

Event Report

**“Peace and Security in South Asia:  
A Conversation with H.E. Aizaz A. Chaudhry”**

**EIAS Briefing Seminar**

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Since Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif assumed office, Pakistan has embarked on a proactive campaign to reach out to its neighbours as part of a larger vision for a peaceful neighbourhood. Today, increased high-level exchanges with its neighbours reflect this important policy shift designed to secure Pakistan internally and externally. In particular, sustained engagement with Afghanistan and dialogue with India have proven to be integral to Pakistan’s future vision of peace and stability in the region. Building on this momentum, Pakistan is pursuing a number of regional economic connectivity projects, such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, the China-Pakistan economic corridor, among many others. In addition, Pakistan’s resolve to counter and eradicate terrorism and extremism in all its manifestations and improving relations with its neighbours bode a promising future. Pakistan’s Foreign Secretary, HE Mr Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry delivered a keynote address discussing Pakistan’s role and contribution to peace and security in South Asia.

## **Introduction**

As he introduced the keynote speaker HE Mr Aizaz A. Chaudhry, the Chair Mr Peter Claes remarked that while legal solutions for Pakistan's regional security challenges are already present, theories of law and the realities of power politics do not always coincide. Thus, HE Mr Chaudhry's perspective as an official would add a political dimension to these solutions. The international community has high hopes and interests in Pakistan and the various roles it can play in contributing to peace and security in South Asia.

## **Pakistan's strategic location at the crossroads of Asia**

Pakistan's geographic location makes it a crucial partner in efforts to connect different strategic parts of Asia: the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia via China. Upcoming initiatives such as the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will provide Pakistan an important role in improving economic connectivity in the region. Pakistan also intends to leverage its strategic position to further its own domestic development. This in turn will contribute to efforts in improving peace and stability both internally and externally.

Pakistan also shares borders with countries of strategic importance – China, India, Iran and Afghanistan. As each of these countries has its own foreign policy agenda, Pakistan will have to navigate this ensemble of policies to find its own place. In addition, due to its good relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan can play a mediating role between the two regional rivals. Demonstrating this desire, the Foreign Office has already expressed its concerns and called for a peaceful resolution following Saudi Arabia's execution of Shia cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr and the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran earlier this year.

## **Pakistan's approach to regional peace and security**

HE Mr Chaudhry emphasised the importance of relations with the EU as one of the strongest pillars of Pakistan's foreign policy. He also expressed a desire to further strengthen Pakistan-EU relations and to achieve peace, cooperation and greater economic connectivity within Pakistan's own neighbourhood, having witnessed the accomplishments of the EU. At the same time, however, Pakistan would remain committed to a respect for sovereignty and mutual non-interference in domestic affairs.

HE Mr Chaudhry described the political landscape surrounding Pakistan and its implications for regional peace and security. For the past several decades, Pakistan's neighbourhood has been marred by superpower competition, foreign intervention, intraregional conflicts, unresolved territorial disputes and a rising tide of terrorism and extremism. Meanwhile, rapid globalization and technological advancements have changed the very concept of the nation state itself; states are no longer sovereign in the classical sense of the term. This paradigm shift has given rise to the multiplicity of state and non-state actors, ranging from mega-corporations to international crime mafias.

Domestically, Pakistan witnessed a historic democratic transition in June 2013, when for the first time one democratically elected government gave way to another through free, fair and transparent elections. Meanwhile, it faces the challenge of dealing with modern fundamentalism, a direct legacy of the Afghan jihad which Pakistan has been left to deal with since the withdrawal of the Soviets. The political vacuum left behind by the sudden Soviet withdrawal has given rise to the threat of fundamentalism, compounded by the proliferation of small arms, narcotics trafficking and radicalized youth.

According to HE Mr Chaudhry, the region's political landscape converges on two trends: a consensus to eliminate terrorism and extremism and a growing recognition of economic connectivity imperatives. To allow these trends to develop, Pakistan has shifted to a focus on improved governance and people-centric policies. In this political milieu, Prime Minister Sharif has articulated a view of peaceful development which focuses on creating sufficient space for the socioeconomic development of the people of Pakistan and the region.

