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Report – In-House Meeting

“US Media Delegation”

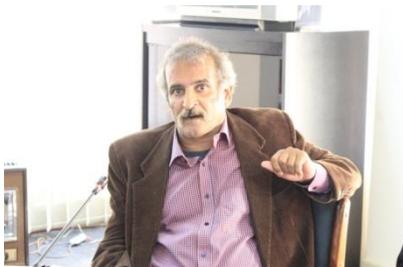
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Pictures of the Event



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, (ISSI) hosted an In-House Meeting with a 4-member Media Delegation from the United States of America on March 5, 2018. The members of the delegation included: Mr. Carlo Munoz, Military Correspondent, *The Washington Times*; Mr. Bennett Seftel, Analyst, *The Cipher Brief*; Ms. Kristina Wong, Pentagon Correspondent, *Breitbart News*; and Ms. Kay Johnson, Islamabad-based Bureau Chief, *Reuters*.

Welcoming the delegation, Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood stated that the global trends are changing, and the most significant of these trends is the peaceful rise of China, and the second is the advent of President Trump which has affected various aspects of international relations. The US has already named China, as well as Russia as the main and potential threat respectively, and as a consequence, tensions have risen between these two sets of countries. He said that while the outlook of the policies which President Trump has adopted is in contrast to the previous administrations policies, however, the general thrust remain more or less the same. The current policy outlook is more militaristic in nature, insensitivities towards its allies, and based on an erosion of multilateral diplomacy. These policy approaches have fundamentally effected not only the region, but bilateral relations as well like that of Pakistan and US, Pakistan-India, and Pakistan relations with Afghanistan.

Ms. Amina Khan, Senior Research Fellow at ISSI presented an overview of the current security situation in Afghanistan highlighting that the security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating day by day. Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have been on a downward trajectory and are imbedded in a vicious blame game primarily reignited by the mistrust that both the countries have towards each other, particularly with regard to differences on counter terrorism, the issues related to the border, refugees and the peace process.

Talking about the peace process Ms. Amina stated that the current Kabul Peace Process is a welcoming development as President Ghani has reached out to Pakistan and has agreed to move forward on negotiations and talks with the Taliban. Pakistan has welcomed this initiative. Prior to the Kabul process, both the countries had been engaged in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity. Under this plan, a number of initiatives were discussed, particularly the issue of refugees which remains an issue of concern for Pakistan, as well as holding talks on the issue of border management.

With regard to the peace process Ms. Amina informed the delegation that there are various peace processes that have been taking place at the bilateral, multilateral and quadrilateral level; but they have not been able to achieve much. The Afghan Taliban have never been included in any of these processes apart from the Murree Peace Process, for which recognition needs to be given to Pakistan for playing an instrumental role in bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table. Unfortunately, this process too, did not achieve much as just before the second round, they were sabotaged with the disclosure of Mullah Omer's death.

Similarly, Mullah Mansoor who had an inclination towards talks was killed in a drone strike by the US. These actions, she said, raise questions regarding the intension of certain elements within Kabul, as well as outside who oppose the peace process. The problem, she said, lies in Kabul as President Ghani has had a difficult time in convincing people in Kabul and his administration for a peace process. The heads of Afghan intelligence department have resigned including Rehmat Ullah Nabi who was against any peace process with the Afghan Taliban.

Apart from the Murree Peace Process, there are other processes that have been going on sometimes simultaneously, and sometimes independently, which eventually end up doing more harm than good. As far as the current Kabul Peace Process is concerned, Pakistan, along other countries, has welcomed this first Afghan-own and Afghan-led initiative. This time, President Ghani has reached out to the Taliban and has shown flexibility regarding amendments to the constitution which was earlier a major issue. He has also talked about the release of prisoners and other important related issues.

Similarly, it is important that the Taliban realize that this is a good opportunity, and that they cannot work in isolation, particularly due to the presence of Daesh in Afghanistan. Also, the people they are fighting now are Afghan national security forces and not the international forces.

