



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Report- In-House Meeting

“Kazakhstan Media Delegation”

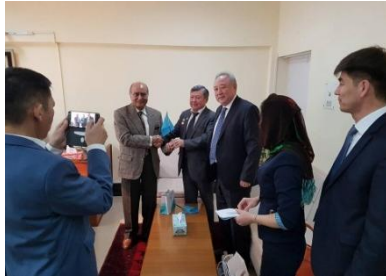
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Compiled by: Shahroo Malik

Edited by: NajamRafique

Pictures of the Event



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) held an In-House meeting with a 7 member Media Delegation from Kazakhstan on November 20, 2017. The members of the Kazakhstan delegation included: Mr. Zhanat Seidumanov, DG, Almaty National Library/President Association of Publishers, Printers & Booksellers; Mr. Arnur Rakhymbekov, Head of Foreign Correspondents Section in Central Office News Agency Kazinform; Dr. Samal Tuleubayeva, Professor, Department of Oriental Studies, Eurasian National University; Mr. Bakhitkhozha Rustemov, Writer/Journalist; Mr. Bolat Tokabayev, Chief Expert, Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies; Mr. Gabit Moldamurat, Director, Akzhayt Magazine and Mr. Paltore Ykhtiyar, Dean of Oriental Studies, Al-Farabi University.

The Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, welcomed the delegation and emphasized on the brotherly ties that exist between Pakistan and Kazakhstan. Referring to his recent visit to Kazakhstan, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood spoke about the warm welcome and generous hospitality he received from the people of Kazakhstan. He stated that he was very much impressed by the economic activity and development that is taking place in Kazakhstan, and that Astana is becoming a very attractive and vibrant capital.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood stressed upon the fact that Pakistan was one of the first few countries to recognize Kazakhstan as an independent state in 1991. Deliberating on Pakistan-Kazakhstan relations, he stated that both countries have recently celebrated 25th anniversary of their bilateral relations and Pakistan would like to further enhance its relations with Kazakhstan as both countries share the same culture and religion, have a common perspective on regional situation, face similar problems not only in the UN, OIC, ECO but other international organisations as well. While discussing the similar problems that Pakistan and Kazakhstan face, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood highlighted that both countries face the challenge of countering extremism and terrorism in the region and stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood expressed his sincere gratitude towards Republic of Kazakhstan for supporting Pakistan to attain full membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Pakistan's claim of becoming a member of Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). He further added that Kazakhstan, like Pakistan, believes that there should be nondiscriminatory, objective criteria for becoming a member of NSG. He stated that despite Pakistan's political will to forge

closer ties, our trade volume is quite low and currently stands at about \$31 million. He was of the opinion that in order to increase the bilateral trade, some definitive steps need to be taken. Ambassador Khalid Mahmood emphasized that Kazakhstan is an energy rich country, while Pakistan has numerous resources and opportunities that Kazakhstan can utilize; hence closer economic cooperation is in favor of both the countries. Efforts have been made to improve connectivity between the two countries through the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) between China, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan which facilitated transit and trade. But in 2010, the route which connected the above mentioned countries was blocked due to land sliding that led to the creation of Attabad Lake. He further added that new opportunities are also coming up which the two countries should exploit such as China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which was China's initiative under its One Belt One Road megaproject. Ambassador Khalid Mahmood while drawing attention to the importance of CPEC for the two countries stated that CPEC provides an alternative route to access the sea through the Gwadar Port which is the shortest route to sea not only for Kazakhstan, but also for other Central Asian Republics (CARs). He stated that instead of going through Afghanistan where the security situation is still a cause of concern for the international community, CPEC provides the best alternative transit route to Kazakhstan and CARs.

Dr. Ahmed Rashid Malik, Director China-Pakistan Study Centre and Senior Research Fellow, ISSI briefed the delegation on the importance of CPEC to Kazakhstan. He informed the delegation that CPEC is an integral part and one of the 6 corridors being built under China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. He stressed that CPEC is not just a road project, but it involves construction of railway links, energy projects, economic zones and much more. Besides construction of railway tracks and road networks, installation of 820km long fiber optic cable is underway for improving telecommunication. Adding on, he stated that China and Pakistan's bilateral trade now amounts to \$20 billion, and around 10,000 MW of electricity has been added to the national grid through energy projects under CPEC. Furthermore, three industrial zones have been built in Hattar, Faisalabad and Dhabeji. In 2016, China invested \$1.1 billion in Pakistan. He stressed that Gwadar Port was specifically designed to cater to the needs of land locked CARs and Central China to provide them with a shortest possible route to sea. While emphasizing the importance of CPEC, Dr. Malik was of the opinion that CPEC is like Suez Canal for China and Central Asia. He then requested the delegation to create publicity and

