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*Report- In-House Meeting*  
**Iranian Media Delegation**

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### Pictures of the Event



A 5-member Iranian Media Delegation visited the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) for an informal discussion on recent developments affecting the Iran-Pakistan relationship.

Members of the delegation included; Mr. Morteza Naghikhani, from *Kayhan International* (English Daily); Mohammadreza Abesh Ahmadlou from the *Iran Daily*; Mr. Afshin Majlesi, Correspondent, *Tehran Times*; Ms. Banafsheh Emaeili Hafshejani, Correspondent, *Mehr News Agency* and Mr. Nader Mazouji from the Persian Daily *Ettelaat*.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI, welcomed the delegation and said that Iran and Pakistan share many commonalities in terms of language, culture, shared history and a common border. Both countries have always entertained brotherly sentiments for each other: Iran was the first to recognise Pakistan, while Pakistan was one of the first countries to recognise the Iranian government after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Both countries also share a mutual stance on regional cooperation- Iran, Pakistan and Turkey were the founding members of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). He said that as in every relationship, there are always irritants- one in this case being the situation in Afghanistan. Ambassador Mahmood spoke of how there was a time when Islamabad and Tehran had divergent policies, but the bilateral relationship is of such strength that while any two countries would have broken diplomatic relations this never happened between Pakistan and Iran. Today, both countries have a similar approach towards the situation in Afghanistan: both now believe that there is a need for a political settlement in Afghanistan. He said that there is a need to develop a regional approach which should lead to a peaceful solution in Afghanistan. The US policy towards Afghanistan is based on achieving a military solution, and which by itself is creating a situation that is a recipe for continued conflict. The US is also now trying to give India a greater role in Afghanistan, and which is creating greater problems for Pakistan.

Ms. Amina Khan, Research Fellow ISSI reiterated the Chairman's statements and said that Iran wants a trilateral Pak-Afghan-Iran approach. She said that Iran is very wary of the presence of the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan and it would like to see the Afghan Taliban as part of the process, as well as the presence of the IS to be eliminated. One major impediment is the reluctance on part of the Kabul Government. In this regard, both Pakistan and Iran need to collaborate their efforts in order to find a regional solution.

With regard to the outburst by President Trump against Pakistan in his latest speech on his administration's policy towards Afghanistan and South Asia, the Chairman said that Pakistan completely rejects the remarks made. It is merely a blame game by the US to cover its own failures in Afghanistan. There are both internal and external factors in Afghanistan which have contributed to the present situation. Pakistan believes it is not time to enter into such a blame game, and instead, concentrate its efforts to resolving this problem. A political approach is needed. There is a need to have national reconciliation in Afghanistan and a peaceful settlement among all parties. It is not possible to exclude the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan's role is not to interfere, but to facilitate a political settlement that is Afghan owned and Afghan led. The primary onus therefore lies on the Afghans.

Ms. Amina Khan added that previously, on the insistence of President Ghani, Pakistan brought the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table in what is known as the Murree Process which was jeopardized by the disclosure of Mullah Omer's death. She stated that the Afghan state is highly divided on the inclusion of the Afghan Taliban in any political process, and this is something that is going to be the most important factor in the peace process. Another thing to note is that Afghanistan does not have a national reintegration programme. While the Kabul Process in June 2017 is a welcome development since it is the first time Afghanistan has taken an initiative, yet, even then, the most important component, the Afghan Taliban, were not invited.

With regard to Trump's new policy, she stated that one of the accusations levelled against Pakistan by the Americans is concerning the security of the border. Pakistan has already secured its side of the border, and even though it has repeatedly requested the Afghan government for joint border management, this has been turned down. Hence, Afghanistan needs to play its role and secure the border and a dialogue should at least be initiated between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

To a question of how can the Afghan Taliban take part in the dialogue, the Chairman said that Tehran has some influence with the Afghan Government and they should be using their clout to persuade them to do so .

Ms. Fatima Raza, Research Associate at ISSI stated that in light of the Trump policy, the Kabul Government will have to do something on their own as well. Afghanistan's best option lies in helping to develop a regional approach.

On the topic of terrorism, Ambassador Mahmood said that the situation in Afghanistan has gotten mixed with the scourge of terrorism, which is a global problem for which coordination among the regional countries is needed. With regard to the Pak-Iran border, he said that the incidents are originating from criminal elements. The solution for this lies in collaborative measures which involve making use of existing mechanisms for keeping such nefarious activities in check. Simultaneously, both countries need to be of the firm view that neither can act against each other's interests.

When asked about trade relations and a possible Preferential Trade Agreement between Pakistan and Iran, the Chairman stated that economic cooperation is currently not at par with the level of political ties. It is hence necessary that a free trade agreement be put into effect. Both countries also need to facilitate the visa process, work towards establishing direct flights between Tehran and Islamabad, and form Expert Groups in all areas such as economy and politics. There are no critical problems which should impede commercial ties; there is no problem of long distance, the means of transport and communication are already in place which means that ideally, the trade level should be boosting, particularly with the resumption of freight train services between the two countries. Another one of the main problems which Pakistan and Iran had were banking problems which were related to the American and UN sanctions. Much work has already been done in this respect and both countries need to move towards establishing branches of their banks in each other's capitals.

He said that the job of the researchers is to find out the factors that are hindering greater commercial ties and present solutions to address them. Both countries also need to be consistent in the rules and regulations they implement.

On the issue of Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, the Chairman said that because of the US sanctions, banks and other investors were not willing to invest in this venture on the Pakistani side. But now that the sanctions are easing, we hope that more investors will get interested. He pointed out that Chian has already agreed to lay the gas pipeline between Nawabshah and Gwadar under CPEC, and we hope that this can be extended to join the IP gas pipeline.