Concluding her presentation, Ms. Amina stated that there are still however, certain areas of concerns, particularly President Trump's policy towards Afghanistan. The separation that the US administration is making between the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network is unreal. They are the same organization, and the notion that once they target the Haqqani network the insurgency will end is highly flawed. Another important concern is President Trump's insistence on India playing a larger role in Afghanistan. This is an issue of concern for Pakistan because of

the sensitive relations Pakistan and India have and the actions carried out by the Indians in Afghanistan which have been detrimental for Pakistan like their support to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch separatist elements. She concluded on the note that Pakistan does not have an issue with a productive role by India in Afghanistan as long as it is not detrimental to Pakistan's interests.

Questions and Answers

To a question regarding Taliban's inclination towards the peace process when at the same time the US is actively engaging in combat in Afghanistan, Ms. Amina said that President Trump is very confident about using military power. He feels that he will be able to push the Afghan Taliban into a corner through a militaristic approach, and will be able to compel them to come to the negotiating table. This has obviously not happened, as we see that the military approach has been an exercise in futility. Then there is war fatigue, the Taliban have been fighting this war for the past 17 years which is one more reason to come to the negotiating table. Furthermore, the growing presence of Daesh in Afghanistan is one major factor that should convince the Afghan Taliban to come to the negotiation table. Also, this is the first time that President Ghani is willing to sit and talk with the Afghan Taliban, and is willing to accommodate and find a way to amend the constitution.

In response to a question posed to the US media delegation regarding the US reluctance to mediate the peace talks in Kabul, a member of the delegation replied that one of the reason is that eventually it's the Afghan government who will have to rectify the process, and there is a sensitivity regarding imposing US views on Afghanistan and its people. There might be some leeway for it in terms of three party talks, but the US will not sit down with the Taliban singularly and talk.

Replying to another question raised by the US media delegation regarding the US support to the talks - whether it would harm or help the talks, Ms. Amina stated that it is the demand of the Afghan Taliban who have been fighting this war and the only way to achieve any stability in Afghanistan is through negotiating a peace deal with the group.

Another member of the delegation raised a question regarding the outcome of increase in military forces in Afghanistan and how it would effect the peace process? Ms Amina responded by saying that earlier, more than a hundred thousand troops were deployed in Afghanistan which could not bring the kind of results that the US was expecting. What will another few thousand troops, in addition to current number of troops deployed in Afghanistan achieve? It will only result in more lives lost. The military approach is flawed and the current status of security situation in Afghanistan should be a sign for the US to rethink their policy.

Replying to another question regarding Pakistan's role in the peace process, Ms Amina said that initially, Pakistan's role was to support the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. However, after President Ghani's insistence, Pakistan did play a role to bring the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table in the Murree Peace Process. But once this process failed, all the blame game came back to Pakistan. There needs to be an ownership by the Afghan government. Pakistan had shown its willingness to support this process, and had extended all the support it could. The Haqqani network remains the major bone of contention between both the countries and its role is exaggerated.

Mr. Waqas Sajjad, Senior Research Fellow at ISSI, in his presentation, highlighted the Pakistan-India relations and also spoke on the prospects of a bilateral dialogue between both the countries. He said that since the Mumbai bombing of 2008, the process of Composite Dialogue has not been resumed between Pakistan and India. Currently, the relations are going through a particularly ugly phase as the rhetoric is high. There are bans and travel issues on both sides, and there are regular violations of the ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC), with over 400 violations by India in 2018 alone already.

He was of the view that there has been a lull in the relationship, with the issue of terrorism being the major stumbling block. India has, at multiple platforms, and almost at every level, accused Pakistan of state-sponsored terrorism, demanding that Pakistan take action to check terrorism from its side before there can be any bilateral dialogue. For its part, during the last decade, Pakistan has been a victim of terror and has been fighting militants in multiple operations and has cooperated with others when it comes to fighting terrorism, and also shown its willingness to continue to do so.

