



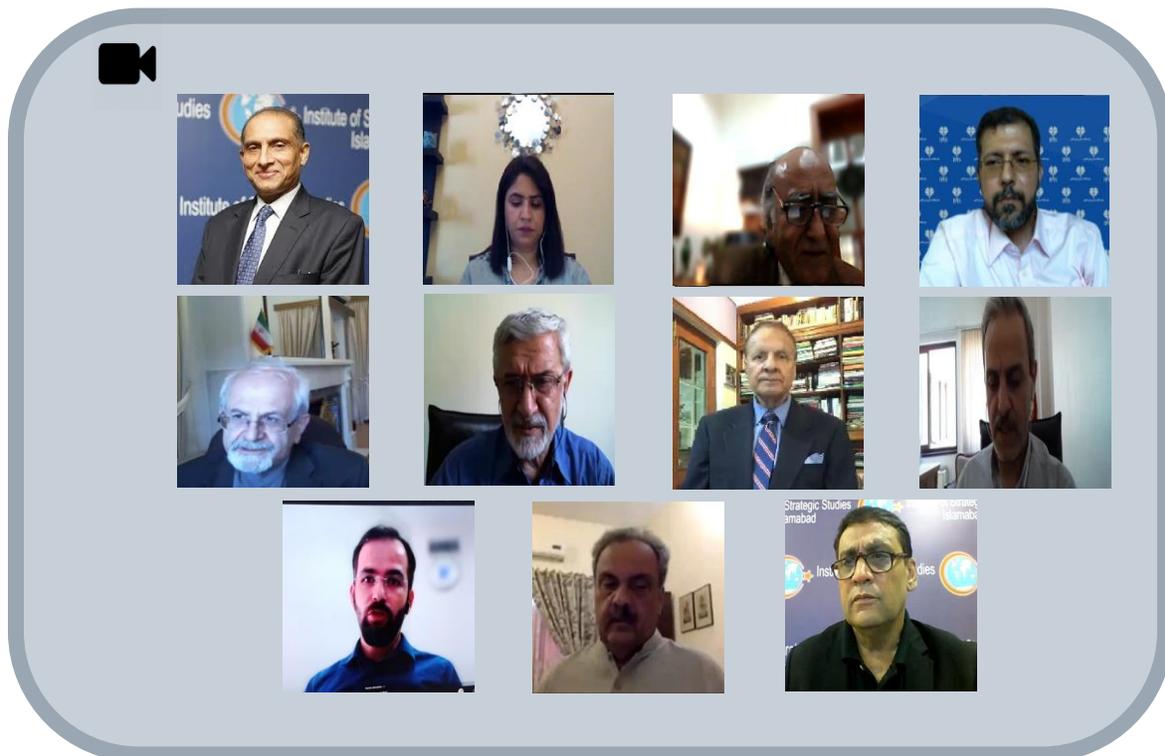
**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
phone: +92-51-9204423, 24  
fax: +92-51-9204658

*Report – Webinar*

# **“Iran, Pakistan and South Asia under the Pandemic”**

**July 14, 2020**



*Rapporteurs: Fatima Raza, Asadullah Khan, Shahroo Malik and Arhama Siddiqi  
Edited by: Najam Rafique*

### Pictures of the Event



As part of the 16<sup>th</sup> ISSI-IPIS Dialogue, the Institute of Strategic Studies of Islamabad (ISSI) in collaboration with the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), Tehran organized a virtual webinar on *Iran, Pakistan and South Asia under the Pandemic* on July 14, 2020. Discussions at the webinar were based on bilateral relations between Pakistan and Iran and regional developments in Afghanistan, Subcontinent and the Persian Gulf.

### **Inaugural Session**

**Dr. Kazem Sajjadpour**, President, IPIS greeted the participants and welcomed this virtual collaboration between the two think tanks. He briefly mentioned that the region is riddled with multiple challenges, especially instability in Afghanistan. He hoped that the webinar would revolve around three Fs: Friendship, Frankness and Fruitful discussion.

**Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry**, DG ISSI in his welcome remarks said that this was part of the 16<sup>th</sup> annual ISSI-IPIS dialogue. He pointed out that global politics is in a state of flux particularly due to turbulent political situation in the US, the upcoming elections and countrywide protests due to the Floyd killing. Major power competition is intensifying as the US is working methodically to contain China's rise through its Pivot to Asia policy, now known as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which has also encouraged India to have dangerous regional ambitions. Prime Minister Modi is attempting to turn the Indian polity into a 'Hindu Rashtra' a polity for the Hindus only. It aims to turn South Asia into a 'hegemonic' region where India would be the hegemon and this behaviour has also landed it into a conflict with China. On Afghanistan, he said that there finally seems to be a ray of hope but several pre-requisites still remain. On the Iran-Pakistan bilateral ties, he said that it is a strategic imperative to maintain good relations. He said that while there are a few irritants, the two sides have never had any political disputes. Unfortunately, the economic potential in their ties has not been fully exploited due to US economic sanctions against Iran which is why the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project also got delayed. Border issues arise occasionally due to cross border militancy, but there is a mutual will to deal with these issues.

## **Session I - West and South Asia, Iran-Pakistan Bilateral Relations**

The first session included presentations by Seyed Rasoul Mousavi, Director General for West Asia, MFA, Iran; Mr. Asif Hussain Menon, DG, Afghanistan, Iran & Turkey, MOFA, Pakistan; Professor Kayhan Barzegar, Director, Center for Middle East Strategic Studies; and Ambassador Javid Husain, former ambassador of Pakistan to Iran.

**Seyed Rasoul Mousavi** focused on managing the bilateral relationship during the times of the pandemic. He highlighted importance of people-to-people relationship between the two countries by utilizing the 900 km shared border as an opportunity for cooperation rather than perceiving it as a threat. He mentioned how traders on both sides had faced issues in transport of goods due to the closure of the border, for example the problems that arose in the export of mangoes from Pakistan. Both countries should focus on finding opportunities to explore new dimensions of mutual ties under the hurdles created by US sanctions and the pandemic.

**Mr. Asif Hussain Memon** emphasized that the border between Iran and Pakistan is actually a border of opportunity as both the countries have not faced any major political dispute. However, the challenges in their bilateral ties need management to steer institutional mechanisms to forge further collaboration. Making a strong case for more economic activity between the two countries, Mr. Asif Hussain said that the location of both the countries at international trading routes provides an opportunity to strengthen connectivity to Middle East, Central Asia and Europe, which will be beneficial for not only Iran and Pakistan but also the region itself. He highlighted a huge potential of cooperation between Gwadar and Chabahar ports and expansion of bilateral trade ties especially under CPEC projects.

Enlisting points of convergence between the two countries, Mr. Memon mentioned Iran's stance on the Kashmir issue while reiterating Pakistan's continued support for Iran's position on the Iran nuclear deal. Prime Minister Imran Khan's message of reconciliation and mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia was also very well-received in Tehran. On the regional level, convergence between Iran and Pakistan is also highlighted in their similar stance on peace in Afghanistan. Presence of refugees in the immediate vicinity of both countries makes it imperative for both Iran and Pakistan to work together for ultimate peace in Afghanistan. He mentioned how the two countries displayed an exemplary level of cooperation against locusts.

As it affects a great number of countries in the region, both countries must maintain regular contact to ensure that the food chain is not disrupted. Border closure during Covid-19 pandemic had impacted trade, but now the trade activity has resumed which shows an appetite on both sides to work together.

**Professor Kayhan Barzegar** said that the two countries never worked against each other and this is the baseline of bilateral relations between the two countries. He said that if we analyse the relations between Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has always tried to balance between the two states. Discussing the historical context, he said Pakistan enjoyed good relations in the time of Shah of Iran and this continues till today. Even today, Pakistan is able to balance between Iran and Persian Gulf states and Iran has always appreciated Pakistan for this. The eastern borders of Iran have been a cause of development and prosperity of the nation which is combined with energy, exchanges of labor forces and has remained a source of soft power. It is completely different from the western side of Iran which is somehow affected by security and ideology. On the eastern front, Iran never thinks that its neighbours will allow any foreign intervention in Iran because they know that the position of Iran in the region is that of a peace maker. Therefore, Iran always sees its eastern border in development and cultural context and is trying to adjust its foreign policy base along these aspects. He concluded that “the best policy for Iran will be to have balanced relations with both India and Pakistan. Iran never effected its relations with Pakistan in the context of its relations with India. Iran always looks at Pakistan independently. Beside bilateral relations, both the sides need to adjust their relations with the geopolitics of the region which is broader security situation in the South Asia.”

