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PRESS RELEASE

Two-Day International Conference Conflict and Cooperation in South Asia: Role of Major Powers

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‘Pakistan’s view on Afghanistan has been vindicated with the United States finally understanding that the road to peace is through negotiations with all stakeholders and not hard power.’ This was stated by **Ms Tehmina Janjua, Foreign Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan**, in her Inaugural Address at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI)’s international conference titled ‘*Conflict and Cooperation in South Asia: Role of Major Powers*’ here in Islamabad today.



Ms Janjua stressed that India has held South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) hostage, and become a hurdle in the way of hosting SAARC summit in Pakistan. While highlighting the strength of Pakistan’s ties with all global powers, she said that Pak-Sino relations are exemplary which received a boost by the recent high-level visit to China. Reiterating

the policy towards India, Ms Janjua said that Pakistan is willing to resolve all issues, including Kashmir on the negotiation table. She further said a solution to the Afghan conflict is highly imperative and Pakistan is in favour of dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban. ‘Pakistan has always been there and ready to help Afghanistan in its struggle for peace, but the ultimate responsibility for that rests with the people and government of Afghanistan’, she said. ‘However, the increasing violence, expanding influence of Daesh, growing ungoverned spaces, all result in an unstable environment which is alarming for Pakistan and other neighbours. It also raises concerns at regional and international levels. Pakistan strives to maintain friendly ties with its neighbours and strengthen our connectivity with the region in line with the vision of our leadership. Our efforts are, therefore, geared towards ensuring positive engagement with all our neighbours with the aim of developing a peaceful and prosperous Pakistan and the region,’ she concluded.



Delivering his Keynote Address on ‘Role of BRI in the Development of South Asian Region’, **Ambassador Yao Jing, Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China**, said that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) had reached its fifth anniversary since its announcement in 2013. ‘Since then, China has concluded more than 100 agreements, created a quarter million jobs, with rate of return on investment at 20%.’ He outlined that ‘under Pakistan’s new leadership, both China and Pakistan have agreed to further enlarge and broaden the China-Pakistan

Economic Corridor (CPEC) and improve social sector development and trade cooperation. CPEC could become an example for future community building and more resources for development,’ he said. Ambassador Jing lamented that South Asia is still facing numerous security challenges like the conflict in Afghanistan. However, he was hopeful with China as the biggest trade partner and largest foreign direct investor, South Asia has entered an era of opportunity where all countries are now aspiring for peace, development and cooperation. Ambassador Yao Jing concluded that given the historical ties between South Asia and China dating back 2000 years, ‘China is a natural partner for the region.’



In the first session on ‘Role of Major Powers in South Asia’, chaired by **Ambassador (R) Shahid Kiani, Dr. Ahmed Ijaz Malik, Assistant Professor, School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan** stressed that the nature of post-Cold War multipolarity demands that the United States should reassess its interests and engage with the other greater powers and regional states, especially

towards conflict resolution and promotion of regional trade. ‘The evidences of multipolarity in current international relations accentuate the need for minimising incidents of war, promoting negotiations to resolve conflicts and initiating trade between developing states. The options for negotiation, conflict resolution and regional multilateral trade in South Asia will work if major powers such as US, China and Russia exercise their influence in initiation of trade-related negotiations between South Asian states as well as global financial and trade regulating institutions,’ he concluded.



Looking at Russia and Putin’s Look East Policy, *Dr. Najamudin Ayoola, Assistant Professor, Center for International Peace and Stability, National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan* outlined that Moscow’s increasing romance with South Asian countries is not an isolated development, but resonates with its National Security Strategy (NSS); Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (FPCR); and Maritime Doctrine. However, he cautioned that

striking a balance between New Delhi and Islamabad will be problematic for Moscow, just as it has been for Washington. ‘Russia’s Look East policy in South Asia will be selective and country-specific. Moscow will not compromise its relations with one country for another, rather it will be driven by need, necessity and priority,’ he opined.

Dr Wang Shida, Deputy Director, South and Southeast Asia Institute, Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Beijing, China said that for a long time, China-



Pakistan cooperation has concentrated on politics, strategy and security, while economic cooperation has not been fully explored. However, this issue has completely changed with the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. ‘Pakistan extended a helping hand to China when we faced difficulties. Therefore, China, a country valuing friendship and righteousness, is now willing to

return the favour to help accelerate Pakistan’s economic and social development.’ He shared that China is also actively involved in regional hotspot issues, especially in the process of reconciliation in Afghanistan. ‘The Afghan situation will definitely have an important impact on the entire region. China can promote the Afghan reconciliation process by ensuring that it is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, and by promoting the comprehensive dialogue among different ethnic groups and seek consensus. The peace process which is the only way out must be led by Afghans, he implored.



