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Transcript

Pakistan in a Changing Regional and Global Environment

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Hina Rabbani Khar:

Ladies and gentlemen. Many thanks to Chatham House for giving us this opportunity to speak with you. Time is short, so let me get to the point.

Whatever direction we look in, there's little doubt that the world is changing rapidly. Many of the changes we're seeing take place have evolved over many, many years. Some confirm the universality of the values of democracy and freedom. Others are challenging long-held orthodoxies about the efficiency of markets and the costs of the unfettered pursuit of profits. Most of these changes have far reaching implications. The global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the difficulties faced by the eurozone, the true rise of the BRIC and Turkish economies – there is great anxiety in some regions, and great hope in others.

Some of the fiscal challenges faced by European countries for example, make Pakistan's less than 5% budget deficit, seem trivial – on paper, of course. Budget deficits are no walk in the park. They have real implications, and being from Pakistan, where poverty continues to be the greatest challenge to the Pakistani future, we are all too aware of these implications. We share in the anxiety and fears of our friends in Europe and everywhere else, in part out of friendship and empathy, and in part out of pure self-interest.

I'm here today not so that I can explain to you the amazing diversity of Pakistan, or the intense fraternity that our spiritual traditions inculcate in us. I'd really love to tell you more about how truly benevolent and warm and hospitable our people are, and how you must not believe the seriously skewed and unfair representations of our country and our people.

But I won't. Instead, I am going to try to explain this thing called our self-interest, or the Pakistani national interest. Pakistan's national interests are simple and easy to understand. We want to live a prosperous life in accordance with our values. There are almost 200 million of us Pakistanis. 200 million. I want you to understand that number. We want this prosperous life for each and every one of us. Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who helped give us our Constitution coined the phrase *roti, kapra aur makaan* – food, clothing and a place to live, as the very basis of the political ideology of the Pakistan People's Party. That is our national interest – a life of dignity, and prosperity for all Pakistanis.

To secure this prosperity, we need our economy to grow rapidly and consistently. To grow rapidly and consistently, we need peace, security and stability – at home, in the region that we occupy, and across the wider world. This is the Pakistani national interest. Peace, security and stability that paves the way for economic growth, that enables prosperity in Pakistan.

So what is Pakistan doing in pursuit of its national interest? This is a million, or billion, or trillion dollar question. It is a valuable and important question however, only if it is a real question. What do I mean?

I mean, that if you have come here today with a pre-conceived set of notions about what Pakistan is doing in pursuit of its national interest, and you've come here today with a pre-conceived set of notions about what Pakistan's national interest is, then for me to continue telling you what we're doing is a bit of a waste of your valuable time.

If we are really interested in learning and understanding what Pakistan is doing in pursuit of its national interest, one of the greatest challenges for us all is to stop assuming what we know, and start listening to each other. Let us begin that here today.

So if you can put rest to what you think you know, through leaks, and disinformation and one-sided narratives that are fanciful, unrealistic and insulting to the almost 200 million Pakistanis that seek to live a life of prosperity, then I am more than happy to explain what Pakistan is doing to pursue its national interest.

Are we good? Good. Pakistan cannot change the geography of South and Central Asia. It cannot change its neighbours. Most fortuitously, it does not want to. Pakistanis have a great affinity and appreciation for the wonderful and rich diversity of its neighbours – whether Afghanistan, or Iran, or India or China. We like our neighbourhood, we're proud to be a part of it.

To extend this appreciation and affinity from merely mutual cultural admiration to the realm of international public policy, Pakistan is pursuing a single-minded policy of transformational change with its neighbours. Whatever the dispute, whatever the context, we have initiated a dialogue with India that we want to be uninterrupted. We have put our money where our mouth is. We have begun trade liberalization with India. The more we trade with each other, the more normal our neighbourhood will seem. This is a commitment that we believe is irreversible. It is a commitment borne of national consensus, and whatever suspicious folks may have about the fidelity of our national

consensus, let me be quite blunt—you should stop reading gossip columns and get real.

Pakistan's military and intelligence community are interested in national security. That is their job. The Ministries for Industry, Textiles and Commerce, along with Ministry of Foreign Affairs are interested in international trade. That is our job. We're all doing our jobs, under the leadership of elected officials. That is how democracies work. Everything else, is gossip.

So, with our neighbor India, despite the presence of significant challenges, including the disputed areas of Jammu and Kashmir, and the common challenge of terrorism that we both face, we're forging ahead. We will, insha'Allah, not stop, until our vision for a normalized region is fulfilled. No region has been successful without a normalization of terms between big neighbours – the European Union and the ASEAN region, are the models for what we aspire to. Insha'Allah, we will get there. India's leaders owe it to their people, and we owe it to ours. We will pursue this path of normalization as a part of the Pakistani national interest.