awareness regarding various investment opportunities that CPEC can offer to the businesses in Kazakhstan. Mr. Arnur Rakhymbekov promised to write an article on CPEC himself when he returns back to Kazakhstan. Endorsing Ambassador Khalid Mahmood's views, Dr. Malik highlighted that CPEC offers a great opportunity to Kazakhstan for enhancing economic ties and a best alternate and safe transit route to the sea as compared to routes passing through Afghanistan.

Mr. Bolat Tokabayev agreed that CPEC can be very beneficial to both the countries and while responding to the concerns raised over the low trade volume between both the countries, he stated that one of the reasons for low trade is lack of proper trade corridor to help expand bilateral trade links. He ensured to promote CPEC in Kazakhstan and give it due attention in the future.

Responding to the question regarding the increasing control of ISIS in Afghanistan and what measures Pakistan has taken to control terrorism, Mr. Najam Rafique, Director Americas/Research, ISSI drew attention to the fact that Pakistan has been the frontline state in the war on terrorism and has borne the brunt of the consequences of terrorism and extremism within the region. He informed the delegation that Pakistan has incurred heavy human and financial losses due to war on terror. It has lost about 80,000-85,000 lives due to the war on terror, while financially, Pakistan has spent over \$130 billion in its fight against terrorism. Adding on, he stated that since 2002, Pakistan has conducted a number of military operations to combat terrorism of which three operations are the most significant; Operation Rah-e-Rast conducted in SWAT (2009), Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2013-14) and Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (ongoing). As a consequence of these successful military operations terrorism in Pakistan has reduced by 75%-80% and Pakistan has moved down to 5th place at the Global Terrorism Index although it still remains among the 10 most affected countries in the world. Quoting NACTA figures, he highlighted that there have also been major successes in eradication of terrorist safe havens: 3,500 militants have been killed, 7,500 tonnes of explosives have been confiscated and 992 safe havens have been eradicated in tribal and other regions of Pakistan. He pointed out that it was due to these operations that Pakistan was successful in apprehending a terrorist of Kazakh origin – *Abdullah* Tohtasinovich Magrupov. He said that the military operations have also helped Pakistan military to gain expertise in combating terrorism in terms of becoming familiar with

terrain and various terrorist organizations. He informed the delegates that some of the organizations that have been checked include Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Punjabi Taliban, militants affiliated with Al Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement.

Further adding on to the discussion, Ms. Amina Khan, Senior Research Fellow, ISSI agreed that there is ISIS presence in Afghanistan, but they are local Taliban who have deflected from the Afghan Taliban. She informed the delegation that according to a recent report, the Afghan government has stated that around 3,000 ISIS fighters are present in Afghanistan, while Americans claim that the number is much lower at about 600. She expressed her opinion that despite the number, the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan is not only a threat to Pakistan, China, Russia, CARs and the Afghan government, but also to the Afghan Taliban who have a completely different ideology than ISIS. She clarified that the Afghan government has also acknowledged that all terrorists that were present in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have been pushed into Afghanistan. This is because Pakistan has taken a number of initiatives on the Afghan border since 2015 which include fencing, mandatory legal travel documents, installing more gates and passes to check, and control the free movement of people.

Ms. Khan was of the opinion that one of the major ways to limit and eradicate the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan is reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan is pushing for a peace process involving the Afghan Taliban in order to help bring stability to Afghanistan and also deny ISIS any sort of influence in Afghanistan. She pointed out that Pakistan shares this opinion with Iran, Russia and China as they all are favoring a dialogue process with the Afghan Taliban. But this process is right now at a standstill as certain elements in the Afghan government are not in favor of having talks with the Taliban. She highlighted that Afghan Taliban now control 43%-48% of Afghanistan's territory.

