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## *Report – Public Talk*

# **“Pakistan US Relations in Jeopardy: Way Forward”**

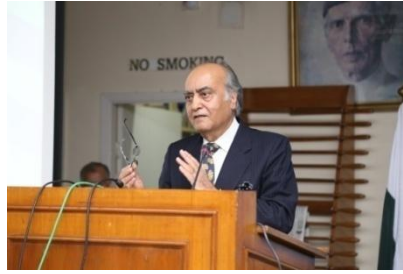
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### Pictures of the Event



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, (ISSI) organised a Public Talk titled, "*Pakistan and US Relations in Jeopardy: Way Forward*" on January 29, 2018. The guest speaker at the talk was Dr. Moeed Yusuf, Assistant Vice President, Asia Centre, United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington, D.C.

Welcoming the guest speaker, Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that Pakistan-US relations at present are in jeopardy and it is a subject of great debate and discussion. Although some may say that the current dynamics of Pakistan-US relations is a new development - it is not. In 2011, the Aspen Institute did a report which foreshadowed what is happening today. Events such as the Afghan Strategy announced by the Trump administration which was largely a South Asia strategy, followed by the National Security Strategy in December 2017, Trump's tweet in January 2018 and the most recent National Defence Strategy all corroborate with the Aspen report. All these strategies reflect the contours of US policy and the element of divergence of interest policies between Pakistan and US, and shows lack of trust between both the nations. Pakistan and US have been the most ally of the allies, and at the same time, the most sanctioned country in the world. However, relationship under President Trump has hit a new low. The only new development that one can see is by comparing last year's strategy reports and this year's National Defence Strategy report. There is a shift in Trump administration's approach to countries from collaborating with against terrorism, to interstate strategic competition - which appears to be a priority now. The issue of terrorism has been placed on second position, prioritizing interstate competition of US with China and Russia. This new development also impacts Pakistan, as the country stands today at the wrong side of US because of its ties with China. Another important factor that Ambassador Khalid Mahmood highlighted was the building up of frustration in US which is due to lack of success it has achieved in Afghanistan after being at war for 17 years.

Dr. Moeed Yusuf began by saying that Pakistan-US relationship was a terrible marriage where divorce is not a possibility because the cost of breaking up is too high. Yet, there is no real possibility of creating a happy union given the contours of this partnership. The divergences in Pakistan-US relations is real, and for too long, both sides have pretended it to be not. What Pakistan and US wants out of this relationship is completely different, and over the past few years that difference has increased. Dr. Yusuf highlighted two main reasons for this divergence:

Firstly, that the global alliance structure is changing. Although it is in flux and one cannot put countries in camps like during the Cold War era, but India-US partnership is a reality in today's time. On the other hand, Pakistan and China relations has been very strong from the beginning which now seems to be expanding more. The more India and US relationship develop, the more Pakistan and China relationship will get strong. What we are seeing is a crystallization of these so called camps which exists in the minds of the policy makers.

Secondly, another point of divergence is Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and US argue that they want peace in Afghanistan. However, the reality is that the peace that suits US in Afghanistan may not necessarily be the peace that Pakistan wants. The peace that US and much of the international community wants to leave behind in Afghanistan is a multi-polar system of government, which by definition, will have a tilt towards India to offset Pakistan's clout in Afghanistan. This can also be seen throughout history, when except for the 90's Afghanistan did not see the need to balance Pakistan and India. On the other hand, the peace that Pakistan wants in Afghanistan is one which requires a lesser role, presence and influence of India.

These, he explained, are the two main elements where what Pakistan and US wants is fundamentally different and not easily reconcilable. This one divergence has created a gap in this marriage which has left both Pakistani and US unhappy.

Dr. Moeed Yusuf further said that we constantly hear both sides accusing each other of undermining their national security interest - self perceived national security interest. What we are seeing is not exactly misperceptions, it is not coming to terms with one another. Hence, the major question now is, why don't both Pakistan and US opt for a breakup? He stated that both the parties have toyed with this idea multiple times. But every time both Islamabad and Washington get close to it, they realise that day to day tactical cooperation still remains critical for both sides to continue to defend some of their national security interests. For example, there is no real divergence on elements like Al Qaeda, Uzbek militants, Daesh, and on how Pakistan and US wants to operate against. There is a lot of intelligence sharing as well. The supply lines that Pakistan provides are of phenomenal help to US which continues to be the case. Dr. Yusuf further highlighted that there have been significant cooperation on Tehrik-e-Taliban presence in Afghanistan, even though this may not be public