He highlighted the issue of human rights abuses in Jammu and Kashmir which are now well-known, with mass graves discovered, the use of human shields, and horrific images following the use of pellet guns against protesting civilians. Many Indian sources themselves have noted that 14,000 civilians have been killed between 1990 and March 2017. The protests over the past few years have been indigenous in nature, and are a natural outcome of decades of oppression. Under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, over 700,000 Indian security personnel have had unlimited and quite un-democratic powers in the occupied state.

Another issue he highlighted was regarding a distinct shift in the political mood in India with the current BJP government under Prime Minister Modi. While earlier indications after he came to power suggested there would be movement towards bilateral talks, this has been completely overturned. For its part, Pakistan has consistently called for talks on all issues including terrorism, and this is the principled stance today as well. The feeling is that better Pakistan-India ties that accompany talks is better for the region, as well as for both countries. This sentiment is of course not prevalent in Indian policy circles.

Mr. Sajjad also talked about Pakistani concerns regarding the Indian activities in Afghanistan. He was of the view that Pakistan does not see Indian presence as an issue, since after all, these are two sovereign countries with a right to have a bilateral relationship – but the issue is with possible interference in Pakistan such as in Baluchistan. Similarly, Pakistan also proposed and invited India to join CPEC, which has so far been rejected by the Indians.

Concluding his presentation, Mr. Sajjad said that there is little to no prospects of bilateral dialogue being resumed in the near future, with the BJP government having a strong stance on the matter, and the political mood in India also reflecting little interest. However, there are reports of backchannel and informal meetings such as those between the National Security Advisors of the two countries. Though again, the rhetoric about them has not been wholly positive. In India, we will see over the next few months if there is any change in attitude as the country gears for elections in April or May 2019 and what kind of campaigning takes place regarding talks with Pakistan – it will be a heated political issue there. Elections in Pakistan are scheduled for this year and there is near unanimity here that Pakistan and India need to move

towards better bilateral relations through negotiations and that there is simply no other choice in this matter.

Question and Answers

A member of the US delegation raised a question regarding the role of US in this situation between Pakistan and India and how can it help? Mr. Waqas Sajjad replied that the important input by the US would be to help change the on-going trajectory between both the countries and not support one party at the expense of the other. India and Pakistan have always benefited by a mutual collaboration.

Adding to the answer, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood stated that Pakistan, for many years, has been insisting to settle and resolve the Kashmir dispute through peaceful means specified in the UN Charter. Pakistan is open to all means of settlement of the dispute under the Charter. It is India which does not agree. It does not want any involvement of a third party. Pakistan is open to third party interventions, like the US, which will be of much help for both the countries.

Another question was raised concerning the recent Indo-US strategic partnership and the flow of weapons it has brought into the region to which Ambassador Khalid Mahmood replied that it is a major concern for Pakistan. This will certainly create an increased imbalance in the conventional weaponry in the region. Furthermore, the US is helping India modernize its military industry and is going out of its way by giving waivers and exceptions to India like the civil nuclear deal. This is creating space for an arms race which is not desirable, and it has emboldened India with a more aggressive stance towards Pakistan. India is opting out of talks; it is not interested to solve the issue of Kashmir and other outstanding problems like Siachin. This has also led to India's aggressive approach towards its other neighbors in the region, and this division of strategic alliance is drawing unnecessary lines. Such actions by America are leading to more tensions and complications in the region.

Another question was raised regarding India's conditions to enter into talks with Pakistan, to which Mr. Waqas Sajjad replied that one very specific demand was about Hafiz Saeed, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, and which comes up repeatedly.

Ms. Mahrukh Khan, Research Fellow at ISSI spoke on the current status of Pakistan and US relations. She highlighted that President Donald Trump's Afghanistan policy and his criticism of Islamabad on the issue of terrorism has marked a clear line of conflict between Pakistan and the US. Trump's allegations against Pakistan and his support for India as a strategic ally, on both security and economic fronts, has prompted Islamabad to review its policy options toward Washington.

