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Report – In-House Meeting

Nepali Media Delegation

March 27, 2019



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PICTURES OF THE EVENT



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted an In-House Meeting on March 27, 2019, with a 4-member delegation from Nepal Press Council. Members of the delegation included: Mr. Kishor Shrestha, Acting Chairman, Press Council of Nepal, Mr. Gyanratna Shakya, Member, Press Council of Nepal, Mr. Khil Bahadur Bhandari, Member, Press Council of Nepal and Ms. Saraswati Shrestha, Member, Press Council of Nepal.

Welcoming the delegation, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry highlighted Pakistan's good relations with Nepal. He stated that Nepal is like a neighbor and Pakistan regards it as one SAARC family. However, the economic contact between the two countries is limited despite the desire expressed by both to enhance trade ties.

Giving a brief over view of the changing global geo-political scenario, Ambassador Chaudhry stated that the world is changing; US is focusing more on Asia with its new strategy called the Indo-Pacific strategy in which it is giving India a dominant role. India and US are now coming close, while China and Pakistan are taking their friendship to a new level by enhancing economic cooperation between the two countries through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

He stressed that there are a number of challenges in South Asia. The US closeness with India has emboldened the Indian leadership and encouraged Modi to take a very hard line and it's a matter of concern for everyone. The policy that India is pursuing has put its secular credentials in question and the minorities in India at risk. The Hindutva approach that Modi is following is not Hinduism. Modi's grand scale policy of Hindutva has deeply concerned all minorities in India that form 30 per cent of the Indian population. Ambassador Chaudhry stressed that since 70 years, the Kashmiris have not accepted the Indian rule and have asked for their right to self-determination. He was of the opinion that there cannot be a military solution to the Kashmir dispute, only political solution is the way forward. Hence, Pakistan believes that a political solution to Kashmir would require India and Pakistan, as well as the people of Kashmir to engage in dialogue.

India has halted the dialogue process between the two countries by accusing Pakistan of sponsoring terrorists and has clearly stated that unless Pakistan takes serious actions against certain banned outfits, India will not resume any talks with Pakistan. Ambassador Chaudhry clarified that Pakistan itself was a victim of terrorism and has suffered a lot of human and

material losses. Successful operations have been carried out in the tribal areas to root out terrorists. After that, the law and order situation has improved significantly. Therefore, when India suspends the dialogue, it's supporting the interests of the militants that do not want peace in the region. India wants to isolate Pakistan; in 2016, the SAARC summit was scheduled to be held in Pakistan and India decided not to attend it. It also pressurized Sri Lanka, Nepal and other SAARC members to do the same.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry stressed that Pakistan does not want war, but it will respond if someone violates its territorial integrity and sovereignty. He highlighted that Modi is playing a dangerous game by stoking the flames of hatred against Muslims, Kashmiris and Pakistan just to win the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. This issue is of grave concern to the people of South Asia and the world as a whole. He was of the opinion that wars do not provide any answers. Pakistan has survived all the wars fought so far and has built a strong defense and will retaliate if any country tries to violate its sovereignty and territorial integrity as witnessed during the recent skirmish between India and Pakistan. Ambassador Chaudhry stated that India is like an elder brother, and hence, should take the initiative to take along all the relatively smaller states in the region. On Afghanistan, Ambassador Chaudhry stressed that it's in the interest of the South Asian region to bring peace and stability back to Afghanistan. He stated that Pakistan wants peace in South Asia. This north-south connectivity (CPEC) that Pakistan has built with the help of China can be enhanced towards east and west. But for that to happen, India needs to change its behavior and act like a good neighbor, not like a hegemon.

While addressing the gathering, Mr. Kishor Shrestha stated that when India imposed the 3rd economic embargo against Nepal, it was a blessing in disguise as it generated a sense of nationalism among Nepalese people and this is the first time that Nepal has a stable government. He highlighted the increased influence of India on Nepalese politics. He informed that high level visits between Nepal and Pakistan have been halted due to Indian pressure. He stressed that Pakistan should seek out more collaborative efforts with countries like Nepal, Thailand, Myanmar and Singapore. It should encourage more people-to-people contact and think-tank collaborations.

Responding to a question about Nepal's relations with China, Mr. Shrestha highlighted that Nepal is now deepening its relations with China. Due to the earthquake, the only road link between China and Nepal got blocked. But another land route has now been opened. Nepal has a high volume of trade with China, but due to India's objections Nepal remains one of the least developed countries in the region. Nepal has recently developed good relations with China after the economic setbacks it had to go through due to embargoes imposed by India. Nepal is now establishing its own petroleum and other industries with the help of China and also has access to Chinese ports. He informed the gathering that around 9 flights from China fly to Nepal every day.

When asked about his views regarding the upcoming Indian Lok Sabha elections, Mr. Shrestha stated that the general perception is that BJP could be the largest party, but the popularity graph of Modi will decrease. The opposition party, the Indian National Congress, is not in a strong position at the moment to win the elections. Discussing the future of SAARC, Mr. Kishor Shrestha stated that SAARC was a good forum, but it can only be effective if Pakistan and India co-operate together.