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Report- In-House Meeting

**With 4-Member Delegation from China Institutes of Contemporary
International Relations (CICIR)**

May 15, 2017



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Pictures of the Event



On May 15, 2017, the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a 4-member delegation from China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR). The delegation was led by Mr. Fu Xiaoqiang, Director CICIR Institute of Security and Arms Control Studies and included Mr. Chen Wenxin, Vice Director CICIR; Mr. Wang Shida, Assistant Director, CICIR; and Mr. Yan Shuai.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI, welcomed the delegation and outlined the agenda of the discussion: Views on US South Asia policy; Developments on One Belt One Road (OBOR) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); and regional issues of common concern.

Mr. Fu Xiaqing thanked the Institute for hosting the delegation and introduced his colleagues. He praised Pakistan's efforts in achieving concrete outcomes in terms of Early Harvest Projects under CPEC. He said that the overall picture was bright and security situation has improved. With the launch of the CPEC project, Pak-China friendship has grown even stronger, but issues of future security remained of common concern for the two countries. India boycotted the Belt and Road Summit held in Beijing in May 2017, which shows its stubbornness. Nevertheless, India's position in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is of great strategic importance. It is a part of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor under BRI. Even in the Eurasian Land Bridge, it occupies a central position, and thus, stands to benefit from this project. However, India has been confronting China in the Indian Ocean, which is shaping the regional security framework.

India has also been working in cooperation with Japan. Beijing has some concerns over the Indo-Japanese projects under the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure as an alternative to China's BRI. China is not against cooperation, but it does object to any initiative which tends to disturb peace and security in the region. China does provide support to Pakistan, but the United States has been forging a military alliance with India. Mr. Fu raised a question on how could China counter this Indo-US military nexus?

On Afghanistan, he spoke on an optimistic note. He was of the view that Afghanistan was not stable since Taliban occupied more territory. It has become a safe-haven for international terrorists. This deteriorating situation of peace in Afghanistan may cause a spill-over in Pakistan and China, which would not be easy to manage. The new President of the United States, Donald Trump has asked NATO allies for more security forces in Afghanistan. Mr. Fu said that China has the same interest in Afghanistan: it wants stability and peace in the country. Now that Pakistan will become a full member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China is looking forward to further cooperation and collaboration in security affairs in the region.

Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood endorsed Mr. Fu's views by saying that he rightly identified the issues of common concern. He said that India is speaking with a 'forked tongue' and giving contradictory statements on BRI. Modi has categorically stated that BRI is

unacceptable, but sometimes he also says that we are not against the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. Sharing his own experiences, he added that while attending a seminar in Nepal recently, the Indian delegation conveyed to the Chinese that it (OBOR) is an imperialist design. However, at a meeting in Tashkent in May 2017, the Indian delegation said that we are not opposing it, and we are already a part of OBOR and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is funding OBOR projects. In other words, according to the situation; they are both opposing it and supporting it. However, the fact remains that they are opposing it anyway since they have not sent their delegation to the BRI Summit in Beijing.

Mr. Chen Wenxin, Vice Director CICIR, expressed his views on US Foreign policy and Sino-US relations:

1. Indo-Pacific concept is dead; Trump's foreign policy is not strategy-oriented and his foreign policy reflects his concerns on soft problems only;
2. Security and economy are two pillar of Trump's South Asia policy. Donald Trump on the first day of his presidency, and afterwards his Secretary of State Tillerson spoke on how to break US foreign policy and US foreign affairs. Therefore, America First is going to be a top priority in Trump's dealing with security and economic issues.
3. Trump is going to cooperate with both India and Pakistan. He'd be cooperating with Pakistan in economic domain and with Indian in defense affairs.

Mahrukh Khan, Research Fellow at ISSI, spoke on the same issue. She said that President Donald Trump's administration and foreign policy strategy is still new to the office, and thus, its approach towards the world in general and South Asia in particular is not very clear yet. Observations can be made on how relations currently are between US and Pakistan, US and India and how they might shape up in the future under the Trump Administration. President Trump's election campaign rhetoric did not focus on South Asia as a region. The narrative was more country specific, with targeted statements on the US approach to its relations with Pakistan, India and China under the Trump presidency. However, there haven't been any substantial policy statements from the White House as yet. Hence, there is not too much to build an analysis, but we can structure a list of future trends or likely direction which can be expected.

Shedding light on US policy towards India, Ms. Mahrukh pointed out that both these countries share good bilateral relations that encompass all areas of trade, energy, infrastructure and defence collaboration. Furthermore, under the Trump administration we can expect not only a stronger bipartisan support across the Congress on strengthening US-India relationship, but also considerable agreements on issues such as counter-terrorism, the rise of China and its growing print in the region, growth in trade, and investments. Hindu lobby has deep tentacles in the US administration and is highly anti-Islamic and is a major voice behind unfriendly Pakistani policies. US defence sales to India amount up to \$14 billion. However, many policy pundits in

India are apprehensive of the prospects of a potential US disengagement from the region, which will have a direct impact on India, both in terms of economic and defence.