Similarly, Dr. Yusuf said that US assistance to Pakistan has also remained of immense help and there is a reason why it has remained and not stopped. Hence, the most important thing at the moment is to make this relationship work and not fall apart. At the end of the day, there remains no doubt that if both Pakistan and US did not cooperate as they did since 9/11, the cost of being in a negative camp will be much higher than they are today. So, while there still remains strategic divergence at the tactical level, both Islamabad and Washington understand that bluff and buster aside, there are very serious interest that binds them together to continue working as a complete rupture will hurt both. The larger question is what needs to be done to do damage control? One desperately tries to convince the other to agree with their point of view. It is important to convince the other for a way forward and not live in the past. That is essentially what we see in this on again off again relationship.

Dr. Yusuf further stressed that a rupture in Pakistan and US relations is difficult, but there will be more stress and tension in the relationship and blame game in the public sphere. However, there are genuine reasons to worry that things may go horribly wrong despite neither side wanting it. He spoke about the 'Donald Trump phenomenon', and said that the unpredictability around US foreign policy, whether good or bad is real. Similarly, the red lines in this relationship can be miscalculated by one side or the other. He also said that the champions of Pakistan and US relationship in Washington no longer exist, and the consensus on coercing Pakistan to do things that US wants is the strongest now. People who used to argue within US government that whatever the problems may be Pakistan remains crucial to US, do not exist anymore. More so, there is a significant change in US strategy. While it talks about peace processes and negotiated settlements, it is clearly and formally a military first strategy. In that strategy, the view from Washington is that Pakistan is part of the puzzle that must be fixed for American to gain an upper hand in Afghanistan. Hence, the pressure on Pakistan is going to be coming and will be sustained, and with election year in Pakistan one might see responses from Pakistan that might create trouble.

Dr. Yusuf also touched upon the nature of Pakistan US, which seemingly, are in an artificial state, in terms of direct relationship between decision makers since 9/11. Because Washington has changed, the trusted networks have disappeared. Both the capitals lack interlocutors, which is an important instrument and a necessity in this relationship. Nonetheless, the most worrisome

part is the constant weighing of China against US and is probably the most dangerous approach to Pakistan-US relationship. The reason for it is thinking about a substitution, but this argument creates space for people to think that the red line with US is further out than it actually is. On one hand there is the pressure and higher risk appetite in Washington, on the other hand, people in Pakistan say we can live without US.

Dr. Yusuf also highlighted the Daesh factor in his talk. He was of the view that as the Daesh factor strengthens in Afghanistan, Pakistan has a real, autonomous, non-state actor, that benefits greatly from creating a conflict between Pakistan, Afghanistan and US.

Coming back to Pakistan-US relations, Dr. Yusuf said that when mistrust becomes the driver of the policies, it becomes almost impossible to see the other side's equation and point of view. The mistrust is so deep that both are attributing worst intentions to the other party. Their rationale regarding to the policy approach that both have adopted are at a collision course. In case of US, as a super power it is entirely rational to say that I keep my options open and see where the situation goes. Likewise, Pakistan can rationalize this approach by saying that this argument is part of the larger game and the policies can diverge. Secondly, if US thinks that military approach and victory is possible, and it is a rational way forward, why will US not pressurise Pakistan to deal with factors they think are a major problem. Third, why would US want to go out of its way to address Pakistan's concerns regarding India, when US's preferred partner is India.

On the Pakistani side, the rationale is why believe that once it gets rid of Taliban problem - the Taliban will not turn against it, and the US will be there to help. When there is a history that provides evidence that points otherwise. In the same way, if Pakistan believes that US presence is about China and the nuclear weapons, what is the point in facilitating a US presence or facilitate its victory.

The most pivotal question is: Where does the relationship go from here? The best Pakistan and US can do in the foreseeable future is to avoid a rupture. In lieu of this, Dr. Yusuf highlighted a few steps that both Pakistan and US can take and address the concerns and issues as they move forward.

Firstly, it is important to understand that the mistrust between Pakistan and US today is deeper than mistrust between Pakistan and India. Hence, decisions taken in terms of tactical cooperation should be verified, otherwise there will be a constant game of finger pointing.

Secondly, while making agreements, one should be careful to not frequently change the goal posts, as the best way to create more mistrust in an environment of mistrust is to say one thing and do another. This factor alone has been a concern on both sides in Pakistan-US relationship.

Thirdly, for the US, the judgement that whether Pakistan has done as US demanded, should be disconnected from the security situation in Afghanistan.

