

The Report of the Webinar on
US-Pakistan Relations in the Wake of Taliban takeover in Afghanistan

On the 4th of November 2021, The Executive Development Institute (EDI), National School of Public Policy (NSPP) in collaboration with The Centre for Public Policy and Governance, organized a talk on "US-Pakistan Relations in the Wake of Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan."

A brief introduction of the EDI at the NSPP was provided by Mr. Ahmad Nazir Warraich (Dean EDI) who explained the significance of the EDI as a premier institution working for the professional training and continuous capacity development of the public and private sector as well as civil society including academia in Pakistan.

Dr. Saeed Shafqat, Professor and Founding Director at CPPG introduced the speakers including Ambassador Dr. Asad Majeed Khan and Dr. Rasul B. Rais. Ambassador Khan is a career Pakistan Foreign Service officer. During his diplomatic career spanning over 30 years, he has held several key positions, including; Pakistan's Ambassador to Japan (2017); Pakistan's Charge d' Affaires ad interim to the United States (2013-2014); Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Pakistan, Washington D.C (2012-2015). He has also been Director General (United Nations) in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamabad (2010-2011) and Minister Counselor at the Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations (2004-2010). Ambassador Khan earned his Doctorate in International Economic and Business Law (LL.D.) from Kyushu University Japan and has been a resource person at various academic institutions Pakistan, including International Islamic University, Islamabad, University of Management Sciences, Foreign Trade Institute of Pakistan and Foreign Services Academy.

Dr. Rasul B. Rais is Professor of Political Science in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, LUMS, Lahore since 2002. Dr Rais has a Ph.D. in Political Science from University of California, Santa Barbara. Before joining LUMS, he remained associated with the Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad for nearly 22 years as Professor/Director, Area Study Centre and prior to that as Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations. He was Quaid-i-Azam Distinguished Professor of Pakistan Studies at Columbia University, New York (1991-94). He is the author of *Recovering the Frontier State: War, Ethnicity and State in Afghanistan* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), *War Without Winners: Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition after the Cold War* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996), *Indian Ocean and the Superpowers: Economic, Political and Strategic Perspectives* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), editor of *State, Society and Democratic Change in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997) and with Charles H. Kennedy, *Pakistan 1995* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) He has published widely in professional journals on political and security issues pertaining to South Asia, Indian Ocean and Afghanistan.

Dr. Shafqat placed the context of the talk by posing the following questions:

- How can we understand the changing dynamics of US-Pakistan relations and is it fair to call it a 'painfully enduring' relations?

- Can we understand US-Pakistan relations without first understanding US-China relations?
- Almost all states, including Great Powers, are now ‘engaging with the Taliban’, how would it possibly lead to ‘recognition of Taliban government’ and what impact it may have on the US-Pakistan relations?

Ambassador Khan took the floor and explained how the US role in Central and South Asia was historically determined by their strategy of containing communism. Trade, investment and educational endeavors too were part of this agenda. However, if we look at trade statistics, Pakistan’s exports to the US have been less than 1 billion USD. Only after 2005 did this number cross 3 billion USD, and last year was at a record of 5 billion USD—all of which are not significant.

The two ‘Hot Wars’; the first Afghan war (1979-88) which was precipitated by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the second, following 9/11/ 2001 and US intervention in Afghanistan—the Global War on Terror (GWT) have determined the nature of US engagement with Pakistan. In fact, Ambassador Khan, described Afghanistan as the “designer in chief” of our relationship with the US. During the Trump presidency (2017-2021) Afghanistan was perceived and projected by the US policy makers as the key-determining factor regarding how the US envisioned Pakistan. As a result, the US curtailed military and economic assistance to Pakistan. In the US perception, Pakistan as an ally did not live up to their expectations. Thus Ambassador Khan contended that, we could say that the US- Pakistan relations have been ‘security centric’ and security forms a central part of this equation.

Ambassador Khan partly attributed weakening of ties to weak people to people exchanges and intellectual discourse between Pakistan and the United States in the past two decades. He contended that such academic exchanges could help in making informed decision-making on both sides as an important component of soft diplomacy.

Ambassador Khan continued that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has resulted in disbelief in the world particularly within the USA. The Trump presidency had created a timeline of withdrawal which the Biden administration inherited and had to follow. However, it has resulted in a state of confusion and blame-game. As a result, Pakistan has become an easy scapegoat and faces criticism.

