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Report – In-house Meeting

“French Media Delegation”

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Pictures of the Event



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) held an In-House meeting with a 5-member French Media Delegation on January 8, 2018. The members of the French delegation included: Mr. Jacques Follorou, Chief Editor/Writer, Le Monde; Mr. Emmanuel Derville, Correspondent (New Delhi based), Le Figaro; Ms. Karen Lajon, Grand Reporter, International Desk, Le Journal du Dimanche; Mr. Joris Fioriti, Correspondent, AFP and Mr. Michel Scott, Senior International Correspondent, TF1 (TV Channel).

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI, welcomed the delegation and emphasized on Pakistan bilateral ties with France. He said that this meeting would be an interactive session to discuss the regional dynamics of South Asia, including the state of affairs in Afghanistan, Pakistan-US relations, Pakistan-India bilateral relations, counter-terrorism initiatives by Pakistan and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Mahrugh Khan, Research Fellow at ISSI, while briefing the delegation on Pak-US relations and recent suspension of US security aid to Pakistan, stated that Pakistan has been accustomed to the tone which was building up as for the past few months. She pointed out that US officials have been visiting Islamabad to persuade Pakistan to support the new shift in the US policy, evident in the Afghan strategy. She informed that the only positive thing that we saw in these visits was the desire to work on a common ground, but major differences between America and Pakistan exist. Pakistan is looking for a peaceful way out of Pakistan which provides a wining situation for all the parties, whereas the attitude of US is very different. This is also evident from the strategies the US is pursuing and the partners and allies it has chosen in the region. It has chosen India as its strongest and natural ally, encouraging its role in regional security calculus and in Afghanistan as well.

Ms. Khan highlighted the fact that India does not share a border with Afghanistan and thus, does not bear the direct consequences of what happens there. She pointed out that the attitude of US towards Pakistan is extremely hawkish, partly due to the active anti-Pakistan Indian lobby which also has a great influence over the Trump administration. She informed the delegation that Pakistan has repeatedly asked the US to provide evidence of all the terrorist networks that exist in Pakistan that try to destabilize Afghanistan. However, US has failed to provide substantial evidence in order for Pakistan to go after these terrorist outfits.

Pakistan has reacted cautiously to US threats. She stated that the Trump administration is showing an inability to understand the sacrifices made by Pakistan in fighting the war that has been brought to our door step. Ms. Mahrukh Khan highlighted that Pakistan has helped US more than any other country, and after a decade it is still being accused of supporting the terrorists. Pakistan has brunt most of the losses in terms of economy, civilian and military lives and infrastructure due to this war. She clarified that it's in Pakistan's interest to stop this war in Afghanistan and work for a peaceful way out.

Asad ullah Khan, Research Fellow at ISSI briefed the delegation on counter terrorism and security situation in Pakistan. He pointed out that challenges to Pakistan's National Security are complex as Pakistan is facing both internal and external challenges. In order to cope with these challenges, Pakistan is following a comprehensive counter terrorism strategy based on the use of hard power followed by application of soft power. He informed the delegation that there has been nearly 45% reduction in the number of violence-related fatalities in 2016, which continued the trend of reduction from 2012. In fact, since 2014, there has been an overall reduction of nearly 66%. Three important factors have strongly contributed in reducing terrorism in Pakistan, namely: Operation Zarb-e-Azb, National Action Plan (NAP) and Operation Radd-ul-Fassad. Mr. Khan highlighted the major successes of NAP which includes establishment of Counter Terrorism Financing units in all Counter Terrorism Departments at provincial level, reorganization of National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), and linkages with international think tanks and intelligentsia inter alia, FATA plan of action, Cyber Security Bill Registration of religious seminaries and clean up operations in Karachi.