Trump administration's opinion on Pakistan is as divided as it was during the time of his predecessor. Most analysts agree that the new policy will run along the same contours as those of the Obama administration. While being based on principles of eradicating terrorism, cooperation for stability in Afghanistan and development aid, the future trajectory for Pak-US relations could go one of two ways. The two countries could take an amicable step back from the deep level of dependency and expectations from each other, as it might well not be the need of the hour owing to the changing geostrategic atmosphere of South Asia. The other way could be to take a fresh start by forging ties on fresh foundations of economic interaction, investment and mutual trade agreements.

Another important player in South Asia is China. It will be interesting to see how the Trump administration develops its relations with Beijing, as it will be looked at very closely not only in the US, but also in India. Furthermore, the progress of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will be a significant factor for the US to design its policy in relation with China, which will have a ripple effect on Washington's relation with New Delhi.

In Afghanistan, the US currently maintains a force posture of up to 9,800 military troops. The Trump administration has vowed to support Afghanistan security forces and is considering a proposal for sending more combat troops to Afghanistan. General Nicholson, commander of the US forces in Afghanistan, in his testimony to the Senate Arms Services Committee characterized the situation in Afghanistan as a stalemate, and recognized the threat of ISIS and Daesh in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region while expressing a need for increased cooperation with Pakistan. The odds are against any radical change in the US policy towards Afghanistan.

Mr. Najam Rafique, Director Research ISSI, remarked that much is up to conjecture when it comes to reading the 'tea leaves' on Trump's policies. The Trump administration has not been successful in identifying its approach towards South Asia. There are indications that he might appoint Christian Fair, an expert on South Asian affairs at Georgetown University in Washington as Assistant Secretary of State, which may give direction to his policy towards this region. If she takes the position, it is very much clear what direction the US South Asia policy would take with her preferred bias towards India. However, President Trump may take a balanced approach towards Pakistan and India. Till then, we will have to go by the policy of his predecessor. And, so far, this is what he has been relying on in terms of strategic relationship with India, and moving from security dimension to working on a broader theme of issues with Pakistan. For one thing, there is going to be a significant reduction in US military aid to Pakistan and forging stronger ties with Pakistan in the fields of trade, energy, science and technology, education and people to people contacts. And, President Trump being the businessman that he is, it has to be seen how keen he will be to open up on the textile quota for Pakistan in the US.

In Afghanistan, the Trump administration has already indicated that the Afghan security forces do not have the required capability to fight effectively. Trump has also moved to give back the authority to CIA in Afghanistan, which reflects that we can expect to see more of the drone strikes against terrorist targets in Afghanistan. The use of MOAB recently in the Nangarhar province in Afghanistan points to the fact that the Trump administration will be using all kinds of new spectacular weaponry. While the US has been trying to figure out a reconciliation process but, besides the American initiative, other states like China and Russia have also taken the initiative towards this end to bring the Afghan government and the Taliban back to the negotiating table.

Director CICIR furthered the discussion by saying that Trump's South Asia policy has two pillars: Global neo-security partnership and counter-terrorism alliance in fighting regional and global terrorism. A faction of the Taliban has not shown strong willingness to participate in the peace dialogue. The US Congress debated that Al-Qaeda and the Taliban established a new relationship, yet it doesn't undermine the fact that the Taliban are going to be a future political group in Afghanistan. The US has also shown its worries over India's Cold Start Doctrine and that the doctrine can escalate tensions in the region. Given this, the director asked how strategic stability could be realized in the region.

To this question, Mr. Najam Rafique responded that these perceptions are right to some extent. As far as the Afghan Taliban are concerned, they are looking for a place in the broader political setup in Afghanistan. Also, we are now witnessing the return of former warlords like Gulbadin Hekmatyar as well. There is a certain direction that the opposing factions are now taking. However, other stakeholders like the US, Central Asia, Europe, Pakistan, Iran, India and China are also involved, and who have their own individual interests.

Regarding the Indian Cold Start Doctrine, Pakistan is not really concerned following its doctrine of Full Spectrum Deterrence and the strategic stability it has brought to the region. The kind of capability with the range of nuclear weapons Pakistan has suggests that it has been able to achieve a modicum of strategic stability, and any use of nuclear weapons can be ruled out. However, many quarters in the western world believe that tactical weapons can be used in case of a limited conflict between Pakistan and India. Nevertheless, India's aggressive posture towards Pakistan is definitely a point of concern, and the country while stepping up firing across the Line of Control has also been using Afghanistan as a second front to launch covert operations in Pakistan.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood furthered the discussion by agreeing that after taking account of Trump's nature and style of government, it would be too early to say what his administration's policy would be towards South. In his election campaign, he had said so many things, but we should not take his words as policy on South Asia. Whatever experience we had, it appears he will adopt a transactional approach and not an overall comprehensive strategic approach focusing

on issues. So far, we have seen that at times he takes a different policy, and at other, he takes an altogether different posture.