With Iran, we've always enjoyed a reasonably friendly relationship. Our relationship is one of good neighbours. We realize there are risks to Iran's stability. Those risks pose a dire threat to the entire region. So we say once again, that whatever our friends in the West are concerned about, they must address those concerns by talking to our friends in Iran. Talk first, talk second and talk last. That is the only path to resolution of the challenges in Iran. Any use of force with Iran poses the kinds of risks that no region should be subjected to.

With China, we have a bond of friendship whose consistency and fidelity is a source of constant strength for both Pakistan and China. Now, there are gossip columns that treat Pakistan's stock of goodwill as a finite resource. They clearly don't know Pakistan. Our mutually beneficial partnership with China is a source of even more goodwill for other countries. What do I mean? I mean that China, far from being a jealous friend, supports Pakistan's quest for better relations with *all* its neighbours. We listen to China. We trust China. China listens to us. It trusts us. And so, without going into the hours of details that I could share with you about how close Pakistan and China are, I will say this. No one need be jealous or worried about this friendship. The Pakistan-China partnership helps us become better partners and friends with all other countries.

I've saved the best, for last. Afghanistan. This is the relationship that we know the most about. We know Afghanistan and Afghanistan knows us. We are intertwined. Our destinies are intertwined. We share a porous border, we share languages, culture, food, music, and poetry. We share the grief of decades of conflict. We share the dead bodies, the broken lives, the valour and bravery of the sons of Afghanistan and Pakistan—those who have given their lives in pursuit of a better Afghanistan and a better Pakistan, those who have died in the pursuit of peace.

But we share much, much more. And the reason that it is not so well known is our peculiar culture in Pakistan. It is counter to Pakistani culture to speak from the top of our lungs about what we do for our family. Afghanistan is family. We don't just say this. We feel it. We live it.

Unfortunately, this cultural habit of doing things without advertising, has allowed those of ill-intentions to create a ridiculous narrative that somehow pits brother against brother – that somehow tries to suggest that Pakistan could ever, ever support anything but peace, stability and security in Afghanistan.

Now I want to remind you, despite our affinity and closeness, peace, stability and security in Afghanistan is important to us, not because of our bonds of brother and sisterhood with Afghanistan. No. It is important to us because of the Pakistani national interest. Remember what I just told you.

To grow rapidly and consistently, we need peace, security and stability – at home, in the region that we occupy, and across the wider world. This is the Pakistani national interest. That is why we are pursuing normalization with India. That is why we want stability in Iran. That is why we enjoy our partnership with China. And that is why we are interested in peace, stability and security in Afghanistan.

So how have we sought this?

Since the government of the PPP took over in 2008, President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani have single-mindedly pursued the building of trust and closeness with Kabul. They have been supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and our diplomats, and they have been supported by the security establishment. Our trips to Kabul have been multifarious, and we're proud that we enjoy both collective and individual trust with President Karzai, from President Zardari, to Prime Minister Gilani, to myself as the Foreign Minister and the heads of our military and intelligence communities.

The only foreign head of state invited to President Zardari's swearing in ceremony was President Karzai. The only foreign trip on which all key ministries, and key military officers have accompanied the Prime Minister? To Kabul.

Kabul is and will remain the most important world capital for Pakistan. But our commitment is not just rhetorical or limited to meetings. It goes much further. In 2008, the average number of Afghans crossing the border every day was 44,000. In 2009, it rose to over 52,000. Today, nearly sixty thousand Afghans cross the border with Pakistan everyday for business, jobs, medical treatment, education and to visit relatives. More visitors now undertake documented travel between the two countries by obtaining visas or visit permits than ever before. The numbers are rising and the modality of these visits is also changing.

Our missions in Afghanistan issued a quarter of a million multiple entry visas to Afghan nationals during 2010. Pakistan issues more visas to Afghans than the rest of the world combined.

Most importantly, Pakistan does not charge any visa fee from Afghan passport holders. Contrary to the craftily promoted perception that Afghans of only one ethnicity are welcomed in Pakistan, one finds people from all over Afghanistan in Pakistani cities.

Our consular records show that visas issued to Afghan nationals closely represent the ethnic composition of the population. My own visit to Kabul on February 1 this year helped me verify this claim in person. Outside government, I met with Ustad Mohaqiq, Yunus Qanooni, Ahmed Wali Massoud, Faizullah Zaki and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. You'll note the ethnic diversity of that list of our Afghan brothers. Brothers, all of them.