### **Combating terrorism and fundamentalist extremism**

Though upon his election Prime Minister Sharif initially attempted peaceful negotiations with Taliban representatives, the negotiations were irreversibly damaged following the June 2014 attack on Jinnah International Airport in Karachi. In response, Pakistan launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb, one of the largest counterterrorist operations in its history with more than 200,000 troops deployed. Several measures have been taken as part of the operation, leading to encouraging results. These measures include: kinetic operations to deny space for launching terrorist attacks, the blocking of funding sources, registration and regulation of madrasas, a ban on the glorification of terrorism on print and electronic media and the use of a counter-narrative to defeat terrorist agendas.

The success of Operation Zarb-e-Azb has led to a sharp decline of terrorist attacks, reaching a six-year low since 2008. Critical to its continued success is the widespread support from the political sector as well as the citizenry. A significant shift in perception occurred following the December 2014 terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar, resulting in a consensus across the political spectrum that extremism could no longer be tolerated in any form. Even in the name of jihad, radical terror apologists could not attempt to justify the massacre of innocent children. In the words of HE Mr Chaudhry, Pakistan would no longer make a distinction between "good" or "bad" terrorism.

### **Mediating peace in Afghanistan**

While Pakistan continues to combat terrorism on the domestic front, it also has a vested interest in an improved security situation within neighbouring Afghanistan. HE Mr Chaudhry stated his belief that the destinies of the two countries are linked; stability in Pakistan cannot be achieved until there is peace in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has suffered from more than a decade of conflict and instability in Afghanistan, especially due to insurgent activity along its north-western border region. The situation has led to a refugee influx into Pakistan, accompanied by narcotics trafficking and

proliferation of arms. HE Mr Chaudhry stated that Pakistan is mindful and supportive of a strong U.S. desire to bring a long war in Afghanistan to a responsible end. However, Pakistan remains committed to ensuring that Afghanistan does not revert to a safe haven for terrorists again.

In July 2015, Pakistan hosted the Afghan government and Taliban representatives in hopes of facilitating a reconciliation process. The first official meeting between the two parties marked a significant development, as the Taliban had not heretofore recognized the elected Afghan government. The meeting was observed by US and Chinese officials, demonstrating that both powers had strong interests in bringing peace to Afghanistan and the region.

HE Mr Chaudhry claimed that the reconciliation process was stalled by a US drone strike which killed Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in May 2016. He expressed a concern for Pakistan's sovereignty, as the US carried out the strike on Pakistani soil without first informing Prime Minister Sharif. He added that as time as shown, there is no military solution – only a political solution – to the conflict in Afghanistan. Killing leader after leader would lead to the weakening and fragmentation of the Taliban. These fragmented fractions could go on to align themselves with other factions such as ISIS or Al Qaeda. If the approach taken is to seek a political solution in order to achieve long-term peace, the removal of Taliban leaders has the potential of actually worsening the situation.

Pakistan remains committed to respecting Afghanistan's sovereignty. Additionally, just as it respects the bilateral relations of other countries, Pakistan hopes that its bilateral relations with Afghanistan will receive the same respect. Interference in internal affairs and a reliance on use of force would have limited effectiveness. HE Mr Chaudhry highlighted a close cooperation between the intelligence agencies and militaries of both countries as a crucial element in bringing about peace. In addition, coordination between the both countries' respective border control agencies would be necessary to deny safe havens to terrorists.

## **Improving relations with neighbours**

HE Mr Chaudhry stated that part of Pakistan's vision for a peaceful region involved maintaining and improving good relations with its neighbours. He cited Pakistan's longstanding friendship with China as an example of how the political will required to maintain such a relationship is now being converted into tangible economic benefits that affect the peoples of both countries.

Perhaps the largest obstacle to interstate cooperation within the region is the historic animosity between India and Pakistan, which has led to difficulties in implementing SAARC initiatives. HE Mr Chaudhry expressed a strong desire to establish warm neighbourly relationships with India. An improved relationship could lead to a significantly reduced wastage of resources, as they could be redirected from the conflict to improving the socioeconomic condition of people from both countries. He acknowledged that Kashmir remained a core issue that could not simply be "wished away," requiring active efforts on both sides to overcome their differences.

Although many improvements can still be made, Pakistan is making steps to demonstrate its desire for warmer relations. Prime Minister Sharif attended Prime Minister Narendra

Modi's inauguration in May 2014, marking the first time since both countries won independence in 1947 that one prime minister attended such a ceremony for the counterpart. In December 2015, Prime Minister Modi visited Prime Minister Sharif in a stopover on his way back from Kabul, being the first Indian prime minister to visit Pakistan in over a decade.

