement with the US and a Status of Forces Agreement with NATO, Afghanistan has also actively sought membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Thinking in terms of multi-alignment and multi-alliance in its foreign policy making, Afghanistan has been hoping to become a point of cooperation between regional powers and initiatives, but it has largely failed due to strategic incompatibilities of the various forums and institutions. In some instances, the Afghan government has been advised by external actors against joining specific connectivity initiatives. This has made choices for Afghanistan a difficult task of geopolitical balancing.

Afghanistan sits at the crossroads of competing visions of regional security and economic cooperation. Despite a shared narrative of regional cooperation, most of the regional connectivity projects have failed to deliver on their objectives, not only in Afghanistan, but also in the region as whole, because decoupling connectivity from geopolitics remains an essential challenge for the region. This has been evident in the Chabahar versus Gwadar debates and the anxieties in other parts of the region over the Belt and Road Initiative. Regional connectivity projects and discourse, which Afghanistan has been aiming to capitalize on as a key narrative for peace, are not easy to materialize because of their inherent geopolitical nature.

Depending on donors’ and leading actors’ views and preferences, connectivity projects at the political levels have been largely about re-imagining the region. Different connectivity projects imagine the region differently and around different centers of gravity. In the past, some countries have been explicit in opposing connectivity projects on geopolitical grounds. For example, the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton characterized the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as an attempt to “re-sovietize” the region.¹² Conflicting geopolitical views associated with connectivity politics have made the regional environment challenging for Afghanistan’s own regional cooperation and connectivity initiatives. For example, the potential for the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process has been limited by geostrategic considerations in some countries in the region. Russia, for instance, has viewed it as no more than a cover for the US-led New Silk Road Initiative to undermine the EEU.

Given these complexities, the question about where Afghanistan sees itself within the existing regional and international rivalries is central to the discussion on the end state as geopolitical balancing both at bilateral and multilateral levels. At bilateral levels, the region

¹¹ Mohammad Reza Bahrami (Bahrami1962), Twitter post, July 21, 2020, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Bahrami1962/status/1285643734202421250?s=20>.

¹² Charles Clover, “Clinton vows to thwart New Soviet Union,” Financial Times, December 6, 2012, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/a5b15b14-3fcf-11e2-9f71-00144feabdc0>.

is witnessing unprecedented tensions between China and India, China and the US, and Iran and the US, among others. Peace and the formation of a new government in Afghanistan might take years, and changes in regional dynamics can quickly impact regional support for peace in Afghanistan if the process fails to address questions of regional power balance.

At multilateral levels, the Afghan Government has been thinking of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's potential as a regional institution to help stabilize Afghanistan. The SCO is the largest—in terms of participation of military power-houses—regional security organization that includes Afghanistan's neighbors and all of the nuclear powers of the region that can in theory shape the regional security architecture. But in practical terms, bilateral considerations, including Russia-China leadership on security topics, have significantly limited its potential. The growing China-India tension further complicates the prospects for the SCO and undermines its effectiveness. Additionally, the SCO role in Afghanistan largely depends on the future role of the US in Afghanistan. Though the U.S. did not object to Afghanistan's application for SCO membership in 2015, the prospect for US and NATO cooperation with the SCO remains practically limited.

THE WAY FORWARD

Ideas about the way forward essentially concern discussions on the substances and formats for regional engagement. Efforts to strengthen regional consensus on peace in Afghanistan have been pursued through various formats and means. The role of the US has been critical within all the existing frameworks. The US has played the double role of both negotiating with the Taliban and taking the leadership for consensus building. In addition to bilateral efforts, a key US approach has focused on big power consensus between the US, Russia, and China. Big power consensus is a critical aspect of support for peace in Afghanistan. However, given the regional dynamics, a more inclusive approach is required to engage with all the important players in the region.

