

## **Roundtable on US Foreign Policy in South Asia**

**31<sup>st</sup> of May 2011, BEI Conference Room, Dhaka**

### **Detailed Report on Proceedings**

#### **Introduction**

The Bangladesh Enterprise Institute held a roundtable on U.S. Foreign Policy in South Asia on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2011 at its premises in Dhaka. The purpose of this roundtable was to analyze past and present U.S. policy in South Asia with a particular focus on Pakistan. Geopolitical implications of national and regional issues in Nepal, China, India and Bangladesh as well as the complex relations between these countries in the context of U.S. Foreign Policy was also discussed. The Keynote Speaker was Ms. Lisa Curtis, a Senior Research Fellow at the Asian Studies Center of the Heritage Foundation and a renowned Political Correspondent on South Asian issues. The roundtable was chaired by Mr. Farooq Sobhan, President of BEI. The key interlocutors at the discussion were IGP Nurul Huda, Prof. Dr. Syed Anwar Hussain, Prof. M. Shahiduzzaman, and BEI Vice President Ambassador Mr. Humayun Kabir. Dignitaries from NSI, RAB, BIIS as well as representatives of various government, media and private organizations were also present.

#### **Opening Remarks**

President of BEI Mr. Farooq Sobhan opened the roundtable discussion by welcoming the attendees and introducing the Keynote Speaker, Ms. Lisa Curtis. In his opening remarks, President of BEI Mr. Farooq Sobhan relayed the expertise of Ms. Curtis on U.S. Policy in South Asia and mentioned the significance of her visit to the country on invitation from the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He revealed that in light of Bin Laden's assassination by a unilateral U.S. operation inside Pakistan in May 2011 and the subsequent diplomatic visit by

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Ms. Curtis would allocate majority of her analysis on U.S. policy in Pakistan.

### **Keynote Speech**

In her introduction, the Keynote Speaker Ms. Lisa Curtis provided an outline of her discourse. She mentioned that the first component of the dialogue would concentrate on Pakistan's relationship with the U.S., followed by an analysis of U.S. perception of Bangladesh's geopolitical climate in the context of South Asian political ambience and lastly an assessment of the India, China and Pakistan nexus and U.S. perspective of regional implications due to the interactions between these countries would be undertaken.

### **U.S and Pakistan**

- Ms. Curtis remarked that U.S. and Pakistan's relations have been tested in ways unprecedented in the last ten years and U.S. patience with Pakistani administration is running thin. With lack of cooperation from the Pakistani military and political leadership, it is difficult to envision a future in U.S. relations with Pakistan.
- Although Secretary of State Hillary Clinton exonerated Pakistan on hiding Bin Laden, the military policy of supporting terrorism and the revelation of Laden hiding under the nose of the Army have resulted in a negative perception of the Pakistani military in the U.S.
- The Keynote Speaker mentioned that Pakistan's inaction in implementing a holistic and comprehensive counter terrorism initiative is hurting their country. She exemplified the 17 hour siege of a naval base just outside Karachi in May 2011 by Taliban militants as comeuppance for years of state sponsorship of terrorism.
- The exacerbating security crisis in Pakistan is threatening the safety of its nuclear arsenal. Infiltration by militants in the Pakistani Army has further augmented fears of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of the terrorists.

- Ms. Curtis stressed the need for the ISI to break off ties with all terrorist affiliates.
- On the crucial issue of aid to Pakistan, Ms. Curtis mentioned that U.S. aid to Pakistan should not be cut off due to the current volatility of the relations between the two nations. She reiterated that the Kerry-Lugar Bill, a 7.5 billion civilian aid program to be distributed over five years should not be scrapped or delayed. Pakistan has received \$20.7 billion worth of U.S. assistance over the past decade, about two-thirds of it in military aid. As a prerequisite for continuing to provide aid to Pakistan, the U.S congress required the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to certify on Pakistan's dedication to fight terrorism. Despite this, LET members, the group behind the Mumbai attacks in 2008, operate freely in Pakistan.
- Ms. Curtis mentioned that the trials of Tahawwur Hussain Rana and David Headley have revealed extensive coordination between the ISI, the Pakistani Army and the LET in carrying out the 2008 Mumbai attacks. The U.S. needs an answer as to how Bin Laden had been hiding in Pakistan for so long. The speaker reaffirmed that Pakistan's inconsistent policy towards terrorism is unfavorable to its relations with the U.S.
- Ms. Curtis concluded her dialogue on Pakistan by mentioning the need for the two countries to pool their resources in the fight against terror. U.S aims to undertake a long term initiative in Pakistan beyond the perceived short term counter terrorism strategy. She stressed that although the U.S. has left no stone unturned in Pakistan, a concerted effort by the Pakistani political leadership to break off ties between the ISI and terror networks and a national consensus on fighting terrorism is required for reinstating security and stability.