She was of the view that the current policy of President Trump is only a continuation of his predecessors policy. The fundamentals of the policy remain the same with a much stronger rhetoric and a more single-minded focus on the Haqqanis with an increased strategic dependence on India. Moreover, she stated that this relationship will remain at a low point and is unlikely to improve any time soon unless the elements within the US policy circles change their behavior and approach towards Pakistan and not view it from the lens of any other country.

Talking on the issue of the US aid cut-off, Ms. Mahrukh highlighted that the US aid to Pakistan has dwindled in recent years anyway. During the administration of President George W. Bush, the US aid was cut by 13 per cent in 2008, followed by almost 64 per cent decrease during the Obama administration. Hence, this move does not come as a shock or a surprise to Pakistan. Furthermore, Pakistan now has a solid partner in China, as manifested in the joint China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project. Also, Pakistan is looking to enhance relations with Russia, Turkey and Central Asian Republics to increase economic gains and improve security. This also indicates a shift in alliances regionally and internationally. All this further decrease the significance of the cut-off of the US aid, which means that America has far less leverage over Pakistan.

Concluding her presentation, Ms. Mahrukh stated that currently, Pakistan and the US are walking on a diplomatic tight rope. There is a need to cooperate and move towards workable, cordial relations which is necessary for both Pakistan and the US. Pakistan cannot be called an ally and put on trial at the same time.

Question and Answers

A question was raised regarding the increase in the muscular approach by the US in Afghanistan under President Trump, and whether it will be counterproductive for the US? Ms. Mahrukh stated that the consequences of such an approach will be more severe for the US as compared to Pakistan. The US needs Pakistan more than Pakistan needs the US. Pakistan's Ground Lines of Communication (GLOCs) are being used by the US ever since it set foot in Afghanistan. Similarly, where the US talks about all the money it has given to Pakistan, the US still owes Pakistan for the use of GLOCs under the Coalition Support Funds. What Pakistan-US share is a two-way relationship, and judging by the current security situation, the US needs Pakistan more and by side-lining Pakistan, it will create troubles for itself in the region. Joining hands with Pakistan is in US favor. She further added that Pakistan's economy is more stable at present than it was a few years ago; CPEC is another asset in the making. Similarly, the US growing relations with India is in disguise helping Pakistan to reach out to other regional powers like Russia, which until a couple of years ago was an important partner of India. Similarly, Pakistan is also increasing its relations with Central Asian Republics and Turkey.

Replying to another question, Ms. Mahrukh stated that what we are seeing now with respect to Pakistan-US relations is a phase which will eventually pass. Also, post India's refusal to send its troops into Afghanistan, there is a realization in the US that no other country in the region except Pakistan can help it in its goals in Afghanistan. However, she added that the length and intensity of this phase will be completely dependent upon the kind of relations the US pursue in this region, especially with regards to India and Afghanistan.

One of the member of the delegation raised a question regarding the notion of good and bad Taliban which has led to a lot of mistrust between both the countries, and how can one move away from this mistrust? Ms. Amina replied that Pakistan has, time and again, reached out to Afghanistan for a better border management, which to date remains a sensitive issue in Afghanistan. This border has been outsourced to militants on both sides of the border. The dilemma is that when Pakistan is taking measures on its side of the border, Afghanistan criticizes it as dividing families. However, post border management efforts by Pakistan, there has been a major reduction in violence in the country. Pakistan is not stopping the legal movement of people

across the border, but fencing border is one way to curb illegal movement. Along with fencing, there are number of other measures that are being implemented like aerial surveillance and additional border gates.

Adding to the answer, Mr. Asadullah Khan, Research Fellow at ISSI stated that the military operations that Pakistan has conducted have also helped in the reduction of violence. However, certain elements do exists which are being targeted through coordinated military strategy.

