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Report – Book Launch

“Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Pitfalls and the Way Forward”

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The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Pakistan organised a Book Launch on ‘Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Pitfalls and the Way Forward,’ authored by Dr Huma Baqai, Associate Professor Social Sciences, IBA Karachi and Dr Nausheen Wasi, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Karachi. Other distinguished speakers included, Dr. Jochen Hippler, Country Director FES, Ambassador Retd. Asif Ali Khan Durrani, Senior Research Fellow, IPRI. Mr. Zahid Hussain, freelance journalist and Ambassador Retd. Qazi Humayun.

The event was moderated by Ms. Amina Khan, Director Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at ISSI, who was of the opinion that the book is timely and relevant contribution. She said that book explores the various aspects of the Pak-Afghan relationship as it brings forth thirteen diverse perspectives from experts across the border.

During his welcome remarks, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry appreciated the work FES has done in Pakistan. He said that the political landscape in Afghanistan has changed and Afghans as well as the neighbours of Afghanistan are yearning for peace and stability. The postulate that there can be no military solution in Afghanistan still holds. He said that there is a firm consensus that an inclusive set-up needs to be in place for sustained peace in Afghanistan. He said that Counter Terrorism is an area of crucial importance not only for the US but all neighbours of Afghanistan. Furthermore, he stated that for Pakistan in particular, there needs to be an assurance from the Taliban about the TTP that they will not be given space to operate from Afghanistan. He further said that the Taliban need to be aware that regional stability can bring in huge benefits. Afghanistan is truly the heart of Asia and can be the lynchpin for connectivity in the region. He remarked that the approach the US is presently taking might create huge instability in Afghanistan and if the Americans have their way, the Taliban government might collapse and Afghanistan will revert back to pre-2001. He said that the region has to play a collective role particularly in terms of humanitarian, technical and financial assistance.

During his welcome remarks, Dr. Jochen Hippler said while talking about the Pak-Afghan bilateral relations, there is a consensus in opinion that there has been a serious mistake in viewing the relationship primarily through government-to-government relations. He opined that

in fact the government-to-government relationship may be less important and that the Afghan government is artificial and not really as relevant as was thought. What happened in August this year merits this argument. He further opined that the bilateral relationship has been influenced by the internal changes and internal contradictions there and that we can learn from the events in Afghanistan. He said when we discuss the Pak-Afghan relations we should be aware that this bilateral dimension not only has a regional dimension to it but is also a matter of global politics. He said that it is very difficult to discuss Pakistan and Afghanistan relations without bringing in China and India, and sometime Iran. He was of the opinion that the bilateral relationship between both the countries sometimes have a negative as well as positive dimension to it. Referring to the Soviet invasion, Dr. Hippler said that Afghanistan has also remained an arena of global politics in the cold war era. He further said, in the post 9/11 era, the reason of American and NATO invasion was more of rhetoric than real one. He said that after the fall of Kabul, the matter of Pak-Afghan relationship, in the regional and global text, is now more important than before. If policy makers all over the world want to make reasonable policies and not repeat mistakes of the past in regard to Afghanistan, this book is extremely timely, he concluded.

While introducing the book, Dr Nausheen Wasi said this book is very timely and the aim of this book was to identify certain gaps in existing literature and the verbal discourse and to focus on the ills of both societies. She further said that there was a need to analyze why Pakistan's narrative was not being projected correctly. The book offers a comparative narrative literature analysis which shows that while Afghans view the Pak-Afghan relations from a bilateral lens, Pakistan views it from a multilateral perspective. Hence, the task was to find a mating ground for both sides and bridge the perception gap which exists. She said that the thrust in Afghanistan has changed and the situation is evolving rapidly. There is soon going to be chaos in Afghanistan and old patterns are once again rearing their heads. She hoped that the objective of the book – which is to level the playing field for future discourse-, is achieved and it provides an avenue from where debates which are aimed at addressing the existing problems both sides face can be initiated.

Ambassador Retd. Asif Ali Khan Durrani, in his remarks said that, this book gives a flavor of what has happened after the signing of agreement between Taliban and United States. He mentioned that both Pakistan and Afghanistan can take several steps related to the politics and

culture to strengthen the bond which both countries already share. He highlighted that at this stage accessibility is a major problem for Pakistan and the kind of accessibility which Pakistan provides to Afghanistan, it cannot have from any neighboring country. Similarly, Pakistan does not share the same kind of accessibility with any other country in the region. He further said both Pakistan and Afghanistan share common challenges and they have similar strategies to resolve them. At this stage Taliban are looking for foreign aid and they should be provided with it. He said that as mentioned in the book that there are certain economic problems in the country and Pakistan should work on making certain strategies to deal with the emerging economic crisis. In conclusion he congratulated all authors for coming together for a very timely and important book.

Ambassador Qazi Humayun, while speaking at the occasion gave a brief overview of the history of the conflict in Afghanistan. He said that the Americans went wrong when they picked Karzai to deal with the situation in Afghanistan because he failed to deliver. He also mentioned that the US further failed in Afghanistan when it initiated the war in Afghanistan. Moreover, he said that now the Taliban are in power and they have improved a lot and they should be given a chance.

Dr. Huma Baqai, Associate Professor, IBA Karachi, while expressing her views said that this edited book is a very valuable addition to the current literature on the subject. She went on to say that the book focuses on the plight of the Afghan people and puts forward an objective blame free perspective about the situation. Dr Baqai further said that the great game has inflicted so much misery on the people of Afghanistan unfortunately.

Eminent Journalist, Zahid Hussain, while expressing his views about the book said that after the Doha agreement had taken place, it was very clear that it would be the end of the American war in Afghanistan. Moreover, he said it was expected that there would be a protracted civil war in the country post US withdrawal. He said the war started in 2001 was a revenge attack by the US and that the US was not very clear about its involvement in Afghanistan and the American public was also misled into believing that it was a successful war. Moreover, he said that Pakistan always maintained the stance that there was no military solution to the problem. Importantly, he said that the US and Pakistani interests diverged and converged throughout the US involvement in Afghanistan.