**Ambassador Javid Husain** said that he was delighted to have this opportunity to express his views on Pakistan-Iran bilateral relations in the context of the prevailing regional and global strategic realities. He stressed that historical, cultural, and religious commonalities call for the closest cooperation between the two countries in political, strategic, security, economic, commercial and technical fields. It is also worth reminding ourselves specially that the security and economic well-being of Pakistan and Iran are closely linked. Whenever the two countries cooperated with each other in political, strategic and security spheres, both have benefitted from such cooperation. History is also a witness that the disregard of this rule hurt the interests of both the countries. Similarly, there are enormous opportunities for mutual cooperation in economic,

commercial, technical and cultural fields both bilaterally and regionally within the context of the Economic Cooperation Organization. Both Pakistan and Iran must take full advantage of these opportunities.

Talking about the global strategic environment, Ambassador Husain said that it goes without saying that Pakistan-Iran bilateral cooperation in various fields has to be conducted keeping in view the prevailing regional and global ground realities and their likely future trends. The defining feature of the global geopolitical scene in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be the growing Sino-US rivalry which would have its repercussions in strategic, political, economic, commercial and other fields. America's unilateralism and disregard of international law and multilateralism combined with the growing reliance on realpolitik rather than the UN Charter by other major powers in the interstate conduct have set the stage for growing world disorder and diminishing importance of the UN. In this world in flux, weaker states will be constantly in search of powerful allies to strengthen their security, heralding an era of shifting alliances in response to changing global and regional ground realities. Increasingly, the power of nations will be measured in terms of economic and technological progress and scientific advancement rather than purely in terms of military prowess which will remain important nevertheless. The global geopolitical scene would also be influenced by overarching issues of climate change, civilizational and cultural contradictions, nationalism vs globalization, and the trend towards regional economic integration.

On regional strategic environment, Ambassador Husain said that these developments are inevitably transforming the regional strategic scenario in the context of which Pakistan and Iran must manage their bilateral relationship. The growing strategic partnership between the US and India to contain the expansion of the Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific theatre, especially in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, is steadily pushing Pakistan into an ever growing close strategic relationship with China to protect its security and promote its economic progress and autonomy in the face of the Indian hegemonic ambitions and the Kashmir dispute. Iran, confronted by the security and economic challenges posed by the US in the Persian Gulf region and the Middle East, has no choice but to seek closer cooperation with China to safeguard its national interests. This trend has been reinforced especially after the rejection of the Iran nuclear deal by the US under the Trump administration. Thus, both Pakistan and Iran in quest for

security and economic well-being are getting closer to China. Similar reasons dictate their close cooperation with Russia which is facing its own set of problems on account of the US unilateralism and expansionism in Eastern Europe. The emerging strategic scenario at the regional level offers a propitious setting for close cooperation between Pakistan and Iran in various fields.

The prospect of the early American military withdrawal from Afghanistan offers useful opportunities to Pakistan and Iran for mutual cooperation and coordination of policies in supporting the quest of the people of Afghanistan for durable peace and stability. Similarly, India's virtual annexation of the Indian Occupied Kashmir in August last year in violation of the UN Security Council resolutions and its reign of terror to suppress the struggle of the people of Kashmir for freedom from the Indian occupation offer another area where Pakistan and Iran can explore the possibilities of mutual cooperation.

The Persian Gulf region right now is riven by national rivalries and sectarian tensions aggravated by interference by non-regional powers. Durable peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region and the Middle East on the basis of sovereign equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of states, and mutual respect are in the interest of all the regional countries. While Iran is an important country in the Persian Gulf region, Pakistan's security and economic interests are also closely engaged in the region. Both Pakistan-Iran cooperation in strengthening peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region is therefore called for as it is required for dealing with the Palestinian issue, a common cause of the Islamic world.