Mr. Asadullah while giving a presentation on the issue of counter-terrorism stated that the US needs to understand that the problem of extremism is deep-rooted in Pakistani society, and it's a new problem. Pakistan has been facing this problem for the past two to three decades and to expect that the situation will change overnight is unfair. Similarly, disowning these factions will bear no fruit. One needs to bring them back into the folds and streamline them with the rest of the society. The need of the hour is to devise and implement a strategy that can help re-radicalize this faction and bring them back into the society.

He further stated that at the moment, Pakistan is dealing with these elements through kinetic operations as Pakistan is engaged on two fronts; one internally, and second externally. Also, with the initiation of the Nation Action Plan (NAP), which earlier came under criticism in the international media, Pakistan is now moving in the right direction. The NAP has helped Pakistan in its fight against terrorism, although it is still in an implementation phase and will be a long-term process.

Concluding his presentation, Mr. Asad said that Pakistan is now trying to use a mix of both hard and soft power to gain maximum results and develop resilience in the society so that it may not fall in the same trap in the future. The mixed approach over a period of time has resulted in favorable results for Pakistan. The current situation in Pakistan is better than it was a decade ago.

Dr. Ahmed Rashid Malik, Director China-Pakistan Study Centre at ISSI, spoke on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). He said that CPEC is a grand project which will transform the economy of Pakistan. The project consists of three phases - the early harvest, second phase and long-term. Pakistan has already started to witness the fruits of the early harvest phase, and currently, the project is in its second phase. There a number of projects divided according to the

three phases of the CPEC project. This includes infrastructure projects, energy projects, and Gwadar Port project. CPEC is transforming Pakistan into a hub economy, which is the central idea behind the project.

Question and Answers

Replying to a question regarding completion of CPEC projects in 2018, Dr. Rashid said that the percentage of completion of projects is remarkable, more than half of the projects are in their completion stages.

Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood further reiterated that CPEC early harvest projects are mainly concerned with energy projects and infrastructure, development of the Gwadar Port and industrialization. The second phase deals with agricultural projects along with completion of the Gwadar project, followed by the long-term plan till 2030. Also, it is imperative to know that CPEC is not an exclusive club, and it is open for other countries to join. CPEC, he said, is a development project which offers opportunities to other countries. Up till now, Iran, Central Asian countries and European countries have shown interest in these projects. The only opposition Pakistan has faced is from India, although Pakistan has offered India to become a part of CPEC as well. Ambassador Mahmood further said that Pakistan does not expect the US to oppose the project at the behest of India in a knee jerk reaction, but rather take a long-term view of the project.

Replying to a question raised by an ISSI researcher, a member of the US media delegation said that the recent move by the US to isolate Pakistan in the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) meeting in February 2018 in Paris, was because there have been so many warnings to Pakistan by the US which have not produced anything. Hence, this move was deliberate not because of any regional alignment, but to nudge Pakistan to change its behavior and is also part of the new US strategy.

Concluding the meeting, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI said that Pakistan is making all efforts to meet the concerns of the international community. Afghanistan crisis has been there for the last seventeen years, and every party now wants a peaceful settlement of this issue. The only question is how to go about it? However, there have been certain positive

developments recently, like Ghani's offer of unconditional peace talks, release of political prisoners, delisting from the terrorist list of the UN, and review of the constitution. Further, the role of America can help resolve this situation with more ease and their involvement will give some assurance to the Taliban factions. Moreover, Pakistan is not against a constructive role and presence of India in Afghanistan, but only to the activities which are detrimental to Pakistan.

Similarly, there have been ups and downs in Pakistan-US relations, both have been most allied of the allies nations, and at the same time, Pakistan has been the most sanctioned nation in the world and post President Trump administration, the relations have come under great strain. The efforts that Pakistan is putting into fighting terrorism is more for its own security and stability.