



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-51-9204423, 24
fax: +92-51-9204658

Report – Webinar

“Upcoming US Elections, Possible Outcomes & Prospects of Relations with Pakistan”

October 13, 2020



Rapporteur: Mahrukh Khan

Edited by: Najam Rafique

PICTURES OF THE EVENT

The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a webinar titled “*Upcoming US Elections, Possible Outcomes & Prospects of Relations with Pakistan*” on October 13, 2020. The speakers at the webinar were: Daniel Markey, Senior Research Professor, John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C; Dr. Rifaat Hussain, Professor & Head of Department of Government and Public Policy in School of Social Sciences and Humanities at National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad; and Mr. Nadeem Zaman Director, Association of Pakistani Americans, Texas.

The webinar was moderated by Mr. Najam Rafique, Director Research at ISSI. In his remarks Mr. Rafique stated that in the US, over 200,000 people have died of the Covid-19 pandemic, 43 million household’s face the threat of eviction and million have filed for unemployment. Amid this public emergency, the killing of George Floyd has sparked a public outcry of systemic racism. It is in this unprecedented context that the US is approaching its most consequential election in history. He further added that President Trump is running for his second term with a white supremacist agenda with complete disregard to legal norms, actively emboldening far right militias who just several weeks ago murdered black lives matter protesters in Wisconsin . He added that many criticize Joe Biden for conservatively pandering to moderate voters at the expense of younger generations who are over-whelming in favor for a systemic change.

Dr. Daniel Markey in his remarks stated that the upcoming elections in the US is not a choice between centre-left and centre-right in the American political spectrum, but present a choice between basic competence and basic incompetence. It is a choice between two candidates - Joe Biden who adheres to basic norms and rules, traditions and principles associated with American politics and President Donald Trump who rejects many of these. He was of the view that the upcoming election will have world shaping consequences both at home and abroad. The domestic agenda in the upcoming elections is more severe due to the Covid-19, the social unrest and economic crisis that the US is facing which is a direct result of poor leadership and the incompetence from the top. Moreover, US is also in the midst of a period of social unrest, the black lives matter movement and a violent response to it. He was of the view that there is a stark difference between the two presidential candidates and the way they will deal with the traditional allies. Where Trump has denigrated the alliance system, Biden, according the Dr. Markey, would reinvest in it. Similarly, there is a stark difference in terms of how US would deal with its

adversaries, principally Russia, North Korea, and Iran, under a Biden administration. Further, US would see a return to a more traditional multilateral approach that is less America alone. He cautioned that under a second Trump presidency, America will further go upside down than it already has with its institutions weakening further and its justice system becoming more dysfunctional. The international leadership vacuum that has been created by Trump's past four years in office would be further filled by America's adversaries and it will take a generation for US to refill that vacuum. Polls suggest that Biden is more likely to win this election than is Trump, and he's likely to win in a big way potentially bringing a democratic majority to the Senate as well as to the House. With Biden in the White House, certain habits of cooperation that have been in place prior to Trump for decades would show themselves to be resilient patterns of working with America's traditional friends, rebuilding and repopulating a number of America's foreign policy institutions as well as reforming institutions such as the State Department.

Looking back at history, Dr. Markey pointed out that when President Obama came into office after a difficult patch of leadership under President Bush, the world celebrated his arrival. Joe Biden's coming into office would be celebrated throughout much of the world for precisely the same reason and would be greeted with relief in many sectors. Moreover, just as then president Obama faced an immediate global financial crisis which had torn the US economy as well as the global economy to shreds, the Biden administration would also be hit with an immediate crisis of recession if not depression and managing this pandemic better than his predecessor.

He further stated that the world has gotten messier and more difficult in the intervening years. The liberal world order is under threat from both within the liberal states, including within the United States, and from without through Western Europe and East Asia. The rise of populism is not a feature just of the United States body politic, but has been seen in a variety of other once liberal societies and beyond that liberal leaders, including the United States and its Western European allies. Simultaneously, illiberal challengers principally in the form of China and Russia are increasingly vocal and increasingly willing and capable of offering alternatives to American leadership, whether it's China's Belt and Road Initiative or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. These are trends and activities that were independent of and outside the rise of Trump and will continue whether he stays or goes. Russia's behavior has demonstrated repeatedly that the United States has trouble standing up to its adversaries or delivering decisive pain, deterring

them from action and in some cases of even helping its friends. So, American leadership was already in question and the one-time assumption of American or a future of American hegemony and leadership is clearly no longer.

While discussing the foreign policy aspects, Dr. Markey was of the view that America's global role and leadership was always overstated which created an atmosphere of expectation by other nations which gave US the benefit of the doubt and advantage over other nations to get what it wants without asking for it. It also imposed a variety of duties and obligations on the United States that President Trump simply ceased to perform because he had no appreciation of their strategic value. But it now seems that there's a more widespread expectation that China is likely to assume this mantle of global leadership. However, as stated by Dr. Markey, the Chinese lack the capability to deliver that leadership.

