



The EU and Pakistan - Why Do They Matter To Each Other?

Event Report

On 26 September 2024, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) and the European External Action Service partnered to present their second briefing seminar on "The EU and Pakistan - Why Do They Matter To Each Other?" Featuring senior journalists from Pakistan on their study visit to Brussels, the Head of Division for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the European External Action Service, Deren Derya, as well as Brussels-based commentator and Visiting Professor at the College of Europe (Natolin), Shada Islam, the panel discussed the current challenges, concerns, and potential in EU-Pakistan relations.

Chaired by the Director of EIAS, Lin Goethals, the discussion was initiated by the journalists presenting their perspective on current challenges in Pakistan. Senior Journalist, Columnist, and Writer at Dawn News, Arifa Noor, explained the recent political developments and unrest in Pakistan as a linked crisis between its economy and politics. The situation in Afghanistan increased the focus on Pakistan and upgraded its importance for the world, which has now been tempered. While Pakistan has largely based its economy on the West's geo-strategic interests, change in the latter's focus brings forth an economic crisis in need of recognition. The uncertainty around an economic restructuring is also leading to a political crisis, where instability is becoming more apparent in light of a dominance by the establishment and political elite. Pakistani youth, self-organising through social media and prone to agitational politics, reflects a change in the country's demography with 50 percent of the population being under 45. According to Noor, the predominantly urbanised aspirational young middle class in Pakistan, whose needs are not met by the economy nor the electoral system, seeks non-traditional methods, like "violent or street politics", in search for change. Moving forward, it will hence be essential to restore young voters' hope in the electoral system.

On the unravelling of stability in Pakistan, Munizae Jehangir calls for external action and awareness. Where Pakistan was once a priority for the EU at the height of anti-terrorism and civil freedom, the same issues still pertain today with less international attention. According to Jehangir, decrease in the number of girls in school, resurgence of the Taliban, and injustice in the criminal system are all issues rampant in Pakistan, embodied by a growing number of enforced disappearances by security forces and the ongoing civilian protests by their loved ones.

Onto addressing Pakistan with a focus on foreign policy, Anas Mallick of Wion News and Shada Islam of College of Europe (Natolin) pointed to the lack of a long term objective in



bilateral relations. In particular, the complexity of issues in EU-Pakistan relations was stressed by both panellists. Where GSP+ is a “totem” of bilateral relations in the fierce bilateral trade environment, the transactional nature of the relationship lacks long term thinking and perspective. Shada Islam commented on the status quo, where EU media lacks positivity in reflecting Pakistan, as well as general knowledge and expertise on the South Asian region overall.

On the EU side, Deren Derya from the European External Action Service reflected on EU-Pakistan relations in light of a new European Commission. In reaffirming the indispensability of Pakistan in regional stability and security, she stressed that GSP+ provides the mere legal framework in bilateral relations for EU-Pakistan understanding. Effective as both an economic and a political instrument, GSP+ offers the main platform for regular discussions and provides potential for future dialogue on climate and other aspects of EU-Pakistan relations, including migration and connectivity. Following the outcome of the EU parliamentary elections, migration will continue to be a top priority for Europe and is likely to grow in relevance under the new European Commission.

Furthermore, in EU-Pakistan communication, the frequent change in Pakistani representation reflects internal instability, increasing the difficulty in expanding bilateral relations. It is apparent that Pakistan’s economic and political stability remains a priority for both sides. However, while Pakistan calls for higher prioritisation from the EU to tackle instability, the EU points to instability as the biggest obstacle for cooperation.

The Q&A session highlighted various security issues. Despite ongoing bilateral meetings in recent years, EU-Pakistan exchange often lacks engagement at the highest level through bilateral summits, as the willingness to engage remains uncertain on both sides. Moving forward, the panel noted counterterrorism as a promising area for enhanced EU-Pakistan collaboration, being listed as a top priority for both agendas. Looking ahead, awareness in Pakistan of the EU and what it stands for will need to be increased, also to attract potential future EU investments into the country and to define the path that lies ahead. Collaboration is a clear two-way street, requiring political stability and engagement on both sides.