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Report – 1st Pakistan-China Think Tank Forum

“Evolving Regional Situation and Pakistan-China Cooperation”

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The China-Pakistan Study Centre (CPSC) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) in collaboration with China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) hosted first webinar under Pakistan-China Think Tank Forum on September 8, 2021. The focus of the webinar was on analysing evolving regional situation and exploring Pakistan-China cooperation. Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, DG-ISSI and Dr. Yuan Peng, President CICIR chaired the proceedings. The speakers included Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Mr. Liu Jinsong, Maj Gen (R) Dr. Samreez Salik, Dr. Rong Ying, Prof. Li Li, Ms. Amina Khan, Dr. Wang Shida, Dr. Sumeera Imran, Dr. Mukesh Khatwani, Dr. Wang Xu and Dr. Yuan Peng.

The webinar was divided into two sessions. First, was the inaugural session with speeches of moderators, heads of ISSI and CICIR; and special addresses by representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan and China, respectively. Dr. Talat Shabbir, Director CPSC and Dr. Hu Shisheng, Director at CICIR, jointly moderated the webinar.

Inaugural Session

Dr. Talat Shabbir, Director CPSC welcomed the speakers and participants to first Pakistan-China Think-Tank Forum. He said 2021 marks 70 anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China, and during past seven decades, bilateral relationship has withstood changes in international system. Dr. Shabbir underlined that as strategic partners, both Pakistan and China, continue to support each other's core interests. Friendship with China is the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy and there is an across-the-board political and public consensus on maintaining strong bilateral ties with China. He underscored that Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its flagship project, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), have brought new opportunities of economic development to Pakistan and other developing countries.

Dr. Hu Shisheng, Director of the Institute of South & Southeast Asian and Oceanian Studies of CICIR while welcoming participants remarked that it is slated to be an annual feature on the calendar of both organisations. He underscored the virtual nature of dialogue and hoped that future iterations would be in-person conferences as "online sessions have restricted the more energetic sessions". He hoped that "future discussions will be in person in a more energetic way".

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, commended ISSI and CICIR teams for organising a timely dialogue on an ‘important’ topic. He urged both sides to continue series of dialogue on topics of mutual interests, further strengthening collaboration in the future. Meanwhile, Ambassador Chaudhry said that after Taliban’s ascendancy in Kabul, now a greater responsibility lies with international community. Regional neighbours of Afghanistan need to engage with new government in Kabul, in order to address threat of terrorism present in Afghanistan, and also assist Taliban in the reconstruction and rebuilding of Afghanistan. He emphasized that, at the same time, greater responsibility lies on Taliban side as they need to fulfil their commitments made with the global community i.e., there will be amnesty for everyone, they will form an inclusive government, respect human rights especially women’s rights and will not allow Afghan soil to be used by any terrorist group including Al-Qaeda, ISIS, TTP, ETIM etc.

Ambassador Chaudhry called for a regional approach to support stability in Afghanistan. He recommended that the regional neighbours should help establish a government, give technical and financial support, bring investments, and extend recognition only if Taliban respect their commitments, especially to take vigorous actions against terrorist networks having presence on Afghan soil. For this, he underlined that Pakistan and China should engage in close dialogue on the Afghan issue, until any regional consensus is reached among regional stakeholders.

Meanwhile, Ambassador Chaudhry also highlighted the role of a spoiler being played by India, and termed it a source of ‘instability in the region’. He underscored that for over a decade, now, the United States (US) is equipping India militarily to be a counter-weight to China in Asia, which will have a spillover effect on the regional balance and stability in South Asia. To mitigate this impact, Ambassador Chaudhry held that Pakistan and China need closer communication with a vigorous strategy to successfully accomplish the implementation of CPEC and BRI.

