

U.S.-Pakistan Relations after the Taliban Takeover

Elizabeth T.: Welcome, everyone. Thank you for joining us this morning. We're going to let everyone join the room and get started in just a couple of minutes.

(silence)

Ambassador Khan: Wow!

(silence)

Elizabeth T.: All right. I think we can get started now. Good morning to all of those joining us here in the United States and a very good evening to our friends in South Asia. My name is Elizabeth Threlkeld and I'm a senior fellow and director of the Stimson Center South Asia Program. It's a privilege to welcome you all to today's conversation focused on US-Pakistan relations after the Taliban takeover. We're pleased to have with us Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, Dr. Asad Majeed Khan, an experienced diplomat who spent decades working on Pakistan's ties with the US in a variety of roles, both from Washington and from Islamabad.

Also with us is our discussant this morning, Stimson Center distinguished fellow, Colonel Dave Smith. Colonel Smith has similarly invested decades in the bilateral relationship, including three tours as army attaché in Pakistan. Gentlemen, thanks to you both for joining us. In terms of format, I'll begin with a question to Ambassador Khan followed by brief comments and questions from Colonel Smith and a response from the ambassador. From there, I'll moderate the Q&A with the ambassador, including questions from the audience.

If you'd like to ask something, please type your question into the Q&A box at the bottom of your Zoom screen and we'll get to as many as possible. Now, this conversation comes at a challenging and consequential time in Afghanistan and the region and in the bilateral relationship. It's been just over a month since Kabul fell to the Taliban. In the days and weeks since, we've seen an exodus of refugees fleeing the country fearful of what the future holds. We've heard assurances from the Taliban that they will respect human rights and avoid reprisals against their enemies.

The international community, including both the US and Pakistan, have called on the Taliban to form an inclusive government and demanded actions, not words. Last week, the Taliban unveiled a government that is not inclusive by any definition. There've been reports of human rights abuses and restrictions on women's role in society. Meanwhile, a human humanitarian crisis looms with UN warning that one million Afghan children could die of malnutrition as the country is on the brink of universal poverty. Concerns over terrorist threats surmount. So, we're here today to take a deep look at these challenges and their impact.

Mr. Ambassador, perhaps you could start by giving us the lay of the land as you see it. How do you assess the recent developments in Afghanistan and what they mean for Pakistan-US relations going forward?

Ambassador Khan: Well, thank you very much, Elizabeth, first of all for convening this conversation, giving me this opportunity to share our position and perspective on developments in Afghanistan that affect Pakistan in so many ways. For us, this is of course a principle and primary preoccupation. I can say that even in the bilateral relationship also, Afghanistan remains the principal and primary preoccupation. I think our ability to get Afghanistan right and our ability to continue to pursue our common, aligned interests, I would say, would largely, if not determine, at least influence the trajectory of the future Pakistan-US relationship.

But before I get into that, let me first of all congratulate you on taking over as director of South Asia Program at Stimson. You bring deep insights into South Asia, you have a long experience of working on the region, so I'm sure you will add great value to the important work that Stimson has done over the years in highlighting South Asian issues in Washington, DC. I also would like to thank Colonel Dave Smith for joining this conversation this morning and I certainly look forward to a productive exchange today.

Now, really, I think you have, I would say, characterized the situation appropriately. Afghanistan clearly is at an inflection point and there is also clearly a new reality in Afghanistan that we all need to pivot. I think the choices for Pakistan, the choices for the region, and the choices for the international community are really clear, which is whether to engage Afghanistan or to abandon Afghanistan or to let them be on their own. Clearly, I think choosing the engagement track perhaps give us a good possibility of influencing developments in Afghanistan.

Right now, I think for Pakistan and I'm sure for every other country in the region, the highest priority is to not let things fall apart and to make sure that the situation doesn't devolve into a civil war. I think while we may not be happy and satisfied with the number of things happening there, but the fact that there hasn't been any violence, that we are not hearing or seeing scenes that the world witnessed in the '90s, that there is a government in control which apparently is maintaining security... So, how do we go from here and how do we avoid a humanitarian catastrophe.

