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Report - Public Talk

“Trump Administration: Emerging Opportunities for South Asia”

February 22, 2017



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Pictures of the Event



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) held a Public Talk titled, "*Trump Administration: Emerging Opportunities for South Asia*" on February 22, 2017. The speaker at the talk was Mr. Shuja Nawaz, Distinguished Fellow at the South Asia Centre of the Atlantic Council in Washington DC.

The Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood in his welcome remarks said that the recent elections in the US were nothing less than an earthquake, and the aftershocks of the elections are still being felt the world over. The elections results left the country internally divided, it gave rise to xenophobia, and the victory speech by newly elected President, Donald Trump, was followed by severe political protests in America.

Ambassador Mahmood also highlighted that the Trump Administration's foreign policy lacks strategic coherence. Furthermore, the first executive orders signed by President Trump bring in an atmosphere of anxiety for America's friends and allies. Also, the recent report published by the Hudson Institute and The Heritage Foundation coming at the heels of the new administration depicts a very hard line stance towards Pakistan. It tends to aggravate the already fragile security calculus in the region. Even though South Asia did not figure prominently during the election campaign, its significance has not diminished. Contrary to how India is seen, Pakistan is regarded only through a security lens in terms of terrorism, the Afghan settlement and nuclear technology. He said that Trump's entire negative prognosis has only further fuelled tensions in the region.

Mr. Shuja Nawaz acknowledged that President Trump had changed the political thinking in the United States - a change that was a long time coming because both political parties had lost their bearings and become complacent. He went on to highlight some of the key elements of Trump's campaign and pointed out that a major contributor to Trump's win was his campaign in the countryside. He stated that Pakistan cannot have a policy based on seventy years of assumptions and fears. This kind of thinking needs to be re-shaped in the context of a regional policy and will require a powerful introspection over a strategic policy which encompasses all the key elements of Pakistani society.

Talking about South Asia, Mr. Shuja pointed out that under the new administration in the US, there will be a very different kind of US relationship with the region - a policy of a Greater South Asia. Mr. Shuja asserted that it is very critical that leaders in South Asia, particularly Pakistan, should pre-empt President Trump and make decisions which are good for their countries.

Moreover, he added, that this offers the leadership in Pakistan a great opportunity to try and wean themselves off the addiction to US assistance. He stated that Pakistan and Afghanistan need to re-think their trade strategy and engage in the easiest, cheapest and fastest way for both economies to grow. He also pointed out that the leverage Pakistan will gain by providing transit gas from Iran will be paramount and remains a game changer for Pakistan to explore. Concluding his talk, he stressed on the importance for Pakistan of transforming the economy and believed that if growth returns, Pakistan's security would automatically improve.

Responding to questions, Mr. Shuja Nawaz said that the US is interested to work with China to develop the new silk route which might lead to a trajectory with the CPEC project in Pakistan. The US itself missed an opportunity to not propose such a project to Pakistan under the Kerry-Luger-Berman bill. He also highlighted that the idea of linking Afghanistan to Pakistan through Gwadar is also being floated in the US, which will also help to produce a link with the area which is under the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. However, a lot of this depends on the situation inside Afghanistan and the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Answering to another question regarding the change in US approach to Pakistan under the new Trump Administration, Mr. Shuja stated that the onus is on Pakistan to prove itself and decide what it wants to be recognised as. Once Pakistan is clear with this fact, it can deal with the US in a more honourable and straight forward manner. President Trump in particular, he emphasised, will project a very personalised and muscular foreign policy. There shouldn't be any assumptions or wishful thinking on the part of Pakistan. However, if Pakistan clearly signals the US and European countries about what it wants to do internally and with its neighbours in order to maintain a balance in its security calculus, it will be seen as a credible partner in this region. He further stated that it will be interesting to see if Pakistan develops a business connection, or a regional business connection with President Trump.

Answering another query, Mr. Shuja said Uttar Pradesh in India is going to witness elections, which will help to build the future shape of Modi's policies. There may be a chance of rise in tensions on the eastern border if Prime Minister Modi runs into problem or difficulty in the elections. If the situation on the border between Pakistan and India escalates, it will bring the US in the region in a manner which will not be in favour of Pakistan. It is pivotal that Pakistan build confidence in its relation with the US.

Answering to a question on the relations between US and Iran, Mr. Shuja explained that the relationship between both the countries will definitely bear a change in nature as compared to the one when President Obama was in office. However, there was always a threat of a military intervention.

Concluding the talk, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that it is not possible for the US to completely withdraw itself from this region when it attaches so much importance to fighting terrorism and extremism, as well as containment of China. He further added that the lack of focus on South Asia presently provides the region an opportunity to pre-empt the Trump administration and come up with a holistic policy for the greater good of the region. He thanked the guest speaker for his articulate and excellent expose of the situation, the prognosis of the problems, and, the way forward.