Dr. Yuan Peng, President CICIR, in his opening remarks said that China and Pakistan enjoy the best political, security and economic relations as well as increased people to people contact since decades. Now enhanced communication between two sides is required to address challenges such as emergence of Taliban government in Afghanistan and regional issues. He said, the current evolving situation in Afghanistan is a big strategic failure of the US. It has far-reaching

implications for the whole region especially Pakistan and China. The emerging situation in Afghanistan carries both challenges and opportunities but it depends upon how China, Pakistan and all other regional stakeholders determine their future course of action. He seconded Ambassador Chaudhry's recommendation that at least China and Pakistan should be cooperating in helping improve present situation for stable future of Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Dr. Peng, highlighted that besides Afghanistan, both Pakistan and China are being impacted the most from India's policies. He underlined that contemporary China and India relations faces difficulties because of the US and its Indo-Pacific strategy. The Indo-Pacific region is a new geopolitical landscape that impacts Pakistan-China relationship. He underscored that both Pakistan and China have shared concerns about the evolving developments in Indo-Pacific region, which calls for enhance communication and coordination between two countries.

Mr. Faraz Zaidi, Director-General (China Division) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in his keynote address lauded the 70 years of successful relations between Pakistan and China. He extended his appreciation to China for its efforts in eradicating extreme poverty and made China the world second-largest economy. He remarked that Pakistan and China are iron brothers, always unaffected by changes in the region. Now bilateral relationship has transformed into an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership with deep mutual trust that is time tested, and not to forget our cooperation against a pandemic that is exemplary. He appreciated China for extending its support to Pakistan in this critical time to fight against pandemic and save lives.

Mr. Zaidi highlighted close Pakistan and China cooperation at multilateral forums, which he underlined follow the United Nations (UN) charter and norms. Similarly, China and Pakistan are collaborating in regional forums like Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In recent years, Mr. Zaidi noted that close Islamabad-Beijing coordination in the fields of poverty alleviation and climate change injected enormous energy into global efforts to reduce poverty and carbon emission.

Meanwhile, Mr. Zaidi explained Pakistan's recalibrated of its strategic vision from geo-politics to geo-economics, thus which focuses on developing new partnerships based on shared prosperity. Therefore, Pakistan is part of BRI and CPEC and can be a catalyst for closer economic integration. He said that CPEC is a key to the economic prosperity of Pakistan and

primarily focuses on the industrialization, socio-economic and agriculture development of the country. He added we are fully cognizant of CPEC and the safety and security of Chinese workers is the top priority of Pakistan.

Mr. Zaidi said that Pakistan is looking forward to work with China for the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan. In this regard, Pakistan and China should collaborate closely for a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. He said Pakistan has already played a crucial role in the Afghan peace process to brought warring parties to the negotiation table and will always work for the stable, and united Afghanistan. Now, Mr. Zaidi underlined that Afghanistan is in a critical phase of its national development, and an inclusive settlement is the way forward. He lauded the importance of regional effort and recommended regional cooperation and engagement to work on the Afghan issue.

Mr. Liu Jinsong, Director-General of the Department of *Asian Affairs* of the Chinese Foreign Ministry delivered a special address. He said that Pakistan-China relations are very special. He underlined that ‘strategic dialogue between China and Pakistan is very critical in order to build trust and nation to nation relations.’ China recognizes the importance of the establishment of Pak-China strategic partnership, with emphasis on words such as “stronger than steel and sweeter than honey”. He emphasized that China and Pakistan have been able to maintain peace, stability and development in times of peace and even in times of war.

Mr. Jinsong highlighted that during the global pandemic, Pakistan and China have retained their economic resilience in this era of economic globalization. This year is an ascending year for the Communist China as it has eradicated the problem of poverty.

Commenting on recent developments in Afghanistan, he said that after that takeover of Kabul by Taliban the “necessary step is to initiate after war reconstruction”. Stressing on the development at Kabul airport, he underlined that the world witnessed chaos and now following lessons should be learnt: (a) it is not acceptable to claim hegemony; (b) it is not acceptable to intervene by force; (c) it is not acceptable to perform selfishly; (d) It is necessary to conduct more moral dialogue and guidance; and (e) it is important to enhance security measures keeping in view the geopolitical games.