And really, I think the other choices are that, should we adopt a coercive approach, or should we adopt an incentive-based approach? Because clearly, in the past, if the past is to be any guide, threats and coercion unfortunately [have] not worked in the past. So, these are, I think, the choices and discussion so far as Pakistan is concerned. We really have

advocated consistently for an inclusive state where all the key Afghan ethnicities and groups are represented in the government. That is our expectation. We would want to see the rule of law, we would want to see the human rights and women rights upheld and maintained.

We would certainly like to see the Afghan territory not to be used against any country, including Pakistan. These are our expectations, and we believe that by way of engagement we see possibility. It's a proposition worth testing because the alternative really is not good. So far, what we have seen from there, we are in the region, we have not seen the kind of refugee influx that everyone feared, at least so far. We are seeing the restoration of regular commercial traffic going in and out of Afghanistan at least to our border posts.

We are also looking at reports being carried by mainstream US media also of how the security situation [is], including the one carried by New York Times today reporting on how life has changed for many Afghans at least in the rural areas and how [the] security has improved from before. So, these are good signs, but at the same time, I think the worrying part of it is that while security may have improved, the economic situation really has undergone a change for worse and the government there is also obviously challenged.

The UN and international community has come together in pledging large amounts of assistance. The effective disbursement of that assistance and timely provision of assistance is absolutely key. We have from our own legal resources provided whatever we could, because really, I think at the end of the day, Pakistan gets affected. If the situation goes from bad to worse, we are going to see refugees. And it's not just Pakistan that is going to get affected. It is going to be the region and beyond and that refugee wave is going to come to almost every shore in the world.

So, it is in our self-interest, it is in international communities' interest to help create conditions that do not trigger a refugee outflow. And for that, we believe some kind of engagement is important. I'll just stop here and then we can go into a more detailed conversation.

Elizabeth T.: Thanks very much. Certainly, a lot to unpack in that assessment. Colonel Smith, over to you for your thoughts and questions for the ambassador.

Col. David Smith: Thank you very much, Elizabeth. But before I make any comments, I would like to echo the ambassador's compliment to you for taking over the reins of the South Asia Program here at Stimson. Great congratulations are in order for that. And I think also a great deal of thanks goes to your predecessor, Sameer Lalwani, who did so much to increase the visibility and the salience of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center.

Ambassador, it's a pleasure to be here with you. I watched your session with Stimson. I think it was eight months ago in February. It was not long after the inauguration of President Biden.

In responding to your comments, I think I have to agree with much of what you've said. In fact, most of what you've said. It is a challenging and consequential time, and the US-Pakistan relationship is certainly at an inflection point because of what has happened in Afghanistan. I'm not sure that I agree completely that there is a binary choice. We can either engage with the new government in Afghanistan or we refuse to do that. I think there are various ways of engagement and perhaps we will be able to drill down into that in this session that we have.

I would like to point out that during your session eight months ago, there's a lot of changes. I recall at that time that you made three points about two positive changes in the region and one that has not improved. In terms of the positive changes in the region, you talked about a new and transformed Pakistan and you talked about the improvement on internal security throughout the country and the improved counter-terrorism tactics that the army has used to contain the militancy and reduce the level of violence. You also talked about the situation on the border has improved because of your border fence and things like that.

Second thing that I recall is that you said that Afghanistan has emerged as a point of convergence between the United States and Pakistan. Then the third thing was of course what you characterized as a bad story, which is of course the poor relationship between Pakistan and India. As I look eight months later, I would have to say that I question whether all three of those have not gone into the bad category. The internal security situation in Pakistan that you talked about eight months ago is deteriorating. It's deteriorating greatly. 2020 was a worse year than 2019 in terms of the number of terrorist attacks and deaths in the country.

As of 12 September, the number of deaths in Pakistan is approaching of the amount from 2020. If the trend continues, it will be well above what happened in 2020. I note that just yesterday, seven Pakistani soldiers were killed in South Waziristan along with five terrorists. There is a new leader of the TTP in the west, Noor Wali Mehsud. He is claimed 32 attacks just in August. So, I'm not sure that that's any longer a good news story and I'm sure you have much concern about that. Secondly, about a point of convergence between our two countries, I think that has dramatically changed.

I think many people were disturbed when Prime Minister Khan, when the new Taliban government took over, talked about the breaking the chains of slavery, which called into question whether Pakistan was actually using

its influence in a good cause to promote, enter Afghan dialogue or not. I think I'd like to hear your views about that and how you would respond to that. Then finally, the situation in India of course has been bad for years. It's not getting any better. I would point out however that your prime minister in June made a public statement asking the United States to intervene about Kashmir.

