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PRESS RELEASE

Two-Day National Conference

Irritants in Pakistan-US Relations: Way Forward

9-10 October 2018



- To remove the mutual mistrust between Pakistan and the United States (US) and to revive cooperation, it is important to holistically debate key irritants that mar bilateral ties, understand each other's security concerns, acknowledge contributions made in achieving peace in the region and work on commonalities, in which, both sides can work together and expand cooperation.
- The key challenge for both Pakistan and the US is to build a relationship that transcends the security-centric approach of bilateral engagements to focus on furthering cooperation in areas of economics, trade, development and culture. Such an approach will help achieve the goal of a peaceful and prosperous region.
- It is important for Pakistan to look inwards because only economic autonomy can give the country an independent foreign policy and a sustainable future.
- Both the US and China are super powers. Pakistan needs friendly and close relations with both countries. Pakistan's relations with each cannot be at the expense of one over the other.

These were some of the recommendations discussed at the Two-Day National Conference on *Irritants in Pakistan-US Relations: Way Forward* organized by the Islamabad Policy Research Institute, here in Islamabad today.

In his welcome address, Acting President IPRI, **Brig (R) Sohail Tirmizi, SI(M)** welcomed the distinguished Chief Guest, the chairpersons and the distinguished speakers. He said that the present

Pakistan-US relationship suffers from mutual mistrust and suspicion due to divergent approaches and interests in the region. To further put pressure, the US administration has ceased military training for defense personnel and the Collation Support Fund (CSF) for Pakistan, resorted to the use of diplomatically harsh language and exercised its influence in the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Brig Tirmizi pointed out that the US' relations with India and Afghanistan have been instrumental in formulating its policy towards Pakistan. 'US disregard of Pakistan's sensitivities, its legitimate security interests vis-a-vis these states has not helped to bridge the mistrust in their relationship', he said.

Delivering his eloquent inaugural address **Ambassador Inam-ul-Haq**, Former Foreign Minister and Chairman BOG, IPRI said that the Conference was timely and important since it provides an opportunity to assess the present state of Pakistan's relations with the US and their future trajectory in the wake of the recent meetings in Washington of Pakistan's Foreign Minister with the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and National Security Advisory John Bolton.



Ambassador Haq stressed that the 'US has no intention of allowing a challenge to its primacy in the world by any country, including China. It will use all the means at its disposal to remain the undisputed and sole super power of the world. Full spectrum domination is its primary objective.'

He pointed out that foreign policy cannot be based on self-delusion, and false assumptions. Foreign policy framers have to be clear, objective and logical, and must factor into policymaking the complex strategic, political and economic development and the constantly emerging new equations. 'Without an autonomous economy, no country can have an autonomous foreign policy', he said.

On the issue of recent Pakistan-US meetings, he cautioned that 'we should note that the discussions have so far been primarily on the end game in Afghanistan. Bilateral relations were not discussed at any length. Bilateral ties will improve only if Pakistan is seen to be helping the US achieve its objectives in Afghanistan.' Ambassador Inam-ul-Haq also predicted that the interrupted strategic dialogue between Pakistan and the US, which was initiated during the Obama Administration, is unlikely to be resumed in its original form. 'We must find alternative ways to move forward on the issues that are of interest to us, such as energy, security, strategic stability, education, science and technology. Free-flowing discussions on regional issues like Afghanistan, South Asia, and West Asia, including Iran could be held by policy planning groups in the two countries. A reset or rebuild of the bilateral relationship is essential, but it will be a slow process of rebuilding trust between the two countries not through statements, but by actions on the ground. He concluded that the 'US remains the most important relationship for Pakistan, since it has the maximum capacity to help the country, and also to inflict pain and damage directly as well as through proxies.'

