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Report – In-House Meeting

Meeting with Ms Hollie McKay, Journalist, FOX News

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Pictures of the Event



A one-on-one meeting took place between Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood and Ms. Hollie McKay, Journalist, FOX News on March 19, 2018. Pakistan-US ties, the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy were discussed in detail during the meeting.

Speaking about the current state of Pakistan-US ties, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood was of the view that while it is a subject of great debate and discussion, Pakistan-US relations are in a state of jeopardy. However, he said that while many may consider the current dynamics of Pakistan-US relations as a new development, he was of the view that it was more or less a continuation of the same US policy Pakistan has been witnessing since the time of President Obama. He said that although Pakistan-US relationship was an important one to both states, there are elements of divergence between Pakistan and US which clearly shows lack of trust between both the nations. Pakistan and US have been the most allied of the allies, yet, at the same time, Pakistan is being blamed for the unrest in Afghanistan. Ambassador Mahmood was of the view that the current tense ties between Pakistan and the US were counterproductive and detrimental to the interests of both countries. He said that instead of shifting the blame on Pakistan, the US should engage in constructive dialogue. He said that mixed signals were coming out of Washington, where one day there are praises for Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts and the next day Pakistan is asked to do more.

The growing role of India in Afghanistan was also brought up. Ambassador Mahmood said that Pakistan recognizes India's role in Afghanistan and welcomes it so long as it is not detrimental to the interests of Pakistan. However, Indian support and abetment to nationalist and secessionist elements in Baluchistan and penetration of terrorist networks in FATA such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other parts of the country in Pakistan along with New Delhi's open opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are serious issues of concern for Pakistan, which the US appears to ignore.

Ambassador Mahmood also talked about the tense Pakistan-India ties, and said that under the Modi government, India has adopted a very aggressive approach which was visible in the number of border violations committed by Indian forces across the LOC. He also highlighted India's human rights violations in occupied Kashmir and said that former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recently criticized BJP's handling of the Kashmir issue, as well as the human

rights violations. He said that the US should acknowledge Pakistan's legitimate concerns, and remain neutral instead of giving India a preferential treatment. He highlighted that by promoting India and sidelining Pakistan, the US would lose the little support it has amongst policy makers in Pakistan, and instead should recognize Pakistan's role, as well as its legitimate concerns.

Responding to Ms. McKay's question regarding the future of Pakistan-US ties, Ambassador Mahmood said that Pakistan has been a close ally of the US and has received support in the field of economic development. Both countries have been through various phases and have worked together on many issues including during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and post 9/11. However, the current mood of the US towards Pakistan is quite upsetting. He opined that although Pakistan and the US's objectives in Afghanistan are the same, the approach is different. Pakistan has always been advocating for dialogue and a negotiated settlement, while the US has focused on a militaristic approach which has not achieved any results. He said the US has three options: pack up and withdraw from Afghanistan, which is not something that will be acceptable to Washington. Second, stay on indefinitely, continue to spend trillions of dollars and attempt to achieve a South Korea type scenario. Or lastly, find a middle way out, where the US remains in Afghanistan to promote and ultimately achieve a peaceful settlement.

Speaking about the situation in Afghanistan, Ms. Amina Khan, Senior Research Fellow, ISSI, was of the view that both the US and Afghan government have failed to deliver peace and stability, and out of sheer frustration, both countries blame Pakistan for the unrest and violence. In order to address the concerns of both Washington and Kabul regarding the alleged safe havens/sanctuaries of the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network, and in an effort to curb illegal cross border movement, cross border attacks and militancy in FATA, Islamabad has taken a number of measures along the Pak-Afghan border since 2013. However, all border initiatives proposed by Pakistan have been rejected by Kabul. It was highlighted that since 2012, Islamabad has spent over 67 million rupees on border management, which includes fencing, surveillance (air and ground), construction of border posts and gates. Hence, clearly, there is contradiction in the Afghan position. On the one hand, Afghan authorities claim that the Durand Line divides families living on both sides of the border, yet at the same time, they continue to accuse Pakistan of interference, supporting the Afghan Taliban, and cross-border terrorism. Ironically, whenever

Pakistan has raised the issue of border recognition, management or regulation, there has been stern opposition from Afghanistan.

