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*Report – Roundtable*

**“Delegation from the International Research  
Council for Religious Affairs (IRCRA)”**

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a delegation from the International Research Council for Religious Affairs (IRCRA) on December 31, 2020 including participants from Afghanistan. President IRCRA, Mr Muhammad Israr Madani was also present on the occasion. Director CMEA, Ms. Amina Khan, and who also works on Afghanistan, welcomed the delegation and gave a brief introduction of the ISSI.

Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry briefed the delegation on global politics and Pak-Afghan ties.

Giving a political and geo-strategic overview of different regions, Ambassador Chaudhry was of the view that in India, the present Modi government is bent on making India a Hindu *Rashtra* while in the Middle East, many countries are still entangled in civil war. Europe is also embroiled in its internal issues and has not asserted itself as an active participant in global and regional politics.

He noted how at the end of the Cold War, it seemed that the world was heading towards multipolarity. After events of 9/11, terrorism and counter terrorism became the focus of the world stage. Presently, however, the world is seeing intensifying competition between United States and China. In order to counter China's rise, the US has embarked on its Pivot to Asia strategy, where among other things, it is trying to fortify India as a counterweight to China. Amidst this competition, the issue of terrorism has somewhat taken a backseat. Under the Trump administration, a general political sentiment in the US showed a strong inclination toward drawdown of US troops from different conflict zones all over the world, particularly from Afghanistan.

In the backdrop of these circumstances, Ambassador Chaudhry explained how the US-China competition was impacting the regional geopolitical dynamics such as in India (being propped up as a counterweight to China), two important changes are taking place. One is an internal change that indicates the formation of a Hindu *Rashtriya* or an exclusive Hindu country devoid of all traces of diverse origins and signs of other religion, cultures and communities. The other important change is external which has been prompted by India's policy of regional hegemony as a result of which, its ties with most regional countries have soured.

Observing the volatile and turbulent state of events in the Middle Eastern region, Ambassador

Chaudhry touched upon the destruction brought on by civil wars that continue in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. He especially mentioned the old Iran and Saudi Arabia rivalry as a major destabilising factor in the Middle Eastern politics.

In the backdrop of this scenario, he talked about the situation in Afghanistan and the peace process which is paramount not only for Pakistan but for the region and subsequently the world. Peace in Afghanistan will be key for bringing about peace in Pakistan. Ambassador Chaudhry briefed the Roundtable participants about the four crucial pre-requisites or methods for cultivating and ensuring sustainable peace in Afghanistan. First of whom is the timeline and manner of the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Internal and external stakeholders have warned that a hasty withdrawal could spell disaster for the war-weary country. Second pre-requisite is success of the Intra-Afghan dialogue which is tricky due to the complexity of the layered and diverse Afghan political setup. There are several components of this dialogue such as nature of the political setup to be implemented after the political settlement is complete, the type of constitution to be adopted in this new setup and the composition of the future political government in Afghanistan. The third and most important one of all is how to cease the continuous violence being carried out in the country. Fourth one is gaining a regional consensus among all countries of the region on a strict policy of non-interference in Afghanistan, preventing proxy wars as well as offering their full support and facilitation for cultivating peace in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Chaudhry went on to say that it was heartening to witness this positive momentum in the Pak-Afghan bilateral relationship in form of exchange of high level bilateral delegations and proposals of transit trade being given from both sides. He also highlighted the importance of a conducive Pak-Afghan relationship, and said that Afghanistan is and always will be Pakistan's neighbour, therefore both countries need to expand the contours of their bilateral relationship, hence it is for the benefit of both countries and for the entire region that this relationship improves. He concluded by saying that it was essential for both sides to expand cooperation on all levels, be it political, economic, military, or people to people contacts. He also emphasized on how the ISSI is working on increasing its outreach to Afghanistan through academic linkages and welcomes such initiatives to further strengthen the bilateral relationship.

After the Director General ISSI's address, an interactive question and answer session was held in which the Roundtable participants asked questions in Pashto and Urdu. The following important

points were raised during this session:

- According to the UNSC resolution 1373 passed post 9/11, countries all over the world had to adopt strict policies against acts of terrorism that resulted in the US going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. During those dire circumstances, the question of peace was impossible to be brought up as US troops in all their might accompanied by the NATO forces had taken over Afghanistan. Despite warnings from Pakistan that there can be no military solution to the Afghan conflict rather a political negotiation will be needed, violence ensued from both sides. However, fortunately after years of conflict, both sides seem amenable to peace talks.
- Peaceful co-existence among all the diverse Afghan factions is very important regardless of their ethnic, political and religious affiliations. Live and let live is the only motto to be adopted for a peaceful future.
- Peace can only be ushered in through economic development which has now become possible via regional connectivity projects such as CPEC. Political differences must be kept separate from mutual economic development through trade and commerce.
- Border management is extremely important for Pak-Afghan border as it facilitates not only people-to-people exchanges but also the economic activity that passes through the several border points that have now been opened.
- Atrocities being committed in Kashmir by the Indian government were also condemned during the discussion where Ambassador Chaudhry urged all Muslim countries to join hands in raising their voice against the on-going oppression in Kashmir by rising above their respective individual interests.
- Negative propaganda intended to destroy and stall the peace process must be negated and curbed by joint efforts of think tanks and academia both in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It was agreed upon that the people of Afghanistan must have a greater say in their own fate and they must give their own input in the peace process as well as in the development and rehabilitation of their country.