That's definitely not going to happen, sir. We can get into that because I have a specific question that I'd like to ask you about that. I have three questions that I'd like to put before you right now. The first, it was just a couple of days ago, Secretary of State, Blinken, announced that the United States was going to be looking at the Pakistan relationship in the coming weeks. He was testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee and he said, "Pakistan has a multiplicity of interests, some that are in conflict with ours."

And he mentioned three of these; constantly hedging its bets about the future of Afghanistan, harboring members of the Taliban, and differing points of cooperation on counter terrorism. Just yesterday, Prime Minister Khan responded to those comments and he called them ignorant, telling CNN, "I have never heard such ignorance." This hardly seems like a very good beginning for developing a US-Pakistan bilateral relationship going forward. So, I guess I would like ask you, what do you see as the likely areas of interest and cooperation between the United States and Pakistan as we seek to build a post-Afghanistan relationship?

Second question is drilling down a little further on that. One of your predecessors, Pakistan's ambassador at Washington, stated yesterday the one reason that the president has not spoken to the prime minister is because he has heard for years the Pakistan narrative that all the chaos in Afghanistan is the fault of the United States and that Pakistan is an innocent victim. This gentleman believes that Pakistan now has to convince the world that it has turned its back on all Jihadi terrorist groups.

He says that genuine counter terrorism cooperation going forward is a better foundation for improve US-Pakistan relations than playing what he calls, and this is a quote, "the old victimhood song that did not and will not sell in the United States." So, I guess my question is, is Pakistan going to cooperate with the United States on specific counter-terrorism measures that are directed at groups other than ISIS-K and the TTP. And I'm talking specifically about three of them; the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammed, of the last two being India-focused militant groups that are resident in Pakistan.

Then my third question is on a different tack. It concerns the nuclear program in Pakistan. Last week, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

released its annual assessment of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and delivery systems with the estimate that Pakistan has 165 nuclear weapons, deliverable nuclear weapons, which was a modest increase of only five over last year. But in that issue, they also included a curious quote from Prime Minister Khan who made the statement on 21 June. And this is the quote... I'm not sure that it's accurate, but I assume that it is because I've seen it in multiple sources on the internet.

He said, "I'm not sure whether we're growing it or not, because as far as I know, the only purpose... " And he's talking about nuclear weapons. Then he broke off, he says, "It's not an offensive thing. Any country which has a neighbor seven times the size as Pakistan has would be worried." So, my question is this, given this quote, are you concerned that in a future India-Pakistan crisis such as the one two years ago at Pulwama and Balakot that the prime minister will be making very rushed, critical nuclear decisions without showing very much detailed knowledge of the subject? Thank you very much, sir.

Ambassador Khan: Well, you have probably given me so much that we'll probably spend the next 30 minutes talking about and you literally covered the whole space, Colonel Smith. I'll try to answer all the important points that you have raised. To begin with, I think you need to draw a distinction between the security environment and how it gets impacted by terrorist or terrorism-related incidents and the overall security situation and environment. I would invite your attention to your embassy's tweet only about 10 days back where they very clearly stated that in fact Islamabad is actually the safest city in the wider neighborhood.

Similarly, if you look at Karachi and Lahore and some of the other major cities, I would contest your claims of deterioration in terms of the urban security environment. Having said that, I think you are also right in pointing out that things definitely have gone from bad to worse when compared with 2019 because 2019 was probably the best year in many years in which we witnessed the lowest number of terrorism incidents taking place in Pakistan. And really, I think that also in a way explains our main concern from the unfolding situation in Afghanistan.

And this is something that we are going to hold any government that is in-charge in Afghanistan to their commitment and to their responsibility to not let the Afghan territory be used against Pakistan. We are seeing more and more foreign-sponsored and foreign-based terrorism incidents being taken against Pakistan. And that includes TTP, that includes ISIS-K, that includes Baloch insurgents who are supported by countries in our region. So, that is a concern and that's why we have consistently maintained that the best counter-terrorism investment in Afghanistan is to invest in peace because if you have a partner and a government which has its grip across

Afghanistan, it will be able to make sure that there are no ungoverned spaces.

