

# **No more time "to wait and see." The international community must act in a unified voice *now*.**

The publicly shared desire of the international community as well as Afghan leaders and the Taliban to prevent a civil and sectarian war in Afghanistan, commands real engagement now.

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In the wake of the sudden collapse of the government in Afghanistan on August 15th, the Heart of Asia Society (HAS) issued a statement, calling on Afghan leaders, Taliban, and the international community to “seize this moment and expeditiously work towards an inclusive national government in Afghanistan.”

HAS is issuing this statement as a follow up and a summary of a recent Track II dialogue in which senior former diplomats, former government & UN officials and Afghanistan experts participated. Attendees, including from the region (Central Asia, Pakistan, Iran, China), Russia, EU, Japan, India, US, Canada, and the UK discussed the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan and reiterated the calls to take action now before it is too late.

After two weeks, the situation in Afghanistan remains uncertain and fluid. The rapid collapse of the Afghan government and Afghan army created an immediate governance and security vacuum in the country; led to the closure of all banks, looting, more violence, and steep rise in food commodities. Importantly, the Afghan people are living with uncertainty, fear a prolonged war in their country as well as losing their achievements of the past 20 years.

During the Track II dialogue, participants stressed that the international community cannot and should not “wait and see anymore.” The situation on the ground calls for immediate action, especially by the UN, EU together with Afghan political leaders and Taliban.

The following is a summary of what the participants of the Track II as well as HAS leadership believe should happen now before it is too late:

- All attendees agree that **the collapse occurred at a critical time**. Drought has caused some 40% reduction in crops production, massive unemployment as international community departs, banking and liquidity crisis and no access to essential imports, famine, the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic and internal displacements (according to UNHCR, 550,000 since the beginning of the year) are some of the factors making the crisis more precarious.

The **more complex and precarious nature of this crisis demand urgent focus from all relevant parties**.

- Taliban has had little experience running a complex government and society which Afghanistan has become. It needs the expertise and technical assistance that is largely available among educated and experienced Afghans. Taliban must guarantee an inclusive government that would allow for the young and experienced to run the system.

- Taliban commitment not to seek revenge and its commitment to an amnesty for those who have been part of the conflict is a positive sign. However, actions must match the rhetoric.

- There is **huge trust deficit in Taliban and among Afghans**. Fear about personal safety, no faith in a better future, and lack of trust are driving desperate efforts by Afghans to flee Afghanistan. While acknowledging that it will take time for people to trust the Taliban, it is critical that Taliban's words and deeds match.

- **Taliban also faces a trust deficit with the international community**. It has been an insurgency; it now wants to be recognized as a government. Engaging and support of assistance to Afghanistan and to a new government in which Taliban is a party to, does not equate to recognition.

At the same time, support genuine Taliban efforts to create an inclusive government should not be thwarted by international support for opponents to this effort. **History records the bitter consequences of the disengagement of the international community and the intra-Afghan conflict of the 1990s.**

- **The world is closely watching** the early signals by the Taliban leadership, including

if the group will hold broader consultations with all Afghan leaders to form a new inclusive government; if the Taliban would unilaterally declare an Islamic Emirate; and whether the flag of the new government only speaks to one side and only a few. **This underscores the trust deficit that exists** between the Taliban and much of the international community. This must be overcome by the Taliban if the group wants to successfully transition from an insurgency into an internationally recognized government.

- The **US is no longer playing a leading role on Afghanistan**. This leadership must come from elsewhere, but still include the US. Regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) may be able to assist if they reach out to bring in wider participation, including UN and EU.

President Putin has discussed SCO's role in stabilization of Afghanistan with Prime Minister Khan and President Xi over the past two weeks. It is important to note that over the years, the presence of India and Pakistan as permanent members of SCO has crippled the organization's ability to be effective in Afghanistan.

- The **lack of an agreed platform** of the international community to bring together all these concerned nations and institutions is an impediment to working on a coordinated and united position. Addressing this challenge and agreeing -

on a solution is essential.

- **Failure of the international community to speak with a coordinated, powerful voice is a result of many factors.**

However, now is the time to focus on preventing a total and long term collapse of Afghanistan. Coordination among and a unified voice of the international community, led by UN and EU is vital if it is to be influential.

- **Taliban needs to allow all Afghan staff for the UN's** developmental and humanitarian programs, such as UNDP, WFP, UNHCR to operate business as usual. This will also urge other international developmental and humanitarian organizations to reopen their offices in Afghanistan.

- **UN can and should be asked to play a larger role.** The UN's two distinctive roles - political and humanitarian - need to be distinguished. It will continue to be a leader in the field of humanitarian assistance such as distribution of food items and it can also play a greater political and diplomatic support to Afghanistan and the international community that is needed now.

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- The **UN SG should send his envoy to hold high level discussions** with Afghan factions immediately and should be given the agency to engage. Participants believe that the UN envoy could be someone who is trusted by all parties so that an environment of trust is created among all sides.

- **Afghanistan desperately needs leadership by Afghans** - not just the Taliban but other political and civil society and private actors. There must be the space for the huge youth population especially those young men and women who have taken advantage of educational opportunities over the past twenty years to continue to contribute to their societies.

HAS will continue to follow the ongoing crisis with grave concern, provide analysis, and hold meetings and dialogues on the situation in Afghanistan. For now, the Afghan people are rightly worried for their future. Allegedly, Taliban are dealing with power-sharing negotiations internally and externally that only includes their party leaders and despite public evidence of insecurity, intimidations, and beatings, the group's spokesmen say that they have the situation under control. Since their arrival, they have called civil servants to return to work but ordered that women in the workforce and higher education should stay at home until further notice. Only some female health workers and a few journalists have returned to work. Reportedly, the group has banned music, banned co-education, and closed some media outlets in some parts of the country. This discrepancy between words and deeds must alarm the international community and engage now to avoid the return of policies that are detrimental to a thriving society.

Nevertheless, HAS is reminding all parties that the situation still bears the potential to serve as an opportunity to steer away the country from further conflict. The stress on **now** is vital. This is an opportunity for the UN, EU, Afghan political leaders, Taliban, and leaders in the region to show in action to the Afghan people and the world that they are truly committed to peace and a government that is inclusive and representative of all Afghans, especially the youth, women, and ethnic and religious minorities.

What happens in the days and weeks ahead, will have a lasting effect on the people of Afghanistan. The publicly shared desire of the international community as well as Afghan leaders to prevent a civil and sectarian war in Afghanistan demands real engagement now.

For Peace and Stability in Afghanistan,  
The Heart of Asia Society  
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