Talking about US-China relations under Joe Biden, Dr. Markey said that under a Biden presidency, competition with China will be the organizing principle of American foreign policy. However, competition under the Biden administration won't look the same as it looks under the Trump administration, nor will it be a reprise of how it looked under the Obama administration. The line on China in the United States has hardened. A Biden administration will bring a re-commitment to traditional American allies including Europe, Japan and Southeast Asia and even India. These allies are convinced of the threat or challenges posed by China and are more likely to work with the United States particularly if China's threatening tendencies are not moderated. Some of this of course will depend on what China does. However, there is a policy consensus in Washington that spans across Democrats and traditional Republicans or former Republicans that the problem with Trump's policy on China wasn't that it's too hawkish, it is that it has been entirely inconsistent, and therefore, not credible and entirely too unilateral and not as powerful as it would be if conducted with allies. Furthermore, the policy on China has been ineffectively managed at a technical level, especially the trade talks. However, a Biden administration unlike the Obama administration would see China more clearly as a main challenger to the US and would be less shy calling out China on human rights issues as well as adopt tougher measures on protecting technologies, pushing back on trade and other practices, and would invest more in the US military cyber capabilities and in other areas where US competes with the Chinese.

On US relations with Pakistan, Dr. Markey was of the opinion that as long as Pakistan is not completely sided with China in this competition, it may find many opportunities for cooperation with US in areas of security and economics, as well as the resumption of the strategic dialogue. Trump administration has taken the US-Pakistan relationship on a rollercoaster ride over the past four years and it hasn't been a rollercoaster quite as dramatic as it was under the Obama administration or even the Bush administration. The US relationship with Pakistan suffered in the early period of the Trump administration, but it has normalized in recent years. Under the Trump administration, Afghanistan is clearly seen as a legacy war, a war that may not be over but a war that America is over with and moving on. As you have seen even from Trump's recent tweets, America is moving out of Afghanistan at least militarily sooner or later, probably sooner.

He further remarked that relations with Pakistan also come in the background of Afghanistan and counter-terrorism. Afghanistan continues to drive US relations with Pakistan. Biden administration, Dr. Markey anticipated, would take on many of these positions similar to the Trump administration, but seek a new equilibrium in Afghanistan and perhaps accepting that Afghanistan will continue to be messy politically and certainly in terms of its internal security. United States will be less and less engaged militarily and what happens there will more likely depend on global counter-terror capabilities that have been developed over the past two decades. He said that being engaged in a war in Afghanistan helped to secure the American homeland against terrorist attacks and perhaps could lead Washington to be more open to working with regional partners including Pakistan, to maintain this counter-terror capability over the long run at a lower cost.

Under such circumstances strategic dialogue with Pakistan would cover issues on energy cooperation, security and non-proliferation, defense cooperation, counter-terrorism, law enforcement, economic cooperation, US investment in science and technology including greater openness in the United States to Pakistanis coming for work and study. All of these things which were once considered quite normal and standard part of US-Pakistan relationship would likely see some return.

While talking about the US-India relations, Dr. Markey said that it will be at the top of Washington's strategic agenda in South Asia. Nonetheless, addressing India under the Biden

administration will be a trickier act. Like the Trump administration, the Biden administration will look at Delhi as a useful and likely committed strategic partner for counter-balancing China in Asia. At the same time, Biden administration is likely to take much more seriously its concerns about the illiberal tendencies of Modi government in India that continues with its current trajectory, and so find it harder and harder to see India as a natural democratic partner as it has in the past. He said that this nonetheless, should not provide Pakistan some sort of opening to drive a useful wedge between India and the United States as there is nothing that Pakistan could or would say or do that would make a new Biden administration less sympathetic to India because it's coming from Pakistan. US policy makers will have to think about whether India's interest are aligned with America's or whether India is in fact on a path on living up to Americas hope both as a great power, as democratic and liberal state and a counterweight to China. He was of the view that if these features are not there, then the US-India relationship will be pushed into a lower and a different path. In short, the US-India relationship will be broadly insulated from US-Pakistan policy. So whatever disillusionment American policymakers currently have about India's political trajectory is separate from and stove-piped from its relations with Pakistan.