### **U.S Perception of Bangladesh**

- Ms. Curtis stated that Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971 had entrenched liberation, democracy and pluralism into the country's identity. She praised the secular Bengali doctrine being established by the current government and conveyed leadership and unity as key determinants in eradicating poverty and extremism.

- The Keynote Speaker allayed fears of a terrorism insurrection in Bangladesh and mentioned the lack of pressing security concerns similar to those faced by regional countries of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. She also accounted for the moderate Sufi ideology followed by Bangladeshi Muslims as opposed to extremist Wahabi principles prevalent in neighboring states.
- Ms. Curtis mentioned the increased need for integration in the South Asian region. She praised recent initiatives by Bangladesh to assimilate in the region. South Asia is home to almost 1.5 billion people but remains one of the least integrated areas of the world. The speaker highlighted the need for regional cooperation and recommended Bangladesh as a key player in the augmentation of multilateral collaboration.

#### **U.S Policy on India, China and Pakistan Nexus**

- Ms. Curtis stated that President Obama's visit to India in 2010 was the beginning of a new initiative in U.S. Foreign Policy in South Asia.
- The Group of Two (G2) proposal was an example of U.S. initiating a partnership program with China in the areas of global governance which would encompass tackling the issues of climate change and financial stability.
- The Keynote Speaker mentioned that intense competition between India and China over economic and maritime issues as well as border skirmishes has frayed relations. However, bilateral trade between the two countries has increased from \$5 billion in 2002 to \$50 billion in 2010. U.S. aims to facilitate greater cooperation between the two economic powerhouses and has suggested India as an alternative to China's close relations with Pakistan. Ms. Curtis stated that the increased reliance of Pakistan on China for bilateral co operation is viewed unfavorably by U.S.
- The Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has recommended India, given it maintains its expeditious economic growth, as a possible provider of security in the region.

## Discussion Points

1. Is the Group of Two (G2) model workable? How does the U.S plan to contain China?

Ms. Curtis responded to this question by revealing that the practicality of the G2 framework has been called into question. China's involvement in the South China Sea territorial disputes as well as its strategic ties with Pakistan has deterred it from evolving as a globally responsible nation capable of ensuring international security and stability. In response to the question of containing China, the speaker stated that the U.S. does not plan to contain China. On the contrary, U.S. policies aim to bring China out from its current policy of non alignment to be more involved in the global community.

2. How can civilian resistance be encouraged against the Pakistani Army? Traditionally the Army has had a stranglehold on the political system. What can be done to change this?

In her response the speaker stated that considering 30,000 Pakistanis were killed in terrorist attacks in the last decade, the discovery of Bin Laden in proximity to a Pakistani Military base has aggravated public skepticism of the nation's defense forces. She stressed the need for Pakistani military to take decisive action against terrorism or risk losing the confidence of the population.

3. How does the U.S. perceive the split in the Pakistani Army into a faction that actively aid and abets terrorists while the other remains dedicated to furthering national security interests? A former naval commando is among three suspects being questioned for involvement in the Mehran Naval Base siege on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2011. Is this evidence of extremist infiltration in the Pakistani defense forces?

The Keynote Speaker responded by stating that the level of infiltration in the Pakistani military by extremists is a cause of great concern. This, together with active support of

terrorism by a faction of the Army, is a great hindrance to the stability of the country. The U.S. must make demands to Pakistan to uproot this system of infiltration in its ranks and collaboration with the enemy.

4. In conclusion of the discussion on Pakistan, Ms. Curtis pointed out that the abandonment of Afghanistan by U.S. policy makers after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 was a mistake. However Pakistan needs to be accountable for its own actions and an upheaval of the military's mindset is required to break off ties between the ISI and terrorist networks and to actively prosecute terrorists.
  
5. Vice President of BEI Ambassador Mr. Humayun Kabir provided the concluding remarks of the roundtable by reaffirming the mutually beneficial bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Bangladesh. He remarked that Bangladesh must be aware of her position in U.S. policy on South Asia and continuing U.S. support is required to operationalize democracy and stimulate social and economic development. He called for the implementation of duty free priority for Bangladeshi imports to the U.S. as a catalyst to bolster economic performance.