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Report – In-House Meeting

Dr. Marvin Weinbaum

Director, Pakistan and Afghanistan Studies,
Middle East Institute, Washington D.C.

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Pictures of the Event





The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted an In-House Meeting on February 23, 2018, with Dr. Marvin Weinbaum, Director of Pakistan and Afghanistan Studies at the Middle East Institute, Washington D.C., on "*Current US Strategic Thinking About Afghanistan*". Other participants at the discussion included Shuja Alam, Additional Secretary MOFA, Ambassador Inam-ul-Haq, Ambassador Riaz Mohamad Khan, Ambassador Riaz Khokar, Ambassador Jalil Abbas Jilani, Ambassador Ali Sarwar Naqvi, Executive Director, CISS; Dr. Rifaat Hussain, NUST, Lt. Gen. (Retd) Talat Masood; and Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Asad Durrani.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI welcomed the guests and briefly outlined the main features of the new Trump administration's strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He said that although Pakistan-US relations were a subject of great debate and discussion, and despite being in a state of jeopardy, the current dynamics of the relationship are not new at all, but more of the same mill. While the outlook of the policies which President Trump has adopted are in contrast to President Obama's policies, the general thrust remained more or less the same. Ambassador Mahmood opined that the current policy outlook was more militaristic in nature, insensitive towards its allies, particularly Pakistan, and based on an erosion of multilateral diplomacy. These policy approaches have fundamentally effected not only the region, but bilateral ties between Pakistan and the US.

Speaking on the current US thinking about Afghanistan, Dr. Marvin Weinbaum was of the view that the Trump Administration was looking for an option to change the course of the war in Afghanistan. Speaking about the new US strategy, he said that it was dilatory and called it a strategy to buy time despite the very clear strategy for winning the conflict. He said that the US is spending more than \$4 billion a year in Afghanistan, and it has already spent another \$30 billion rebuilding the country, and supports more than 90 per cent of Afghanistan's defense budget. As part of the new strategy, the Pentagon has expanded the combat authority allowing US forces to conduct offensive operations against the Taliban rather than only engaging in self-defense. While the Trump administration's new strategy follows nearly the same pattern as that of the previous US administration, the focus now is highly militaristic, and aims to target Taliban leaders through force in the hope that it will compel the group to make a compromise and enter into talks.

He also questioned Trump's policy of sending a few additional thousand troops and said that there was no point of sending this low additional number of troops. He said that 4000 or 100,000 troops would not turn things around. They are not being put in there to turn the tide or greatly influence the military outcome in the short-term. They will go in as a *minimal maintenance strategy*, whose main function is to buy enough time for the Afghan government to put its act together. The Trump administration's militaristic strategy aims to target Taliban leaders through force in the hope that it will compel the group to make a compromise and enter into talks. However, the approach that the US is adopting is certainly flawed, since the Taliban have been gaining ground and have clearly stated that they will only agree to talks when international forces leave Afghanistan. The Taliban have dismissed any suggestion that they have been weakened by the US approach, and in fact are stronger than before, as is evident from the fact that they continue to gain territory, as well as spread their influence throughout the country. Dr. Weinbaum was of the view that the military option would not help achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan and that efforts should be made towards a peaceful settlement.

Dr. Weinbaum was clear in pointing out that Afghanistan's future is, unfortunately, not very bright because one-third of its territory, mainly the rural areas, are effectively controlled by the Taliban and other extremist groups. These gains are not attributable to the Taliban's reorganization or rise in popularity. Rather, they are bound up with the failure of the Kabul government to meet the expectation of the Afghan people.

Speaking about the Taliban, Dr. Weinbaum said that the Taliban have, over the course of 16 years or so, managed to establish themselves in Afghanistan and have numerous means of support; including cultivating poppy, smuggling, extortion, and support from the Afghan diaspora. However, at the same time, they have not been able to take over the country and that he did not expect them to do so in the near future. He was of the view that it was in the best interest of the Taliban to enter into a negotiated settlement with the Afghan government. Speaking about the peace process, Dr. Weinbaum was of the view that the US has abandoned the idea of a negotiated political solution, and instead, is now focusing on a more militaristic and aggressive approach. He said that while the (limited) increase in troops will certainly not turn the tide against the Taliban, they will help the Afghan government to stabilize and strengthen only to deny victory to Taliban. Dr. Weinbaum said that he did not support such a notion and would

never put his money behind such an idea, but said that was the only choice there was - it was a long shot and requires certain actions, but one was not sure whether Kabul was capable of doing so. He said that the Taliban were in it for the long haul, yet the hope (in the US and elsewhere) was that they were buying time to get their act together essentially for reintegration, which was inevitable. So unless they (the Afghans) cannot reconcile amongst themselves, which includes reforms on so many levels, it will be hopeful thinking, but it is the only clear way forward.

