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Report – Panel Discussion

**“Pakistan – Bangladesh Relations in the
Context of Peace and Stability in South Asia”**

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PICTURES OF THE EVENT



The India Study Centre (ISC) at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) organised a panel discussion on "Pakistan – Bangladesh Relations in the Context of Peace and Stability in South Asia" on 16th of September, 2020. In his introductory remarks, the Director ISC Dr. Saif Malik said Pakistan and Bangladesh being two very prominent countries of South Asia are endowed with immense potential for cooperation and enjoy a pivotal geopolitical, geo-economic as well as geostrategic position in South Asia. Both countries are also connected by a shared history and a common faith. The main threat to the peace and security of South Asia rotate around the hegemonic designs of India towards all its neighbours including Pakistan and Bangladesh who share common borders with India.

Welcoming the guests, the Director General (ISSI) Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhary said that a very disorderly world is emerging. There is a competition between China and US where India has decided to join hands with the US. This has emboldened Modi to create a Hindu Rashtra which is an anti-minority concept. It has also encouraged India to assert its hegemony in the South Asian region. Therefore, it is important that the smaller countries of South Asia must consult each other. Pakistan and Bangladesh need to break ice in their relationship and since Bangladesh has made great strides in economic field, Pakistan can also learn from Bangladesh's experiences.

Ambassador M Serajul Islam, Bangladesh's former Ambassador to Japan shared his views on "*Security and Cooperation in South Asia: Bangladeshi Perspective*". He said that since Bangladesh came into existence, it has been working for the peace and security of this region. Soon after independence, Bangladesh invited Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Dhaka and the same year Shaikh Mujeeb-ur-Rahman also visited Lahore. It was Bangladesh's President Zia-ur -Rahman who floated the idea of a regional organisation and it goes to his credit that SAARC was founded. President Zia-ur-Rahman hoped that SAARC would be a far better organisation as compared to other regional organisations. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Following the nuclearization of South Asia, Sheikh Hasina Wajid, who was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh at that time visited both New Delhi and Islamabad to ease tensions in the region. However, Bangladesh's relations with Pakistan were stagnant since 2009 whereas, there was an upward trend in case of India. This situation changed with the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's

reaching out to his Bangladeshi counterpart. He emphasised the importance of maintaining good relations and stressed that both the countries should continue their efforts towards this goal.

Prof Dr Moonis Ahmar, former Dean Karachi University extensively spoke about "*Security and Cooperation in South Asia: Pakistani Perspective*". He said that the South Asian region is facing many problems and it is absolutely imperative that SAARC to be revived. Unfortunately, two major countries of the region are not on talking terms with each other. Unless India and Pakistan mend fences with each other, peace and security in the region will be a farfetched dream. There is a need to bridge the trust deficit but this cannot be done unilaterally. India must also reciprocate. He lamented the fact that the current dispensation in India has badly damaged the Composite Dialogue process and all CBMs with Pakistan. While making a strong case for the revival of SAARC, Dr. Moonis also suggested that China should be made a permanent member of SAARC as China can help in maintaining peace and security in the region.

Mr. Muhammad Mohsin Rashid, a Senior Lawyer Supreme Court of Bangladesh while speaking on '*Improving Bilateral Relations : Possible Areas of Cooperation*' highlighted that Bangladesh is the 3rd largest country in South Asia and 2nd biggest economy. While giving the brief history of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations, he said that soon after Bangladesh's independence, Shaikh Mujeeb-ur-Rahman had visited Lahore and was warmly welcomed by Pakistan. Similarly, when Mr. Bhutto visited Dhaka, he was also received with full protocol. Z.A Bhutto even went to lay wreath at the monument of unknown martyrs. He said that South Asia is a region of great potential and one particular country should not be allowed to sabotage the bilateral relations of other South Asian countries, particularly, the relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh. While appreciating the initiative of Prime Minister Imran Khan of contacting his Bangladeshi counterpart, Mr. Rashid suggested that both countries should work closely in the context of peace and security in South Asia and should become an example for other countries to follow. Both countries should make visa procedures easy to encourage people to people contacts. Air travels should be subsidised. There should be more discussions and MoUs on security arrangements. He also made a strong case for more frequent bilateral visits by South Asian leaders.

Ambassador Alamgir Babar, Pakistan's former High Commissioner to Dhaka spoke on *'Improving Bilateral Relations: Possible Areas of Cooperation'*. He was of the view that it is high time for both the countries to look forward instead of living in the past. There are challenges in the bilateral relationship but these challenges can be dealt with if both the countries work together. He identified three broad areas of cooperation that included cooperation at political level, trade & commerce and people to people contact. He emphasised the need to revive the mechanism of political cooperation as the last meeting between the foreign secretaries of both the countries took place in 2010. He also suggested for more consultations between two countries on multilateral forums.

A question was raised regarding Bangladesh's stance over the slow progress of BCIM, which is one of the projects of China's BRI due to India's opposition. Ambassador M Serajul Islam responded that Bangladesh is a strong supporter of regional connectivity. Whether it is BCIM of China's BRI project or BIMSTEC, or any other connectivity projects with India, Bangladesh is fully on board.

While concluding the event, Chairman Board of Governors ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mehmood summed up that there is desire of peace and development in the region but there are challenges. In South Asia, the major country cannot be left out. India is an elephant in the room. He recalled that in 2014, Modi's election manifesto talked about neighbourhood and SAARC but this completely reversed in 2019. Lately, India is having turbulent relations with all its neighbours. He stressed that besides SAARC, track two channels also need to be revived. At the same time both the countries also need to be careful of the spoilers.