In order to further strengthen efforts toward building regional consensus on peace in Afghanistan, it is recommended to:

- Engage with the question of the end state in a substantive way. A high-level meeting of Afghanistan's neighbors should be held to spell out a set of fundamental values and principles with regards to the regional stance on the end state in Afghanistan. This should include support for an outcome that ensures an inclusive and sustainable government, which can contribute to regional stability and guarantee protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of all Afghans. Given both the regional and internal dynamics of the country today, a democratic system in Afghanistan is essential for sustainability of government, as well as peace and regional security and stability. In the absence of a model of government that can guarantee the fundamental rights and freedoms of all Afghans and ensure inclusion and meaningful participation, including of women in public life, Afghanistan could quickly fall into chaos, which would have a detrimental impact on regional security;
- Avoid creating parallel and competitive forums for regional engagement on the peace process. Regardless of their intentions, such forums are likely to weaken rather than strengthen regional consensus by creating a competitive regional environment. Instead, high level regional consultations should be intensified under formats that are both inclusive and effective and that allow for more focused, substantive discussions to take place among a smaller number of countries with greater influence in the Afghan peace process. In addition to great powers such as the US, Russia, and China, such a format must include Afghanistan, Iran, India, and Pakistan. For broader regional and international support, the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process could be used to ensure that all regional



and major international stakeholders feel involved in the consensus building process. However, to be effective, such regional processes must be amended to allow for more active roles for non-regional powers, notably the US and the EU, whose roles are critical to peace and post-peace development and international support to Afghanistan.

- Develop a framework for a regional agreement to address regional countries' fundamental concerns and interests in Afghanistan, as well as Afghanistan's concerns and interests in the region. The agreement should serve as the basis for balanced and peaceful relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors and ensure that Afghanistan's security and sovereignty are guaranteed while security or interests of other countries are not threatened in, from, or by Afghanistan. Such an agreement is fundamental to confidence building among countries of the region in a post-peace agreement Afghanistan. As part of that regional agreement, it is essential that Afghanistan stays neutral toward any conflict in the region, and countries of the region commit to not interfere in Afghanistan. The agreement should become an integral part of the peace settlement and signed among countries of the region and the future government coming out of the Afghan peace negotiations;
- Work toward a strong UN Security Council resolution in support of lasting peace in Afghanistan, where the fundamental rights and freedoms of all Afghans are guaranteed. The UN's role has been marginalized in current peace efforts for various reasons. This has led to concerns not only as to which authority is going to oversee, monitor, or enforce the future peace agreement, including a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire, but also uncertainties in the region about which international actor is going to fill the role of the UN in the peace process. The UN's engagement will improve trust and help broader international consensus on peace in Afghanistan. Additionally, successful peace agreements elsewhere have depended on a strong National Security Council resolution and an effective and well-planned mandate to help implement peace agreements;
- Develop an economic support package to enhance regional investment and connectivity as part of the international efforts to support peace. Regional economic connectivity can create interdependence and bring the region closer together. As highlighted, the current regional environment for connectivity is highly competitive. The key challenge is how to decouple geopolitics from connectivity. Regional efforts should focus on ways to build consensus through creating greater synergy among regional initiatives and confidence building practices. The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process can be used to spur this, as it is the most inclusive consultative platform in the region, and includes key donors to Afghanistan such as the US, EU, Japan, Germany, the UK and others. The Process should serve regional economic cooperation by enhancing confidence building and removing political barriers for regional cooperation;
- And finally, as a means to ensuring progress towards the achievement of the above objectives, intensify engagement with experts, scholars, and diplomats in the region including using Track 2 and Track 1.5 mechanisms. Such engagements are helpful in understanding the policies and dynamics concerning the peace process in the region. It will be extremely helpful to form a working group consisting of scholars and experts in the region and beyond as well as former senior government officials who are committed and dedicated to the cause of regional peace and stability to work on mechanisms to strengthen regional consensus on peace. The group should be provided access to and support from governments of the region to consult with relevant officials, help build confidence among regional actors, and formulate plans and strategies for regional consensus in support of peace in Afghanistan.



Heart of Asia Society (HAS), founded in 2019 in Kabul, is an independent Afghan think tank working to expand research and dialogue in Afghanistan and among countries of the Heart of Asia region. HAS prioritizes support to the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan, with a special focus on conducting research and facilitating dialogue aimed at garnering regional consensus and support for Afghan peace. Please read more on our work at: www.heartofasiasociety.org.

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