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*Report – Web Panel Discussion*  
**“Future Directions of Pakistan-US Relations  
Post US Elections 2020”**

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The Centre for Strategic Perspective (CSP) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a web panel discussion on “*Future Directions of Pakistan-US Relations Post US Elections 2020*” on November 12, 2020. The panel of experts included: Ambassador Najmuddin Shaikh, former foreign secretary of Pakistan; Dr. Nisar Chaudhry, a Pakistani American affiliated with the State Department; Dr. Irfan Qaisrani, Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bahria University, and Mahrukh Khan Research Fellow, CSP-ISSI. Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, and Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BoG, ISSI also joined the panel for the discussion.

Director CSP and Editor at ISSI, Mr. Najam Rafique opened the panel discussion. Introducing the subject for discussion, he said that as Joe Biden walks into the White House on January 20, 2021 as the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the US, America and the world of course would heave a sigh of relief. He will be walking into the white house with a series of daunting challenges both at the domestic as well as the international front. The US is suffering from a raging pandemic, civil unrest, critical economy, and unemployment. At the global level, it is suffering from isolationist and biased policies that have plagued its image globally as a credible power. Moreover, US relations with Pakistan have widely been described both as 'transactional' and 'frenemies'. Over the past two decades, relations between both the capitals have witnessed varying amounts of highs and lows, yet both have managed to continue to engage on issues of mutual interest and importance with Afghanistan being high on the agenda. He questioned whether Biden will revamp US relations with Pakistan or will he prefer to stick with the transactional mode of relationship? He said that Prime Minister Imran Khan has extended his congratulations to Biden and Kamala Harris and stressed on working with the US for peace in Afghanistan and the region. He further added that President Biden has served as Obama's Vice President through both his terms in the White House and he understands the issues involved in US relations with Pakistan. The only question is: Will he choose the Obama era ‘AfPak’ approach or will he choose to follow a different approach in relations with Pakistan? Will anything change for Pakistan with Biden in the White House.

Posing a question to Ambassador Shaikh, Mr. Najam inquired about his perceptions on the coming change in the background of indications by President Trump that he is going to contest the elections and that he has no intentions of vacating the White House.

Ambassador Shaikh was of the view that there are six contested states and in these six contested states, Biden is winning by a substantial majority. The count in these six states will be completed by November 30 and on December 12, Ms. Murphy, the General Services Administrator, will be required to certify and announce that the votes have been counted and that a particular result has come about. Moreover, the Congress will then have to ratify the results. After that, funds will be made available to Biden with which he will further his transition. Mr. Shaikh said that Biden may not receive much cooperation in that regard as Secretary Pompeo, speaking on behalf of President Trump, has made it clear that they will continue to contest the results, and go to the Supreme Court and other courts. He further stated that the courts have tended to stay away and are not prepared to try and interfere in this particular process, but this may change. The composition of the court is very much conservative, but the persons nominated to the court have indicated a non-interference in this particular process. On December 12, definitive results will come out. He highlighted that each state determines its own policy with regard to the tabulation of the votes and once that tabulation is completed the votes are certified by the state. He further stated that there are chances that the Biden administration will not have any cooperation from the Trump administration in terms of the briefing papers and these papers will only come forward after December 12, because until then Trump administration will not allow this to happen.

Answering to a question on how Kamala Harris, an Indian-American as the Vice President will look at Pakistan, Dr. Chaudhry opined that it is important to understand that policy of a nation is made by determining what is best for its national interest rather than personalities. He highlighted that what is said as campaign narratives differs from how it is translated into governance. Moreover, he stated that the main policies are drafted by the establishment, the deep state, and the intelligence community and not by the President or the Vice President. On US-Pakistan relations, Dr. Chaudhry said that there are multiple factors that will draft US policy towards Pakistan including how US decides to deal with China, India, Iran, and Afghanistan. He was of the view that the policies of a nation are etched and carved in a very calculated approach. The US election process is complex and the state determines how to count the ballots. The legislators in different state will actually send their electoral votes to the Congress. He said that this is a very serious issue as out of nine closely contested states, eight has Republican legislators, and there is a possibility that they will be countersued again by Biden as well as Trump and then the legislators may decide to send those names on their own to the Congress.