Adding on, she pointed out that although Afghan National Forces are now responsible for providing security, there has been an increase in civilian casualties by 52% which shows that regardless of the fact that the Afghans are taking control of the security situation in their country, the civilians are still at risk. She stated that the international community and the Americans have now come to the conclusion that Afghanistan is now worse off than it was in 2001, which clearly

shows that the war on terror in Afghanistan was an exercise in futility. She believes that its time that the government of Afghanistan should speak to the Afghan Taliban for establishing peace in Afghanistan instead of playing blame games and accusing Pakistan for instability in Afghanistan. She stressed that on numerous occasions, Pakistan has brought the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table but the Afghan government backs out at the last moment. Similarly, Ms. Khan pointed out that the Kabul Peace Process, an initiative by the Afghan government to bring stability back to Afghanistan and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group's recent meeting were fully supported by Pakistan, but again the most important component, the Afghan Taliban, were not invited to take part in this process.

While addressing a question regarding monitoring of the number of Pakistani citizens that have joined ISIS in Syria and what steps Pakistani government has taken to counter this growing threat, Ms. Amina responded that most of the terrorist threat to Pakistan comes from its home grown terrorist organizations such as TTP, Jammatt-ul-Ahrar, a splinter group of TTP and remnants of Al-Qaeda. She informed that there were certain individuals who had pledged allegiance to ISIS and a few that travelled to Syria, but those individuals have been apprehended by the Pakistani authorities and the Pakistani government is taking serious steps to address this issue including stronger border management on the Afghan-Pakistan border. Considering ISIS's presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan has asked Afghanistan to support it in this initiative. She stated that as there have not been many cases of Pakistani nationals supporting ISIS, which indicates that Pakistan has been successful so far in controlling ISIS's influence in Pakistan.

Mr. Paltore Ykhtiyar appreciated Pakistan's efforts in combating terrorism and fighting ISIS. He informed that Urdu is also one of the languages that is being taught at the Oriental Studies Department at Al Farabi University. Mr. Ykhtiyar stated that students at the Oriental Studies Department are studying the religious differences between India and Pakistan and the Kazakh National University in Almaty has a separate China Centre in which students are studying the CPEC project. Hence, he stressed that there's a need for a deeper cooperation between the two countries in academic fields, especially in science and humanities. He said that as Oriental Studies Department's Public Policy faculty is closely observing the situation of ISIS in Afghanistan, therefore, Pakistan's assistance in this area will be quite beneficial.

Dr. Samal Tuleubayeva pointed out that Kazakhstan is very rich in minerals, natural gas and oil, but unfortunately it lacks access to sea. She informed that a rail route was developed through Turkmenistan to Iran which boosted trade, but due to recent developments in the Persian Gulf and Iran's involvement in the Arabian Peninsula, CARs are reluctant to use this route. Hence, she stressed that CPEC is very important for Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states as an alternative route to sea and this meeting provides the best opportunity to gain more information regarding CPEC. While briefing about Kazakhstan's initiative in stabilizing Afghanistan, Dr. Tuleubayeva stated that apart from providing humanitarian help, Kazakhstan supports a lot of Afghan students to come and complete their studies in Kazakh universities. She pointed out that Kazakhstan has also taken numerous diplomatic initiatives such as CICA, to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, and being a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council from 2017-18, Kazakhstan got the opportunity to discuss the situation in Afghanistan at an international forum. She appreciated Pakistan's efforts in countering terrorism and stated that Pakistan has now rich experience in combating terrorism. She highlighted that Kazakhstan is in the forefront in establishing peace in Syria and has hosted seven rounds of Astana Peace process till now.

Dr. Tuleubayeva further highlighted the fact that since the establishment of diplomatic ties between Kazakhstan and Pakistan in 1991, there is lack of information about Pakistan among the general public as the media only focuses on terrorist attacks taking place in Pakistan while ignoring all other aspects. She promised to write articles on Pakistan to show the real situation and economic prospects that Pakistan has to offer to the people of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, she was in favor of establishing study centres with specific focus on CARs in Pakistan and promoting frequent people-to-people contact in order to help building positive image of Pakistan in Kazakhstan.

Concluding the meeting, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI highlighted the importance of Kazakhstan in greater Eurasia as all the important transit routes pass through Kazakhstan. He stated that Kazakhstan is not only rich in resources, but also has a very strategic position than can support more trade and economic activity in the region. Endorsing Dr. Tuleubayeva views, he stated that CPEC provides the best alternative route to sea after the recent developments in Syria and Iran's involvement in the Arabian Peninsula. He stressed upon the need to intensify mutual co-operation in order to combat terrorism, mentioning the Regional

Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO as another forum to intensify co-operation between the two countries. Furthermore, he stated that there is a need to establish better connectivity and resume direct flight routes between both the countries to fully exploit the potential that both countries have in enhancing trade, combating terrorism and bringing back stability to Afghanistan.