Dr. Markey concluded his talk by raising a word of caution for Pakistan. He said that it would be especially important for Pakistan to not seek to find itself siding entirely with or subsumed within a Chinese sphere of influence and should see some value in maintaining good and effective ties with the United States and the West. A Biden administration would be more than open to this type of effort. In terms of the US-India relationship, a tightening of US-India relationship would be healthier for the United States. The United States needs to continue to understand that India itself has some concerns about accepting a junior and subservient role or even a traditional formal alliance relationship with the United States, and that is likely to continue to be the case. Increasingly, US policymakers have to think about whether India's interests are naturally aligned with America's and whether India is in fact on a path to living up to America's hopes both as a great power, as a democratic and increasingly liberal state, and an Asian counterweight to China. However, if India is only becoming increasingly competitive with China but other features are not there, then the US-India relationship will be pushed into a slightly slower and different path. In short, the Biden administration is likely neither to continue with what have been failed policies under the Trump administration, but neither is it likely to

find that it will go back to Obama era strategies or approaches because the world has moved on and the United States now has a great deal of catching up to do.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI moderated the follow-up session. In his opening remarks, Ambassador Chaudhry said that predicting the result of US elections is tricky. He highlighted two constants in US foreign policy overtures that will remain the same with marginal difference. First, the US competition with China, that will remain regardless of who comes into power. This competition will remain a constant as it's already part of US national security strategy and its national defense strategy and we see no indicators otherwise. Secondly, US relations with India that might witness a marginal difference if Biden comes into power, over the human rights violations in Indian Occupied Kashmir. He added that while the Modi government may come under greater criticism because of its illiberal tendencies, there is nothing to suggest that there is a zero sum, whether this will be a plus for Pakistan and Pakistanis are not looking at it that way because the real danger to India of today is from within India. He said that the biggest change that is expected is the change that might come in US approach towards globalization and its leadership role in world affairs if Biden takes over. Highlighting the agenda of discussion, Ambassador Chaudhry said that in Pakistan, you come across both opinions, some say that America will not move out of Afghanistan regardless of who assumes presidency, it is going to stay maybe not troops but through advisors. There is also a degree of thinking that an abrupt withdrawal of US forces perhaps could be highly destabilizing for Afghanistan. The most conspicuous change would come to how the Trump administration has approached globalization and America's leadership role in global affairs in world affairs. According to Ambassador Chaudhry, as far as Pakistan is concerned nothing much will change in terms of US competition with China, US partnership with India, and US relationship with Iran.

Dr. Rifaat Hussain was of the view that the upcoming US elections may turn out to be messy and unprecedented. Trump will not be disposed easily towards leaving the White House even though there are issues concerning his personal health, there are issues relating to law and governance. The battleground states, Louisiana, Philadelphia, and Florida, which were the main districts in which Trump administration won the last elections, there is no guarantee that there has been any significant change in voters preferences which will be toward the Democrats. However, the main states in which the Trump administration won the last elections have little to no preference to

vote for the Democratic candidate. It will be naïve to right off President Trump's victory in the upcoming elections.

He further added that given the damage that the Trump administration has caused to the US economy, its international image, its commitment to multilateralism and US reputation as a responsible state and an international leader has suffered greatly due to the policies pursued by the Trump administration. The world is looking forward to a Biden administration. Instead of dealing with it as business as usual, the American attention will be focused inward because there are a huge amount of vacancies that need to be filled out which are lying unfilled under the Trump administration even after four years. There's a repair work that America needs to engage in so it will have to reorder its domestic political system, particularly its institutions, in order to be able to play a very important and very coherent role. This alone can take US a couple of years.

He highlighted that because of the damage done at the home front, the Biden administration will have less time on its hand to refigure its relations with the world. The focus will be more inward than outward. While talking on the threat from China to the US, Dr. Hussain remarked that China has taken hold of both the Democrat and Republican imagination, yet the organizing principle of the US foreign policy is going to be enmity and adversity towards China. This feature alone will shape Biden's presidency's foreign policy towards the rest of the world. He further added that given the tendencies that we find among the Modi administration because of his illegal disposition, his tampering of the human rights record and his frequent threats Pakistan, there could be a trigger crisis or a false flag operation of the nature of Balakot. We will have to wait and see how would the Biden administration respond to that kind of a crisis.

Dr. Hussain was of the view that the overall US approach to its allies will improve considerably under the Biden administration if it comes to power. The overall the health of not just Pakistan's relationship with the United States, but also US relations with the international community under Biden leadership is going to improve considerably. There's going to be a reliance on the traditional channels of diplomacy so American diplomacy which has become whimsical and hostage to the Trump administration is likely to disappear. While talking about Pakistan relations under a Biden administration, Dr. Hussain stated that not much is going to change for Pakistan

but not much is going to get worse for Pakistan either. Under the Trump administration, Pakistan has seen the relationship with the United States fluctuate from 2017 or early 2018. There may not be a sea change in the US approach towards Pakistan, however the relations may not see the lows that they did during the early years of Trump administration - the approach will be more balanced and more traditional. This fluctuation is going to disappear under Biden, and replaced with more measured and balanced approach which is going to be more traditional