And when there are no ungoverned spaces, we will not see militias and countries heading and supporting those militias. Then terrorism has been a common concern. It's a concern that is shared by practically every country in the region. For that reason, I'm sure you must have seen our foreign minister visiting practically every country in the immediate neighborhood of Afghanistan. We are also part of the Troika plus where China, Russia is also represented together with the United States and Pakistan. Then these countries have actually from time to time come out, very clear, consensus documents which outlined their priorities in the context of Afghanistan.

So, I also would say that really, I think our interests with the United States and other key players in the region are really aligned in ways like never before. And please challenge me because I think, and if I understand correctly, [the] United States wants peace in Afghanistan. So do we. [The] United States doesn't want the Afghan territory not to be used against any country. We definitely don't want that to happen. Our national security committee issued a statement almost a month ago where we clearly called upon the Taliban government to uphold rule of law, to respect human rights, to respect women rights, and to create an inclusive government where they have representation.

I understand at least through the Troika plus declarations that we have co-signed with the United States, there is a clear unanimity and agreement on that part also. So, I really don't know when you say that... About the past, frankly, listening to some of the comments that were made in the hearings in the Congress, I'm more surprised and disappointed frankly simply because we have at least in our official exchanges always heard appreciation and acknowledgement of the positive contributions that Pakistan has made, particularly over the last several years in terms of supporting the peace process and in terms of bringing things to a point where there has been a transition without the violence that everyone feared would happen.

And not just that, even in terms of evacuations. I don't know how many of your listeners are aware that Pakistan has so far helped with the evacuation of close to 13,000 individual people from Afghanistan. That includes nationals from 30 countries, including from United States. And we are as we speak still assisting and extending every support that we can in terms of facilitating the evacuation, which I understand is really a key priority of the US government. So, that is, again, another area where our interests are aligned. Now, bringing economic stability, greater regional connectivity in Afghanistan for any government in Afghanistan is another priority.

And clearly, our government has publicly stated, and we have moved from geo-strategic to geo-economic paradigm and where we are very keen. And we see, in fact, the point of interest for Pakistan in seeking peace in Afghanistan is really to realize our true connectivity potential in the wider region. So, that is, again, another area. The Troika that US, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan [have] created is designed to achieve that objective. That's another area where I clearly see our interests aligned with the United States. In fact, really, I think what is important is to see that after 40 years, there is a chance to create real conditions of peace.

Now, framing Taliban as the enemy and demonizing Taliban, would that help US achieve its objectives in Afghanistan? It's a choice that United States has made. We have so far shared very candidly our perception and our perspective on where things are, and we've been saying it all along for past 20 years that there is no military solution. Then this effort to draw a distinction between Afghans and Taliban again is not really going to take the conversations to the next stage in any way. So, Taliban are as much Afghans as any other Afghans are. That's really a choice that United States has to make.

But for Pakistan, we have facilitated, and we will continue to facilitate any and every effort which aims at securing peace in Afghanistan. In terms of Pakistan's actions against the terrorist groups, really, I think... I've been part of these conversations now for many years and I can tell you that we have covered so much ground in terms of basically responding to the asks that United States has been making over the years in terms of the fears that our tribal areas were being used as safe haven. We have cleansed and cleared.

There is a fence which covers 90% of a 1,600-mile border, which is probably the most treacherous border that we have built from our own resources to make sure that there are really no border crossings taking place and that also is in response to our own fear of miscreants and terrorists coming into our territory. So, we have done that in our own self-interest. And we have, through our own National Action Plan, gone after the terrorist groups. We made a commitment that we will not let our territory be used.

And as part of the FATA Action Plan also, we have indicted, we have prosecuted, we have convicted, we have proscribed entities, and our record and all of this is available in the public domain. The tough benchmarks that were set for us, I think, it is for the international community to see. Then we have clearly heard appreciation and praise for the ground that we have covered. So, there is a clear commitment and a very clear manifestation of the actions that we have taken. In terms of the nuclear

program and this statement being attributed to the prime minister, I'm sorry, I've not seen that.

But let me say one thing, that whenever you read a report on Pakistan, please apply a source test. The source test is to see where that particular news report originated. Maybe you will not be surprised that in almost 95% of the cases, the source of all such reports that seek to demonize Pakistan or cast dispersions on Pakistan are originating from India. And please go back and revisit that news story and report about... I mean, I've been receiving calls from journalist and media here in Washington asking me, "Oh, Pakistani fixed-wing aircrafts were seen bombarding areas in Panjshir, that Pakistani drones were used in Panjshir."

