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Report – Public Talk

“BRI & FOIP: Are They Compatible?”

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PICTURES OF THE EVENT



Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a Public Talk titled "*BRI & FOIP: Are They Compatible?*" on September 30, 2019. The speaker at the occasion was Dr. Akio Takahara, Dean, Graduate School of Public Policy and Professor of Contemporary Chinese Politics, Graduate Schools for Law and Politics, The University of Tokyo.

Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry welcomed the guests. Highlighting the recent developments around the world and in Asia in particular, Ambassador Chaudhry said that the world around us is in a flux. Great power competition has returned to the forefront of international politics. This time Asia, our continent, is home to growing strategic competition between China and the United States. Both countries have put forward competing visions for Asian security.

Ambassador Chaudhry further said that over six years ago in 2013, China launched its 'Belt and Road Initiative', popularly known as BRI, a vast program to promote global trade, infrastructure development and investments involving dozens of countries and international organizations, envisaging more than US\$1 trillion in investment. The BRI was preceded by concepts of 'One Belt One Road' and the 'Silk Road Economic Belt'. He elaborated that in BRI, the "belt" refers to overland trade routes, while the "road" actually alludes to sea lanes connecting Southeast Asia with Africa and Europe. In 2016, President Xi Jinping called for a new regional security cooperation structure that would "suit Asia's unique traits". He termed it as the 'Asian Security Concept'.

On the US side, the Ambassador emphasized that initially, the US watched BRI grow as Obama administration had sought to integrate China into the global order. However, later, Washington started to push back. The goal ostensibly was to limit the growing Chinese reach in Eurasia and Asia-Pacific. The current Trump administration has embarked upon an Indo-Pacific Strategy to preserve the existing US-dominated international order in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The US initiative, in a way, builds on the idea of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) that was first announced by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in August 2016. The Japanese officials contend that for them, the FOIP was a concept, not a strategy.

India and Australia have been drawn into the FOIP through a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, also known as the Quad) for security cooperation among Japan, United States, Australia, and India. Under the strategy, United States is expanding maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean region, including through the new Bay of Bengal Initiative, and extending maritime security and peacekeeping to the Pacific Islands. Similarly, as an economic framework, FOIP talks about an alignment of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, terming it as the confluence of the two seas.

Ambassador Aizaz further said that these two visions for Asia's security and development are accelerating US-China competition in Asia. This has the potential to affect strategic and economic engagement of China with the Eurasian nations as the regional order evolves. In this competition, most Asian countries find themselves in a difficult situation: either support a current superpower, or align with the emerging major power of the region which can displace US as superpower in the long-run. A third option for these countries is to hedge between Beijing and Washington by cooperating with both in select economic and foreign policy endeavors. This can complicate the successful implementation of both the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative. While concluding, the Ambassador reiterated that for countries like Pakistan, the accelerating strategic competition in Asia could generate new economic and strategic challenges. Thus, navigating this competition will be a major policy challenge for Pakistani leaders in the years ahead.

Dr. Akio Takahara thanked the ISSI for hosting the event. While highlighting the concepts behind BRI and FOIP, Dr. Takahara said that both the concepts are important for Asia's security and development. He elaborated that BRI is a new model through which Xi Jinping wishes to stabilize big power relations, and avoid confrontation between a rising power and the hegemonic power. However, Dr. Takahara insisted that strategic competition between the two countries cannot but intensify over variety of issues which include cyberspace, South China Sea and also in the field of science and technology. He said that there has been a rapid decline in US-China relations since 2017. In the list of key challenges, the US National Security Strategy calls China (and Russia) revisionist powers, "that use technology, propaganda, and coercion to shape a world antithetical to our interests and values." Moreover, US National Defense Strategy lists China at the top of external threats.

Dr. Takahara further said that with the advent of BRI, we see China's swing in the diplomatic policy pendulum from 'America First' to 'Eurasia First', i.e. turn to the neighbors in Asia and further to Europe. Through BRI, China connects East Asia and Europe, and develop the routes for trade. Under this framework, China shares institutions to facilitate investment and trade, for which it has established a new international bank (AIIB). This has attracted great attention and participation, and investment and trade have increased. However, he said that BRI has raised concerns about the profitability of some projects and China's strategic interests. With its maritime advancement, China is intruding into territorial waters of other states, oil and gas exploration, construction of artificial islands, harassing fishing boats and reconnaissance vessels. The speaker further said that BRI is a constellation, who's definition is unclear. However, in reality what matters to us are the stars, i.e. projects and not be dazzled by the constellation. Moreover, it is signature project of Xi Jinping, and the symbol of Xi's power and authority in the world.

While delving in the detail of FOIP, Dr. Takahara said that its aim is to improve connectivity between Asia and Africa through free and open Indo-Pacific, and promote stability and prosperity of the region as a whole. Key areas of FOPI include:

1. Developing an environment for international peace, stability and prosperity, and sharing universal values.
2. Addressing global issues toward achieving SDGs and promoting human security.
3. Together with developing countries, contributing to economic diplomacy and regional revitalization that aims at "quality growth".

The speaker further said that the two aspects of the two initiatives - BRI and FOPI - are strategic and economic. However, with fragility and resilience in Japan-China relations, if we focus on the economic aspect, then the two constellations can overlap and coexist. He further stressed that Japan must provide an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative along with cooperating with China in developing Asia and Africa, and conduct better public diplomacy towards the Chinese.

In his concluding remarks, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG, ISSI congratulated Dr. Akio Takahara for presenting a comprehensive presentation on the important topic. He said

that the time-tested relationship between China and Pakistan has become stronger with the launch of CPEC, and it has smoothly moved ahead with the new political set up in Pakistan. The larger political consensus on CPEC in Pakistan points towards realization of the fact that economic development takes lead when it comes to choosing between politics and economics. In this consensus lies the hope for Pakistan's bright future.