The latest visit of US National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster to South Asia reveals that the Trump administration's policy in the region is still a continuation of Obama's policies. That Pakistan needs to do more is the same mantra Obama used to say. In Afghanistan, he expressed his commitments towards America's broader national security interests and intentions of increasing troops in that country. In India, he did not express such a clear cut support as Obama did, but the overall policy towards India would be based on the China factor and using India as an advantage. That's why the US is providing weapons to India on such a large scale. Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that one factor should be remembered; there is a great influence of Indian diaspora, and the Hindu community supported Trump during elections. It is more likely that Indo-US cooperation would continue. Pressure on Pakistan too would continue. He said that it would not be surprising if Trump took a U-turn from this strategy. The direction for Trump in South Asia will however, remain the same; containment of China, putting pressure on Pakistan, and building up cooperation with India.

The next round of discussion covered different aspects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Mr. Wang Shida elaborated that in 2013 when the idea of CPEC was first proposed, it was opposed by several quarters. But after 4 years of meticulous planning and execution, the project is shaping up to be a success. Mid-term and long-term plans under CPEC are focused on energy, infrastructure and railroad networks. He appreciated the pace of work being conducted at Gwadar, but he also highlighted different challenges to CPEC which he categorized into the following three:

1. Internal challenges such as the differences between the central and the provincial governments, and between different political parties.
2. Security challenges, which no doubt, have been reduced after the successful launching of Operation Zarb-e-Azb.
3. Geopolitical challenges to CPEC. Indian uneasiness to the pace and width of CPEC is no secret. India is concerned with strictly avoiding a change in the balance of power in South Asia, and through CPEC, China will gain better access to the Indian Ocean. Mr. Shida further opined that the reaction of the United States towards CPEC has been quite ambiguous and complicated to understand.

Research Fellow and expert from the China Pakistan Study Centre (CPSC) at ISSI Ms. Neelum Nigar responded to the challenges faced by CPEC. She said that even though the project faces many challenges, the opportunities it presents are also massive and must not be overlooked. The

successful implementation of various projects is indicative of the fact that CPEC is ahead of all the other economic corridors under the broad Belt and Road Initiative.

Mr. Muhammad Faisal, Research Fellow at CPSC alleviated Chinese concerns about the criticism being aimed at CPEC by explaining how the 18th amendment changed the governance system in Pakistan. He explained how the provinces had been granted a greater degree of freedom in their affairs. Thus, it is only natural that different provincial set ups viewed foreign investments differently. The crux of the matter is that CPEC is being warmly welcomed by all quarters. He also apprised the Chinese delegation of the security arrangements made by Pakistan government for protection of CPEC.

Mr. Mir Sherbaz Khetran, Research Fellow and expert on Baluchistan and Central Asia told the delegation that the nationalist parties in Baluchistan condemned all attacks on CPEC projects and the endangering of precious Pakistani and Chinese lives alike. He further elaborated that BLA and BLF were also under great pressure to declare and justify the nature and source of their foreign funding. Insurgency in Baluchistan is weakening with every passing day. However, the government has hit a few snags in dealing with border management with Iran and Afghanistan.

Mr. Najam Rafique further mentioned that the corridors under the auspices of OBOR are still a fairly new phenomenon, while points of conflict among different regional countries are decades-old issues that need to be addressed first. For example, the question of Kashmir plaguing the security of South Asia needs to be resolved as soon as possible. He also said that the US New Silk Road initiative is a dwarf in comparison to the splendour and expanse of OBOR.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood stressed on the unique nature of CPEC and its efficacy as a flagship project of the OBOR vision. He pointed out that through CPEC, both land and maritime routes shall converge at Gwadar. Unlike other corridors, CPEC involves only two countries - Pakistan and China - which makes it all the more easier to navigate through the political barriers and bureaucratic red tape that usually hinders such ventures. It also connects to several other corridors which makes it an integrated project. It is the only corridor among six others that is developing at an impressive rate at the moment.

Mr. Wang Shida further asked how CPEC could benefit the economy of Pakistan to which Ambassador Khalid Mahmood responded that it is a highly prosperous and economical venture for both Pakistan and China. Energy projects and infrastructural development will create a ripple effect, benefits will trickle down to the general masses and thus it will enhance Pakistan's economic standing in the region and the world.

In further discussion, Mr. Yan Shuai asked about the threat of the IS (Islamic State) in Pakistan. Ms. Aminah Khan Research Fellow and Afghanistan expert at ISSI explained how the random groups of terrorists in the border region pledged allegiance to the ISIS leadership, but there is currently no proof of the existence of the IS in Pakistan. As far as the presence of IS in

Afghanistan is concerned, the MOAB dropped by the US security forces had also targeted the possible hideouts of IS, if any.

Mr. Muhammad Saffee, Research Associate, further stressed that there was no ideological congruity in Pakistan with the cause of IS.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood his closing remarks also stressed that Pakistan's free and sovereign soil is not fertile ground for the Islamic State (IS) and its nefarious designs. He thanked the members of the delegation for their valuable input in the enlightening discourse. He ended the meeting on the optimistic note that the exemplary friendship between China and Pakistan bodes well for the economic harmony and peace in the entire region of South Asia.