Congress than has to meet on December 6 to finalize the tally and if neither one of them gets the majority, then there will be another election conducted by the Congress. In that case, each state will have one vote. He pointed out that in 26 states in the US the legislators are Republicans, and in 23 they are Democrats. Hence, the Republicans remain in majority and if they vote the outcome will heavily favor Trump and he will have no problem in accepting the results.

Dr. Chaudhry further stated that US relations with Pakistan will to some extent depend on regional dynamics including its relations and dynamics with China, its relations with India, with Iran, and with Afghanistan.

Responding to a question on the perception of President Trump as a political figure within the US, Dr. Chaudhry responded that President Trump is known to be not politically sophisticated; neither has he had diplomatic dexterity nor the understanding of international relations. He is not a good student of history and has no knowledge to how to navigate and lead the world. However, in the aftermath of elections the serious concern should be that 70 to 72 million people wanted to bring him back and continue as president. This alone should be a question of concern in the US. Nevertheless, US will continue to remain a major player in the world. It is critical for Pakistan to devise a policy keeping in mind its strategic geopolitical value. He cautioned that in the changing world order, that is tapered down, Pakistan will have to come up with creative policy management to generate its own value so that it becomes an important factor while the US devise its policy towards Pakistan. Coming back to the US policy on China under Biden, Dr. Chaudhry stated that Biden, since he's a politician and a diplomat, is going to navigate his course and steer his path towards reengagement with China. He further stated that Biden has enjoyed relatively good rapport with China; he advocated on the Hill that China should be made part of the World Trade Organization and that China should be granted most favored nation status.

Dr. Chaudhry highlighted that we need to be cognizant that regardless of the narratives that came out during the campaign, certain things that have happened during Trump's presidency will remain irreversible and will have to be managed like the unfair treatment of Kashmiris in Indian occupied Kashmir, or the change of its status by India, the sale of military equipment to Saudi Arab, or the review of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel may not be touched upon. Similarly, Pakistan will have to manage its relations with the US despite being part of a tough

neighborhood. Pakistan will have to strike a very good balance, a delicate balance in its relations with the US.

In a query to Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, on the future of the new administration's relations in South Asia, Ambassador Chaudhry hypothesized that the most important change that will happen under the new administration is the US resumption to global engagement, multilateralism and international agreements and reversing the trend of isolationism set by Donald Trump. Under Donald Trump, the US has been disengaging from its global leadership and global responsibilities and Biden is likely to reverse that trend and will move towards international agreements from many of which America withdrew under Donald Trump like Climate Change and JCPOA and others.

With regard to US policy towards Asia, Ambassador Chaudhry believed that there will not be any major change; whether it is US relations with China, or its policy towards India, or its policy towards Pakistan. There is a bipartisan consensus on competition with China in the United States and that will not change. As far as India is concerned, there is a consensus in the US that India is their natural partner in counter-balancing China and therefore that will also not change. What might happen though is some kind of criticism that might come out of Biden administration for the gross human rights violations that are consistently being committed in India and in the Indian occupied Kashmir. Pakistan may see resurrection of a structured engagement, one that was absent under the Trump's presidency. He highlighted that under Obama administration there was a strategic dialogue with six working groups and Biden having served as vice president at that time could be inclined for a structured engagement. Ambassador Chaudhry further stated that Pakistan will have to walk through a delicate balancing act in its relations with China and the United States.