Mr. Jinsong, underscored that as the US- the biggest external actor in Afghanistan – is walking away, the international community should provide economic assistance to enable Afghanistan achieve a smooth transition and avoid the situation of refugees. Meanwhile, he underlined that during the course of recent developments, China and Pakistan have throughout maintained close communication and relations have become even stronger. Both countries are observing increasing risks and challenges in terms of terrorism. He reiterated that both sides will reinforce their close cooperation to combat terrorism as strategic partners.

Commenting on the CPEC, Mr. Jinsong, emphasized that CPEC should be extended to the wider region, and both sides need let CPEC play a better role in benefiting more people. He underscored that for successful development of CPEC, China is confident that Pakistan will accelerate implementation of strict security measures to ensure security of Chinese project sites and personnel, which will create a favourable environment for furthering cooperation between two countries.

Working Session

Theme I - Perspectives on Regional Security

Maj Gen (R) Dr. Samreez Salik, Former DG-ISSRA, presented Pakistan’s perspective on the evolving regional security environment in South Asia. He said that, at present, South Asia is the least integrated and most conflict prone region of the world. The intra-regional trade is only six percent of the total trade of South Asian countries. The intrinsic and extrinsic dynamics have brought South Asia to this stage.

Dr. Salik said intrinsic factors include the ‘unique structure’ of South Asia, where smaller states are surrounded by a giant i.e., India, and consequently, smaller countries explore alliances. Secondly, the centrality of India in South Asia has proved to be counter-productive for the region, as India has been “condescending and over bearing towards its neighbours”. Meanwhile, external dynamics include: a) active role of external powers in the region, thus, impact of global transitions; b) China is competing with the US, and the South Asia is one of the regions for future Sino-US rivalry; and c) Indian Ocean Region has become a centre-stage of rivalry in the 21st century.

In this backdrop, Dr. Salik highlighted that as China seeks to rise peacefully, there might be some competition and hostility in South Asia due to geopolitical factors. And, for China, stability in Afghanistan is crucial for advancing BRI and CPEC. And if there is continued instability in Afghanistan, it will directly impact CPEC. Meanwhile, the US has failed in its attempts to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan. Now it is up to the regional neighbours of Afghanistan to support peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Dr. Rong Ying, Vice President China Institute of International Studies, presented Chinese perspective on the regional security environment. He remarked that the sudden and surprise takeover of the Taliban and the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan raises new issues, and foremost is now the US will spend its resources on competing with its rivals like Russia and China. Second, now that the US has withdrawn from Afghanistan so, how is it going to affect the US engagement with the region?

Meanwhile, Dr. Ying underscored that Pakistan and China have established solid foundations of bilateral cooperation during past 70 years, and during past two decades, the strategic relationship has not faced uncertainty. He added, after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan and China should use it as an opportunity to make their relationship further stronger and more stable with the goal to adopt a common approach to deal with the region especially the Afghan issue. Another aspect is China can gain crucial knowledge on political situation and economic development in Afghanistan from Pakistan. Similarly, as CPEC is a project of economic development and an opportunity, both Pakistan and China need to jointly face challenges such as security and explore measures and strategies secure construction of CPEC.

Prof. Li Li, Director of the Centre of South Asian Studies at the Tsinghua University, shared views on regional security environment. She noted that while South Asia has faced multiple security challenges in recent years, its strategic importance has increased in global politics. She highlighted that Sino-India relations have remained friendly despite their border conflict, while Pak-India relations have not improved despite ceasefire being observed at the Line of Control (LoC). Meanwhile, Afghanistan has experienced a dramatic change after the historic pull out of US troops. Some outside forces are considering providing support to groups fighting the Taliban.

Prof. Li highlighted the threat of new wave of influx of Afghan refugees.. She said the sudden changes in Afghanistan will increase economic burden of regional countries as the Western countries have frozen economic assistance to Afghanistan. She added, the US, being the major leading power, has the largest responsibility to extend its support to the new regime of Afghanistan. Through that way, Afghanistan can be emerged as a potential point of cooperation and between the US and China in future. She underscored adopting this approach could be best served the interest of broader region.

