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*Report – Public Talk*

# **Conversation with Ambassador Cameron Munter**

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## PICTURES OF THE EVENT



On January 15, 2019, the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) in collaboration with Karachi Council on Foreign Relations (KCFR) organised a public talk by Ambassador Cameron Munter, President of the East West Institute (EWI), New York and Brussels. Dignitaries present on the occasion comprised of ambassadors, policy makers, journalists and businessmen.

The welcome remarks were given by Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG ISSI. He said that it is well-evident that extreme volatility has been the hallmark of relations between Pakistan and the US. The two countries have been partners in security pacts (SEATO and CENTO), jointly waged Jihad against the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and following 9/11, have been collaborating in the War on Terror. During this war against terrorism, Pakistan lost some 75,000 precious lives and suffered US\$123 billion material losses. Pakistan has repeatedly become the victim of the US sanctions on account of its nuclear programme and later in the war against terrorism.

While acknowledging liberal aid and assistance provided by the US to Pakistan over the last seven decades, the bilateral relations have been heavy on security and transactional in nature. Now they are uni-dimensionally fixated on the situation in Afghanistan and the great power rivalry spawned by the rise of China. Ambassador Mahmood said that in the face of all the challenges, Pakistan found other partners for collaboration in the economic and defence areas. This does not mean that it is a substitute for the friendly mutually beneficial co-operative ties with the US, which Pakistan continues to aspire. The US needs to stop looking at Pakistan only through the Afghanistan prism. Delinking Pakistan from Afghanistan has shown disregard for Pakistan's essential security concerns and stability of the region. Restoration of mutual trust is the quintessential requirement of the day. The interests of the two countries have greatly suffered when they have worked at cross-purposes and both have gained immensely when they cooperated with each other.

Ambassador Cameron Munter then made his comments. He stated that it is important to not only think about the historical background but to focus a bit on the future and to try and think of the existing relationship, rather than to dissect the difficulties and try to speculate the strengths and possibilities of the future. He said that there has been an overemphasis on two things. Firstly, on how the Americans look at Pakistan through the lens of counterterrorism and for that to become

an intellectual and institutional context of an entire relationship is a distortion. Secondly, Pakistan and America are not the entire countries in the region that matter. Hence, we need to bring in the multilateral angle to see for example what countries like China are doing in the region. He said he has always been impressed by the strength of the Pakistani society. Suffice it is to say it is not without its problems: different cultural groups being a key case in point. He went on to say that each country has its own sets of problems. However, both the US and Pakistan have enormous philanthropic traditions. Each has a huge pool of talented and educated people. He said that there is this whole strength outside the sphere of government that is being underutilised. Both countries need to look more long term and specifically talk about building ties between institutions, businesses, schools and universities.

A non-state institution can perhaps get those things done which the governments aspire to do. It is better to look at the strengths of the Pakistani society and carry out the relationship through them. So instead of solving the problems, it would be better to go around the problems and invest in a long term future by re-building trust and letting the governments follow rather than lead. He also talked a bit about the East West Institute - a global non-profit organisation – which, he said, is key to the future of the relationship between the US and Pakistan. The whole idea of the institution is to widen the existing aperture for the American people and get people together who normally do not talk. The best way forward is by bringing in thinkers, policymakers and the youth to collectively and patiently work towards a brighter future, he said. Ambassador Munter lamented that given the old rhetoric, building the relationship between Pakistan and the US will be an uphill task. The relationship is sometimes viewed as a zero-sum game, which is one of the problems. One way this can be done is by building ties in institutions - a non-state institution can get those goals achieved which the government aspires for, he said.

During the question and answer session that followed, the main questions asked were, during Ambassador Munter's tenure that why was he was not effective in showcasing any positive image of Pakistan? Even with successful government elections this year, why does the US still views Pakistan as terrorists and India with its many flaws is always projected as being better than Pakistan and what more can be done to improve relations between America and Pakistan? Ambassador Munter replied that if one continues to look at issues of past they can never be able to look at the future. By clinging to the blame, one can never look forward. The problem in



Washington is called ‘Pakistan fatigue’ - no one really knows what to do about the relationship and some people think that by improving relations with India, a solution can be reached. There are people in Washington who do not hear and only view Pakistan through a specific lens. The way to change it is not through sending public diplomacy officers to Washington but to look to a different audience, which does not have a strong opinion yet formulated about Pakistan. The people at the EWI can help here, he said.

Every relationship is a two-way streak. Once we get to the dialogue stage progress can be made. Business people talking to each other and civic people talking to each other is how we get past this issue, he stated. He went on to say that he hoped that relationship with America or China does not become a choice. America is not paying attention to the CPEC so the notion that we are against it is wrong. He said that both countries must work together to create confidence for a better future. He felt that both America and Pakistan should not see themselves as victims but as active agents of change. Ambassador Munter said that it is time to target a different kind of audience, not hardliners but those who do not have a set notion against Pakistan. On a question of how relevant is Pakistan given the changing transition of power globally, he replied that power is increasingly changing and the role of traditional measures of power are lessening in comparison to the role of economic power. Hence, it is the duty of leadership in both countries to ensure that things move ahead in a sustainable way.

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Ikram Sehgal, Chairman KCFR, thanked all the speakers. He praised the work the EWI has been doing especially in facilitating dialogue between Pakistan and the US. He said that if we had to rehash the past, we should not forget to rehash all the good things as well. He went on to say that the world is changing and is changing for the better for Pakistan. It is for Pakistan’s best interests if it has good relations with all the countries in the region and not put its eggs in limited baskets alone.