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Report – Inauguration

“Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA)”

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The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) held the inauguration of its Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA) today. Mr. Sohail Mahmood, Foreign Secretary of Pakistan was the Chief Guest on the occasion. H.E. Prof. Julius Kibet Bitok, High Commissioner of the Republic of Kenya & Dean of African Countries' Ambassadors in Pakistan also made remarks on the occasion.

Ms. Amina Khan, Director CMEA, in her introductory remarks expressed gratitude to Ambassador Chaudhry for giving her the opportunity to head the newly established CMEA. She said that this is not only a privilege to head the Centre, but it gives her equal pride to be heading a Centre run by an all women team - which includes Fatima Raza, Arhama Siddiqa and Areeba Arif Khan. She said that in these rapidly changing times when novel challenges are emerging, it is imperative to study different regions and countries in order to better understand their respective challenges and responsibilities that call for shared and collective action – such as the global issues of climate change, large-scale migrations, political instability and conflicts and the most recent one of them all; the coronavirus pandemic. In the case of Pakistan, it is important that research becomes focused on regions that are significant for Pakistan's foreign policy, and also on those that are ignored despite repeated slogans of their high potential, such as the ME&A region which is of immense importance for Pakistan.

CMEA aims to promote and provide quality research, analysis, policy input and dialogue on issues related to the Middle East and Africa, two very important regions as envisaged in Pakistan's foreign policy. Fostering closer comprehensive ties with the Muslim countries in the Middle East and identifying areas of mutual interest between Pakistan and Africa in keeping with Pakistan's Engage Africa policy are key priorities that underline the vision of CMEA. In addition to studying political issues, CMEA will focus on the potential for economic cooperation, cultural sharing, and potential for collaborations on other fronts such as multilateral forums.

Director CMEA stated that with such cross-cutting research, it is anticipated and hoped that Pakistan's policymakers will find the CMEA a useful and effective partner, and an avenue that can be used to establish greater understanding and collaboration with the ME&A region. Since CMEA'S soft launch in March 2020, and in these rather testing times of social distancing; the Centre has constituted its Advisory board consisting of national and international academics,

diplomats and experts (some of whom have joined us today). She appraised the guests of the work CMEA has conducted in the few months since its launch which comprises webinars, reports, issue briefs and engaging with the ME&A desks at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Most recently, the Centre also signed its first MoU with the Middle East Monitor (MEMO) based in the UK. She concluded that “We at CMEA envisage to expand our work and engage with similar organizations and individuals from around the globe through research, webinars/conferences on issues related to the Middle Eastern and African regions with the aim to become a Centre of excellence.”

In his welcome remarks, the Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry stated that it was delightful to be inaugurating yet another Centre of Excellence at ISSI. He said that the work of all the Centres of Excellence at ISSI is driven from the priority to improve the quality of research and analysis both inside and outside ISSI. ISSI has also enlisted with 12 indexing agencies which are gateways to international academia. The Centres act as a mechanism to get back feedback on research and dialogue on so events can be conducted on issues which are relevant to Pakistan. He said that the aim was to create a synergy between research and dialogue, be relevant to the Government and the people of Pakistan as well as the national interests of Pakistan. He acknowledged the enormous support ISSI has received from the Foreign Ministry for which he said he was very grateful.

Ambassador Chaudhry said that in this new age, real battles are battles of narratives. Pakistan has some good narratives and policy projections which must be magnified and there are some narratives which have to be countered. ISSI in essence, complements the work of the Foreign Ministry and other stakeholders in Pakistan. He said CMEA has a unique significance for Pakistan. The Middle East is a region which is considered the near neighbourhood of Pakistan, where the latter has huge stakes, especially in the Gulf, necessitating a detailed study of the geopolitics of the region. Engaging with Africa especially in the realm of economic diplomacy is also one of the top priorities for the Government of Pakistan. He said CMEA will monitor developments in both these regions, organise dialogues, build a database of relevance to Pakistan and provide policy inputs to all stakeholders. He wished CMEA best of luck and hoped that CMEA would deliver on this front and work closely with the government in this regard.