Then someone jokingly said that "Well, we are also seeing reports from Indian media saying that Pakistani submarine were cited in Kabul also." So, really, I would say that it, these reports need to be taken with a pinch of salt. And as regards Pakistan's nuclear safety and security measures, I mean, NTI reports are there. There is enough out there in the public space that would tell you about how serious we take the safety and security of our nuclear weapons and the measures that we have taken and our commitment to abide by all the international commitments that we have made.

I mean, people here have not really given much attention to the uranium being sold in the black market in India. And there have been several episodes and nobody has really questioned the safety, security of the stockpiles in India. I don't know why, but I just imagine if that had happened in Pakistan, what would have been the reaction across the world? So, I'll just stop there.

Elizabeth T.:

All right. Thank you both. A lot, again, to unpack there. We have a little bit less than a half hour for the remainder of our Q&A. So, as a reminder to our audience, please use the Q&A box if you'd like to submit a question. I think what I'll plan to do, Mr. Ambassador, is combine some questions that I have with what we're hearing from the audience. There's a great deal of interest. We've already gotten several questions. So, I'll try to combine these together. And I think to start, I'd like to pick up on a topic we've already actually touched on this morning.

Seems to me the US and Pakistan might agree on what we would like to see in Afghanistan in terms of an end-state, in terms of the shape of the government, but we disagree on how to get there, on the approach to dealing with the new Taliban government. From Washington side, we try to use leverage to shape the group's behavior through restricting access to financial resources, denying recognition. Pakistan meanwhile has called for engagement as you laid out this morning saying the focus should be on

incentivizing them on issues like women's rights. So, the fundamental question seems to be how to best shape the Taliban's behavior.

And I wonder, do you see a role for both carrots and sticks in that equation? And if the approach is exclusively engagement and incentives, is there not a risk of emboldening the Taliban's bad behavior that we've seen so far, for example in the less than inclusive government and some of the concerning videos that we've seen coming out in terms of reprisal attacks and that sort of thing? So, I wonder how you weigh those options, sir.

Ambassador Khan: I think these are all very, very fair questions. What is really important and critical is to read the intention right and to separate facts from fiction in terms of assessing and evaluating the situation right because I think that will determine in terms of where we go next. Now, in terms of what has happened between United States and Taliban so far, and I say this more as an observer of developments in South Asia and in Afghanistan, they made a commitment that they will not attack the US forces as a result of the agreement that was signed between US and Taliban and US did not have a single casualty in the period after the agreement.

The only unfortunate and sad occurrence was basically the attack that the ISIS undertook in the last days of US's departure. The Taliban committed that they are not going to attack the US retrograde. They did not attack the US retrograde. I'm sure you have seen Ambassador Khalilzad's interview where he clearly points out... I mean, there was an understanding also that Taliban are not going to take over Kabul as long as US had its boots on the ground and that it was President Ashraf Ghani's departure which surprised even the United States. Maybe that was Ashraf Ghani's way of getting his sweet revenge.

He just disappeared and adds to a spanner in the works in Kabul and resulted in the chaos that we saw in the aftermath of that departure and also the reports where General McKenzie reportedly spoke to Mullah Baradar and clearly, they were not even ready to go into Kabul. I mean, again, what I'm saying is that looking at how they have conducted themselves so far, a good case can be made. And it's not just in terms of making the commitments that they made in the process of negotiations, even those small, shorter duration cease fires also.

I mean, I used to hear even in this city the talk of the Taliban not having the capacity to enforce cease fire, therefore they are not accepting a ceasefire, although their position from the beginning was that it has to be the end state and not the beginning of the process. And they did demonstrate their ability. Whenever they accepted that, they clearly showed their ability. And today, what we are hearing from the ground...

And this is, I think, for you and everyone else to reconfirm and corroborate. I don't want to be speaking for them or for anyone else. But clearly, what we are hearing from the ground is that the security situation is under control.

So, coming back to the point that I am making is that if based on what they have done so far, I think we are in a reasonably good position to read their intent. At least what they do in future, no one knows, and in Afghanistan, situation changes by hour, not even by days. But they are making the right noises and they are making the right gestures in terms of allowing girls and women to resume jobs, to go to schools, opening colleges. So, they are also saying these things publicly. Now, the point is that when we say engage, I don't think it means recognition. I think they must be held to account for the promises and commitments that they have made.