Talking about the possibilities of Pakistan-Iran bilateral cooperation, Ambassador Husain offered the following proposals to strengthen Pakistan-Iran relations:

### **Political**

- Mindful of the fact that the security and economic well-being of the two countries are closely linked, regular periodic consultations at political and senior official levels on important bilateral, regional and global levels are the need of the hour. Generally speaking, the two countries should learn from their past experience without being a prisoner of the past.

- Coordination of policies in promoting durable peace and stability in Afghanistan through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process is a strategic necessity for Pakistan and Iran. Both Pakistan and Iran should avoid their mistakes of 1990's in dealing with Afghanistan.
- The two countries should exchange views on how they can cooperate with each other in supporting the Kashmiris' struggle for freedom from the Indian occupation in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, nuclear issues concerning Iran, the Palestine issue, and the issue of durable peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region.
- Pakistan and Iran should also cooperate in strengthening OIC for promoting cooperation within the Muslim world and in supporting multilateralism through reinvigorating the UN.

## **Security**

- Both Pakistan and Iran have been victims of terrorism sponsored by foreign powers through such outfits as BLA and Jundullah which was succeeded by Jaish-ul-Adal. They should cooperate to exterminate such elements in the interest of the elimination of terrorism.
- Elimination of drug trafficking is another area in which the two countries can cooperate to their mutual benefit.
- Strict measures for border management to prevent the cross border movement of criminal elements are also called for.
- Regular periodic meetings of the security officials of the two countries should be organized to promote cooperation in the various security areas.

## **Economic**

- Despite the obstacles and difficulties created by the American economic sanctions on Iran, Pakistan and Iran should devise innovative measures to promote mutual bilateral trade, which is currently at a very low level, and economic and technical cooperation.

- The two countries should try to revive the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project by involving China and turning it into an Iran-Pakistan-China pipeline project as part of CPEC.
- Possibilities of long-term Pakistan-Iran cooperation in the petrochemical sector should be explored.
- Gwadar and Chabahar should be developed as sister ports complementing each other.

## **Defence**

- In view of the strategic reality and the lesson of history which dictate that the security of Pakistan and Iran is closely linked, there should be regular exchange of visits and consultations between their defense and intelligence officials to explore possibilities of mutual cooperation in the defense sector, especially under various possible scenarios threatening their security.

## **Culture**

- Pakistan and Iran enjoy close cultural affinities, religious commonalities, and historical linkages between their peoples. Urdu and Persian are closely linked with each other through common vocabulary. The two countries also have a common cultural heritage. While literary giants like Firdousi, Saadi, Hafez, Rumi and Jami are well-known and highly regarded in Pakistan's literary circles, Iqbal, the national poet of Pakistan, is deeply revered in Iran. Both countries should therefore take steps to strengthen cultural ties through regular academic, literary, artistic and journalistic exchanges and the promotion of cooperation in these areas.

## **Session II – *Regional Developments: Afghanistan, Subcontinent and Persian Gulf***

The second session of the webinar focused on "*Regional Developments: Afghanistan, Subcontinent and Persian Gulf*". Speakers in the session included: Mojtaba Rouzbahani, Senior Fellow; Amina Khan, Director, Centre for Middle East and Africa, ISSI; Mir Mahmoud Mousavi, Iran's former Ambassador to India and Pakistan; Ambassador Shamshad Ahmad,

former Foreign Secretary; Hassan Ahmadian, Professor, University of Tehran; and Ambassador Asif Durrani, former ambassador of Pakistan to Iran