Fourth, there is too much conversation about the Afghan refugees. The idea that if every Afghan refugee is sent back to Afghanistan the problem would be solved, will, in reality, add more to the already existing anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan.

Fifth, it is crucial for both sides to keep their expectations realistic. As the strategic divergence remains, and even if the two parties start moving to a tactical front, there won't be a major paradigm shift on either side.

Dr. Yusuf said that for him, the most worrisome part is when Pakistani officials, whether privately or publically talk about reconciliation. There are conversations about of reconciliation, who is going to bring a plan, and who is going to do what, when the important thing is to keep the expectations limited. As at this point, a possibility of a serious effort of reconciliation in the coming months is very low. For Pakistan to believe in a quicker reconciliation will be nothing but a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the US side, work on tactical cooperation is one option and expecting Pakistan to bring the Afghan war to Pakistan's soil will be naive. Similarly, US expecting Pakistan to kill and fight against the Haqqanis will create problems for US itself. Hence, it is important for both Pakistan and US to keep their expectations managed and realistic and find a point where both can work together on a common ground.

All these conversations raise one red flag which Pakistan and US will continue to have. The current US foreign policy approach across the world prizes coercive tactics to get things done. Once a country responds to that pressure and make concessions, it is important to not end up on a point where one side feels that its coercive actions are working, and the more pressure it puts the

more it will get out of it. While the other side feels that any further pressure will only make the whole arrangement move apart. This tactic will create a reactionary result unless both sides keep on talking on what those red lines are in reality.

Finally, leverage other actors. Dr. Yusuf was of the view that China and US have a more overlap of interests than any other country in Afghanistan. This relationship has not been leveraged enough. And the need is to broaden the conversation and bring in economics - the AfPak economics, the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan-US economics which offer tremendous potential irrespective of all strategic concerns. Hence, leveraging other actors, specially China, is very important.

Dr. Yusuf concluded his talk by saying that the best way to destroy Pakistan-US relationship at this point is either to play out everything in public or not to try as hard as possible to create trusted interlocutors that both sides are missing today. If personalities keeps on clashing and everything plays out in the media, both Islamabad and Washington will have a serious problem. There is more happening in both the capitals than we know. The mistrust is so deep that it is colouring all the decisions at the end of the day. And the only way to break out of this cycle is through verifiable understandings on how to move forward, behind closed doors and through trusted interlocutors.

The talked was followed by Question and Answer session.

Q: A question was raised regarding lobbies like that of Hussain Haqqani which is active in Pakistan bashing compared to more rational intellectual voice in US which is not active, and which can advocate for Pakistan. Similarly, Indians who work in different media houses in US and academia push forth Modi's vision of India. Despite the offensive posture of North Korea, US has agreed to talks with it. Why is Pakistan treated the way it is - through the lens of Afghanistan?

Dr. Yusuf in his reply stated that Pakistan according to him is not in a defensive posture and that is the whole gripe that US has against Pakistan. Ultimately, US leverage over Pakistan has not worked. Likewise, the goal of policy narrative is not to prove ones strength, but to protect yourself and your perceived national interests, whether one gets it through aggression or passive



prudent attitude. Replying to the observation made on North Korea, Dr. Yusuf said that it is not logical to give the example of North Korea in this context. Why is it that Pakistan wants to be like North Korea? Pakistan is the 30th largest economy in the world, and making a comparison of such a nature is naive. With regards to the existing lobbies and their function, he said that Pakistan and US interest are at a crossroad at the moment, while US and India share the same common interests. In the Cold War it was the opposite. It is a very difficult argument to make in Washington that while your interest diverge, US should be mindful of Pakistan's concerns regarding India. It is an interest issue that is driving the conversations in Washington. There are not enough intellectual voices in Washington who understand Pakistan inside out, whereas other countries have that advantage.

Q: There is no doubt that the way forward seems very difficult, probably impossible. The interest of Pakistan and US are conflicting and not divergent, peace in Afghanistan is not our common interest - the main interest of US is a continued military presence. In fact lack of peace helps then to build a case for a continued presence. Also, regarding trust between both Pakistan and US - building trust has been the least important thing.