In the second session ‘US South Asian Policy under Trump: Future of Regional Stability’, chaired by **Dr. Maria Sultan, Director General, South Asian Strategic Stability Institute (SASSI), Islamabad, Pakistan, Dr. Joshua T. White, Associate Professor, Johns Hopkins University, School of Advance International Studies, Washington D.C., US**, highlighted Trump’s South Asia policy and discussed how there had been an evolution of views in Washington vis-à-vis Pakistan and its role in Afghanistan. ‘It now appears that the US is no longer dependent on Pakistan because in the post 9/11 era, their counterterrorism objectives and desire to do something about al-Qaeda have been achieved. However, when it comes to US objectives in Kabul and Pakistan’s role, the results have been mixed due to great power contestations.’ ‘What we are seeing in US policy is President Trump himself. Nobody should expect that one can wait-out Trump or that the US-Pak relationship could return to its previous state, but we can hope it stabilizes to a lower state because the worst case would be apathy.’ Regarding India, he remarked that the Trump administration is very much following up on defence and security space with India, but the perceptions this space is creating is polarising the region and could have negative consequences. The US is directly engaging with the Taliban and looking for a political solution by putting US’ presence as a bargaining chip on the table since the money spent in the region has been more than Congress is now willing to bear. ‘This is consistent with what Pakistan has been asking of US from beginning’, he opined.



Talking about reconciliation, reintegration and the complexities of the Afghan peace process, **Prof. Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmad, Vice Chancellor, University of Sargodha, Pakistan** shared his view that South Asia may now be on new path since the peace process has taken precedence over the military approach given the flurry of peace diplomatic efforts. ‘Pakistan, on its part, has made serious efforts towards Afghan peace and reconciliation. ‘We facilitated the Murree talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. We worked with Afghanistan, the US and China in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), but unfortunately, both times the peace was

undermined.’ Pakistan’s policy remains to constructively engage in all initiatives and processes for peace, but he reminded the audience that peace will remain a distant dream if past history continues to overshadow it, and become a lost opportunity of broken promises, trust deficit and buck passing, if the same old pattern is repeated. The prolonged nature of the conflict itself, economy of conflict and divergent interests are also complicating the peace process. ‘This is a



paradox that has to be overcome, and players need to engage pragmatically and realistically.’ He remarked that CPEC has created a geoeconomic framework for conflict resolution in South Asia. ‘It is likely that the framework of conflict in the region is being replaced with a framework of economic integration through connectivity and economic cooperation.’ In the session, *Dr. Shehryar Khan, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Iqra University, Islamabad, Pakistan* also discussed emerging trends in the

security architecture of South Asia and Pakistan’s role.

Earlier, delivering his Welcome Address, *Brig (R) Mohammad Mehboob Qadir, Acting President, IPRI* shared that the foundations and architecture of global multilateral institutions underpinning the existing world order are gradually witnessing an erosion of legitimacy. ‘The confidence in such institutions is depleting due to their inability to arrest the rise in inter-state conflicts, fix dysfunctional or fractured states and minimise the ensuing humanitarian costs. A slumping world economy, trade wars, return of protectionism, re-emergence of narrow nationalist and ultra-right forces in the West, climate change, food insecurity and so on, are other significant challenges that remain to be



grappled with successfully,’ he said. Brig. Qadir also remarked that Asia remains the most threatened continent in terms of violent conflicts with gross human rights violence in Palestine and Kashmir under repressive occupations remaining unchallenged and unaccounted for. He pointed out that China, through CPEC, has offered an opportunity for the regional connectivity and inter-regional cooperation. ‘Pakistan believes that regional connectivity will qualitatively change the lives of 1.9 billion people of South Asian region. Opening Kartarpur Corridor, although a small step, is still a leap of faith in this direction. Similarly, Pakistan’s Gwadar deep seaport will serve as an economic gateway for the entire region,’ he said. He, however, cautioned that blowback effect of the Afghan crisis had induced massive violence in Pakistan. ‘Powerful regional countries and global powers must shoulder their responsibilities by using their influence to bring the South Asian countries to the table, shun violence, coercion and more importantly destabilising proxies,’ he concluded.