Making his observations on a question on US-China confrontation under the new administration and Pakistan-US relations independent of that element, Professor Qaisrani stated that US has global and independent strategy, while the rest of the world aligns or engages to US. With regards to the trade war between US and China, Dr. Qaisrani believed Democrats are more interested in the geo-commerce of the world rather than geo-politics. There is a possibility that US would slightly engage with China likes we saw between Xi Jinping and Obama when the

security dilemma was muted and at the back burner as both engaged in commercial activities rather than geopolitical issues. However, during the Trump Presidency, the world witnessed tough competition between the US and China in South China Sea and in terms of trade war, as US also engaged in offensive tendencies towards Beijing. He was of the view that the Democrats and especially the Biden administration would re-engage with China in terms of economic competition and underplay the geopolitical issues between them. Shedding some light on US-Pakistan engagement, Dr. Qaisrani said that there is some hope and optimism on how the US will engage with Pakistan under the Biden presidency. However, the center of gravity between US and Pakistan would be the Afghanistan issue and how the new administration will follow the peace deal signed with the Taliban during the Trump administration. Moreover, the Biden administration would follow the withdrawal in a systematic and gradual manner.

Answering a question on her perceptions of the relations between Pakistan and US under the new administration as a young researcher, Ms. Mahrukh Khan said that relationship is not stagnant and there have been highs and lows but there have always been some sort of an engagement even if at a minor level. She stated that the larger question at the moment is whether a Biden administration will change or alter the trajectory of relationship or whether Pakistan will see a new era of bilateral ties. She was of the view that Pakistan shouldn't expect a sweeping or a drastic change in US tone under Biden administration. The new administration will most probably continue with the current set of policy towards Pakistan rather than diverging from it, while there are chances that the continuation of the policy may come with a few alterations. She further highlighted that a specific policy trajectory by US may become more prominent in the second year of the Biden administration as it has more intense domestic challenges to face like the raging pandemic, healthcare issues, and unemployment issues. It is only after these issues are addressed that the Biden administration would look into shaping its foreign policy. Ms. Khan was of the view that the US policy towards Pakistan will be dependent upon a couple of factors. There is a possibility that the road of the relationship may go through Kabul and Beijing. The success of the Afghan peace process may perhaps determine the future direction of ties under the Biden presidency. She stated that while Islamabad has repaired its strained ties with Washington after supporting the negotiations with the Taliban, Pakistan also has limitation on its influence and this aspect needs to put across in Washington. US should be mindful of the fact that Afghanistan should not be the only prism through which US needs to look at Pakistan. Similarly,

Pakistan closeness with China is also seen as a concern and this can become an element of distress in Washington. She reiterated that there is a bipartisan consensus in Washington regarding China and the way the US plans to deal with China to become the global dominant power. She also highlighted the possibility of area specialist under the Biden administration, an element that was completely absent under the Trump administration. Hence, the Biden administration may introduce area specialist to deal with South Asia. Furthermore, she cautioned that if that becomes the case, US can propose to co-join Pakistan and Afghanistan again. Ms. Khan also highlighted the possibility of the resumption of a limited strategic dialogue that has a conditional based approach. Shedding light on the issue of the resumption of military aid, she stated that the continuation of the military aid will be dependent on how well Pakistan understands the US interests in the region, in particular Afghanistan. Ms. Khan said that the general impression that exist in Pakistan is that Biden administration may have a soft spot for Pakistan due to the fact he was the main architect of the Kerry Lugar bill. This may need to be readdressed and changed. The dynamics of the relationships that Pakistan had with the US when Biden was the Vice President were different from what the ground reality is today. The US wants to get out of Afghanistan as it only remains a legacy war for them. Biden has repeatedly talked about involving international community, especially the United Nations in Afghanistan. He has categorically stated that whatever happens in Afghanistan is for Afghans to deal with. In light of these arguments, she said that Pakistan should not expect any drastic policy change from the US. Pointing out to US-China rivalry, she restated the prospects of China becoming an element of stress in the relationship.