Our own leadership has consistently laid out time and again our expectations. And as Colonel Smith pointed out, we are already seeing a spike in incidents of terrorism in Pakistan and some of that can be traced back to Afghanistan. So, before anyone else, we would want to hold them to their promises and commitments of not allowing the Afghan territory. So, it is our concern also. In that way, I think now the thing is it's really a question of how to approach it. I would still say that we really are on the same page in terms of where we want to go. The problem is that, how do we go?

There are those in this city who are advocating a more punitive approach to suspend assistance, to designate Taliban and everyone else's terrorist entities. Would that work? At the end of the day and I think in all of this, what we unfortunately forget are the Afghan people. And they deserve a break, they deserve peace, and they have seen too much fight for too long. Whatever happens there and if the humanitarian crisis aggravates, there are those who will be able to move to other countries, but then unfortunately, there will be those who won't even have the resources to get out.

So, they will feel the pain and punishment of things that they have not done. So, should they be punished, or the international community needs to find ways in which we can basically mitigate the impact of a humanitarian crisis on that population while at the same time working to create conditions that will help avoid a complete breakdown. That's what we are saying and that's how we would want to go about doing things in Afghanistan.

Elizabeth T.:

Thank you. I think even as you point out, the overall security situation has stabilized to a certain extent in Afghanistan. I must say, sir, we have seen

troubling reports of reprisal actions by the Taliban, restrictions on women's rights, that sort of thing. So, I do feel a need to push back a bit there. But I wanted to pick up on what you were saying, the space between engagement and formal recognition. From Pakistan's standpoint, what would your government need to see from the Taliban before an offer of formal recognition would be on the table?

Ambassador Khan: As I said, I think we have repeatedly stated that we will work with the other key players in the region and international community to see how the Taliban act on the promises and the commitments that they have been making in terms of extending a formal recognition. For now, US has been obviously... and others have also been preoccupied with the question of evacuations and bringing out their citizens. Somehow, the last Troika Plus meeting in Doha was, I would say, pretty successful. Those are the kind of platforms the Secretary Blinken and foreign minister of Germany convened a conversation on the evacuation situation which we also participated.

Then the foreign ministers of the immediate neighbors have actually issued a consensus declaration where they have laid out their expectations from the government in Afghanistan. So, I really would say that this should be an ongoing effort, that it's hard to say what will happen eventually, but basically, their ability to even deliver on the promise and commitments that they have made in their dealings and in their negotiations with Troika Plus, in negotiations with the United States, is an important benchmark that we can use to see how they have performed in terms of extending a formal recognition.

But for now, there is, I think, no hurry to go there. Right now, what is really important, urgent, and critical is to avoid the aggravation of the humanitarian situation. And for that, the legal niceties should be put aside, and we should come together to help the people of Afghanistan.

Elizabeth T.: All right. We've seen an increase, unfortunately, as you've both mentioned, in attacks against Pakistan carried out by the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan since the Afghan Taliban took power in Kabul including the incident yesterday that left seven Pakistani soldiers dead in South Waziristan. National security advisor, Moeed Yusuf, has said that Pakistan has made it clear to the Taliban that it won't accept terrorism from Afghan soil and yet these attacks are continuing. So, I wonder, is this an issue of capacity on the part of the Afghan Taliban to crack down? Is it an issue of will?

Also, I'd like to get your thoughts on the offers of amnesty that we've seen from foreign minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, to the group. How can

those be justified given the attacks that TTP has carried out over the past decade? Thank you.

Ambassador Khan: Again, I think it's little too early and too soon to comment on the current or recent spike in TTP-led [attacks]. And they are not all TTP-led. I mean, there are other terrorist groups also. And these are our fears, and these are the fears that prime minister keeps mentioning. We became a battleground for many terrorist groups unfortunately over the past 20 years, and that's a scenario we want to avoid. And I think national security advisor is very right. I mean, as I said, that we have taken all the measures and steps on our side of the board.

We obviously cannot do anything on the Afghan side, that's the Afghan government, whichever government is in charge there. That's our red line and we will continue to expect whoever is in charge in Afghanistan to make sure. And that's why we don't want things to break up to a point where you do not have anyone in charge in Afghanistan and which only makes it easier for these groups to operate out of ungoverned spaces on the other side.

