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Report- Public Talk

“Iran and its Surroundings”

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Pictures of the Event



Iran and its Surroundings

The Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) hosted a Public Talk under its Distinguished Lecture Series on August 10, 2016 titled “*Iran and its Surroundings*.” The keynote speaker was Dr. Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, Head of the Center for International Research and Education at the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), Tehran, with the status of Deputy Foreign Minister. The Ambassador, Islamic Republic of Iran, H.E. Mr. Mehdi Honardoost was also present at the occasion.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors of ISSI in his welcome remarks emphasised the close collaboration between the ISSI and IPIS since 2001 when they signed an MoU. He highlighted the common ties of culture, religion and language that Iran and Pakistan have, and how the two countries have stood by each other in hours of need. He especially mentioned how Iran stood by Pakistan during the 1965 and 1971 wars with India, and Pakistan, in turn, have also supported Iran at many occasions. He especially mentioned Pakistan’s support for Iran when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) referred Iran’s nuclear case to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Pakistan voted against the referral, whereas India voted for it. He emphasised the need to develop economic ties and stressed the need to improve trade between the two countries. He was hopeful regarding the progress on Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline following the lifting of international sanctions on Iran. He emphasised that the new ports of Chabahar and Gwadar should not be viewed as competitors from a negative lens, but should rather be seen as complimenting projects which will help the progress of all the neighbouring states. He said that one cannot divorce bilateral relations from regional security.

The keynote speaker Dr. Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour said that there are many constructed perceptions regarding Iran which are mostly incorrect, but they are a part of reality and need to be addressed accordingly. He further highlighted that the region in which Iran exists is the most complex one and there are many existing challenges related to economy, politics and security. He structured his talk around an important question: how can one understand Iran’s relations with its surroundings? In this regard he emphasised three elements – assumptions, building blocks and cooperation which are essential to understanding Iran’s surrounding and subsequently its foreign policy.

Elaborating on the first element he said that these were assumptions about Iran. He said that Iran is just like any other country in the world and has similar foreign policy goals. Iran seeks security as its number one goal and prestige. Another factor central to understanding Iran is how important is its independence. He also mentioned that Iran is the only country that produces security domestically. This includes the hardware like armaments and software. This also has important impact on Iran’s foreign policy. He emphasised that in order to understand Iran’s surrounding, one needs to understand assumptions surrounding Iran. . He said that a lot of literature is being produced and many narratives are being introduced regarding Iran, most of them biased and un-related to the region. He condemned the “fast-food” assessments of Iran that are in fashion. These are not well-rooted or based on a deep understanding of the country but simplistic approaches which negate reality and are counterproductive.

Elaborating on the second element of building blocks, he said that it mainly related to the geography of Iran. Explaining the unique geography of Iran, he said that it is at the center of many regions but does not belong to any of those regions. He said that Iran is surrounded by 15 different neighbours, all possessing different strategic goals, security concerns, cultures and domestic politics. Iran is at the centre of them and links the region in a distinctive paradigm. In order to understand Iran's foreign policy one needs to understand the dynamics of 'building blocs' that surround Iran. Some of its neighbours include the Arab world including Egypt which is grappling with its own internal issues, Syria which is engulfed in a complex civil war, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and a troubled Afghanistan. This makes for a troubled neighbourhood with many foreign policy challenges.

Coming to the third element of cooperation, he emphasised that there was a unanimous consensus in Iran that security cannot be achieved without good relations with immediate neighbours. He said that all regional and international issues can be solved through cooperation. He reiterated the point that Iran is not an expansive power and that Iran is not an advocate of zero-sum game. He admitted that challenges do exist in this regard, but efforts for good, cordial relations should never stop. Perhaps the biggest challenge Iran faces today, he said, is dealing with the 'fear Iran industry' globally.

Dr. Kazem summed up by appreciating Pakistan for its unrelenting support of Iran at regional and international forums. He expressed his pride in the structural strength of the bilateral relationship between the two countries and the efforts Pakistan has made to curb the menace of terrorism. He went on to state that relations between think tanks in Pakistan and Iran should be promoted and encouraged as they produce new policies and new ideas.

Question and Answer Session

Question: Iran has been quiet on the Kashmir issue which is of immense importance for Pakistan. Is it Iran's trade relations with India that prevent it from speaking up on the Indian atrocities in Kashmir?

Answer: Iran condemns inhuman behaviour all over the world, especially against the Muslim world.

Question: During the period of 2000-2002, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia seemed to be improving. However, relations seem to have worsened since, why is that the case?

Answer: That is a question that must be asked of Saudi Arabia. It is Saudi Arabia that has made pronouncements against Iran. It has even tried to sabotage the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1. In fact, it must be acknowledged that Iran is a solutions to all problems, not a problem itself.

Question: There is a perception that Iran is a theological state. Is the Shia-Sunni divide partially responsible for the enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia?

Answer: Iran is firmly in favour of the unity of the Muslim world. The sectarian narrative is used against Iran. These discourses have strategic mis-intensions and do not, in fact, relate to Iran's policy.

Question: **What steps can be taken to improve Pakistan-Iran relations in the economic, trade and cultural fields?**

Answer: There are many cultural and linguistic commonalities between the two countries that must be built upon. The two countries are going to try and increase the trade volume in the coming years. There are already joint projects in the pipeline that can be developed and completed. The gas pipeline between the two countries is one such project. There is also power transmission line to the Balochistan province of Pakistan.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BoG, ISSI, in his concluding remarks, underlined that Pakistan highly values its cordial relations with Iran and is fully committed to strengthening ties and enhancing long-lasting cooperation. He praised the positive roles being played by the current governments of Iran and Pakistan for having progressive visions of peaceful coexistence and cooperation regionally and internationally. He emphasised that neither Iran nor Pakistan should allow third parties to mar or affect bilateral relations. He also praised Iran which has always supported the Kashmir cause, and expressed optimism over strengthening of economic ties in the wake of lifting of sanctions on Iran. He said that removal of sanctions, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are all opening up new vistas of cooperation and connectivity and Iran-Pakistan bilateral relations are a valuable asset that must be guarded and built upon.