The interactive session was moderated by Director CSP Mr. Rafique, who pointed out several observations including President Trump's promise to withdraw the US forces from Afghanistan by Christmas. He posed a question to Ambassador Shaikh that whether this promise will see the light of day or was it only an electoral gimmick? In response, Ambassador Shaikh was of the view that the withdrawal by Christmas was only an electoral tool as there is no way in which the troops can be removed by December. The American forces have made it clear that a much longer time will be taken. Nonetheless, the point to understand here is that the US has no interest in Afghanistan and Biden shares the same view. Biden is of the view that it is going to be Afghanistan's neighbors who will have to look after it and that US strategic interests in Afghanistan are zero. This means that essentially Pakistan will have to deal with it. The situation

will get clearer after the donors conference on Afghanistan that is due by the end of November. Ambassador Shaikh highlighted the importance of sealing the Pak-Afghan border and to fence the portions that remain and to increase surveillance on the paths that remain open. Although it is a difficult task, it has to be done. Pakistan has to insulate itself from Afghanistan. He further made note of the fact that the Taliban are not friends of Pakistan and their ambitions diverge from that of Pakistan. Similarly, there are issues such as the recognition of the Durand Line which Taliban fail to recognize. This can also create serious implications for the tribal areas of Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan should try and increase trade with Afghanistan in order to remain active in the developments in Afghanistan. This will also help Pakistan to monitor Indian influence. He further stated that Pakistan's national interest requires it to focus on the growing Indian effort in Afghanistan. As for Indians, there is nothing more valuable than Afghanistan as a possible way of creating a further rift between Pakistan and its neighbors.

Posing a question to the Chairman Board of Governors ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Director CSP, Najam Rafique asked about the possibility of Biden castigating India on its human rights situation and whether there could be likelihood of a solution to the issue of Kashmir. Ambassador Khalid Mahmood replied that Biden is an experienced hand and he's quite conversant with all the issues and the intricacies of the issues in South Asia. During the election campaign, he criticized India for its violations of human rights in occupied Kashmir and also opposed the draconian measures which India has taken in occupied Kashmir. He was of the view that Biden has expressed concerns on the way minorities, particularly Muslims, are being targeted in India, but election campaigning is different from governance. Whether it will be implemented in total or not is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, Biden may not totally adhere to what they have been campaigning for and the reason for this is linked with the equation between China and the United States. US-China confrontation has resulted in a strategic partnership between the United States and India and while there will be some modulation of the US-China relations instead of confrontation, it could transmute into a competition. But still, China will be considered as a challenge by the United States, hence US-China competition will endure and so would the US-Indian strategic partnership.

Adding to the interactive session Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that in the last four years a lot of water has flowed under the bridge and a systematic narrative has been built by



intellectuals, by books, by think tanks that China is number one enemy of the US. The national security documents and national defense documents call China and Russia as major power competitors of the US. On the issue of troop withdrawal, Ambassador Chaudhry stated that while Trump wants the troops to leave, the establishment does not want to. US will keep, if not troops, but their intelligence operatives, their advisors and more importantly some kind of mechanism for counterterrorism.

Ambassador Shaikh added that the Americans will maintain a presence of the forces that the CIA supports that will in large part consist of Afghan forces that are controlled and supervised by retired American personnel who have been deputed for this purpose. The CIA has an interest in maintaining a presence in Afghanistan in terms of what it can do to monitor what is happening in China, what is happening in the neighborhood, and what is happening in Pakistan.

Dr. Nisar Chaudhry added that a world leader has to remain engaged in foreign policy to be a global power; this has to be their top priority. Biden cannot achieve his objective or agenda until seats in Georgia which are going to be redone for Senate, are won. The Republicans will try their best that President Biden does not get credit for anything until the mid-term elections. In the US, the interests are defined, determined and conveyed by the intelligence community. He was of the view that the Biden administration would reframe and restructure its approach to international institutions.

Concluding the discussion, Mr. Najam Rafique said that all the issues discussed are important for Pakistan. What would be US policy towards China, how would Pakistan manage US-China competition, how would Pakistan manage US-India relationship, and the situation in Afghanistan all require extended discussion and debate.

### PICTURE OF THE EVENT