Speaking about her frequent visits to Kabul, Ms McKay stated that it was difficult for her to buy into the US-Afghan narrative that Islamabad was responsible for the war in Afghanistan or the rising violence. She said that it had become a norm for Kabul and Washington to shift the blame on Pakistan, and that it was time for Kabul to take ownership and responsibility for their failures in Afghanistan.

Speaking about the peace process, Ms. McKay was informed that Pakistan welcomed the recent offer that President Ashraf Ghani made to the Afghan Taliban during the second round of the Kabul Process, as it was by far, the best offer presented by any Afghan government to the Taliban. The fact that President Ghani offered recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate political group, hold new elections involving the Taliban, as well as his offer for a constitutional review, were important and quite generous considering the fact that a constitutional review or amendment has always been a major demand of the Taliban, and is unlike any offer made in the past. Ms. Amina Khan said that the Taliban should seriously consider the offer made, as it was the only way to put an end to the bloody conflict. In this regard, the issue pertaining to the reluctance of the US to talk directly to the Taliban was also raised, and that if the US truly wants to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan, they should have no hesitations in speaking to the Taliban as a first step in a series of many to achieve a negotiated settlement. The narrative of the US that they do not want to talk directly to the Taliban as it is an internal issue of the Afghan state is highly flawed since the US is a party to the conflict. Ms. Amina said that the Taliban insist on talks with the US as a first measure because they know that the US is the one calling the shots in Kabul.

On a question by Ms. McKay about the status of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, Ambassador Mahmood responded by stating that while Pakistan has hosted over 5 million Afghan refugees, over the years they had become an economic, social and security strain. Hence, Pakistan would like to see the respectable repatriation of all refugees, particularly the registered ones which do pose a security threat to the country.

Ms. McKay also asked about Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy and the steps that have been taken to curb extremism in Pakistan. Mr. Asadullah Khan briefed her on Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy and said that Pakistan has been suffering from instability and terrorism ever since the US war in Afghanistan in 2001, and had taken a number of steps to curb the threat. Pakistan adopted a 20-point National Action Plan (NAP) in January 2015 to crack down on terrorism, as well as supplement the ongoing anti-terrorist offensives throughout the country.

Hence, Pakistan is following a two pronged strategy in this regard:

- 1) Counter-terrorism which entails a soft approach based on the National Action Plan (NAP), and Pakistan's National Internal Security Policy.
- 2) Anti-Terrorism, which entails kinetic operations in FATA including operation Zarb-e-Azb, and the on-going operation Radd ul Fassad which is focused on Pakistan's entire territory.

The overall security situation in Pakistan since 2014 has improved significantly. According to the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), there has been 16% decline in terrorist incidents in Pakistan in 2017 compared to 2016. There has also been a 97% decrease in target killings. This has largely been due to Pakistan's comprehensive military operations in FATA such as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd ul Fassad which covers the entire country. As a result of Zarb-e-Azb which was launched in 2015 under the National Action Plan (NAP) as a result of the devastating terrorist attack on the Army Public School, all terrorist networks like the TTP and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JUA) have been pushed out of FATA into neighboring Afghanistan. As a result, the TTP and JUA have been mounting attacks against Pakistan from Afghanistan, where they have set up safe havens in Kunar and Nuristan. Out of the 370 incidents reported in 2017, 213 were perpetrated by TTP and its sympathizers based in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Mahmood added that while these groups may not be supported by the Afghan government, the Afghan forces lacked the skill to tackle such forces and hence as a result, they have been able to conduct terrorist activities in Pakistan.

Apart from conducting operations, the government has taken several other measures such as Madrassa reforms, choking financing for terrorists and terrorist organizations, action against hate

literature/ Newspapers promoting hatred, sectarianism and extremism, as well as dismantling the communication network of terrorists groups. Ambassador Mahmood pointed out that while the government and security agencies were working hard to curb and ultimately eliminate the threat of terrorism, it is by no means an easy task and that it will take time and immense patience to rid the society of such elements and ideologies. In conclusion, Ambassador Mahmood said that instead of blaming Pakistan and putting unnecessary pressure (such as putting Pakistan on the FATF list), the international community, and in particular the US, should help support Pakistan's efforts.