**Reset of US Pakistan relations (Part I)- Economic Security**

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The first webinar of the series on the ‘Reset of US-Pakistan Relations’, hosted by KCFR, Karachi Council on Foreign Relations, took place on January 12th, 2021 with much success. We were privileged to hear brilliant speakers such as Ambassador Cameron Munter (Former United States Ambassador to Pakistan), Dr. Daniel Markey (Sr. Research Professor and Academic Director, Johns Hopkins, SAIS), Dr. Moeed Yusuf (Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on National Security), and Dr. Huma Baqai (Associate Professor, Institute of Business Administration). The opportunity and the focus on a relevant, practical conversation was certainly worthwhile for the listeners and participants.

There was a definite emphasis on reengaging US-Pakistan relations in a completely different world. There has been some disconnect in the past due to Afghanistan not reaching an active dialogue process. However, much has changed and given the clarity of the timelines and the milestones to achieve, the authorities have a clear line in front of them.

The area of interest which came to the forefront was the one regarding Pakistan’s geo-economic location. There is a need for the US to see us more actively through an active global economic interest and not in the current lens as a go-between of powers, conflicts, and other conversations. Pakistan’s way forward has to be based on “Economic Security” andbased on specifically what was termed the 3 builders as put forward by Dr. Moeed Yusuf: 1) Connectivity:  For eg. CPEC and BRIwhich are underway. 2) Aiming for goals of maintaining development partnerships. Pakistan wants to develop a partnership that is truly mutually beneficial and not receive assistance and 3) Pakistan’s responsibility for near neighborhood peace and regional security.

An acknowledgement in general was of the regional security which was one of high importance specifically in terms of India and Pakistan relations. Although there was no clear solution given there for Pakistan, the fact remains that there is always a threat of an escalation of hostilities which will be of concern.

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The current Biden administration taking over is already familiar with Pakistan and the region as some of them had already served in the Obama administration. One thing is definite that both sides must be willing to reinvent their relationship on new grounds or we will be back to where we left off.  The new administration will certainly want to see Pakistan through different lens. To get away from the old reputation Pakistan must also focus now on domestic reforms. The weak stance on transparency previously had crippled growth, tax collection being one of the prime examples. There are also many economic inequalities within the structure of the country setup itself. Pakistan has been known to our US counterparts as being strategic in both economic and geo-political relation. It is a known fact that we do have a capable military. The same military which has not only protected its own nation for decades from our neighbors but has also been utilized in good faith by our allies in times of need.

Dr. Daniel Markey held views on how the Biden administration is familiar with Pakistan and the region and would bring great expertise. Amb. Cameron Munter has been a well-known figure and has remained a good friend in the past of Pakistan. A seasoned diplomat, he gave a straightforward talk in terms of future planning and conversations. He expressed that this was a good opportunity for both countries to collaborate on new global challenges being faced versus the old narrative. The old narrative which was in general a negative publicity of Pakistan.Dr. Huma Baqaiexpressed thoughts that as far as future relations go, there was still the apprehension of being always regarded as only a contingent partner and nothing more.

The webinar series are not official statements from either side, yet they do outline conversation goals in a comprehensive way as strategic planners and change makers as participants were present. One thing is true for the US and Pakistan to reach goals today, that Pakistan must get its domestic economic security prioritized. Another thing which is vital for the relationship to solidify would be that Pakistan is looked at as an independent entity rather than being seen through the lens of Afghanistan, or even in relation to China or between superpowers.

The world changing with the pandemic has brought upon a greater disconnect amongst the categorization of people, the global economy is fast deteriorating as we speak. If anything, for Pakistan the gap between the rich and poor is growing. Understandably there are huge challenges on the domestic front. However, there are many conversations that can develop now especially apart from the previous ones in terms of climate change, the pandemic, trade, IT, and other non-security engagements. In the past the US and Pakistan have shared counter-terrorism goals especially in terms of other countries rather than their own merit as strategic economic entities.

The issue of establishing economic security is something that was mentioned several years ago via private analysts and economists, but any official implementation policies had been previously sidelined or are non-existent. Hearing it now from the current government spokespersons is interesting. It shows that there is a serious rethinking going on in the government about US-Pak relations and regional policy. The focus on strengthening the economy will not only develop our infrastructure and industry thus creating jobs and fighting poverty. An economically thriving Pakistan can make a stronger impact internationally and in the region. We have always promoted our geo-strategic location (in terms of security) which is excellent and a conduit for many relationships but alone, it is not enough.

On promoting or expanding economic strength, one wonders if this is only lip-service on the part of our authorities or if they fully intend to deliver. Pakistan does understand the challenges faced. The question is whether we can transform the conversation to applicable, implemented, and workable solutions for the population. One thing remains true is that we must accommodate the direction given for the case of any future movement, for bilateral relations to progress.