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Report – In-House Meeting

with

Dr. Joshua White

**Associate Professor, John Hopkins University School
of Advanced International Studies**

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Pictures of the Event





The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, hosted an In-House Meeting with Dr. Joshua White, Associate Professor, John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. Dr. White spoke on Trump's South Asia Policy and Challenges to the Relations between Pakistan and the US.

Director America and Research ISSI, Mr. Najam Rafique welcomed the speaker and stated that US and Pakistan have always shared a love-hate relationship, but with President Trump in the office the dynamics of the relationship remains a mystery because of his inexperience in the field of foreign policy. For all practical purposes, his South Asia policy would, in all likelihood, be a continuation of his predecessor. Much, of course, will depend on the kind of foreign policy team which the new president puts together.

Dr. White in his opening remarks highlighted four different shifts that are happening in the transition from Obama to Trump, which reflects a lot of changes. A lot of these changes are happening at the higher policy level, one of the aspects of this policy making is towards South Asia in general, and Pakistan in particular.

He started by explaining the first shift, which is towards ad hoc style of decision making by the new US President. The US national security decision making system has been more or less structured in the same way since the first Bush Administration. It is a structure which is not dictated by law or regulation. It was developed under the first Bush Administration and has been followed ever since. It is a very disciplined and an inclusive system where different levels of committees meet to prepare options for the next level, all the way up to the National Security Council, to the President and his Cabinet. The process is extremely rigorous, there are outside views, analysis, but, this process is changing now. He further stated that there is a noticeable change in the style of decision making. There is a lot more chaos in the decision making process, which, to some extent, also has its positives, but it also presents risks. He said that in normal circumstances, it takes about 10 people to review the tweet the POTUS makes. But with President Trump, no one can stop him from tweeting, nobody reviews what he is tweeting, and in times of crisis, this can be very problematic, as every single word the President says matters.

The second shift Dr. White elaborated on was that President Trump is transactional, he thinks about relationships as deals, in which he is always looking at the present and the future and not the past. Hence, country to country relationships seem very little to him. He has been most critical of some of Americas closest allies, like Mexico, Canada, Korea, and Australia. This approach also presents certain opportunities for different countries. Countries like Japan are well positioned as it is a financially resourceful country. Similarly, China is ironically in a good position to deal with the US because it has leverage over critical national US security threat like North Korea.

Then there are countries Dr. White said, which will experience more difficulty in dealing with the transactional government in US. One of these could be India because from the US perspective, US investment in India over the last decade has been long-term and strategic. The US often finds India to be a challenge to deal with because it wants lot of US investments. It wants the most advance defence technology, but resists engaging in joint patrols or joint military activities with the US. It want to cooperate in joint counter-terrorism ventures, but will not join

the counter ISIL coalition. Yet, the only reason US engages with India is because a strong India over the long-term will help to assure balance of power in Asia. However, in a transactional approach to relationships, it is unclear what India will bring on to the table. It will be more clear when Prime Minister Modi visits the US in June 2017. There might be some engagement on counter-terrorism, defence, and LNG.

Coming to US's relation with Pakistan, Dr. White said that there are chances that this relationship will also be under a lot of challenges. A big reason for this is the perception that exists in the US that it is giving more than its getting from its relation with Pakistan. The US has maintained a fairly long-term strategic relationship with Pakistan. It has seen ups and downs. But we have still learned to cooperate and develop a relationship on the basis of mutual interest. Despite of all that, if you look from a narrow perspective of what the US is giving and what it is getting, a lot of questions and challenges could be raised. Which also puts Pakistan in a transactional frame.

The third shift Dr. White highlighted was the US move towards bilateralism, as the Trump Administration is very suspicious of multilateral agreements. This idea is not unusual for a Republican, they have long been suspicious of multilateral institutions because they feel it reduces US sovereignty. This is one of the reasons why Trump backed out of the Trans Pacific Partnership. Similarly, it is unclear how much the Trump Administration will invest in regional economic and political architecture in Asia because of his bilateral orientation.