**Mojtaba Rouzbahani** stated that Afghanistan is a very important neighbor to both Iran and Pakistan, and peace and stability in Afghanistan strengthens security in our region. He highlighted that Islamic republic of Iran has played its peaceful role to shape a bright future of Afghanistan. Following the outbreak of civil war in Afghanistan as a result of intervention of superpowers, the country has constantly been a victim of conflicts and bloody violence which continues till the present day. In 2020, peace and stability is returning to Afghanistan and the signing of peace agreement between US and Taliban is considered an important and influential development. He stated that the withdrawal of US forces can only take place responsibly only if it does not destroy the framework needed to build peace and stability reflected in the country's constitution. Some players are trying to influence terrorists and extremist to pursue their interests. He stressed that peace process in Afghanistan needs to be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led in which the government of Afghanistan should play a central role. Iran has been clear enough to support the preservation of the constitution of Afghanistan. The country needs the support of its neighbors for a mutually beneficial arrangement during and after the peace process. Afghanistan should not be a matter of competition but a matter of cooperation between Tehran and Islamabad.

**Amina Khan** in her remarks stated that after nearly two decades of protracted war, bloodshed and all the baggage that war carries, the US and the Afghan Taliban finally signed a peace agreement on February 29, 2020 amid hopes that the country returns towards normalcy. The historic agreement came after 18 months of extensive and rather exhaustive negotiations not to mention numerous hurdles including a brief collapse of the process in September 2019. The deal itself revolves around four principal issues, namely i) Ceasefire, ii) withdrawal of foreign forces within a fourteen months' period, iii) Intra-Afghan talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, iv) Counter terrorism (CT) assurances that the Taliban will not participate in or aid others in threatening the security of the US and its allies.

While highlighting the hurdles in the way of peace, Ms. Khan stated that since the signing of the agreement, there have been a number of hurdles in its actual implementation, such as political

uncertainty stemming from the Ghani-Abdullah feud, delays by President Ghani in the release of prisoners, Taliban's refusal to reduce violence let alone enter in to a ceasefire, delays in the initiation of the US withdrawal, delays in the commencement of intra-Afghan talks, as well the threat caused by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic that has not only claimed 774 Afghan lives but has also played a role in shelving talks. However, despite the hurdles, she stated that certain developments have taken place, generating optimism towards the implementation of the deal. These include the appointment of Abdullah Abdullah as Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), a 3-day ceasefire by the Taliban reminiscent of the ceasefire that took place in June 2018, and release of 2,000 Taliban prisoners as a gesture of goodwill. Therefore, it appears that the gestures exhibited by Kabul and the Taliban have played a constructive role in convincing both sides to engage with each other. She further pointed out that in June, we saw that the Afghan government and more importantly, the Taliban expressed willingness to engage in intra-Afghan talks which is a significant development considering the fact that the group has continuously refused to do so in the past. Moreover, the appointment of Dr. Abdullah to spearhead the peace process on Kabul's behalf is of utmost importance. However, his performance will depend on how much independence and autonomy he is given, and that unnecessary hurdles are not created by the Palace, as we have seen in the past.

While news of intra-Afghan talks is a much needed step, Ms. Amina Khan stressed that it must be realized that if they do take place, it will be the beginning of a highly sensitive and complex process that will require patience and compromises from all sides. After all, as the recent past has shown us, the highs can quickly be replaced by the lows. While the ongoing exchange of prisoners is setting the ground towards the talks, a number of irritants continue to stand in the way

Ms. Khan was of the opinion that since the signing of the deal, the group appears to have come out as the most responsible actor, be it towards addressing the corona virus or their commitment to the peace agreement and future of Afghanistan. Recognizing the Taliban's apparent commitment, in March 2020, US Secretary of State Pompeo said that in contrast to the Afghan government, the Taliban were keeping their end of the peace deal by delivering their team to the ultimate negotiations. Following the clauses of the US-Taliban deal, the Taliban have halted attacks against international forces, yet they continue to target Afghan forces - their reluctance to

abandon or reduce violence against Afghan forces is highly problematic and a stumbling block in the way of peace. The Taliban must put a halt to their hostilities towards the state, because at the end of the day its ordinary Afghans that are losing their lives. If the Taliban can accept the US – the same country that invaded Afghanistan, they should also be ready to accept the Afghan government as an equal stakeholder. Moreover, for a group that is going through war fatigue, the Taliban should do this not as a sign of weakness, but a chance to further their cause through a non-violent platform and secure for themselves a legitimate place in the Afghan polity, which is not something that was always on the cards.