Mr. Nadeem Zaman in his remarks said that within Pakistan, there are conversations on the US exist from Afghanistan and what would be the nature of that exit? Whether it's going to be quick withdrawal or a complete withdrawal or a complete disengagement. He spoke about Afghanistan through a regional business and market perspective and stated that before the Afghan war in the middle to late 90s there was some financial engagement between the West and Afghanistan and onward to the Central Asian markets. The US has over \$90 billion interest in the Central Asian region, hence it is important to see the Afghan issue from a regional and market access prism. With regard to access to that market, currently there's about \$31 billion of private investment in Central Asia, there is about \$50 billion that has been extended by World Bank and IMF through US guarantees and little less than \$10 billion in the US assistance to a number of these countries. Exxon Mobil is interested in investment in that region which Afghanistan would be part of. Keeping that in mind, it is naïve to expect an immediate US disengagement and withdrawal from Afghanistan by either the Trump administration or the Biden administration purely because of financial engagement both by the private sector and the US government.

In the interactive session, questions were raised regarding the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan to which Dr. Markey replied that the clock is already ticking in terms of the deal with the Taliban and expectations on the Taliban side that US conventional military forces should have withdrawn by May 2021 and there will be a question in US policy circles about whether or not to adhere to that timeline. If Biden enters office, it would live up to the promise of departure. If the Taliban continue with military operations and no significant progress is made in the intra-Afghan dialogue, then much will depend on a series of heated and contested debates within the new administration. He stated that there's nobody talking about putting in more forces or staying considerably longer in Afghanistan except for McMaster, the former national security adviser to Trump. He further added that conventional military withdrawal by the United States

from Afghanistan does not mean zero activity or disengagement with Afghanistan. It should continue to mean bolstering the Afghan government financially and providing a variety of both military and non-military assistance and even undertaking standoff military operations in support of the Afghan military that wouldn't necessarily require considerable conventional military basing inside Afghanistan.

Answering to an observation made on the US global leadership, Dr. Markey said that if the Senate goes to the Democratic party as well as the House which nearly everybody is expecting will stay in Democratic control, then you'll have a single party government across both houses of the Congress and the presidency in which case you can push forward on appointments to all of these jobs. You'll see very little in the way of congressional pushback on budgetary and other requests. Everything will be fast-tracked in a way that presumably would allow a Biden administration to be off to the races and even act in parallel addressing both domestic and international concerns nearly simultaneously. There'll be all kinds of bottlenecks but to simplify things will move very quickly within six months to a year. Many of the big ticket appointments and other things would be solved and people would be acting very quickly. On the other hand, if the Senate stays Republican, there will be a kind of a wrench in the works and you may see a slow and a friction inducing process on the Senate side. This will hobble the new administration that would require continued negotiations between the two houses of Congress and the presidency and will make all of this process much harder. Dr. Markey commented that the world is not going to take America's word for its commitment to showing leadership just because Joe Biden wins the presidency. US has a lot of work to do to even get back to the skeptical level of acceptance of American leadership that it enjoyed under the Obama administration. It will take some time to reassert and to kind of get its act together back at home, rebuild some of the institutions, and re-staff some of them.

Replying to another observation, Dr. Markey stated that it is in America's interest never to be the one that closes the door to cooperative relations with the other countries. In other words, US goal, particularly in countries that are neighboring China or very close to China, is to keep the door open and continue to have relations with these because that's actually in the American interest. However, Pakistan and China in a practical sense make it impossible for American investors to have an opening in Pakistan because the playing field is not level because Chinese

companies and Chinese workers and investors are given red carpet treatment and American efforts are made quite difficult.

In his concluding remarks, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors, ISSI stated that normally, the elections are a matter of what we call domestic jurisdiction, but elections at the presidential level in the United States is a different matter. The presidential elections in the US are a matter of great concern and interest for the international community. What happens in the US, its ramifications and implications affect all as US is still the sole superpower, the strongest in fact the largest economy in the world. It is also the strongest and most advanced military power and also leader in science and technology and also the oldest democracy. He was of the view that to understand the implications of the policies, one has to understand the thrust behind those policy choices. Trump has championed the ideology of 'America First' and unilateralism in his foreign policy approach. The thrust of his policies has been in getting out of global institutions, global treaties compacts, and not caring much for the allies like NATO and European Union, while his guiding principle has been confrontation. He remarked that the elements that impact Pakistan and US relations the most are US relations with China and India, Pakistan's relations China with reference to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Afghanistan. He stated that one cannot expect the United States to withdraw from this region because it can keep a watch on Iran, Central Asia, China, and Pakistan. This also provides US with an advantage to keep an eye on Pakistan's nuclear program. He reiterated that US policy towards India will not see any significant change at the strategic level. Similarly, new administration's approach to counter-terrorism and nuclear issues will remain unchanged. He was of the view that Pakistan-US relationship remains transactional under the Trump leadership and the relationship may not see any significant changes under the Biden leadership.