Replying to the comment, Dr. Yusuf said that US ultimately aims to have an open-ended approach in Afghanistan - preferable depending on the situation in Afghanistan. There may be other external factors that may take over which may push things in a certain direction. During the Obama administration, when they started to drawdown troops from Afghanistan everyone panicked, and Pakistan's official position at that time was for US to not leave Afghanistan. None the less, all possible end aims are on the table and even US does not know at this point where this will end up. Dr. Yusuf said that from 9/11 onward, the one word that you get to hear more than anything else is India, and from that flows the debate about consulates. There is no doubt that mistrust exist and if mistrust start driving policies in itself that will build the worst case scenarios. In this case, verification become much more important than it would be in a normal environment. He further added that it is entirely rational for every country to diversify options - but there is no substitute to US for a long time to come. Even China has been very clear and conservative in challenging US because of the interdependence in the global economic affairs. Hence, it is unfair to say that substitution is an imminent possibility and believing this will be a big mistake given that US is a neighbor.

Q: What are the reasons why mistrust exists at all tiers political, diplomatic and intelligence, when Pakistan has extended every possible cooperation and intelligence sharing with the CIA. Where does the problem lie?

The mistrust, Dr. Yusuf stated, is not driven by political, diplomatic or intelligence, as much as by the divergence of interests. In Pakistan and US case, it is not true that full cooperation has been extended - it will be irrational for both side to extend full cooperation if they feel it will not be in their interest. Both Pakistan and US feel they are rational, yet, they can end up at a collision course. US is of the view that Pakistan supports certain actors who work against US. Pakistan says that US policy is a failure in sight and it has nothing to do with what Pakistan has done. The mistrust is because of the actors that US thinks are creating problems in Afghanistan. The divergence of interest will keep this mistrust going, the important question is that it shouldn't get to the point where mistrust itself becomes the reason of rupture of the relationship.

Q: In asymmetrical warfare, if a stronger party announce timeline it will show them as a weaker side. What was the rationale behind this approach taken by the Obama administration? Secondly, is peace the only desire of US in Afghanistan or there is more than that?

Replying to the questions, Dr. Yusuf said that there has been a lot of critique regarding the time line. In the current US strategy one of the big point made was getting rid of the timeline. Looking at this from a US perspective, Dr. Yusuf said that when US had timelines it was critiqued for having timelines, and thus not being able to subdue the insurgency. Now, when US dismisses the timeline and puts forth an open-ended approach the debate comes up -what is US here for? Because the situation in Afghanistan is not improving, the question will keep coming up in front of US of its goals and objectives in Afghanistan. At this point it is in a catch 22 situation, it cannot convince countries like Pakistan in either way.

Q: The Americans are trying to coerce Pakistan as is evident from their policies. How far is US likely to go to coerce Pakistan? In Afghanistan, US is looking at Pakistan to do a lot. What is the ground force, the ISAF, actually doing if they cannot protect the capital of Afghanistan.

Dr. Yusuf replied that it is difficult to answer as to how far US will ultimately go. However, there are two sorts of consensus in Washington, one is that a policy of inducement has not delivered and thus only coercion is left to try. At the same time, there is a policy view that says that there is a lot of coercion that US can do - but be careful. Hence, the calibration game where one finds US policies in action. The risk appetite of the Trump administration is high than previous administrations. So to hope that things will work out eventually as they did during the previous administrations will be a big mistake for Pakistan. The people making decisions in US are serious about coercion and will go further than anybody in the past has. Answering about the ISAF and the situation in Kabul, Dr. Yusuf said that this is a classic surge on surge - the military surges and the insurgent surges. Also, the ISAF troops are not defending spaces in Kabul. These attacks, according to Dr. Yusuf, do not suggest a paradigm shift in terms of the capability of the insurgents. They always had this capability and they are now just demonstrating it. Also, this does not at the same time suggest that they can dent US more or take over places.

Q: Is US seriously interested in bringing peace to Afghanistan, or is it sitting there looking after its broader interests in the region? Secondly, there was a delegation of Taliban in Pakistan for meetings. Was there any hints from Washington for initialling this move, and would Washington seriously be interested? And lastly, is Washington able to bring any unity in the unity government in Afghanistan?

Replying to the question regarding mistrust, Dr. Yusuf said it really depends on which capital you sit in. In Washington, there is a constant debate on ways to find a solution in Afghanistan and end the war. The problem is peace on what terms? There are many ways to look at it, one could argue that peace could come if US leaves Afghanistan. The problem with insurgency is that is difficult to define when you are in a position of strength. It is an intangible amorphous concept that one keeps on debating. As a result, when a party is in a position of weakness, they don't want to negotiate as one would end up giving more than it should. When a party is in a position of strength one argues that why should you negotiate as you would win. It is very difficult to come to hurting stalemate when both parties realise that it is time for negotiations. Hence, it is not a question that whether US wants peace, but rather when is the right time to compromise in terms of a negotiation. As far as the unity government is concerned, Dr. Yusuf stated that it is an election season and ethnicisation of politics in Afghanistan is quiet visible.