Besides, Prof. Li underscored the need to address challenges emerging from COVID-19 pandemic, particularly, the impact of second wave in India on poverty and health crisis. In South Asia, she underscored that the longer the pandemic stays the more will be the poverty.

Theme II - Afghanistan after the US Withdrawal: Role of Regional and Great Powers

Ms. Amina Khan, Dir Centre for Africa, Middle East & Afghanistan at ISSI during her presentation highlighting the changing situation in Afghanistan, including announcement of interim cabinet. She underlined that “transition so far has been smooth with the exception of Panjsher valley. Strict protocols are being followed to not damage the private property”. However, she emphasized that “the promise of inclusive government unfortunately is not being seen being fulfilled a “concerns are being over the fact that no other Afghan faction or women are included in the interim cabinet”. She underscored that “it is imperative for Taliban to consider and engage with the other afghan groups”.

Ms. Khan underscored critical questions such as ‘what will happen to the army, police and other security apparatus?’ She remarked that Taliban have to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for other extremist groups. She underlined that despite their differences the neighbours of Afghanistan have shown their mutual consensus on the regional security. She noted that “Taliban have been more than forthcoming towards China and there certainly can be regional pressure.” She emphasized that ‘Afghanistan cannot be sanctioned, as it will hurt Afghan people more than the Taliban’. Hence it is ‘imperative that regional states stay engaged with Afghanistan so that the Taliban don’t get space to get isolated as it won't harm them but the public.’

Dr. Wang Shida, Deputy Director at CICIR in his presentation highlighted that “the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan has led to major changes in the geopolitics of Afghanistan.” He said, “despite the troops withdrawal from Afghanistan, America still maintains a certain level of influence in Afghanistan, and the US will remain a key player in the Afghan issue’. He underlined that “this time, instead of direct intervention, the US will intervene in the Afghan issue indirectly by multiple means” He highlighted that “the US still maintains its intelligence gathering and counter-terrorism operation capabilities in Afghanistan. The August 26 attack on Kabul airport by IS-K, the US quick identification of the perpetrator and launching of an airstrike against them is an example of it”

Dr. Shida, remarked that “Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan has increased after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul” while ‘India has lost its stakes in Afghanistan’. He said, Pakistan has played a key role to conclude the Doha agreement between the US and Afghan Taliban in 2020 as well as during intra Afghan talks. He underlined that ‘even after their victory the Afghan Taliban still need Pakistan to provide support in order to ensure governance, making favourable regional environment and maintaining access to Indian ocean’. Meanwhile, he noted that Pakistan also considered the Taliban come back to power as major progress, though Pakistan remains committed to extend recognition to the Taliban regime via building a regional consensus.

On Russia influence in Afghanistan, Dr. Shida, noted that ‘it continues to rise’. In recent years, Russia’s attention and involvement in the Afghan issue have gradually increased. It has now also become a key player in the Afghan issue. At the same time, the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan would have a negative impact on Russia and Central Asia. It includes the problem of drug trafficking and the influx of refugees. After the Afghan Taliban entrance into the Kabul, Moscow expressed readiness to work with the new regime, however, later Russian Foreign Minister said, Russia was in no hurry to recognise the Taliban government. This, Dr. Shida, underlined leaves confusion about the course of the future relationship between the Afghan Taliban and Russia.

In short, the US withdrawal and the Taliban coming back to power cause major changes in the geopolitics of the region. The US influence in Afghanistan declined after its troop withdrawal but still play a cordial role. it will continue to intervene in the Afghan issue indirectly in the

future. Meanwhile, regional countries' influence increased and could play a greater role in Afghanistan. Pakistan's influence over Afghanistan increased while India is the loser in the whole scenario. On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban fought with unity due to a common interest to push back foreign forces from their soil. But, the Taliban's internal harmony after victory over Kabul is also scattered with making internal blocs among them due to dissent of views and diversion of interest.

