

## Press Release

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**Pakistan needs to avoid getting caught into the crossfire of the great power rivalry in the Asia Pacific region and should not be forced to pick sides in the emerging security dynamics between the US and China.** This was the key message of the leading diplomats, former senior military officers and eminent intellectuals at the international Seminar entitled “**US’ Indo-Pacific Shift: Risks and Opportunities for Pakistan**” organized by the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS) on November 23 in Islamabad.

Senator Sherry Rehman was the keynote speaker and other eminent speakers included Ambassador Richard Olson, the Senior Advisor at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Admiral Asif Sandila, Former Chief of the Naval Staff of Pakistan Navy, Ambassador Jalil Abbas Jilani, former Foreign Secretary and Director CASS. Ambassador Inam-ul-Haq, former Foreign Minister of Pakistan concluded the discussion. The seminar was chaired by President CASS Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan (Retd), while Sitara Noor, Senior Researcher at the Centre moderated the event.

President CASS Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan, while delivering the opening address highlighted the evolution of the US’ Indo-Pacific shift and assessed the situation from a historical perspective. While analyzing the US interests, he stressed that the world was witnessing the implementation of this US “Indo-Pacific Strategy” in the form of an accelerated regional alliance formation, close security cooperation and large-scale military build-up in Asia-Pacific. He also touched upon China’s “Five Principles of Coexistence” and emphasized that these contrasting world views by two contemporary great powers reflected two different civilizational cultures and had far-reaching impact on geopolitical, geo-economics and geostrategic spheres. At the end of his remarks, he laid out a set of questions in front of the speakers and audience that must be addressed to make intellectual discourse more substantive and result-oriented.

In her keynote address, Senator Sherry Rehman maintained that searching for terms that define the current age was textbook pigeonholing. She stressed that global contest, underpinned by meta trends bend history in nontraditional paths. Commenting on the US’ Indo-Pacific shift, Senator Rehman noted that the US had a strategic alliance with India across multiple domains including defence, space, maritime, and knowledge economy. She warned that the American neuralgia to contain the rise of china will force many countries to make umbrella choices based on military binaries. On Pak-US relations, she lamented that Pakistan was viewed from the prism of Afghanistan and treated as a mistrustful, transactional frenemy, what she termed the anti-hero of all allies. She warned against forcing the regional countries to make zero sum choices and stressed that interdependence should be the way forward.

Ambassador Richard Olson shared the view from Washington DC and underlined that the US did not view its competition with China as carving the world into blocs as it was done during the Cold War. He stressed that the competition with China was not military rather it was economic, and the US was willing to cooperate with China where it could such as on climate change, Covid, Afghanistan, and strategic stability. According to him, there existed a realization in the US policy circles that asking countries to choose between US & China was

unrealistic. Nonetheless, there was a growing consensus in Washington DC that the rise of China was the principal foreign policy challenge. This bipartisan concern was sharpened by the perception that China was pursuing policies inimical to American interests in the Indo Pacific region. He concluded on the note that although Pakistan did not fit into the Indo-Pacific, Pakistan and the U.S. could continue to cooperate on counterterrorism.

Admiral Mohammad Asif Sandila (Retd) started with a comparative assessment of China's BRI project and the US' Indo-Pacific shift and stated that the former (BRI) was fast developing connectivity projects whereas the latter was marred by security concerns. He stressed that China's stability depended on naval power and added that China learnt from the Soviet example and would avoid a confrontation with the US. While analyzing the security dimension of regional shifts, Admiral Sandila highlighted that the Indo-Pacific will gain more importance in the future as the US had made a policy shift. In his assessment, energy reserves would play a very important role as it was estimated that 70% of oil & 50% gas reserves were within this region.

Ambassador Jalil Abbas Jilani shared his optimism for positive and good relations with both the US and China and advocated that Pakistan should continue to play the role of a bridge between the US and China and not play one against the other. On the other hand, he also warned against the challenges and acknowledged that due to a series of ideological, cultural, economic, security and political factors, the US-China confrontation would stay for a long time. He added that Pakistan's challenges vis-a-vis US-China rivalry will have economic & security dimensions, especially in terms of sustaining economic cooperation with China while retaining Western goodwill. Ambassador Jilani was of the view that Pakistan and US had greatly benefitted by having cordial ties and that must continue through a structured dialogue. He added that the world must shun the notion that Pakistan will opt out of China's partnership.

Ambassador Inam ul Haq while delivering the concluding address highlighted that there were various levels of pressure in US-China bilateral relations including areas of potential confrontation such as Taiwan, South China Sea, and Indo-China border dispute. The US was also exerting pressure over China for human rights concerns in addition to a trade war that included the imposition of anti-dumping duties, high tariffs, sanctions & efforts to decouple the two economies, and creation of new supply lines. Finally, there was an intensifying tech war. He added that the most concerning pressure were in the area of geo-economics that had forced China to create an alternative economic system.

The international seminar was well attended by a large number of diplomats, senior military officers, heads of various think tanks, scholars, journalists and students, who actively participated in the question and answer session.