

**THE
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REPORT

PUBLIC TALK

“Challenges in US-Pakistan Relations”

Dr Marvin G. Weinbaum, Scholar-in-Residence, The Middle East Institute, Washington, DC

March 9, 2011

The Institute of Strategic Studies organized a Public Talk under its Distinguished Lecture Series 2011 titled “Challenges in US-Pakistan Relations” by a distinguished American scholar-in-residence at The Middle East Institute, Washington, DC, Dr Marvin G. Weinbaum.

The new Director General of the Institute, Ambassador (Retd) Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, welcomed the distinguished speaker and said that US-Pakistan relations are going through a critical phase. There was a long history of defense and strategic cooperation between the two countries. During the 1950s and 1960s the two countries were member of regional defense treaties; during the 1980s they jointly assisted the Afghan people in resisting Soviet occupation; and since September 11, 2001, the two are supposed to be allies in the so-called war on terror. Moreover, the US is a major market for Pakistani exports, a major source of external economic assistance both, directly and through the IFIs, and a major source of humanitarian relief assistance in times of natural disasters. There are also significant Pakistani immigrant and student communities in the US.

Despite the foregoing, Qazi observed, there were not only significant differences between the two countries on a range of issues, including nuclear cooperation; the path towards an Afghan settlement; the role of India in the so-called Af-Pak region; US economic assistance etc. Indeed, recent polls suggest that the public of both countries held significantly negative images of each other. In fact, even in official circles of both countries many see each other as security threats to

their respective national interests instead of being reliable partners or allies. In this regard, US-Pakistan relations have been a “strange animal” and it was very appropriate for a good American friend of Pakistan to come and throw light on the significance and future direction of our bilateral relations.

Taking the podium, Dr Weinbaum gave an insightful and comprehensive overview of the US-Pakistani relationship, and how it has evolved over the years, despite the fact that the relationship has been fraught with difficult challenges. The speaker reiterated that the relationship has always been a marriage of convenience, however, relations after the 1971 debacle posed great challenges and the relationship remained normal despite all odds. According to Dr Weinbaum, the United States has always supported democratic governments in Pakistan, but circumstances have compelled it at times to support dictatorships during such times like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which left no choice for the US, but to support General Zia ul Haq and similarly, the 9/11 attacks, which again forced the US to support a military regime in Pakistan. He said that relations between the two countries have always been a marriage of convenience and history shows that when John Foster Dulles, under his policy of containment, offered Pakistan help, Pakistan was quick to reciprocate because of its disadvantageous position vis-a-vis India. The United States has also backed democratic leaders, and in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s case, the US even intervened to get his death sentence changed, but failed.

Elaborating on the historical context of this relationship, Dr Weinbaum explained that when General Zia took over, US-Pakistan relations were rather cool, but the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 changed a lot of things. For the US, the need to work with whoever was there arose and it was simply the objectives that mattered. When the US saw the emergence of the democratic system in 1988, it was welcomed wholeheartedly. The period following the Soviet withdrawal was a very challenging time as the US had no real interest in the region, apart from humanitarian issues. The Soviets had left and it was considered not so important to maintain a presence in the region. When Nawaz Sharif was removed in 1999, the move was not welcomed, but as mentioned before, 9/11 changed a lot, just as it had with the Soviet invasion.

Dr Weinbaum opined that it is a matter of context and the US prefers to work with democratic governments unless there are exceptional circumstances. In recent times, there has been a serious effort to redefine and reset the relationship.

Moving beyond the historical context, Dr. Marvin G. Weinbaum said that the relationship between US and Pakistan is often based on America's short-term military objectives and Pakistan's own national interests. He mentioned, however, there has been in the past few years an honest effort for US and Pakistan relations to change the image and misperceptions about both the countries towards each other. He said that with all the differences and challenges Pakistan and US have undergone in the past, under the present circumstances there can be no denying the fact that the success of US and its coalition partners in Afghanistan will be a success for Pakistan, and a stable Afghanistan will certainly bring stability to Pakistan. Nonetheless, Dr Weinbaum recognized the fact that Pakistan faces a legitimate fear that once US interest in the region and in Afghanistan are addressed US and the international community will once again ignore the region.

Dr. Weinbaum outlined the two-stream policy that Pakistan has towards US and Afghanistan:

1. First policy is in accord with the West in which Pakistan's interests are best served. Both share a common objective in this war, i.e. a stable Afghanistan which is not going to be a breeding ground for Taliban and insurgents in the future.
2. Second, a reserve policy that Pakistan has in which it willingly protects certain elements in Afghanistan for its own interests in the region.

He emphasized that Pakistan, for long, has seen Afghanistan through the prism of India, and that its interest in Afghanistan has been more Indian-centric. He stressed on the possibility of US and international forces failure in Afghanistan which will bring very serious consequences for Pakistan, US as well as the region. He called attention to the fact that if US fails in Afghanistan it will bring have a negative impact on Pakistan. According to Dr Weinbaum, once the Taliban succeed in Afghanistan they will have every motive to influence, motivate and

instigate the Pushtuns living across the Durand Line in Pakistan. And sooner or later other countries like Iran, China, India and Russia will get in the way making Afghanistan a proxy ground for wars in future.

He said that US concern should not only be for Afghanistan but for the whole region especially for the Subcontinent. America's failure in Afghanistan will not only strengthen Al-Qaeda's foothold in Afghanistan, but will also provide them with further opportunities for global terror. Dr Weinbaum said that it is imperative to have a stable and neutral government in Afghanistan which is friendly to all its neighbours and whose territory is not used for any kind of mischievous activities, and the only way to achieve this is by political means. He was of the opinion that there has to be a power-sharing political system in Afghanistan where the Afghan Taliban also has a say.

At the conclusion of his lecture, Dr. Marvin G. Weinbaum emphasized that a divorce between US and Pakistan is not possible. Both of the countries are dependent on each other and the relationship needs to move beyond the military sphere. For both the nations to prosper, it is important for US and Pakistan to understand the fundamentals of their relations. There should be more people-to-people contact. He said that it is not only important to have the political elite on board regarding Afghanistan, what is more important is that the US should also work to have the Pakistani public on board as well in order to succeed in Afghanistan.

Responding to a question regarding US and India's strategic alliance and its reluctance towards have a relationship with Pakistan in that manner, Dr Weinbaum replied that Washington has different policies for both the nations because India and Pakistan serves different objective. US needs Pakistan to pursue its policies in Afghanistan, whereas its relation with India are more in a larger regional context. In reply to another question concerning the revolts in the Middle East and the possibility of its likelihood in Pakistan, he said that there are certain elements present here in Pakistan who want a political change. But at the moment, it seems difficult because the military is playing a very stable role in this process. According to Dr Weinbaum, another reason why a situation like Middle East cannot erupt in Pakistan is because there is no catalyst which can ignite the change of system in Pakistan.

In his concluding remarks Ambassador (Retd) Tanvir Ahmed Khan, Chairman Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, said that US and Pakistan need to acknowledge that they still need to harmonize their ideas on the future of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that it will be decided, first and last, by the will of their people. He said that it is now time to get back to the drawing

board and think out-of-the-box. The people of Pakistan will not be reconciled to being pawns in a larger strategic contest. He concluded on the note that Washington's interests in this part of the world have to accommodate the national interests of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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