Ms. Amina Khan, Senior Research Fellow, ISSI briefed the delegation regarding situation in Afghanistan and Pak-Afghan relations. She pointed out that although Afghan National Forces (ANF) are now responsible for providing security, there has been an increase in civilian casualties, drug trade, and Taliban insurgency which shows that regardless of the fact that the Afghans are taking control of the security situation in their country, the security situation in that country has deteriorated. Similarly, the possible presence of ISIS is a threat to peace and security not only for the Afghan government, but also for the regional countries. Unfortunately, the peace process with Afghanistan Taliban is at a standstill as the country lacks a national narrative to move towards the Afghan Taliban. The fragile government of President Ashraf Ghani openly

opposed speaking to the Afghan Taliban. Ms. Amina highlighted that Murree Peace Process was the first officially recognized peace process between the Afghan Government and the members of the Afghan Taliban. But that was sabotaged when the intelligence agencies of Afghanistan conveniently disclosed the death of Mullah Omer just one day before the second round of peace talks where some major progress was meant to be made. Similarly, Mullah Mansoor was ready to talk with the Afghan government, but he was killed in a drone strike while crossing into Balochistan.

Ms. Khan further added that the Kabul Peace Process, an initiative by the Afghan government to bring stability back to Afghanistan and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group's recent meeting were fully supported by Pakistan. But again, the most important component, the Afghan Taliban, were not invited to take part in this process. Ms. Khan was of the opinion that there are elements within the Afghan government and external forces that do not want the peace process with the Afghan Taliban to succeed. Since 2014, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have deteriorated and they have been trapped in a downward spiral of antagonism and mistrust due to unfulfilled expectations on both sides, counter terrorism differences, border and refugees issues and lack of progress on the peace process with the Afghan Taliban. Since 2015, Pakistan has taken a number of initiatives on the Afghan border which include fencing, mandatory legal travel documents, installing more gates and passes to check and control the free movement of people. She informed that Pakistan has spent more than Rs. 67.3 billion in order to secure its border with Afghanistan but each time it had to face resistance from the Afghan government accusing Pakistan of dividing families on both sides of the border.

Ms. Amina further added that the presence of India in Afghanistan is another thorn in Pak-Afghan relations. A number of terrorist attacks that took place in Pakistan had links to India. Hence, it's a major issue of concern particularly when President Trump is pushing for a greater Indian role in Afghanistan. Ms. Amina Khan clarified that Pakistan favors a regional approach in Afghanistan in which regional countries should play an active role. She pointed out that Pakistan shares this opinion with Iran, Russia and China as they all are favoring a dialogue process with the Afghan Taliban. Ms. Amina said that growing ISIS presence in Afghanistan is major cause of concern for all these countries, but they are local Taliban who have deflected from the Afghan

Taliban. She informed that the Afghan Taliban have a completely different ideology than ISIS and since past one year a major fight is going on between the Afghan Taliban and ISIS.

Considering that there is a perception in Pakistan that the US is basically determined to help India in order to maintain its hegemony in South Asia, Mr. Emmanuel Derville asked about the threats that this situation can pose to Pakistan's national security.

In response Ms. Amina Khan stated that India opposes presence of Afghan Taliban in the peace process. Pakistan has provided solid evidence indicating that India is playing an important role in destabilizing Pakistan by supporting terrorist outfits and Baloch separatist groups. Similarly, the TTP, now based in Kunar and Nuristan parts of Afghanistan, has openly accepted that they have been taking support from the Indians. She clarified that Pakistan would never accept presence of Indian troops on Afghan soil. She further highlighted that Kulbushan Yadhev is another prime example of India trying its best to destabilize Pakistan.

When asked whether India wants to take over Pakistan, Mr. Najam Rafique, Director Americas/Research explained that Indians do hold to the notion that the very existence of Pakistan is detrimental to their concept of Akhand Bharat and they have never really accepted the reality of Pakistan. Indians have repeatedly made efforts to undo the partition of 1947; they were successful in 1971 in separating East Pakistan. He said that India will do everything in its power to undo what is left of Pakistan for which it is making all sorts of efforts including fanning separatist forces in Balochistan and funding other forces inimical to Pakistan.

When questioned what would be the impact on Pakistan if US decides to put sanctions, Mr. Rafique stated that Pakistan had been under US sanctions before, and this time too will have to face short-term repercussions particularly in aid provided to social and development sectors, and, if the US decides to call in its debts. He was of the view that in the long-term there will not be any negative consequences. He was optimistic that the nature of relations between the two countries was such that there will not be any long break in relations between US and Pakistan. He said that both US and Pakistan need each other within the region; America more so than Pakistan because of the latter's importance and role for peace in Afghanistan, as well as Pak-India relations.

