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Report – Book Launch

"Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: International and Regional Perspectives"

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) organized the launch of its second edited book, titled, "Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: International and Regional Perspectives" on August 10, 2022.

Speakers on the occasion included, Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM), and Pakistan's Special Representative for Afghanistan, who was the Chief Guest at the occasion and the Keynote address was given by Ambassador Mansoor Ahmed Khan, Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan. Other speakers included Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Riaz Mohammad Khan, Former Foreign Secretary, Ambassador Jawed Ludin, President and Co-Founder, Heart of Asia Society, Dr. Niels Hegeswisch, Country Director Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Pakistan, Ambassador Abrar Hussain, Pakistan's Former Ambassador to Afghanistan, and Ms. Elizabeth Threlkeld, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of the South Asia Programme at the Stimson Centre, USA.

Ms. Amina Khan, while giving her introductory remarks about the book, stated that Afghanistan is being viewed as a regional issue, particularly in terms of the ongoing crises in different parts of the world; this is a very myopic view of the situation and that history has always shown developments in Afghanistan to have global ramifications. She went on to say that Afghanistan cannot be abandoned or ignored; rather, it is a global issue that warrants a collective response. While shedding light on the situation in Afghanistan, she said that while the Taliban are certainly not ideal, it must be asked whether there are any viable alternatives at this stage. Perhaps a clearer question is whether the international community desires the Taliban to fail or succeed, the answer, it appears at this point, will mean the failure or success of Afghanistan. She further explained that on the Taliban's part, now that they are in power, it is imperative that they deliver on all accounts, and ensure that they honour their pledges of reform pertaining to governance, basic yet fundamental rights, a representative political framework which is not only limited to an inclusive government but rather a diverse and robust opposition and of course honoring CT assurances. It is imperative for the Taliban to realize that if they fail to do so it will become increasingly difficult for the international community and more so from regional countries to engage with them let alone move towards recognition. She also said that there was a consensus amongst the authors that it is essential to recognize that mistakes of the past are not repeated,

since abandoning or ignoring Afghanistan will not bode well for any stakeholders. She concluded by saying that it is a time to remain engaged with Afghanistan– where the onus is on all sides to deliver.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, while giving his remarks stated that the book on Afghanistan is a timely contribution with a perspective from every country. He said that it is reflected in every book chapter that every country wants a stable Afghanistan and that every country is wary about terrorist forces. Afghanistan, if stable can become a transit corridor. He went on to say that the situation in Afghanistan is very grim, with a defacto government in place, and with political and economic instability prevalent presently. It is time we should realize that all countries should play a role in Afghanistan. All countries have stakes in Afghanistan and all are against the spread of terrorism. He further said that women's rights are also important and that Afghanistan should not become a narco state and it should become an energy corridor for regional countries. He went on to say that, to incentivize recognition, Taliban should fulfill and honor their commitments of reforms. He concluded by saying that, for Pakistan, a stable Afghanistan is quite crucial and both countries should be closer in tangible terms such as trade, border management and bilateral ties.

Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq, in his address stated that in Afghanistan there are three important aspects which should be addressed immediately; human rights, women's rights to education and work and inclusive government which will include all Afghan factions. He mentioned that, Afghanistan has transformed in the last many decades especially since 2001, notwithstanding the momentous changes of the last one year, some of these transformations are irreversible, such as enthusiasm for girl's education and women employment. During the past two decades, women's education had spread to smaller towns in Afghanistan, which was previously not the case and women employment in formal sectors had gained acceptability that was unattainable previously. The international community is expecting unequivocal action regarding girl's education from Afghan authorities, and being a neighbor with deep cultural and religious linkages, Pakistan may be sympathetic to certain nuances, but we believe in the right of education for everyone as a fundamental human right. Muslim history is replete with women playing an important role in public life. The opening up of secondary schools will not only signal to the international community openness on behalf of the interim Afghan government but will

also ensure Afghanistan's long-term societal progress. Another change in the Afghan society is the universal demand for the just and visible participation of all ethnicities in governance. Although he said that political structures have been traditionally considered as a country's internal issue, but lessons of history can be offered such as the path of reconciliation leads to more stable and prosperous outcomes than politics of exclusion and by politics of confrontation.

He also spoke about some positives and went on to explain that after four decades, for the first time, the entire Afghan territory is under the control of Kabul and that there has been a commendable progress in the defeat of the ISKP. There has also been a positive facilitation of trade activity. Due to supportive attitude, better control over corrupt practices and minimum interference of interim government in the private businesses, the cost of doing business has reduced by 20 per cent and it is helping foreign trade despite absence of international banking operations, he explained. Talking about Pak-Afghan trade, he said that Pakistan has allowed duty free import of Afghan goods and for the first time ever, Afghan exports to Pakistan surpass Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan. Furthermore, he said that the international community must cooperate and foreign exchange reserves must be unfrozen as well as the revival of credible banking channels. He said that 90 percent of Afghans are at a risk of poverty and Pakistan has provided assistance in every way, including the facilitation of third country travel, assistance during natural calamities as well. Pakistan has offered training and capacity building to Afghan personnel as well, he concluded. He also supported the idea of promoting regional connectivity by the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan and by trans-Afghan railway line.

Ambassador Mansoor Ahmed Khan, while giving his keynote address, stated that August 15 will mark a year since the Taliban dispensation came to power. For this whole one year, the Taliban have been in charge of the Afghan interim government which controls entire Afghanistan territory as well as all Afghan institutions which is an important reality. He shed light on a number of factors like current developments and what next is expected. He went on to say that Afghanistan has suffered for four decades through direct and indirect interference and that there are five key areas which are notable. He further explained that peace and security have significantly improved since the Taliban takeover and that there is much better accessibility in various parts of the country. This, he went on to explain, has been also confirmed by the UN presence over there. In the past two decades, rural Afghans faced the problem of night raids, but

presently this is not the case. Terrorism is a biggest threat for the security of Afghanistan. There were certain pockets on Afghanistan's territory which were home to a number of terrorist groups including regional and global terrorist organizations. While talking about the economy, he stated that after the US withdrawal, there has been a domestication of the Afghan economy as foreign aid is absent.