He was of the opinion that unless and until Kabul does not put its act together and move towards national reconciliation, there will be no movement on the peace process with the Taliban. He was of the view that the template for the peace process has always been there which included a review of the constitution to make it more Islamic, as well as withdrawal of foreign troops. However, he suggested that there was a lack of will. He said that the trouble with such a framework (which has been around for the past 5 years) is that it was limited. Once both parties got to the table and what would happen after that was anybody's guess? There has never been a discussion beyond that. He reiterated that unless all parties do not reconcile, any hope for peace would remain elusive. He also said that it was not about one side winning and the other side losing. The failure of the Afghan state would certainly not be a victory for the Taliban. It will be a protracted, bloody, chaotic civil war with proxies all over the place. It is in no one's interest, but that will be the reality with the increasing rise of the Islamic State which is the epitome of brutality. He said the Iranians, Russians, and the Indians will be there, and Pakistan's best hope is that friendly Pashtuns that favor Pakistan will be on its borders.

He briefly spoke about Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the peace deal that was signed between the Hizb-ul-Islami and the government of National Unity. Dr. Weinbaum was particularly critical of the peace deal, as well as Hekmatyar whom he referred to as the most unsavoury character. Yet, despite his personal reservations, everyone in the State Department welcomed the deal as some sort of game changer - and the pathway to achieving peace with the Taliban, which it has certainly not. Instead, Hekmatyar has been busy fuelling ethnic tensions and is as clever as they come to gain some position.

Discussing Pak-Afghan ties, Dr. Weinbaum said that President Ghani recognizes that Pakistan's role is pivotal, and that there is really no future to Afghanistan without Pakistan. Hence,

President Ghani has really reached out, and made a concerted effort to get Pakistan on board, but he was sent back empty handed. Pakistan's greatest mistake was that it did not show a greater response to his overtures and help him. This may be because Pakistan was not sure it could deliver, and when Ghani came back with nothing, he was bombarded by internal opposition of selling out to Pakistan. Hence his 180 degree turn against Pakistan, where he stated that Pakistan could not be a part of the solution. He further went on to say that the special office that was created by the US spent all its time looking for the ghost of negotiations in Pakistan instead of Kabul and a regional solution. While Pakistan certainly needs a regional solution to make anything work, in which it has a very critical role and is key, it will not pull the irons out of the fire for the country, as it cannot agree amongst itself on anything. In the end, it is only the Afghans themselves that can deliver whether they are capable of it or not.

Speaking about Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, Dr. Weinbaum was of the view that despite criticism emanating from the US, it would be difficult to achieve any kind of success in Afghanistan without Pakistan's cooperation. He said that the US expected Pakistan to clamp down on the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani Network which is inevitable if major US goals in Afghanistan have to be accomplished. Pakistan's influence on the Taliban had receded significantly and Dr. Weinbaum was of the view that Pakistan was never able to dictate to the Taliban even when they were in Kabul. The notion of an easy way out of Afghanistan by putting pressure on Pakistan was highly irrational. Therefore, he did not completely agree with the Trump administration's strategy of putting pressure on Islamabad to deliver the Taliban or for that matter the Haqqani network. He opined that Pakistan has kept its lines open with the Taliban all these years because it believes that they are assets for a future possibility that if Afghanistan fails Pakistan needs friendly Pashtuns for support. However, he reiterated that there could be no solution without Pakistan. Although Pakistan certainly has differences on the approach and mechanism, it wholly supports a political settlement per se, but one in which Pakistan is sure it will not be against its interests, and often, it just boils down to the fact that it's not the government which is going to be close to India and is going to give India an opening in Afghanistan, to do various things against Pakistan.

As for the current state of Pak-US ties, Dr. Weinbaum said that the current policy of President Trump was more or less a continuation of his predecessors policy. The fundamentals of the

policy remain the same, but centralized around stronger rhetoric and more focus on the Haqqani network and increased strategic dependence on India. He said that Pak-US ties would remain at a low point and were unlikely to improve any time soon unless the elements within the US policy circles altered their behavior and approach towards Pakistan and not view it from the lens of any other country. However, he was of the view that it was unlikely to happen .

Dr. Weinbaum opined that publicly criticizing Pakistan in what appears to be insulting language was counterproductive. He said that instead of public criticism and humiliation, the US should employ other means to gain Pakistan's support, and said that a heavy dose of diplomacy was needed to reduce the current tensions. He said that apart from diplomacy, consistent dialogue was needed between the two countries which could create incentives on both sides for cooperation. Trading allegations against each other was counterproductive.

Responding to a question about increasing US pressure on Pakistan, Dr. Weinbaum pointed out that the US does not, in fact, have many options when it comes to Pakistan. In the end, both countries will need to find means to cooperate in those critical areas within which they, despite everything, share common interests.

With regard to the US increasing tilt towards India, Dr. Weinbaum said that the US should not prioritize one country over the other and that the US did not want to see an India-Pakistan confrontation. Talking about the Indian role in Afghanistan, Dr. Weinbaum stated that Pakistan tends to exaggerate India's role in Afghanistan. He believed that the best way to reduce India's presence in Afghanistan is through a more cooperative relationship with Kabul. Dr. Weinbaum further went on to say that he did not expect the current situation to lead to a serious breakdown in relations. Despite the tilt toward India, he was of the conviction that it is important for India and Pakistan to avoid confrontation, and that Washington might not seek to increase tensions by pushing India to take provocative actions in Afghanistan. The US is always mindful of the fact that India and Pakistan are nuclear weapon capable states and that it must stay engaged in the region. While the US may be displeased with the level of cooperation it receives from Pakistan, it recognizes that it can ill-afford to have Pakistan as an adversary; especially given its concerns about nuclear proliferation and the need to work together to confront global terrorism.