In the first session, **Ambassador (R) Shamshad Ahmed**, Former Foreign Secretary gave an overview of Pakistan-US relations and their strengths and weaknesses. He argued that unlike other government policies, foreign policy is neither scripted nor has any bullet points, 'it is an external reflection of a country's internal conditions. So if a country is weak and crippled from inside, its foreign policy will not be robust and strong either.' Ambassador Ahmed explained that for the US, Pakistan is not a 'lost friend' because Pakistan's geopolitical situation is virtually important for peace in South Asia. He said that 'Pakistan has not disappeared from the US' radar screen rather looms large for US stakes in Asia.' He remarked that no relationship is without problems, and Pakistan-US relationship is no exception. 'The

time has come for focusing on a state-to-state relationship based on sovereign equality, rather than one which is transactional or based on expediency of personal interests and agendas.’ He was of the view that ‘Pakistan needs to realize that what is important is not what we are required to do, but what is in our own national interest. Strengthen Pakistan’s economy and governance systems so that we are not at the beck and call of any country, including the US’, he recommended.



Discussing his views on the *Making of US Foreign Policy and Pakistan*, Ambassador (R) **Riaz Hussain Khokhar**, Former Foreign Secretary remarked that the Pak-US relationship should be evaluated from a dispassionate lens rather than emotionally. ‘We should be frank with the Trump administration about what Pakistan can actually deliver in Afghanistan especially in terms of the Taliban because at the end of the day, Pakistan does not have the kind of influence which is often projected.’ He remarked that ‘having a “strategic relationship” with the US is out-of-the-

window and one should not have high hopes for that since the US has already courted India.’ Ambassador Khokhar reminded the audience that the US is still unable to stomach Pakistan’s nuclear program which it is keeping an eye on more keenly than even Iran’s program. He recommended that Pakistan should adopt an assertive message that it is sincere and committed to having a good and sustainable relationship with the US; activate Pakistan’s diaspora in the US; instead of being enamored with lobbyists, Pakistan’s embassy in Washington needs to be strengthened.

In the session on *Identifying Factors of Trust Deficit in Pakistan-US Relations*, chaired by Lt General (R) Asif Yasin Malik, HI (M), Former Defence Secretary, Government of Pakistan, **Dr Salma Malik** from the Department of Defense and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad expounded on the relationship between regional actors, especially India-Pakistan and the role of the US. She said that Pakistan’s relations with India and the US can be examined at bilateral, triadal and even at the multilateral level where Pakistan has consistently strived for good relations with India, never missing on the initiative towards normalization of ties, while fully cognizant of the general negative issues such as Kashmir to be a priority. She said that there has not been a reciprocation of warmth and good will from New Delhi. Over the seven decades, there have been many up and down swings in bilateral relations between the two neighbours – with the US playing a proactive role of moderator during time of crises much to India’s displeasure. ‘However’, she said that ‘the last two decades have seen this balance tilting in India’s favour – with the landmark strategic partnership, signing of recent 2+ 2 agreement, US support to a nuclear normalization attempt by India and shift in the Asia pivot has taken the India-Pakistan rivalry into a very different direction.’ Dr Malik pointed that ‘the challenges for Pakistan



have increased manifold as a result of these developments, further affected by the arrogant, antagonistic and dismissive attitude of the Indian leadership which leaves little space for an open, unconditional engagement and dialogue.’ She recommended that ‘in this situation, for Pakistan to rely on Washington as a neutral mediator is no longer an option – but what is imperative for Islamabad is to develop indigenous capabilities, strengthen its economic profile, engage with world capitals and work towards sustainable governance to negotiate from a position of strength.’

On the issue of promoting Pakistan-US cooperation in countering extremism and terrorism, **Dr Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi**, Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, said that Pakistan has been at the forefront of the war on terror for the US which has had its own severe backlash. ‘Leaving it alone with a few accusations is not the solution to the problem. More economic and financial assistance to Pakistan will contribute to the emergence of a more tolerant society. ‘The US putting Pakistan in the grey list of the FATF will be counterproductive’, he said. Dr Soherwordi concluded that Washington needs to craft a vision of the future that places Pakistan into a much larger regional context beyond the prism of looking at it from the Afghan and Indian perspective.

In the interactive and packed Q/A session, the eminent speakers reiterated that Pakistan needs to take advantage of its geographical location as its biggest asset. For stability and security, there should be no pockets of alienation in the country, otherwise alien forces can take advantage of such issues. Pakistan needs to maintain credibility of its policy positions because once credibility is gone, no one on the international stage will trust such a country or its leaders.