With the absence of 12 to 13 billion dollars in the reserves, the country presently has 3 billion only, which is a stark contrast. He went to explain other facets, like inclusivity, which he called a sensitive issue. Being a multiethnic and diverse political country, it needs inclusive structures. Talking about human resource constraints, he said that a large number of skilled human resource manpower has left the country, which is a huge challenge for the country. According to a rough estimate, during the past one year, nearly one million Afghans left their country which is a big setback to the country. He said that the Afghan government remains constructively engaged with the international community and the presence of the diplomatic corps is a testament to this. He said that the sustainability of peace and stability, international engagement and regional integration can help steer the course when it comes to Afghanistan's progress. However, the pace of development will depend upon how the internal dynamics of Afghanistan evolve. While shedding light on Pak-Afghan bilateral relations, he said that there should be a model for free movement of trade and people between the two countries. Ambassador Khan concluded by saying that engagement with the international community and recognition are very important factors.

Ambassador Jawed Ludin, while giving his views stated that the book is a wonderful contribution, with an insightful set of perspectives from the region. He went on to say that the Taliban ascension has been a turning point for Afghanistan. He said that the region has a shared vision and a common platform for active engagement is required. Ambassador Ludin reiterated that Pakistan's regional approach is good and worth appreciating and that it is very much about ownership of the issue. He said that the region has a shared past with Afghanistan and should have a shared future as well, with a vision encompassing unity and peace, and that therefore it was time for the regional to take ownership and assume responsibility. The threat of terrorist groups is a common factor within the region. He also said that the economic prosperity can be

achieved through regional connectivity as well. The US has systematically shunned Afghanistan, he concluded.

Dr. Niels Hegeswisch, while expressing his views on the book stated that the importance of the political discourse on Afghanistan, defying expectations and the reality of the once ousted Taliban now being in control of Afghanistan. He added that the merits and demerits of the US nation building efforts in Afghanistan and the abrupt abandoning of the two decades long project, which would be debated in the months and years to come, regardless of the rationale for withdrawal existing for some time. He also explained how despite warnings from the UN and other relief organizations, the world has been seeing the humanitarian crisis turning into a humanitarian catastrophe, while the Russian invasion of Ukraine has pushed Afghanistan into oblivion.

He further said that despite the news capturing media headlines and policy discussion in the first two weeks post withdrawal, the bitter reality is that Afghanistan soon became the side story in the Western media and policy discussion. Dr. Hegeswisch called the book a timely literary contribution that discusses the domestic occurrences in Afghanistan and regional and extra regional dynamics influenced by events within Afghanistan. He stressed on the importance of the role of CAMEA and other policy advisory bodies with regard to playing a part to sensitize the now insensitive Western world about the pressing urgency in Afghanistan and the innocent lives of Afghans at stake.

Ms. Elizabeth Threlkeld, while expressing her views about the book stated that it is a valuable contribution which adds food for thought as we reflect back to the Taliban one year anniversary of takeover in Afghanistan. She further said that this volume remarkably does offer a set of perspectives on how the situation has evolved in Afghanistan. Remarkably there were convergences between different perspectives however there were some areas of disagreement, however, there have been really a quite number of convergences in the analysis. Authors around the region and across the globe are still grappling with the fallout of Taliban takeover and what it means for the individual national interests but as well as the people of Afghanistan for the border region as well.

Ms. Threlkeld pointed out the consensus amongst authors regarding women's rights and other such issues. She reiterated that many authors recognized the enormous potential that Afghanistan holds in terms of the role it can play in regional connectivity, its economic potential, the demographic dividend of its young population, its cultural ties, and links across the region. She said that there are enormous opportunities in Afghanistan; however, the challenge is how to harness them, how to leverage them, and how the Afghan people can utilize them. Furthermore, she said that the authors kept coming back to the question of stability and the sort of political dispensation that will allow the country to make most of the resources and the potential that it does have. There are the refining challenges that Afghanistan faces today, for example, in order to explore economic potential, Afghanistan needs regional connectivity that required stability, she concluded.

Ambassador Abrar Hussain, while expressing his views stated that this book indicates that there are number of commonalities among the regional countries with reference to Afghanistan. These are in favor of an inclusive government and expect that Taliban should fulfill their commitments of reforms and all regional states share a deep concern about terrorism in Afghanistan. There needs to be a focus on stabilizing the socio economic condition of the country. All countries should realize that UN and US sanctions should be removed for socio economic prosperity. He reiterated that the Taliban should come up with practical solutions and must take steps in the right direction, or else dialogue will not work. Similarly, the international community should also show support and solidarity, he concluded.

Ambassador Riaz Mohammad Khan, while rounding up the discussion, stated that the book project deserves appreciation as the book had 3 features of a quality book, as a good book should be; it is reasonably comprehensive, whether the information or data analysis is credible, thirdly whether the reader is able to draw conclusions relating to the understanding of the issues discussed. He further said that this book is very thoughtfully written and organized and by inviting scholars from neighbors and around the world it has provided a unique perspective of all the capitals which are important to Afghanistan. He went on to say that everyone had expressed concern over security, the presence of extremist groups and organizations in Afghanistan. He further said that governance in the country is insensitive, specifically with reference to human rights. He concluded by saying that we will not be able to convince the Taliban, but we owe it to

them and ourselves to not be apologetic for what is their outlook, which is a disservice to their society.