

Institute for Policy Reforms

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Pakistan and USA must forge common vision for regional security

“Pakistan and USA must remain engaged in the best interest of Afghanistan” said USIP’s Moeed Yusuf at a roundtable discussion held today by the Institute for Policy Reforms.

Earlier, in his opening comments Mr. Humayun Akhtar Khan, Chairman Institute for Policy Reforms stated that Pakistan’s bilateral relations with USA are based on a narrow range of interests. For fifteen years, Pakistan and USA have worked closely in the areas of regional security, counter terrorism, terror financing, and on nuclear security. ‘Even within this narrow base, the relationship runs through cycles of fluctuation. And today it stands at an ebb,’ he said. Since 9/11, Pakistan has been critical in locating and defeating terrorist threats. The low point of our relations today can be seen in US Congress’ refusal to grant subsidy for F 16 planes. US bilateral assistance has decreased and CSF reimbursement is often put on hold. Both countries have not been able to broad base the relationship. ‘We may not allow our partnership to be lost in mutual lack of trust’.

Moeed Yusuf explained that the fundamental problem in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship has remained transactional at the core despite constant efforts by both sides to create a strategic partnership. The key issues that drive the relationship include Afghanistan, terrorism, nuclear weapons, among others. Pakistan and the U.S. do not see eye to eye on any of these and this leads to periodic tensions even as they continue to cooperate at the same time.

While Afghanistan is no longer the U.S.’s number one foreign policy concern, it is still a vital interest and therefore the pressure on Pakistan to ‘do more’ against the Haqqani network is likely to continue. Yusuf saw little hope of a total convergence in strategies between the two sides as Pakistan believes that using force against the Haqqani network can create a major backlash within Pakistan. He warned that there is no sustainable solution possible in Afghanistan unless Pakistan and the other neighbors are involved but the mistrust between Pakistan and the U.S. on this issue had become too deep for them to forge a common vision. Yet, he stressed that both sides needed to continue engaging in the best interest of Afghanistan – with the aim of helping to end the insurgency in the country. He also highlighted the importance of a positive Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship and the danger in Kabul’s approach to single out Pakistan as being responsible for its problems.

Mr. Yusuf argued that despite tensions over Afghanistan both sides understood the importance of avoiding the mistakes of the 1990s whereby the bilateral relationship was cut off. He said that he was convinced that both sides remained committed to continuing the relationship. The challenge was for the two sides to isolate their tensions over Afghanistan from the broader relationship so that their cooperation on other issues can continue. He felt that both governments needed to work harder on changing the negative narratives about each other in their countries because these

narratives were responsible for the mistrust and made it harder for them to convince each other of their sincerity. He highlighted that Pakistan was one of the few countries that had recovered from a poor security situation in recent years and this creates an obvious opening for Pakistan to promote a positive narrative about itself.

He also spoke about the recent failed Pakistani and Indian bids to enter the Nuclear Suppliers Group. He predicted that the U.S. and other countries will make a strong effort for India's entry in the future and that Pakistan had a narrow window to convince the world to facilitate its entry as well. Since the NSG only admits members through consensus, if India is admitted before Pakistan, it will almost certainly block Pakistan's entry thereafter. He therefore stressed the need for Pakistan to proactively engage the U.S. and other major powers to garner support. Overall though, he was of the view that the U.S. tilt towards India was real and natural given India's expanding economic base and the Western world's concerns.

He said that Pakistan needed to fundamentally reconsider its foreign policy paradigm to extract greater benefits from a globalized economy. He saw the need to unlock South Asia's economic potential by exploring ways of greater cooperation within the region. Only then can Pakistan truly turn its location into a strategic dividend. He praised Pakistan's efforts with China but suggested that Pakistan should see this as a complement to its relations with countries like the U.S. rather than a substitute.

A spirited discussion followed his presentation in which senior former counter terrorism experts from the police and Pakistan Army, former ambassadors, and prominent journalists participated actively.