H.E. Prof. Julius Kibet Bitok said that the African group of ambassadors and high commissioners in Pakistan are happy with steps the government of Pakistan and people of Pakistan have taken to engage with Africa. He highlighted the notable efforts by the government of Pakistan to boost engagement with African countries. He called the recently held Pakistan- Africa Trade and Development Conference held in Nairobi in January 2020, a landmark development in the ‘Engage Africa’ policy of Pakistan. The conference hosted over a hundred businessmen and women from Pakistan. The conference was indeed the beginning of a new chapter in Pakistan Africa engagement. He said he looked forward to more such interaction and visits at the highest levels of government. These he said were engines of effective engagement.

He said that Africa and Pakistan are good friends and have been collaborating in different fields of development. He said that there was no better time to forge better and deeper partnership especially in the backdrop of Pakistan’s ‘Engage Africa’ policy coupled together with the new African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement. The Free Trade Area seeks to ease the free movement of goods and people, transforming the 1.2 billion African population into a single investment and growth hub platform to promote shared prosperity. The African group recognises the significant contribution of trade and investment as vehicles of accelerated economic growth. A fusion of African natural resources and Pakistan tech can bring enormous benefits to both sides. It is important to develop a common agenda with institutional support between Africa and Pakistan.

The African continent comprises of a large number of Muslim countries and has been mentioned earlier a part of Africa also comprises of the Middle East. The Middle East is blessed to be the origin of two major world religions - Christianity and Islam. It is also endowed with natural resources such as oil which has shaped influence in the global arena. However, unfortunately the region is also facing a number of challenges of serious ramifications. It is my hope and desire that CMEA will be able to find comprehensive solutions to issues that affect the MEA region, he said and further build on the Africa- Pakistan relationship, he said. I encourage ISSI to be the engine of knowledge for Pakistan, region and beyond, he concluded.

During his remarks, Mr. Sohail Mahmood started off by saying “At the outset I want to recognize so many luminaries present on the occasion.” He commended Ambassador Aizaz, who he said is a dynamic force behind many key initiatives in ISSI and beyond.

He stated that the Middle East is one of the most critical areas in the world today- a bridge between East and West, cradle of three monotheist religions and most importantly, Islam. Its strategic significance stems from its flow as the global energy supply in the world, which comes with its own set of challenges. The people of Pakistan, share strong linkages with the people of the Middle East region. Pakistan has high stakes in the region's development and stability. There are no issues where Pakistan has not stood shoulder to shoulder with the Muslim countries, he said. In turn, Pakistan has received reciprocal support on the Jammu and Kashmir issue, on matters of economy and political support whenever required. This partnership has been the bedrock of Islamic solidarity in modern times. The economic dimension of the Middle East is also significant for Pakistan. An example is how the region has one of the largest concentrations of Pakistani workers which play a significant role both for the growth and development of their home and host country. The region is also an important destination for Pakistani exports. The Middle East states are also Pakistan's closest collaborators in the defence and security domain. In short, Pakistan's future is closely tied with the growth of the Middle East impacted by the current global changes sweeping across the world, matters which need in depth research and enhanced understanding, he said.

Similarly, he said that the African continent is where Pakistan's past, present and future converge. Both Pakistan and Africa have been successful against colonisation, which entails a natural meeting of minds and entails working in unison. Both Pakistan and Africa also have a strong tradition of mutual support, rendering from assistance to capacity building of state institutions and peacekeeping. With the Pak-Africa conference in Nairobi, the two sides have embarked on a new journey of friendship, he said. Moreover, under its Engage Africa policy- which is aimed at deepening economic and cultural bonds, the Government of Pakistan is shoring up its diplomatic presence in this important part of the world by increasing high level interactions and laying down the foundations of a futuristic partnership that focuses on connectivity, economic complementarity and mutual investments

He said the region is changing rapidly. To better utilise the opportunities available and guard against the threats, it is imperative that scholarly research, to better analyse the systemic shifts taking place in the region be conducted. This is why, the Foreign Secretary stated that the establishment of CMEA is both timely and beneficial and wished the centre best of luck in its future endeavours and assured the Foreign Office's maximum cooperation and support