Elizabeth T.: Following up on what we've heard from the foreign minister in terms of potential negotiations with the TTP or offers of amnesty, where does your government stand on that position? Does that not risk repeating some of the mistakes that we've seen particularly from the past decade and before that led unfortunately to some of the insecurity on Pakistan's western border?

Ambassador Khan: I mean, for us, the objective really is to make sure that we do not have people who challenge authority of the state, we do not have any groups operating out of our territory that threaten Pakistan or threaten any other country outside of Pakistan. For that, we will use every mean at our disposal. That includes kinetic means, that includes other options also. But for now, I think it is really too soon to say what means and vehicles we are going to use. But as I said, for us, the real objective is to make sure that we do not allow any entity or any group to operate from our territory or to operate against us or to challenge authority of the state.

Elizabeth T.: All right. I want to turn now as our time is unfortunately running short to the US-Pakistan relationship. We've talked a lot about Afghanistan today. But I think as we've heard, also already you alluded to the hearing going on in Congress, which I'm sure you've been following closely. But I must say we've seen some strong words from both sides in recent days in Washington. Members of Congress from both sides of the aisle have called for a reassessment of US-Pakistan ties including some questioning Pakistan's status as a major non-NATO ally.

Meanwhile, in Islamabad, Prime Minister Khan said in an interview with CNN that the US and Pakistan had had "A terrible relationship over the past two decades." I have to say, I don't envy you, your job these days, in the current environment. But I wondered, given those frustrations on both sides, sir, where do you see the relationship headed and where would you say the most constructive areas to focus on are with those clouds on the horizon?

Ambassador Khan: Well, I think the beauty of this relationship, Elizabeth, and you've been a student of this relationship as much as I have been, and maybe I've been for much longer, there never is a dull moment. And dammed we are when it is going well and dammed we are when it is not. But really, I think in coming back to what Dave asked earlier also in terms of there being no call between the prime minister and the president, well, first of all, we do not use telephone call as a measure of where the relationship stands and should not be used.

If that was to be used, then I think we have had cabinet level interactions, numerous, maybe five between Secretary Blinken and foreign minister, between NSA and foreign minister, and our NSA and army chief, with secretary of defense. And then we have sec advisor on commerce speaking to sec of commerce, advisor on commerce speaking to USDR, the NSA coming here. So, these exchanges are continued, and I have seen frankly worse times in terms of mutual... how should I say [it]...accusations in the public space? But we always had a lot in common also and a lot to pursue together that has kept this relationship going.

And as I said in the beginning, I think Afghanistan frankly has been a burden on the relationship and somehow the vicissitudes in the context of Afghanistan or the situation in of Afghanistan has impacted it. Then that's why we are very keen to basically see that behind us, because independent of Afghanistan, I think Pakistan, United States, we make a very compelling case for a mutually beneficial, broad-based relationship. Today, [the] United States is still the largest export destination for Pakistan. [The] United States is one of the top five investors and has been like that for almost as long as Pakistan has been in existence.

[The] United States is the third source of remittances to Pakistan. [The] United States is home to probably one of the most influential dynamic Pakistani diasporas, anywhere in the world. And not just that, and I say this, and I have made this point several times in the past also. There are so many other factors, non-tangible factors; the cultural factors, the fact that we use more or less the same accounting practices as you do. Our concept of property rights is the same as yours. Our bureaucracy and then military leadership is often trained in this country. We use English language as the vehicle of communication.

Then on top of that, I know that Indo-Pacific is an important priority for the US and for the Biden administration and Pakistan is one of the largest littoral states on the Indian Ocean Rim and we have a good history of maritime cooperation also. And that's really where we would like to work with and the economic partnership, trade partnership, investment partnership, bringing more balance to them. And CTAs of course. And again, I think I missed that. They have asked this question about counter terrorism. This is an area where we have cooperated in the past.

Then this is certainly an area where I believe our interests would remain aligned because of what you just said in terms of seeing some turbulence spilling over into Pakistan. ISIS-K is a common threat, seen as a threat by practically every country, including Taliban. That also gives us another good reason to work together. Similarly, Al-Qaeda has attacked us in the past because... And I do want to take this point. Again, going back to the hearing and some of the media coverage that I have seen over the past few weeks, clearly, I think when folks here talk about US victory against Al-Qaeda and US having achieved its objectives in Afghanistan in the first two years of going into Afghanistan, well, how did that victory come about?

