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Report- In-House Meeting

Dr. Sadollah Zarei

Executive Director, Indishe Sazan Noor Institute, Tehran.

November 6, 2017



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Pictures of the Event



The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) organized an In-House Meeting on November 6, 2017 with Dr. Sadollah Zarei, Executive Director, Indishe Sazan Noor Institute, Tehran.

Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood welcomed the guest and emphasised the close cultural links and Islamic identity that was the basis of deep-rooted ties between Pakistan and Iran. He said that despite some ups and down in their relations, Pakistan and Iran have close brotherly relations. He said that Pakistan wishes the closest possible relations with Iran.

Dr. Sadollah Zarei also agreed with Ambassador Mahmood over the depth of relations between Pakistan and Iran. He stressed on the need to establish even closer relations between the two countries, and said that one area where there is potential for improvement is the economic interaction. He suggested that the two countries should have a regional approach as far as economic relations are concerned, and that they should work towards expanding trade to \$20 billion in the next ten years or so.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood agreed with Dr Zarei on the need to improve trade. He said that it is a pity that despite the fact that there is no dispute between the two countries and they share similar culture and religion, economic activity is very limited, and stands at about half a billion dollars at present. He said that there is a Preferential Trade Agreement already signed between Pakistan and Iran, and it just needs to be implemented. He also said that tariff and non-tariff barriers have to be lowered, and banking channels need to be opened. In fact, if there is political will, these impediments can be overcome. He further said that in order to achieve greater economic cooperation, the right security environment is very important.

Dr Zarei emphasised how regional security is important. In today's world the security of regional countries is interlinked. He gave the example of Iraqi Kurdistan and how Iran, together with Turkey and Iraq, had worked to peacefully resolve the Kurdish separatist issue which could have resulted in a lot of bloodshed and instability in the region. The lesson he drew from this is that regional countries have the potential to solve their issues without outside interference, especially without US assistance.

Talking about regional peace and security, he said that Iran's role was important. Iran had controlled security threats within the country, as well as in the region. He said that the terrorist activities in neighbouring Syria and Iraq could not be controlled without the help of Iran. If it was not for the role Iran had played in controlling terrorism and the spread of the Islamic State (IS) influence, today its presence would be there in more than ten countries in the region, including Riyadh. In Iraq, the terrorist threat from IS is finished due to Iran's role. Here, he emphasised the role of the local people and their support which is vital in fighting terrorism.

He said that Israel is the root cause of insecurity in the region. The US has been supporting it, which makes Washington's aims in the region apparent. He said that since security is interconnected, any Western and US pressure on Iran affects the whole region. Although Iran can withstand US pressure, all regional states need to be united to counter it.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood agreed that regional countries need to cooperate in order to overcome problems. In this regard, he said that a regional approach towards achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan would be the correct approach. Pakistan is working towards a regional approach for the resolution of the Afghan problem involving Russia, China, Iran and the US. He also talked about the US President Donald Trump's new South Asia policy which is military centric in nature. He said that this policy is problematic because it will not only obstruct peaceful resolution of the Afghanistan problem, but would also create problems in the region with an increased Indian role in Afghanistan provided by the new US policy. This, he said, shows a fundamental insensitivity to Pakistan's concerns. He pointed out that the US portrays Pakistan as being solely responsible for the US failure to achieve peace in Afghanistan. However, the fact is that it is the US policies that are the cause of failure in Afghanistan. The US is now employing the same coercive policies against Pakistan that it did against Iran. The US is using similar rhetoric and policies against China and Russia as well. He stressed the need for greater cooperation between countries that have become a targets of the US adversarial policies. He said that greater cooperation is emerging between these countries which is essential for peace in the region.

He also appreciated Iran's positive position towards the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and emphasised that he does not buy the argument that Gwadar and Chabahar ports are rival ports. Instead, he said, they are sister ports and would complement each other.

He said that he appreciates the move towards better relations between Iran and Pakistan. He said that it is encouraging to see a convergence of threat perceptions emerging between the two countries. This means that Iran and Pakistan can work together to counter threats to the regions.

Questions and Answer Session

Q: Regarding Saudi-Iraq Coordination Council, is it possible that Iraq is playing a double role?

A: There has been pressure on Iraq from the US. The alliance between Iran and Iraq is strategic in nature and a barrier against US interests. This alliance is, therefore, problematic for the US. Also, the combined oil reserves of Iran and Iraq are greater than that of Saudi Arabia. The fact that the two countries control such huge reserves of oil and the subsequent power they wield over the oil market is a scary prospect for the US. Iran and Iraq ties are strong and would not be affected by Saudi-Iraq cooperation.

Q: What guarantees are there that the Iraqi Kurdistan issue would not rear its head again?

A: Iran has promoted a two-way solution to the Kurdish problem in Iraq. Iran has worked with Iraq to solve the political problems vis-a-vis the Kurds. At the same time, Iran has supported Kurdish human rights and overall improvement of their standard of life. This two-way approach would ensure that the solution to the problem is lasting.

Q: The US is promoting India's involvement in this region, especially in Afghanistan . Since India is at odds with Pakistan, what steps can Iran and Pakistan take to counter this threat?

A: It is essential that India and Pakistan move towards conflict resolution and solve outstanding issues that are irritants in relations between the two countries. In this regard, dialogue between the two countries is important. Iran can certainly play a positive role in fostering cooperation between India and Pakistan, especially economic cooperation that would be beneficial for all.