This sense of fraternity is the only explanation for why over three million Afghan refugees live in Pakistan, even today. For thirty years, they have called Pakistan home. The Afghan cricket team captain grew up playing the sport in Pakistan—and what a talent he is. At one point, over 5.5 million Afghans were living in Pakistan. 37% of the refugees who voluntarily repatriate to Afghanistan are back in Pakistan within weeks.

What do they do in Pakistan? Today, over 7,000 Afghan students are enrolled in Pakistan's colleges and universities. This represents about 60% of all Afghans studying in institutions of higher education abroad. In addition, about half a million Afghan refugee children attend schools in Pakistan .

To facilitate the capacity building efforts of other donors, Pakistan also encourages third party sponsorship of training of Afghan students and officials in its institutions. Under this policy, over five hundred Afghan nationals attended courses in the field of agriculture from a few weeks duration to postgraduate degrees in the Agriculture University of Peshawar alone. Scores were trained in other professions ranging from medicine to civil aviation.

Most successful professionals in today's Afghan society had studied in Pakistan. They dominate the work place not only in government offices, international organizations and NGOs but also as professionals, businessmen, and skilled and semi-skilled workers.

And more proudly, Afghan graduates from Pakistani universities are paid significantly higher salaries than graduates from any other neighbouring country. Pakistan is further providing 2,000 fully funded graduate and post-graduate scholarships to Afghan students in its institutions of higher learning over the next four years. The placements are being made in ten different fields from medicine to IT to agriculture. The first batch of the students under this programme left for Pakistan in 2010. We are now in our third year.

What else? Health. Over 90% of Afghans who seek medical treatment abroad visit Pakistan. Most of the Afghan patients opt for free treatment at government or philanthropic healthcare facilities. Moneyed Afghan patients are welcomed by many countries but for their less fortunate compatriots only Pakistan has kept its doors opened.

Just a few examples of the effects of this facility: 40% of patients in Peshawar's major government hospitals and 11% patients in tertiary hospitals all over Pakhtunkhwa province are Afghans; over 50% patients in major government hospitals in Quetta are Afghan nationals; and two Pakistani philanthropic hospitals perform free eye surgeries on about 30,000 Afghans every year.

Since 2001, Pakistan has also played an active, but unpublicised, role in Afghanistan's reconstruction and providing humanitarian assistance. Pakistan has built faculties and facilities at Kabul University, Nangarhar University in Jalalabad, and Balkh University in Mazar-e-Sharif. The Rehman Baba High School in Kabul was completed in 2009, where 1200 students are currently enrolled. The Jinnah Hospital Complex is under construction in Kabul. Once completed, it will provide the most modern health facility in the country.

Our help has been instrumental in building the Nishter Kidney Hospital in Jalalabad. Afghan doctors, paramedics and technicians to run this facility are

also trained in Pakistan. The building of the 200 bed Naib Aminullah Khan Logari Hospital has almost been completed in Logar. We've built roads and highways, like the Torkham- Jalalabad Road in eastern Afghanistan. We've provided direct cash assistance, we've provided food packages as humanitarian aid. We're also building two Eye Hospitals, a Limb Centre at Badakhshan, and two new Medical Centres in Kabul and Jalalabad.

All told, Pakistan has committed over US\$330 million for reconstruction and assistance projects in Afghanistan. The dollars we spend are more effective in Afghanistan, where our overhead costs are lower than any other countries'.

And it is not all benevolent. Our businesses are engaged in job growth in Afghanistan in pursuit of profits. The state-owned National Bank of Pakistan (NBP) was the first foreign bank to operate in Afghanistan after 9/11. The telecommunication and technology industry in Afghanistan depends heavily on Pakistani manpower. Pakistan is the largest trading partner of Afghanistan while Afghanistan is Pakistan's third largest export market. Pakistan has provided transit trade facility to Afghanistan for decades without any reciprocity. We're constantly seeking to improve the Transit Trade Agreement to further facilitate Afghan transit trade through Pakistan.

Now, as far as the state of play for reconciliation talks are concerned, again, contrary to clever word play and cheap headlines, Pakistan's position cannot be more clear. We will support any and all initiatives that are all-inclusive, that are Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-driven.

Moreover, we have done nothing to block any other initiatives. Anywhere.

Nothing is as dear to Pakistan's national interest than peace, stability and security in Afghanistan. But we will not lead, or pretend to lead. We will follow our Afghan brothers and sisters. That is a promise that we make not to you, or to any other people – but a promise to the Pakistani nation. It is a policy we pursue for the Pakistani people. That is who has suffered from a lack of peace and a lack of stability and a lack of security. That is who we represent, that is who we work for. The Pakistani people.

I thank the Pakistani people, my people for giving me the opportunity to represent them. I thank you all for listening.