When asked about the element of mistrust between US and Pakistan, Mr. Rafique responded that mistrust is not with Pakistan per se, but in fact it is with one particular institution, the military. There are certain national interests that this institution has in terms of regional stability, peace in Afghanistan and towards India. As long as the military is not willing to play the American tune there is going to be pressure on Pakistan. As far as bearing brunt of economic pressures is concerned the country is in a much more comfortable position today than it was when Symington and Pressler amendments came about.

To a question on if by any chance the US steps back in Afghanistan, would Pakistan be pursuing China's agenda? Ms. Mahrukh Khan replied that Pakistan's relationship with China is very independent; China does not dictate terms, while with the US it is the opposite. It has always been a more bullying sort of a relationship with the US, and for the past few years Pakistan has been trying to get out of this unhealthy relationship.

Responding to a question regarding establishing peace in Afghanistan, Ms. Amina Khan stated that one of the major ways to limit and eradicate the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan is reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan is pushing for a peace process involving the Afghan Taliban in order to help bring stability to Afghanistan and also deny ISIS any sort of influence in Afghanistan. But this process is right now at a standstill as certain elements in the Afghan government are not in favor of having talks with the Taliban. She highlighted that Afghan Taliban now control 43%-48% of Afghanistan's territory. She was of the opinion that its time that the government of Afghanistan should speak to the Afghan Taliban for establishing peace in Afghanistan instead of playing blame games and accusing Pakistan for instability in Afghanistan. She stressed that on numerous occasions, Pakistan has brought the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table, but the Afghan government backs out at the last moment.

Asked about the possibility of more Middle East fighters joining ISIS in Afghanistan, Ms. Amina responded that there are local groups who have sworn allegiance to ISIS, but very few fighters from the Middle East have come to join ISIS in Afghanistan. However, she pointed out that there is a presence of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Afghanistan.

Dr. Ahmed Rashid Malik, Director China-Pakistan Study Centre and Senior Research Fellow, ISSI briefed the delegation on the importance of CPEC to Pakistan economy. He informed that China has offered \$46 billion to Pakistan, out of which \$35 billion are provided as investments, while only \$11 billion are provided as loans. China has a very transparent process of selecting companies for these investment projects. He stated that the loans provided by China are concessional loans on which the mark up does not exceed 2%. Pakistan will start paying back these loans along with interest once these projects are completed, possibly at the end of 2019. The payback time period has been extended to 25 years.

When asked whether Pakistan would be able to repay these loans, Mr. Malik clarified that these loans are not a burden as they will provide a cushion in transforming Pakistan's economy. He pointed out that Pakistan's GDP in 2015 stood at \$270 billion, which has now increased to \$300 billion. When comparing the flexibility of loans with those provided by IMF, World Bank, Japan and the US, Mr. Malik highlighted that loans provided by China have very flexible terms and conditions. He further informed that many roads, railways and industrial zones are being built under the umbrella of CPEC which will provide job opportunities to hundreds of local people. He was very positive about the future economic situation in Pakistan, claiming that in the next 7 years Pakistan will become the 25th largest economy of the world, and soon it will be termed as another Asian Tiger.

When asked whether France will support Pakistan or the Trump administration if sanctions are imposed on Pakistan, Mr. Emmanuel Derville replied that there are no sanctions presently in view from the French side vis-à-vis Pakistan.

Responding to a question regarding chances of Congress coming back to power in the next Indian elections, Mr. Derville stated that Congress is no position to regain power as it lacks a charismatic leadership and an ideology.

Concluding the meeting, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood highlighted that Pakistan has borne most of the brunt of the War on Terror which includes losing more than 70,000 lives. Hence, it is not in the interest of Pakistan to continue this war and it wants peace in the region. Pakistan is in much better position today to withstand American pressure. Pakistan is moving towards the right direction; it has successfully reduced terrorism to a great extent. He clarified that ISIS has no

presence in Pakistan although it has gained ground in Afghanistan right under the nose of US. On Pakistan-India relations, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood stated that as long as outstanding issues like Kashmir, Sir Creek, are not resolved, peace cannot prevail between the two countries. He was optimistic that France, which has a tradition of having an independent stance on international matters, will not follow US dictation on imposing sanctions on Pakistan.