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Report – Panel Discussion

“Pakistan-China-Afghanistan: Prospects of Trilateral Cooperation for Regional Stability”

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) held a Panel Discussion on 'Pakistan-China-Afghanistan: Prospects of Trilateral Cooperation for Regional Stability'. The panel featured former ambassadors, academics and experts on the field, namely, Ambassador Masood Khalid, former Pakistani Ambassador to China, Ambassador Omar Samad, Nonresident Senior Fellow Atlantic Council and Prof. Lin Minwang, Deputy Director of the Center for South Asian Studies and Assistant to the Dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, China.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General, ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI and Dr Talat Shabbir, Director China-Pakistan Study Center (CPSC) at ISSI also took part in the discussion.

Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, pointed to a shift in China's role in Afghanistan. Previously, China, while supportive of peace and stability in Afghanistan, for the most part had deliberately kept away from the security aspect, and instead had focused on playing a more proactive and constructive role in terms of economic and political investment. However, now, China was taking up a more proactive role in the resolution of the Afghan conflict, by providing necessary facilitation between the Afghan government and the Taliban in realizing reconciliation. She noted that China was, alongside, also helping Islamabad and Kabul improve ties, through various means for example, the establishment of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral mechanism, which is dedicated to trilateral cooperation and cooperation to support and facilitate the Afghan peace process, enhance regional connectivity and undertake projects for regional development.

Elaborating on the economic importance of the trilateral framework, Ms. Amina Khan said that it can lead to the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan under the larger BRI initiative. However, she argued that the full realisation of the potential economic benefits and the opportunities arising out of such a development are hindered by the lack of clarity, Kabul's apparent reluctance, unstable security situation in Afghanistan, the complex nature of Pak -Afghan ties, regional rivalries including the Indo-Pak rivalry, and the existence of numerous terrorist groups, to name a few.

She stated, that Beijing's growing interest and involvement in Afghanistan stemmed from its trepidation of transnational terrorism, possible spread of militancy into its Xinjiang province, and support to Chinese militant groups i.e. the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The other factors that attracted Beijing's interest in Afghanistan were the potential extension of its larger BRI framework, regional politics, presence of the US, and the growing role of India in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Chaudhry was of the view that China's chief concern was the terror threat from Afghan soil that endangered its economic development goals in the region. He opined that China viewed Afghanistan chiefly as a neighbour and put counter terrorism and economic development as priority. CPEC which both Pakistan and China champion depended on not only the Afghan peace process but also on other energy and trade development projects. Any meaningful trilateral cooperation depended on peace in Afghanistan, he said.

On the effectiveness of the trilateral meetings and prospects of future development of Afghanistan. He said that the meetings till now had failed to come to a logical conclusion.

Ambassador Masood Khalid commented on the role and capabilities of the three regional actors – China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He said that the three had different capacities and different domestic and international environments in which they took their decisions. China was a behemoth – an emerging power, Pakistan was a developing country with a struggling economy, and Afghanistan was, as yet, war torn.

He argued that, the success of the trilateral cooperation depended on China's willingness to bear the financial burden. He said that it goes without saying that China wanted Afghanistan and Pakistan to work hard to overcome misgivings about each other. Depending on the ground situation, China was willing to help Afghanistan in socio-economic development. China had already invested heavily in railway and mining in Afghanistan and was already a developing partner of Pakistan in CPEC. Trilateral cooperation would engage Pakistan's workforce, industries, untapped resources and markets in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Ambassador Chaudhry pointed out the persistence of the security versus development dilemma in which security had managed to take priority. Focus on peace and stability and

counterterrorism reigned supreme and concurrently the development component involving trade and investment and the possible extension of CPEC.

On whether the trilateral can bring about any regional stability, Ambassador Masood Khalid said that the three regional actors – China, Pakistan and Afghanistan have different capacities and different domestic and international environments in which they take their decisions. China is a behemoth – an emerging power, Pakistan is a developing country with a struggling economy, and Afghanistan is as yet war torn. Much of the trilateral cooperation will depend on China's willingness to bear the financial burden. He said that it goes without saying that China wants Afghanistan and Pakistan to work hard to overcome misgivings about each other. Depending on the ground situation, China will be willing to help Afghanistan in socio-economic development. China has already invested heavily in railway and mining in Afghanistan and is already a developing partner of Pakistan in CPEC.