Q: The role of interlocutors and engagement behind closed doors is questionable in the current atmosphere of mistrust and whether transparency can serve well as compared to secrecy. Secondly, what kind of verifiability or measures can be done in terms of tactical cooperation?

Dr. Yusuf responded by saying that the element of secrecy has jaundiced the public perceptions on both sides which has been a serious problem post 9/11. Also, there is a need to differentiate between mistrust between interlocutors who have to make decisions, and mistrust at the public level. At the public level more secrecy will create more confusion leading to more mistrust. Similarly, at the policy level, the interlocutors have to make decisions not by pointing fingers at each other and accusing each other, but on the basis of rational interests behind closed doors. In terms of direct interlocutors, there has never been a disconnect this wide where you don't have people to talk to who can make things happen as it used to in the past. As far as the tactical measures are concerns, Dr. Yusuf was of the view that there are many measures which can be put into action. For example, like the recent hostage release, and a few names given by US to Pakistan to act against. Similarly, there are names and coordinates given by Pakistan to US for TTP people in Afghanistan. The point of verification is not about getting into the specific, the point is when there is so much mistrust neither side should expect that other would take their word at face value. There has to be done something more to convince the other side.

Q: What could be Pakistan's reactive response to cut-off of US aid? The lesson to be learned for Pakistan is to be self-reliant and self sufficient as this is not the first time US did what it did by cutting aid. Also, what is your opinion regarding the deepening of mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul, as nothing is moving forward between both the capitals?

Dr. Yusuf said that being self-reliant and sufficient stands true for any country. Replying to the question regarding mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul Dr. Yusuf said that we have often seen that both the sides often agree to something and the follow-up months are wasted with blames and suspicion. There is a need to find a way in which both sides comfortably agree to work on and neither of the side should have unrealistic expectations. Within this frame, whatever is possible without hurting each other's sovereignty, sensitivity, interests should be worked on. The mistrust is so deep that is difficult for both sides to take each other on their words.

Replying to another question regarding a U-turn by US in foreseeable future if in case the military strategy fails in Afghanistan, Dr. Yusuf stated that the current US strategy is thought out as a US system. The people who are driving this policy are people who are bureaucrats, and senior officials. There is no way to tell if there is a U-turn, the indications are pretty clear that this is a sustained path that will be followed till at least it is clear that it will deliver or not.

Q: Where could the spring offensive by the Taliban in Afghanistan lead Pakistan US relations, and will the surge of troops that the US has talked about be a surge of private contractors in Afghanistan?

Dr. Yusuf was of the view that the concept of spring offensive has become a myth because there is yearlong fighting and what we are seeing right now in Afghanistan is a surge from the Taliban. It will be continuation of the same. If the spring offensive goes to a point where we see what is happening in Kabul sustained every day, there will be tremendous pressure on Pakistan and the chances of relations falling apart will be much higher. Regarding the military first approach, Dr. Yusuf said the strategy taken up by US is a strategy in which US wants to weaken the Taliban with the use of force as the negotiations take off, US wants to be in a position of strength, unlike the Obama strategy which was a reconciliatory strategy. US military terms of engagement and use of reference was very restricted under the Obama administration, and which has been relaxed under the current administration and powers are being used much more freely. Secondly, there is a condition-based approach, this is another thing that is being seen as a change in order for the governance to improve. Third is the pressure on Pakistan. These are the three stated reasons why there is belief that the tide can be turned. Believing in a complete military victory in Afghanistan is not true, not even among the most hawkish policy circles in US. There will have to be a negotiated settlement which is also acknowledged in Washington.

Wrapping up the Question and Answer session, Chairman ISSI Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that this has been an exquisite and a stimulating experience. He said that it is very difficult to cover every aspect of Pakistan-US relations in a limited time. He thanked Dr. Moeed Yusuf for providing an articulate expose on the state of Pakistan-US relations. He said that while there are issues which are essentially of bilateral nature, one cannot be blind to the current geo-strategic alignment that is taking place. This new phenomenon not only effects the bilateral

Pakistan-US relations, but also other major countries. Interstate strategic competition is now the primary concern of US and its aim and objective is to compete, deter, and win. It is important that Pakistan and US avoid any kind of rupture in their relationship and look for a common workable ground. It is equally imperative to overcome the deep mistrust that both the countries have towards each other. Concluding the talk, Ambassador Mahmood highlighted the importance of interlocutors at different policy levels which will help to build trust between both the capitals.