## **Economic connectivity**

HE Mr Chaudhry repeatedly emphasised the importance of improving regional economic connectivity with respect to Pakistan's push to invigorate its economy. Improved economic connectivity would facilitate trade, attract investment and especially for Pakistan, help to address its energy resource difficulties.

Leveraging on its strategically advantageous location, Pakistan has already pursued various initiatives meant to integrate the regional economy. While projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and the Iran-Pakistan pipeline can help alleviate energy problems within Pakistan, perhaps the most ambitious project is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC, as an extension of China's ambitious One Belt, One Road initiative, aims to expand Pakistan's infrastructure, including energy links, highways, railways, ports and airports. Despite its name, CPEC will not function as a single "corridor," instead, it will be a network linked to China's land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and its Maritime Silk Road, through the port city of Gwadar. Thus, it has a potential to bring benefits not just to China and Pakistan but to the entire region and beyond. For example, investments in the Port of Gwadar as part of the CPEC initiative can lead to positive external spill-over effects, as it will serve as a node linked to the separate Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline.

HE Mr Chaudhry cited CPEC as a result of longstanding friendly relations with China and believes that CPEC has the potential to usher in a new era of peace, cooperation and development in the region and beyond. If successfully implemented, CPEC will multiply trade and investment opportunities in the adjoining regions of the two countries and potentially integrate the whole region in years to come. Initiatives aimed at improving connectivity such as CPEC will draw countries closer together, foster cooperation and add an impetus to establish peace and security. Afghanistan, for example, is situated in the middle of the TAPI pipeline. In order for the project to work, all countries would have to cooperate in order to achieve the necessary degree of stability.

Apart from bringing direct material benefits to countries in the region, equitable socioeconomic development could help reduce radicalization in underdeveloped regions. HE Mr Chaudhry acknowledged that frequently, extremism spreads when the "have-nots" imagine themselves as victims and believe they have the right to snatch from the "haves." If Pakistan is able to provide its people with sufficient education and skills-upgrading opportunities, these various projects will be able to reduce unemployment, poverty and inequality; by extension, it can potentially reduce the attractiveness of extremism.

## **Renewed optimism in democratisation and economic development**

While Pakistan has long been plagued by internal security issues, HE Mr Chaudhry expressed a positive outlook in the future. He cited the peaceful transfer of power in the 2013 elections as an example of how Pakistan is committed to working for its people and maintaining peace. Other indicators of Pakistan's positive future cited are improved credit ratings, GDP growth rates maintaining an upward trajectory, a favourable investment environment and a flourishing stock market.

## **Q&A and Conclusions**

In addition to further elaborating on the main points of his keynote address upon receiving questions from the audience, HE Mr Chaudhry shared insights on concerns regarding issues such as the Kashmir territorial disputes, insurgency in Balochistan, and US drone strikes.

Addressing concerns from the audience regarding Kashmir, HE Mr Chaudhry stated that Pakistan was aware of and deeply concerned by human rights abuses in Kashmir. He stressed that although it will be a challenging task, India and Pakistan must be able to face these issues and address them together if any progress is to be made. Regarding Azad Kashmir, the Pakistan-administered region, he referred to ongoing elections and the increasing amount of self-determination being exercised by the populace there as evidence of positive developments in the region.

HE Mr Chaudhry remarked that during his recent visit to Balochistan, he saw promising improvements in the region such as the building of new roads and widespread enthusiasm towards the development of Gwadar Port. He acknowledged that extremism was still an issue that has to be addressed in the region, and that inequality often pushes people to extremes when they feel they have no options. Thus, one of the challenges that must be handled properly is ensuring that the benefits of developments in Balochistan can be shared widely and equitably.

In answer to a question regarding US drone strikes, HE Mr Chaudhry once again referred to rapid technological developments and its implications on the norm of sovereignty. He emphasised Pakistan's wish to see non-interference by other states in domestic affairs. Ever since the Arab Spring, many Middle Eastern countries had become victims of instability, and this has had ripple effects beyond the region and as far as even Europe. He referred to cases such as Syria and Libya and expressed Pakistan's policy stance: that the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) does not entitle states to use unilateral force to change regimes.

*Report prepared by Ian Wu*