Responding to a question about the prospects of a regional approach, Dr. Weinbaum explained that the idea to have the regional players such as China and Russia along with Pakistan coming up with a settlement of some kind is as delusional as the others. He said all the regional countries have different motivations for the moment, all of them have hedging strategies. There's no common view except for the fact that none of them would really want to see the Taliban back. While that's true enough, at the same time none of them have really had much faith in the Afghan state, and as a consequence of that, they maintain these hedging strategies.

Answering a query about the possibility that India would send its troops to Afghanistan, Dr. Weinbaum said that it was a throwaway line and the Indians have made it clear that they will not be the tail on the dog anymore than China being the tail on your dog, and will not send troops to Afghanistan. Instead, they will continue to use their soft power which has been very effective. Despite Pakistan's apprehensions, India has very close ties to Afghanistan, and the only way Pakistan can limit India's role is to have better and stronger ties with Kabul. Pakistan is certainly in a much better position to aid Afghanistan's successes. While Pakistan may not have the same leverage as it did in the past over the Taliban which is now limited, and to think that Pakistan can dictate to the Taliban is a mistake. It does have spoiler influence - if it cannot make things happen it can certainly stop them from happening. But the US is, erroneously, looking for Pakistan on both counts, by asserting that if Pakistan wants it can force the Taliban into negotiations - this is a highly flawed assertion.

A participant raised the issue of the Kashmir dispute and said that Pakistan has been insisting on a peaceful settlement specified in the UN Charter. Pakistan is open to all means of settlement of the dispute under the Charter. However, India's reluctance has prevented a peaceful resolution. India does not want any involvement of a third party. Pakistan is open to third party interventions, like the US, which will be of much help for both the countries. Responding to a question on whether the US was willing to play a role in the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, Dr. Weinbaum said that people should not expect a real change with Donald Trump as US President, and even suggesting the notion that President Trump would jump into the Kashmir dispute is laughable.

Regarding the situation in Afghanistan, Ambassador Riaz Mohammad Khan opined that whenever one talks about Afghanistan, one is astounded by the complexities. Talking about reconciliation, he said that in the past he was of the view that it was necessary to have US-Russian understanding. Pakistan, Iran, CARs, Indonesia, can be helpful, but at the end of the day the only thing that can pledge peace and stability is reconciliation amongst the different factions of Afghanistan. He said that after standing by this for 27 years, he now tends to disagree with this notion. Today, the Afghan status quo has moved from one external catalyst to another. Speaking about the peace process, he said while there was a need for negotiations, it appears that all efforts at negotiations have been half hearted, and focused more on a militaristic approach. Even at the height of the surge, the Taliban were not compelled to talk? Ambassador Riaz was of the view that the only way forward was to engage in negotiations, yet he questioned why any effort made towards negotiations were jeopardized - be it the opening of the political office of the Taliban in Doha, or killing of Mullah Mansoor. He said that while the means are clear, the goals are not. Means are always there, but goals are how do you use these towards certain goals? Speaking about the safe havens, he said that Pakistan is taking measures to prevent any support from its side, and questioned the notion widely prevalent in the US and Kabul that the surge has not produced results because of these safe havens. To what extent can Pakistan be blamed? He said that Pakistan and the US should not jeopardize their bilateral ties on account of the situation in Afghanistan.

Dr. Weinbaum responded by saying that some leaders do move across the Pak-Afghan border, but to blame Pakistan for the failure of the surge or increase in the presence of the Taliban is certainly not true. He said that despite these apparent attempts to sabotage attempts at negotiations, the US did favor negotiated approaches.

Speaking about the MOU signed between the ISI and NDS, Professor Riffat Hussain said that while the MOU was signed in good spirit, when Pakistan asked President Ghani to deliver on intelligence sharing he could not do so due to internal opposition from within his government, as well as the Afghan intelligence, and hence had to back out.

To this, Dr. Weinbaum said that the degree of suspicion in Afghanistan about Pakistan is unbelievable. The narrative is that anything that goes wrong in Afghanistan is because of

Pakistan, period! Which might be convenient for Kabul but is a clear sign of weakness. Ghani certainly did not have the political support for the intelligence MOU, but he really went out of the way and took a lot of opposition to support this deal, and senior Pakistani officials later confided and said that in retrospect, Pakistan should have given him something more. The Afghan government wanted Pakistan to completely divorce themselves from the Taliban, which is not a conceivable expectation, and he did not prepare his country for this. He really had nothing to go back with, hence the disappointment.

Concluding the discussion, the Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood thanked the participants and Dr. Weinbaum for the enriching discussion which left a lot of food for thought.