

Report

In-House Meeting with Ambassador James A. Larocco

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**THE INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES,
ISLAMABAD**

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The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, organised an In-House meeting with Ambassador (R) James A. Larocco, Director, Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, Washington D.C. on *“Current National and Regional Security Issues”* on December 18, 2012.

The Director General ISSI, Ambassador (R) Ashraf Jehangir Qazi and Chairman ISSI, Ambassador (R) Gul Haneef welcomed the US delegation headed by Ambassador Larocco. In his welcoming remarks, Ambassador Qazi said that Pakistan-US relations were an important subject of discussion specifically in the backdrop of a new government in Washington and upcoming elections in Pakistan. Ambassador Qazi highlighted that these bilateral relations offer lot of good things but at the same time

lack the depth and are presently undergoing a difficult time. He was of the view that in order to build a sound, predictable and mutually beneficial relationship, image-building needs to be done on both sides. As for Pakistan, Ambassador Qazi suggested that Pakistan's voice would resonate better in Washington if governance within the country becomes better, stable and improved. He hoped that the upcoming elections would help improve the state of governance in Pakistan.

Ambassador (R) James A. Larocco opened his presentation with some general points on the new US administration under President Obama's second term. Firstly, Ambassador Larocco pointed out, that because this would be Obama's second term in office, he would be focusing more on his legacy. Though President Obama would not subject most of his decisions to interest groups as he does not have to fight another election after this term, he would be using his enormous presidential powers for decision-making without much influence from these groups. Although he still has constraints from the Congress, still, most of his future decisions would be his own.

Secondly, Ambassador Larocco argued that the new US administration would be different than the earlier one because of the change of personalities on portfolios such as Secretary of State, which is most likely to be awarded to John Kerry and the position of Secretary of Defence which may be given to Chuck Hagle. He was of the view that opposition in the new administration would come mostly from the Republican hardliners.

Thirdly, Ambassador Larocco informed that President Obama's second term would not push very hard on social issues, but the focus would mostly be on the fiscal stability within the US and foreign affairs. The President's job is to tackle the economy first and foremost. One of the reasons Obama has been re-elected is also based on the fact that American economy did not collapse and is still running better than others like the EU member states despite extreme international financial downturn. The new administration's financial policy would be all about jobs and means and mechanisms to handle the fiscal situation.

Fourthly, on the issue of the new administration's foreign policy, Ambassador Larocco asserted that the American strategic interests had not changed on the issues of energy security, non-proliferation and counter-terrorism. But some of the top issues in current administration's foreign policy would be:

- Dealing and responding to the Syrian situation which has become very drastic as a result of 1.5 million refugees that have moved to neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, as well as the humanitarian situation that has been created with the internal displacement of around 5 million people. The Syrian situation is also complicated by the possession of chemical weapons and the role of jihadist to seek power in Syria, as well as the assessment in Washington D.C. that the longer US waits in intervening, the higher price the US

and the world would have to pay. Ambassador Larocco added that there were hints that chemical weapons were being made and transferred within Syria by extremist groups. Ambassador Larocco emphasized that the resolution of the refugee issue was more important and could be resolved through the establishment of border control. He pointed out that Turkey had suggested establishing humanitarian safe-zones inside Syria itself in order to prevent the outflow of refugees to other countries. Ambassador Larocco opined that the US would intervene if terrorist groups try to come into power in Syria, and that the US is closely working with the Saudis and Qataris on the issue.

- The second priority of Obama's new administration would be the setting or re-setting of a new relationship with the new Chinese leadership. Ambassador Larocco said that trade and investment between US and China is very significant and there is a realization within the United States that we have so much to lose if we do not work together in a better manner. The US understands that China is an expanding power, but China needs to avoid any future conflict in the South China Sea.
- The third priority on the US foreign policy would be Afghanistan, where America has given a deadline to pull-out its forces by 2014. The only priority for US post-2014 Afghanistan would be that terrorism does not return to Afghanistan and that is a multi-dimensional issue. This post-2014 Afghanistan requires Pakistan to be comfortable with the political and economic situation in Afghanistan.
- The fourth priority over Obama's second term would be Iran. For the US, Iran is very important, and it needs to be dealt with in a positive manner because the situation in Afghanistan could not be resolved without the Iranians. Also, the world has demonized the Iranians, but they are a practical people and if they were to be reached out, they would be flexible in their approach. Ambassador Larocco said that though the US has not had any direct contact or negotiations with the Iranian government for the past nine years, there have been dialogues and discussions through third countries and there is hope that US and Iran can reach an interim agreement to start a dialogue. Ambassador Larocco rejected the proposal to reach a comprehensive agreement with Iran because of opposition to Iran by mainly the Gulf countries. Ambassador Larocco highlighted that any interim agreement with Iran would focus on a non-aggression as bare minimum, and also the limitation of developing more nuclear weapons.

The Director General of ISSI, Ambassador Qazi intervened and said that Iran has been demonized because of being an independent power in the Persian Gulf and the fact that it was Israel who felt more threatened by the Iranian capability. He was also of the view that Iran has the capability but is not making any nuclear weapons and also the

capability is maintained as deterrence against an immensely nuclear capable Israel which is the only nuclear power of the region.

Ambassador Larocco disagreed and said that Iranians surely had nuclear weapons and there is a fear that a nuclear capable Iran may lead to a nuclear exchange in the Persian Gulf and that was exactly the reason the American administration wanted to reach an interim agreement with Iran. He said that most of Iran's neighbors, including Pakistan, as well as big powers like Russia do not want a nuclear capable Iran.

Ambassador Qazi opined that asking Iran to limit its nuclear capability when others in the region and around the world are not doing so would be unfair specifically when such capability is a deterrent capability for self-defense in a hostile neighborhood.

Ambassador Larocco was adamant that the US administration would bomb Iranian nuclear facilities if Iran tries to cross the red line of possessing more than five nuclear weapons.

Ambassador Qazi argued against US policy of intervention without seeking the UN Security Council approval and taking unilateral actions against countries. He reiterated that big powers like the US need to respect international law and bodies to set an example as well as to make the world safer.

In conclusion, Ambassador Qazi thanked Ambassador Larocco for giving a general overview of the policies during Obama's second term.

Prepared by

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