The final and fourth shift is the shift toward mercantilism. Dr. Joshua White articulated that this approach deals with the economic theory which focuses on balance of trade between countries, rather than gains from trade. Trump not only focuses on balance of trade, but also the balance of trading goods, and manufacturing goods. This approach will largely effect US relations with China, Japan, South Korea and India as these are the countries in Asia with which the US has a negative trade balance in goods. Dr. White believed that this approach will not be relevant for Pakistan, because in Pakistan areas such as textiles, are not competitive in the US.

Bringing together the four trends, Dr. White mentioned one can articulate what it means for South Asia. Firstly, the overall trajectory of US relations with India will likely continue. It is a positive trajectory, we might see less energy by the White House as compared to the time of President Bush and President Obama. Secondly, if there is a Pakistan and India crisis of any kind, that is where the US policy will become clarified. In that case, Dr. White believed that we will see that the US will tilt a bit towards India. That is also where we will see the US wrestling with its interests in South Asia. He further added that unless Pakistan finds a way to insulate and inoculate itself from some of the risks the extremist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed pose, then the US will be more sympathetic towards India in any Pakistan-India crisis.

With regards to Afghanistan, Dr. White said that the Trump Administration is finishing a South Asia review which will primarily be an Afghanistan review. At the moment, the US does not have very good options, as the Afghan war has been going on for a long time. It is considered to be a stalemate that is deteriorating in favour of the Taliban and not in favour of the government. The US is trying a number of things to counter that. It has tried the surge which brought change for a very short period of time at a great cost and was not able to change the fundamental balance

between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The US has also contemplated on reducing its presence by limiting it to an embassy based presence. Therefore, what President Trump will try to do is increase the attention of resources in Afghanistan at the least to try to stabilise the security environment. The Trump team is of the view that the only way to settle the Afghan dispute and to resolve it is through a well-crafted political settlement.

Reiterating on Pakistan and US relations, Dr. White added that there exists a perception on both sides that the US needs Pakistan less than it used to and Pakistan needs US less than it used to. The relationship in past few years has become a bit normal and routine. For the first time in 15 years, the conversation between Pakistan and the US is not centred around US assistance to Pakistan and its frustration as there is a significant decrease in US monetary assistance to Pakistan. This is also because of the change in nature of dependency on each other, and also because of Pakistan's relatively good macroeconomic management. Another factor is the increase of Chinese investment in Pakistan which has made Pakistan to think more broadly and out of the box to meet its economic challenges and to look for more lucrative options. This has also led the US to think about Pakistan's role in Asia on broader terms.

Concluding his remarks, Dr. Joshua White said that there might be a risk that Pakistan might be moved back into the AfPak frame and the Trump Administration will see Pakistan through the lens of Afghanistan as they are focusing more on the Afghan war. Thus, even though there is a visible positive change in the air, there exists certain core security issues which are still unresolved like the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and nuclear issues which pose challenges to this relationship.

A sets of questions were raised during the Question and Answer Session. A question was raised on whether this style of decision making in the Trump Administration that has been discussed, would also extend to the Pentagon with regards to the US policy towards South Asia, specifically the Strategic Dialogue that was revived under the Obama Administration. More questions were asked regarding the US pivot to Asia, Trump's Afghan policy, and Trump Administration views on Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

Replying to the set of questions raised, Dr. Joshua White said that there is a different style of civil-military management by the Trump Administration. He has authorised the generals to take decisions according to what they see best, which is not the way the US system works, as military activities can have political consequences. He further added that the US will try to maintain a limited, board-based relationship with Pakistan. President Trump has proposed a budget which slashes foreign assistance, although there is not much hope that the budget will pass as it will have to go through the Congress. Yet, we will see a reduction in the US foreign assistance budget and spending on foreign affairs, which consequently will impact on things such as US engagement with Pakistan on various issues under the Strategic Dialogue such as energy, civil society, health and education.

Answering to the question about the Pivot to Asia, Dr. White stated that although the US is a Pacific power, it sees its future bound up in Asia. The previous administration spent a lot of time and effort investing in ASEAN and the other related organisations. Also, with all the US rhetoric on the Pivot to Asia, the US was slow about moving resources from the Middle East to Asia.