Dr. Sumeera Imran, Associate Professor at Department of International Relations, National Defence University, in her presentation focused on China's evolving role in Afghanistan. She underscored that China's behavior in Afghanistan is essential. Four critical questions to be addressed: (i) what is China's role in Afghanistan? (ii) what is preventing the great powers to grant recognition to Afghanistan? (iii) what are the great power security interests in Afghanistan? and (iv) what are the security interests of regional powers in Afghanistan?

Dr. Imran underscored that China's future role in Afghanistan will affect the US-China global power competitions. Earlier, China was only focusing on economic development projects in Afghanistan; however, now China is taking a proactive political role and might enhance its economic engagement. China is pursuing a pragmatic approach, and to meet its strategic and economic challenges, it can be an attractive trade partner for new Kabul regime. China's economic interests correlate directly to security assurance by the Taliban. Strong economic ties will create stability in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, commenting on regional countries, she noted that Modi government in India is still figuring out its next policy. For Pakistan, she underlined that, Islamabad's international image is directly linked to the way domestic situation evolves in Kabul. With Iran, Dr. Imran emphasized, sectarian differences are a divisive force.

Theme III - Enhancing Pakistan-China Cooperation

Dr. Mukesh Kumar Khatwani, Associate Professor/Director at University of Sindh, said that the Taliban does not pose any direct threat to any country as they have already reiterated their commitment to not let anyone use their soil against any nation. However, there is a threat to regional states that is emanating from militant outfits having presence on Afghan soil such as IS-

K, TTP and ETIM. China is concerned about the presence of ETIM that could potentially destabilizes western region of China. Pakistan's primary concern is the presence of TTP on Afghan soil. Pakistan might have to deal with the refugee issue as well. Pakistan needs to counter the narrative that exists among local Afghans about Pakistan. He added that Pakistan and China have common ground to work closely on Afghan issue to tackle the threat of militancy. CPEC is playing a greater role not only in the economic development of Pakistan but also contributing in the regional prosperity. He said that for the successful implementation of CPEC, both the sides need to uphold close communication.

Dr. Wang Xu, Research scholar at Peking University, in his presentation noted that with the joint efforts from both sides, the CPEC has achieved remarkable results, deliver benefits to the two sides of the people and contributed to strengthen regional connectivity and stability. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, China and Pakistan have sincerely helped each other which has further strengthened their iron brotherhood. Dr. Xu put forward six suggestions for China-Pakistan cooperation in the post-pandemic era:

1. The world is undergoing profound changes and the international environment is becoming increasingly complex, unstable and uncertain. Therefore, the Pakistan and China should step up to build strategic communication on sensitive issues to further strengthen bilateral cooperation.
2. Pakistan and China should stick together at the time of difficulty and advocate solidarity and cooperation. Both sides uphold the vision of a community of public health for mankind and firmly oppose all attempts to politicizes, labializes and stigmatize COVID pandemic to pressurize China. It only disrupts the international cooperation and bring more harm to people across the world. Countries should abandon the vaccine nationalism and address the issue of vaccine production, capacity, distribution and availability to the developing countries.
3. To promote international counterterrorism cooperation and enhance mutual learning among civilization, there is a need to avoid linking terrorism to any particular country, ethnic group or religion. Promote dialogue and exchanges among civilization, strengthen people

to people and cultural exchanges, enhancing political understanding and make conducive environment to promote counterterrorism cooperation.

4. Expand China-Pakistan economic corridor. At present, industrial, agricultural and infrastructure cooperation have become key development areas of CPEC. In the future, Pakistan's geo-economic potential can be further explored to promote regional integration by expending CPEC to other countries of the region.
5. Strengthening humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan especially food and COVID pandemic curb vaccine and also providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan refugees
6. Strengthening Pakistan-China cooperation among media, universities, think tank as well as strengthening exchanges of experience in state governance such as anti-corruption, poverty alleviation, economic reform and social governance.

These presentations were followed by a brief Q&A session, where speakers exchanged views.

In the end, Dr. Talat Shabbir representing ISSI, and Prof. Hu Shisheng, from CICIR delivered vote of thanks. Both moderators commended speakers for a constructive dialogue and vibrant exchange of ideas.