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Report – WebTalk

“Hong Kong: Current Status & Future”

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China-Pakistan Study Centre (CPSC) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a WebTalk on 'Hong Kong: Current Status & Future' under the Distinguished Lecture Series was held on June 25, 2020. H.E. Mr. Yao Jing, Ambassador, People's Republic of China to Pakistan delivered the talk, while participants comprised ISSI research faculty and media.

Dr. Talat Shabbir, Director CPSC, in his introductory remarks welcomed the distinguished speaker, Ambassador Yao Jing, discussant Ambassador Masood Khalid and participants. Highlighting the background of current situation in Hong Kong, Dr. Shabbir, noted that during past 12 months the violent protests have destabilized an economically thriving city, while undermining rule of law and social order. Meanwhile, the government of Hong Kong has been dealing with unrest in a restrained manner while engaging protestors in dialogue. Given the large scale of demonstrations and their frequency, protests appear to be facilitated by external forces and are blatant 'interference in internal affairs of China'. These attempts also undermine implementation of 'One Country, Two Systems' framework. For decades, Pakistan has consistently supported One China policy and with regards to Hong Kong Pakistan considers it as China's internal matter.

In his distinguished talk, Ambassador Yao Jing briefed participants on the background of the Hong Kong issue. He underlined that violence started in June, 2019, when Hong Kong legislature tried to adopt a special legislation on legal assistance and extradition of criminals. This criminal law, however, was politicized leading to agitation. These protests took place with support from Western countries. Peace and stability in Hongkong have been totally destroyed. Rioters are attempting to write a new legal framework for Hong Kong. Economy has come down, as a major financial centre and trade hub, Hong Kong has suffered. Daily lives of people have been disturbed. Most importantly, the engagement between Mainland China and Hong Kong has been disturbed. Supply chains, tourism, normal people-to-people contacts have been suspended.

Shedding light on the new national security legislation, Ambassador Yao stated that, due to COVID-19 pandemic, annual session of National People's Congress was delayed till May, 2020. During its session, central government and parliament decided to deliberate on a new legislation for security measures in Hong Kong. This proposed law is in line with the One Country, Two

Systems framework. Hong Kong people and administration support this legislation. Central government is only implementing its jurisdiction on security issues. Some countries such as United Kingdom, are claiming that according to UK-China joint declaration China has no right to adopt such a legislation. But in the joint declaration, there is no single, article, or any limitation on China's law-making. First article clearly states that China resumes sovereignty over Hong Kong. Current legislation is a domestic matter of China. But West is saying China is violating its commitment about One Country, Two Systems. Some countries are also saying China is violating its commitment to guarantee high degree of autonomy to Hong Kong. From legal perspective, China is entitled to undertake such a legislation. Historically, Chinese government has the mandate to exert its sovereignty in Hong Kong. According to special legislation on Hong Kong, it is mandate of central government to deal with issues of foreign relations and national security.

Ambassador Yao highlighted why a domestic law is becoming a huge geo-political tussle. He noted it is because of a profound change underway in the policy of Western countries. For past three years, China is now taken as a major rival of Western Camp. United States, under Donald Trump initiated this rivalry, and is doing its best to show China as irresponsible and aggressive nation. It is even branding technology developed by Huawei as a tool of Communist Party. Similarly, in Taiwan situation, U.S. is supporting independence of Taiwan. In three joint communiques, U.S. had committed to One China principle, but now, China is being labelled as changing status quo. Similarly, in western sector of China-India border dispute. Earlier, foreign countries did not comment on such issues, because of bilateral communication channels. But right now, China is being shown as aggressor. China faces such kind of hostility and criticism from West.

Ambassador Yao underlined that China believes that its efforts for peaceful rise and development will not be tolerated. West is spreading wrong propaganda regarding China and creating a lot of problems. China believes that through its action law and order situation has improved in Hong Kong. Moreover, as far as China's sovereignty and territorial integrity is concerned China will move forward. Hong Kong still enjoys maximum autonomy according to special legislation, but China will not allow Hong Kong to move towards independence.

For China's international engagement, Ambassador Yao underscored, it believes in multi-lateralism. For all international commitments and agreements, China has always agreed and joined hands. China would never take any step to take any initiative to sabotage regional peace and development. China would never take any step to sabotage global order. He also touched on Pakistan-China relations and noted that bilateral cooperation between our two countries is also under scrutiny in Western eyes and a lot of rumours are created and floated around by Western media and governments regarding Pakistan-China relations. He asked participants to share their suggestions on how China and Pakistan can deal with these challenges in a better way.

Ambassador Masood Khalid, Pakistan's former ambassador to China, was the discussant. Sharing his views, he underlined, that in 1997 a historic wrong was corrected when Hong Kong was handed to China after British colonial rule. Now, it is taken as a special territory. It has its own legislature, own law. Today Hong Kong has emerged as one of the most important business centre. It is one of the world's largest exporter. Hong Kong ranks third in number of billionaires residing there. Its universities rank very high. The trouble in Hong Kong started a year ago. The protests in Hong Kong has badly affected the economy. COVID-19 has caused ripple effect. Continued violence will cause more serious hardships in Hong Kong and will cause instability.

Ambassador Khalid noted that current hype has been created by Western think-tanks and it is dramatic. China respects principles of non- interference in China's internal matters. World will only be a safe place if we show tolerance, respect, and follow principle of non-interference in sovereignty and territorial matters of other states. China is playing very important role in international system. The countries who are engaged in negativity towards China do know that it is not for global stability. Pakistan-China relationship has maintained a steady course and it is supported by people and leadership of two countries. Pakistan and China relationship will continue to forge ahead. But we need to be fully aware of the challenges that lie ahead. We need to strengthen our strategic communication. There is a need to have close interaction at higher levels. Several structures of bilateral dialogues can be deliberated upon and diplomats from both countries can be involved and both countries can establish a small body comprising senior officials. Monthly, quarterly consultations and exchange of views should be held.

This was followed by an interactive session.

A question was raised about measures taken in Hong Kong to deal with the threat of COVID-19 during protests? Ambassador Yao responded that Hong Kong did not see a sudden surge in COVID-19 cases, thus, a lockdown was not suitable.

Another question was asked about, the dual nature of American policy, where they call for China's support in the elections and also put pressure on China on issues like Hong Kong and Taiwan? Ambassador Yao responded that external policy of America is undergoing a phenomenal change. Washington continues to change its approaches and positions towards dealing with outside world. This is becoming difficult for practitioners of foreign policy. These unexpected and sudden changes sometime mean China is helpless in dealing with America.

A question was asked if American support to protestors in Hong Kong is part of its Indo-Pacific strategy? Ambassador replied that Indo-Pacific strategy is focusing on power projection, defaming China and its initiatives. The goal is to contain China. The pattern is always the same.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI Board of Governors, in his concluding remarks said when sovereignty of Hong Kong was reverted to China, affairs of Hong Kong were to be governed by China. Sovereignty of China was re-established in Hong Kong formally. And British rule was ended completely and now Hong Kong has legally and practically become part of China. Principle of respect for sovereignty, non-interference and autonomy are followed by China. China wants to check internal subversion, violence, foreign interference etc and there is nothing wrong to do so. He noted that US policy on Taiwan, Hong Kong, South China Sea, Kashmir and Ladakh is interconnected and biased. Dual standards of US can be seen. On Kashmir, Palestine and Indian Muslims most of the western countries remain silent. He suggested that Pakistan and China should collaborate at different international forums to tackle this onslaught against China. Similarly, efforts should be made to guard any subversion, interference and false propaganda against Belt and Road Initiative, and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.