Trilateral cooperation will engage Pakistan's workforce, industries, untapped resources and markets in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. China's fundamental interest in Afghanistan is stability in Afghanistan and to secure its borders with Afghanistan in order to prevent terrorism from permeating through. He also said that China's security dilemma is compounded with Beijing's eagerness to see a US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The withdrawal can potentially lead to resurgence in terror activities in Afghanistan and their spillover into China. China has established close contacts with the Taliban and gained reassurance that ETIM will not spillover into Afghanistan. China is pursuing a wait and see policy in Afghanistan: cautious and flexible and its role is indispensable and central. He said that peace is a requisite for any meaningful trilateral cooperation to take place. Although China has invited India to join CPEC, India lies on the other side of the fence. Hence, India must reevaluate its relationship with its immediate neighbors if it wants to be a part of the regional matrix and connectivity structures.

On the topic of trilateral cooperation, Ambassador Omar Samad said that when we discuss trilateral cooperation and regional stability we should keep in mind that it is very complex and involves a lot more actors. What connects Pakistan and Afghanistan is not only shared geography but also geostrategic, common threats like poverty, inequality, oppression, counter terrorism- which can only be countered through interaction and cooperation. He said that we are

on the threshold of a great game. Collaboration is increasingly becoming geoeconomic and involves everything from crypto-currency to backing and financial exchanges. China has made it clear that it is dedicated to improve connectivity and build an open inclusive world community. The Afghan conflict serves as a distraction to the economic connectivity of the region. There is also the danger posed by civil and militant proxy wars that will potentially fill the vacuum left behind by American forces. He said that Pakistan has a major role to play as a neighbour. The least destructive and best case scenario is to go towards a political settlement. At the end of the day it is the Afghan people who matter and the Taliban must understand that a lot has changed in Afghanistan since the 1990s. Afghan's need to know that the right to self-determination and civil rights are fully ensured. All stakeholders need to focus on playing a constructive role. The more stress we put on the peace process, an inclusive political setup and an equitable solution, the more there is a chance of progress. He also said that for China, CPEC and China-Central Asia corridor are both crucial for the success of BRI and in their junction lies Afghanistan and as a result a host of dividends through these corridors. China and Pakistan are both important players and together there is a lot that they can do to untangle the issues that hinder the inter-Afghan dialogue. At the end of the day it is the Afghan people that have to give their approval to a future setup that is inclusive to the Taliban as well.

Prof. Lin Minwang said that China's interest in Afghanistan is multifaceted, particularly in the avenue of counter-terrorism. Routes from Central Asia lead to China historically. Geo-strategically Afghanistan is very important as it is located at the crossroads of two economic corridors – CPEC and the China-Central Asian Economic Corridor. Spillover of instability from the Xinjiang province into Afghanistan is a prime concern for Beijing. In this regard, China believes that instability in the region can be countered through economic development. He said that foreign interference in Afghanistan has been detrimental to the Afghan society. He reinforced that there is no power vacuum that needs to be filled; Afghanistan belongs to Afghan people. On trilateral cooperation he said that this mechanism is really important for China seeing as it is a very important partner of Pakistan and Pakistan and China have a convergence of views in Afghanistan. However, the political situation in Afghanistan is of great concern. Improving connectivity with neighbouring countries is very important as it will allow full exploitation of the region's economic potential. Economic corridors are the way to go about it, he said. On the question of how regional rivalries jeopardise Afghanistan's inclusion in CPEC, he said that India

is the prominent power in the South Asian region and when it comes into progress India is bound to oppose it.

Dr. Talat said that there is a convergence between Pakistan and China regarding peace, connectivity and prosperity in the region. In this regard existing forums will allow engagement between all players including Afghan leaders, China, US and Pakistan. It is important for China to have peace in its periphery since expansion of BRI necessitates this. Both China and Pakistan hope that peace will prevail post US withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, he said that for any development, peace in Afghanistan is important and at the moment the post-withdrawal scenario is still debatable since September 11 seems a long way off. It goes without saying, Pakistan wishes for a peaceful withdrawal, he concluded.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood stated that Pakistan, China and Afghanistan cooperation can be viewed through the lenses of peace and stability, development, reconstruction and counter-terrorism – the last three are dependent on the first factor. Afghanistan's cooperation is restrained by spoilers inside and outside of the country. We need a wider regional consensus which is backed by the US and other western countries. If the US is on board then India will also automatically be also on board.