I'm sure people are aware of the role, of the critical role Pakistan played in dismantling, in decimating Al-Qaeda. Almost all, at least seven of the top wanted Al-Qaeda operators were taken out with the help and assistance of Pakistan. I mean, there's very little appetite to give us credit for that. But then all the blame sometimes is thrown at our door for Taliban success, which is really, I think, happened despite us. So, I think these are the kind of candid conversations that we need to have because we value this friendship, we value this relationship.

We still believe that our collaboration and cooperation has contributed to peace, security, and stability in the region and to the prosperity of Pakistan. We want to continue to see it that way. We don't want to see it through either the Beijing prism or through the Delhi prism or through Kabul prism. That's where we are.

Elizabeth T.:

Thank you, sir. Our time is fast running out this morning, but before we close, I'd like to ask you both for some very brief, final thoughts. Emphasis on brief given where we are in the hour. But I can think a few people better than Colonel Smith to be able to address some of the issues that you just raised given the time that he spent on the ground in Islamabad. And I would commend to our audience, if you haven't seen it, a piece that Colonel Smith had written on the anniversary of 9/11, in war in Iraq, recounting the 72 hours after that attack in Islamabad, and how that moved forward in the us Pakistan relationship. So, Colonel Smith

over to you very briefly. We'll give the ambassador the last word and then close out. [crosstalk 01:00:39]

Col. David Smith: [crosstalk 01:00:39] Yes. I'll be very brief, but I think there's one point on which the ambassador and I are in total agreement. There are many things that we are probably not, but on one thing I think we are agreed. The United States cannot walk away from Pakistan. We walked away before in 1965, in 1971, and in 1990, and many would say we've been having a slow-moving walk away ever since 2011. These were grave mistakes, and they need not be repeated now. We have three key interests that are connected to Pakistan.

There is a continuing risk of terrorism directed against the United States by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and their friends that has to be taken care of. We still are concerned about the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. Finally, there's the need to prevent a future war from India and Pakistan that could escalate to the nuclear level. And all of this means is that whether we like it or not, and whether we are upset about Afghanistan or not, we have to find a way to work together to do what we can to ameliorate what has happened in that country. Thank you.

Elizabeth T.: Thanks, Colonel Smith. Ambassador, last word goes to you.

Ambassador Khan: Well, I would like to read as my concluding statement what Ned Price said in response to a question on the remarks made during the congressional hearing for your audience because I think they need to hear this. And in response to the question, Mr. Price said that, "So, when it comes to Pakistan, we have been in regular touch with Pakistani counterparts as well as Pakistani leadership. We have discussed Afghanistan in some detail. As you know, Pakistan was represented at the ministerial level Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Maas convened last week.

Pakistan contributed to that forum, echoed much of what we heard from other participants. And as I said before, there was a good deal of consensus that the gains of the past 20 years, especially on the part of Afghanistan's women and girls and minorities, is... preserving those is in everyone's interest. Easing the humanitarian plight of the people of Afghanistan is in everyone's interest. That includes Pakistan as well as countries that may be farther afield." The statement continues but I'll stop here.

So, to just reaffirm and reiterate that our interests in Afghanistan are aligned. We are on the same side and we are keen to work together not just with United States, but all other key players in the region to work for peace. And so far as the bilateral relationship is concerned, we value this one and then we really want this to go to the next level. And for that, we'll

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continue to make efforts. Thank you very much for affording me this opportunity. It's been a great pleasure being part of this conversation.

Elizabeth T.: Well, fantastic. It's been a pleasure from my side as well. Thank you both for joining us, for sharing your thoughts, and also to our audience for tuning in to this discussion. We look forward to continuing the conversation in the future. We got to a number of questions from the audience, but there were so many more that we have yet to tackle. So, Mr. Ambassador, I hope you'll- [crosstalk 01:04:29]

Ambassador Khan: Please send them to me. Send them to us [inaudible 01:04:32].

Elizabeth T.: Perfect. Look forward to having you back for future conversations with the Stimson Center South Asia Program. Thank you all.

Ambassador Khan: Thank you. All the best.