According to Ambassador Khan, investing in peace in Afghanistan is the best counter-terrorism strategy that can be pursued by countries especially Pakistan. Ambassador Khan argued that on peace building the US and Pakistan’s strategic goals are ‘fundamentally aligned’—both countries need a stable Afghanistan that is not a security threat. It is clear that force and coercion do not work and therefore ‘engagement with the Taliban’ is the only option. This of course does not necessarily mean ‘recognition’, but engagement particularly in light of the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding may not be ruled out.

On the rise of China and its role in the global and regional affairs, Ambassador Khan said that the emergence of China as a new superpower cannot be ignored. He underscored that sustainable peace in Afghanistan cannot be ensured without the cooperation of all major

stakeholders including the US and China. In this regard, the CPEC can also play a major role by providing avenues of mutual cooperation between these countries.

Ambassador Khan concluded his talk by saying that Pakistan is a country with its own economic and geostrategic salience, a fact that needs to be acknowledged for fostering cordial relations with the US. Like any independent state, Pakistan has its national interests which require it to pursue economic and political interests with its neighbors and in the region in addition to its bilateral ties with world powers.

In the current scenario, US-Pakistan relations are in ‘a good place’. Media reports do not necessarily and accurately reflect the sentiments of the US administration. Pakistani and US public officials engage on dialogue concerning issues of global interest including the economy, trade, climate change etc.

Dr. Rasul B. Rais stated that our policy on Afghanistan was one that was framed by Pakistan’s need to engage with its neighbor. The US made a decision to be involved to counter the Soviet Union. However, the US appeared not to have recognized the role Pakistan played in facilitating the US’ engagement in the region.

Pakistan has been marred with internal conflicts and immense sacrifices during the US-Afghan War, though these have not been sufficiently acknowledged. The year 2014 was a turning point for Pakistan when the Obama Administration announced a withdrawal strategy. It was understood that a period of turmoil would follow, as the major stakeholders were unable to facilitate the creation of a functioning Afghan administration or a ‘new Afghanistan’. Therefore, now what happened in August this year has been a repetition of history – where we saw people attempting to flee Afghanistan in desperate circumstances. The US withdrawal has been a complete failure. The events that unfolded following US withdrawal has illustrated that the US has been unsuccessful in achieving anything meaningful in Afghanistan.

Time has come for powers like US to realize that Pakistan is a country that cannot be sidelined and that its importance is not limited to its strategic geographic location only. Pakistan has immense potential that is driven by considerations of its economy, geographical size and demographics including a significant middle class. Dr. Rais stated that that there are many overlaps; economic, cultural, and linguistic factors between Afghanistan and Pakistan making it possible to foster a constructive working relationship.

The talks were followed by an invigorating Q&A session. Ambassador Khan and Dr. Rais were asked to dwell upon the Pakistan-US-Afghanistan nexus and what the term “strategic threat” meant in the equation. The discussion revolved around the argument that Pakistan is an independent country that is pursuing its strategic goals like any other country would. Pakistan’s foreign policies are in line with international practices.

On the issue of refugees, Ambassador Khan articulated that Pakistan is the ‘location of choice’ for those fleeing Afghanistan. After the US withdrawal, there are signs of introspection and efforts to create a more realistic understanding of the situation. Dr. Rais

added that Pakistan has been home to more than 70% of the Afghan middle class; a majority of them have received their education here.

On a question pertaining to changing alliances and pressures resulting from strategic alignments, Ambassador Khan said the only way to face these pressures and move forward was through collaborative diplomatic efforts.

For the closing remarks and vote of thanks the two Rectors were invited to comment. In his comments Dr. Jonathan Addleton, Rector Forman Christian College, appreciated the speakers and the organizers of the event. He found the presentations to be insightful and felt that they gave much to hope for in terms of the future of the region. His own childhood experiences, including his time in Murree when Kissinger was visiting Pakistan for talks with China, point to the pivotal role Pakistan can play in fostering regional dialogue and cooperation.

Dr. Ijaz Munir, Rector NSPP concluded the event and drew attention to the need of considering the ‘opportunity cost’ for the US while remaining engaged in a 20 years long Global War on Terror in Afghanistan. This opportunity cost was America’s inability to create successful relations with other regional partners—an ‘opportunity cost’ that is seldom talked about but it is nonetheless a lost opportunity for the US. On the other hand, China has used the past 20 years to build its economy and its diplomatic clout. The lesson to learn here is that when we make our strategic choices, we should always take into consideration the possible future trajectories and their outcomes.

In the end, The Rector, NSPP ended his talk by appreciating the efforts of the Dean EDI and his team for the work put in to arrange this successful event.