Nonetheless, it will be interesting to see if Trump recognises the importance of Asia. But it is unclear what he will do about the US Pivot to Asia as he has a lot of mending to do with key US allies in Asia and rebuild relations with the Asian countries before launching a broader strategy.

Answering the question on Afghanistan, Dr. White reiterated that there will be an increase in the number of US troops, although it may not be significant. Most of these troops will work under the train, advice and assist programmes in Afghanistan as counter-terrorism missions are already being worked on. It will be more about putting US forces in partnership with Afghan forces to target and fight ISIS/ Daesh and Taliban. The objective will be to try and stabilise the security and strategic environment in the region. Moreover, under the Obama administration, the US was committed to finding ways to engage the Taliban through channels like the QCG, and even when the things weren't happening through a formal channel, there was a continual effort by most countries in the region and by the US to reach out to the Taliban. Yet, the geometry of the process is very critical and difficult. The Taliban themselves are divided about the utility of talks, whether to fight or talk or otherwise. Moreover, the Afghanistan government is divided itself over the engagement with the Taliban.

Talking about the involvement of regional countries in the talks with Taliban, he added that Pakistan has a lot to gain and a lot to lose in Afghanistan. It has enormous stakes in Afghanistan so leaving out Pakistan is less of an option. Consequently, it leads to other countries in the region like China leading and becoming part of the peace process, and then Iran, Russia also come in the picture, making the whole idea even more difficult to be executed. This also raises another concern regarding the Russian role and engagement in Afghanistan. The US major concern is that Russians have begun to play the Iranian game in Afghanistan. They pledge publically their support to the government, and at the same time also support the Taliban, politically and materially.

Replying to the question on nuclear weapons, Dr. White stated that there has been a caricature of the US concerns about Pakistani's nuclear weapons. The concerns US had regarding the nuclear weapons in Pakistan has decreased. US recognises that Pakistan has done enormous work to bolster the security of its nuclear weapons. Still, there are some concerns regarding the safety and security of the nuclear weapons despite the serious precautions and measures taken by Pakistan.

Another set of questions were asked regarding embargo on Iran, and the future of Iranian nuclear deal under the Trump Administration. Other questions were raised regarding Russia's growing position in Afghanistan, the US keenness to bring Pakistan and India on the dialogue table to settle outstanding disputes, specially the Kashmir dispute, and whether the increase in troops by the US in Afghanistan will lead to another stalemate and an extension in the withdrawal of the US, and Trump's views on China and the China factor in Asia.

Replying to the questions, Dr. White said that contrary to the criticism and Trump's campaign remarks on the Iranian deal or the TPP, NAFTA, and national security deals, his team still wants to keep the US-Iranian deal in play. Also, the State Department has certified Iran's technical compliance to the deal. Furthermore, he added that there will be enormous pressure on Trump by the US allies and the national security establishment if he starts rolling back on all the

agreements and deals the US did in the past. The only risk will come if the US gets into a rhetorical war with Iran, and an exchange of harsh rhetoric takes place between both the two countries.

Answering the question on China, Dr. White responded by saying that Trump's views on China are not entirely clear. He came in with a lot of tough talk on China, the White House is staffed with people who are very well versed with China, but the element of North Korea is also there. So it will be interesting to see how it unfolds. But, the relations will be more in terms of trade over the Trump Administration as compared to his predecessor. With regard to CPEC, the US has been unable to articulate a clear view on it. This is because there are a lot of different competing views in the US. One view point talks about the US and China being geo-strategic competitors, and that the US should facilitate China's strategic reach across Asia. While the other set of opinions argue that the US should be a part of it, if not very proactively.

Responding to the question on Russia and Afghanistan, Dr. White said that Russia does not have significant influence in Afghanistan. Maybe it can increase in future, but for now, it is something to be watched.

On Kashmir, Dr. White said that there is a thin chance that the US will take a new position on the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India. The opinion that exist otherwise is nothing but a wishful thinking, there are very fragmented statements that actually support this argument. The US and officials in the Trump Administration working on South Asia are committed to the position that the US has had previously, which is on the understanding that Pakistan and India reached in at Simla.

On the surge in Afghanistan, Dr. White reiterated that the surge was able to change the momentum in Afghanistan. The attempt now would be to bring the equilibrium back to the peace process.