

Opportunity of course-correction for the U.S.

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ISLAMABAD: "Now is the time for President Obama to correct the course of flawed U.S. policy towards Pakistan, as he does not have to worry about re-election," said Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed, Chairman Senate's Standing Committee on Defence and Defence Production, at a roundtable organized by the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) here on Tuesday.

Senator Mushahid Hussain maintained that president Obama was re-elected at a time of declining international political clout of the U.S. He argued that president Obama won re-election despite strong and vocal opposition from Israel, which, he added, was unusual. He hoped that president Obama would rectify the mistakes of the first term without having to worry about re-election to the office. He added that there were many flaws in U.S. policy towards Pakistan in the first term of president Obama such as misuse of the drone technology, wanting Pakistan to facilitate negotiations with the Taliban on the one hand and asking it to launch operations against them on the other, and trying to bypass Pakistan in reaching out to Taliban leadership for talks etc. Senator Mushahid Hussain maintained that Pakistan would expect the new Obama administration to halt the drone attacks, which, he argued, were a violation of the international law and a cause of deaths of the civilians. He added that Pakistan would also want the U.S. to include Pakistan in any reconciliation process in Afghanistan, and that Pakistan would expect the U.S. to resolve its problems with Iran diplomatically. Senator Mushahid Hussain maintained, however, that Pakistan will also have to be more firm in its opposition to drone attacks. He added that the Americans are capable of course-corrections and that President Obama would be bolder in his second term in the office.

Senator Mushahid Hussain shared that he had had the privilege of meeting with the president in waiting of China Mr Xi Jinping. He called him a frank, confident, and farsighted leader. Senator Mushahid Hussain argued that while China was concentrating on economic development, one of its main concerns was the growing economic disparities across regions. He maintained that China is a more open society than ever before with more than 400 million bloggers expressing their opinions on the internet. Senator Mushahid Hussain was of the view that China would continue to focus on peaceful rise and projecting its soft power. He cautioned, however, that maintaining a peaceful rise without irking its neighbors or worrying a fearful west would be one of the challenges that China will face in the years to come. He advised the U.S. against pursuing a containment of China policy. He was of the view that any such policy would diminish the dividends of a developing Asia for the world.

Talking about South Asia, Senator Mushahid Hussain said that the region is in transition as elections are nearing in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Iran. He maintained that new regionalism was emerging in South Asia, which was also taking countries like Afghanistan, Myanmar, Iran, and China into its folds. He was of the view that India should not have backed out of Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline, as the project could be a game-changer in regional integration.

Senator Mushahid Hussain argued that while NATO had decided to withdraw from Afghanistan by 2014, Pakistan also needed some realignment of its Afghan policy. He was of the view that signs of changing

policy perceptions in Pakistan are evident from the fact that Pakistan is now calling for a "peaceful, stable, and united Afghanistan," rather than a "friendly Afghanistan." He added that China was also showing keen interest in Afghanistan and had recently concluded economic and security agreements with Afghanistan during the visit of Zhou Yongkang, China's domestic security chief and a member of the Communist Party's central Politburo, in September.

Responding to a question about evolving Pak-Russia relations, Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed said that a shift was evident but that Pakistan will have to assure Russia, and even China, that its territory would not be used by terrorists operating in Dagestan region of Russia or Xinjiang province of China. "We can no longer hide behind the 'ungoverned space' argument. The government of Pakistan will have to establish the writ of the state in ungoverned spaces, if those are used against other countries by elements residing there," he said. He maintained that Pakistan lacked a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy.

Talking about the domestic situation in Pakistan, Senator Mushahid Hussain argued that dynamism was visible in Pakistan. He maintained that power had gotten diffused into multiple centers of power like the executive, the judiciary, the legislature, the media, the military, and even the civil society. He added that Pakistan is the freest Muslim democracy of the world where there is vocal media and open civil society. Expressing his confidence in the exuberance of the civil society in Pakistan, Senator Mushahid Hussain said, "Sometimes the political elite of Pakistan appear out of sync with the fast pace of the developing civil society in Pakistan." He added that smooth transition from one civilian government to another after completion of the full-term of the first would be a milestone in Pakistan's political history.

Stephan Roken, Deputy Head of the German Mission in Pakistan, argued that the Qatar reconciliation process with the Taliban was not aimed at bypassing Pakistan and that Pakistan government was kept informed of all the developments. He cautioned the audience against viewing international bilateral and regional relations in zero-sum terms. He added that the example of European integration was a clear example of non-zero sum win-win situation. Rick Waters, Deputy Political Counselor of the U.S. Embassy, argued that there was a bipartisan constancy on most issues pertaining to Pak-U.S. relations that is why Pakistan should not expect a major post-election change in U.S. policy towards Pakistan. Amb. B.A. Malik argued that Pakistani decision-makers will have to evolve consensus over the sort of change they want to bring about in the country and respond to international expectations from Pakistan. Prof. Zhou Rong of the Chinese Guangming Daily argued that freedom of expression over the internet in China was unprecedented. Dr. Shabana Fayyaz of the Department of Defense and Strategic Studies at the Quaid-i-Azam University said that there were ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan as well and that the Afghan government and NATO forces needed to tackle the problem there as well.

Other participants of the roundtable included: Mr. Ashraf Azim, President IRS; Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Saleem Haider; Amb. Ali Sarwar Naqvi, Executive Director of Center for International Strategic Studies; Syed Moazzam Hashmi; Mr. Ahmed Bilal Mehboob, Executive Director of Pakistan Institute for Legislative Development and Transparency; Mr. Gilles Bourbao, Deputy Head of the Mission of the Embassy of France, and researchers from IRS.