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Report-Public Talk

“Pakistan-Iran Relations”

May 27, 2016



Pictures of the Event



Pakistan-Iran Relations

The Institute of Strategic Islamabad (ISSI) organised a Public Talk on “Pakistan-Iran Relations” on May 27, 2016. The distinguished speaker on the occasion was, H.E. Mehdi Honardoost, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Pakistan. The talk was held under the ISSI’s Ambassador’s Platform forum.

Ambassador Masood Khan, Director General ISSI in his welcome remarks highlighted that Pakistan and Iran enjoy very warm relations that were anchored on very strong foundations. Both countries are neighbours and have religious, ethnic, cultural and linguist bonds. In the recent past, the leaderships of both sides have exchanged visits and through this new beginning, both countries are trying to form a new relationship post-US-UN sanctions. He stated that in the economic realm, the Iranian-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline is considered to be a flagship project between the two countries and needs swift implementation. He went on to say that Pakistan needs Iranian steel, oil and gas and iron and electricity and there are plans to build industrial sites inside Pakistan, particularly for petro-chemical storage for which Iran has promised to help with infrastructure development. Likewise, Pakistani products particularly textiles, surgical instruments, sports goods, and agriculture products also have a huge market in Iran. The Ambassador stated that there have been deliberate efforts to increase bilateral trade to \$5 billion by 2021. Pakistan also wants to connect Iran to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and both Iran and China have shown interest in this. He went on to say that Gwadar and Chabahar do not have to be rivals, but in fact become sister ports. Both countries share a unique economic geography: they are neighbours, they have contiguous territories; and are therefore very keen to cement their economic partnerships. In fact, Pakistan should think of its western corridor passing through Iran going upwards north to Central Asia and Moscow, and westwards towards Turkey and Europe. Hence, Tehran is a conduit for Pakistan and any development in Iran does not mitigate development in Pakistan. Ambassador Masood stated that Pakistan wants to see peace and stability in the region. Both Iran and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) are eminent and most important countries in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Pakistan wants harmony to prevail.

H.E. Mehdi Honardoost said that Pakistan and Iran are two important countries of the region, they share political and cultural ties. Any relationship between the two nations should be tangible, and trade and economy are important components for achieving this. He stated that the present trade figures do not depict the trade potential that both countries possess. He cited the recent visit by the Iranian President Dr. Hassan Rouhani as a milestone, because it brought many issues to the forefront - most of these concentrated on trade and business. As a result, many channels have been activated between the two countries. Among the various MOUs and agreements that were signed, the connectivity of the private sectors of both countries was an important one. He pointed out that in a few months, the Joint Economic Commission would meet

in a new atmosphere post sanctions. The Ambassador stated that border management is very important, not only with regard to trade, but because it will help settle many other issues faced by the two countries. Hence, a better life for the people along the border was essential. He emphasised creation of new jobs because of the youth bulge in both countries. Ambassador Honardoost pointed out that though Gwadar and Chabahar have been called rivals, there was no competition between the two harbours. In fact, he stated that more connectivity and cooperation was needed. Along with cordial relations in politics and culture, both countries should promote trade relations. He went on to cite a number of projects between the countries. On top of the list, he stated, was the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline project, which he said, has the most benefits in terms of both safety and cost and will help put the economy of Pakistan on the launching pad. He pointed out that despite the criticism this project has faced, both Pakistan and Iran are in agreement and they should go ahead with the successful completion of the IP project. Iran has already completed the pipeline on its side of the border, and was waiting for Pakistan to turn on the tap. He also mentioned the Power Transmission Project and hoped that there would be an increase in power supply from 74 MW to 100MW, and gradually, to 3000 MW.

The Ambassador stated that both Pakistan and Iran are the two biggest Islamic countries in the region, and hence have a lot of responsibilities to shoulder. Both countries can work together for a better future not only for the better future of their respective nations, but also for the entire region. He stated that international terrorism and narcotics are major concerns and that International bodies should be more active for the peace and stability between Muslim countries. He said his government believed that nobody could drive a wedge between Iran and its neighbours. Leaders of both Pakistan and Iran share similar views and approaches to international events and developments. He acknowledged Pakistan's role as a wise mediator when tensions between KSA and Iran arose in 2015, and said that regional cooperation is the only way for settling all the matters between the two countries. He said that all sources exist for a better cooperation platform. The future is bright and clear and holds good prospects for both countries.

During the very enlightening question and answer session, Ambassador Honardoost stated that Iran will never allow its soil to be used against any country and that Iran considers all of Pakistan's concerns as its own. He emphasised that there was no ambiguity about this stance. In response to another question, he replied that the recent agreement between Afghanistan, Iran and India is in no way a threat to the Gwadar port and in future, both Chabahar and Gwadar will act as sister ports, providing connectivity and linking the region. He said that Iran had previously offered Pakistan to link with the Chabahar port, and the doors are always open for Pakistan to link with Chabahar.

He also stated that in order to ensure safe borders, Pakistan and Iran need to work together and that terrorism has parents, which are illiteracy and poverty. Moreover, he said that in Islam, you

cannot hunt for pleasure, so killing other human beings is out of the question. In response to another question about the presence of Mullah Mansoor in Iran before being killed by a drone in Pakistan, he said that Iran has never supported these elements and certain countries are harbouring them. While responding to a question about Iran's relationship with India, the Ambassador said that it is clearly Iran's stance that relationship with any country must not affect our relationship with our neighbours. He also stated that Iran has made efforts to facilitate those dwelling near the border areas by giving them cards, so that they may cross over easily without visa.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors of ISSI, in his remarks, stated that history is proof of the fact that Iran is a dependable friend. Pakistan's love and affection for Iran dates back to pre-partition and this process has continued till the present. With regard to sectarianism, Ambassador Mahmood called it a curse and said that Pakistan has successfully countered this problem on many fronts and will continue to do so. He also highlighted Pakistan's role as a harmoniser and mediator in the region. He further stated that in this age of regional cooperation, there has to be collaboration instead of competition. He concluded by saying that Iran and Pakistan share a very precious relationship, one which must be valued and further strengthened.

In his concluding remarks, Ambassador Masood Khan stated that both Pakistan and Iran are now determined to remove all the difficulties and barriers that stand in their relationship and want to realise the full potential of their historic relationship. He said that there are those who oppose full growth of the relations, but we will not let these forces undermine the growth of Pakistan-Iran relationship. All these problem areas can be eliminated through dialogue mechanisms. Over the years, Pakistan has always maintained basic and strong solidarity with Iran. At the United Nations, Pakistan has maintained its principled stance on human rights, nuclear rights and sanctions, and both Iran and Pakistan have stood by each other at all international forums. A huge potential exist in the economic realm and steps are being taken to realise this and simultaneously work on the security dimension of the bilateral relations. The IP pipeline is the connective tissue between Pakistan and Iran which correlates them. This must be implemented and all barriers should be removed.