Now that the political feud has been settled between Dr. Abdullah and President Ghani, it appears that all the ingredients necessary for a peace deal are in place; hence it is now up to the stakeholders to show themselves as both ready and willing for it to succeed. Moreover, while external challenges to the peace process are often spoken about, little or no attention is given to the internal /national challenges which by far are the greatest hurdles in the way of peace. Hence, Kabul should focus on political and national reconciliation as well as national and social healing - critical factors that have been missing from the Afghan equation.

External actors can only do so much, it is important for Kabul to take ownership and realize that talking to the Taliban and reaching a compromise is solely in the hands of the Afghans themselves - while it is certainly not easy this is something the Afghans will have to do themselves in the upcoming talks.

While highlighting US's role, Ms. Amina Khan stated that many have criticized the US-Taliban deal for being “both truly momentous for happening at all and severely modest for what it contains.” Considering the past 19 years of bloodshed, this is the best option the Afghans have, and while it isn't perfect, it is better than war and is certainly a starter. Hence, this opportunity should not be missed. The US has a responsibility to push all sides to fulfill their side of the agreement, and ensure a credible and workable agreement. As has been witnessed in the past, haphazard and hasty compromises that are prone to collapse need to be avoided at all costs. Instead, Washington will need to play a proactive role, ensuring it allows the Afghans to come up with their own plans, and know when to intervene and put pressure on all sides. So now that intra-Afghan talks are finally on the verge of occurrence, critical aspects essential for peace that

were overlooked in the US-Taliban deal need to be addressed and focused in the upcoming intra-Afghan talks.

On the issue of troop withdrawal, Ms. Amina Khan was of the opinion that on its part, the US needs to ensure a responsible withdrawal, without showing undue haste. A hasty withdrawal would have catastrophic consequences not only for Afghanistan but the entire region. Even though the Taliban have continued to emphasize the withdrawal of US forces, at the same time, the group has stated that they would want the US to come back and help build the country through reconstruction and development, clearly indicating that they are open to some sort of US presence on their terms. She stated that for now any reduction in troops should solely depend on the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks. Ceasefire remains the most challenging pre-requisite of the peace process. She further stressed that unlike the US-Taliban deal which failed to secure a ceasefire, the US should push for a sustained and credible ceasefire, which should be a key focus and outcome of the upcoming intra-Afghan talks.

Talking about the future political set up in Afghanistan, Ms. Khan stated that so far, little to no progress let alone discussion has been made on what kind of a political set up Afghanistan would have in the future post intra-Afghan talks. Hence, it is essential that the future political set up, and related issues such as the constitution, rights and role of women, are addressed and agreed upon in the upcoming intra-Afghan talks. Without addressing such pivotal issues, the talks will be an exercise in futility. One option could be to continue with the current political structure and accommodate the Taliban in it. She further added that another option could be an inclusive interim set up - an idea that was largely supported by all the different Afghan political factions in the Moscow talks (2018), the timeline of such a government could be determined by the stakeholders based on its performance.

While talking about the future of Afghanistan, Ms. Khan stated that Afghanistan has suffered for decades from war, political instability, corruption, and now faces a new threat in the form of Covid-19, which is a huge test as well as an opportunity for the Afghan government and the Taliban to come together, accommodate each other and take a chance on peace. She emphasized that the aim now more than ever, should be to focus on achieving peace in Afghanistan. As a starter and positive gesture, the Taliban must demonstrate a visible reduction in violence, not as a

means of weakness or surrender, but rather as an opportunity to further their cause through political engagement. She suggested that this should be accompanied by the upcoming intra-Afghan talks, which should lead to a timeframe for a gradual and responsible troop withdrawal, leading to a sustained and credible ceasefire that is not prone to collapse. The process is long and extremely fragile, which requires the utmost care and commitment.

**Mir Mahmoud Mousavi** stated that stability and security is the same as of last year. There have been terror attacks and drug trafficking also continues. It is important to highlight that the growing nationalism in India is going to be problematic for the whole region. He was of the opinion that nationalism in the sub-continent is dangerous for the region. BJP government seems not to care about the negative impact of its policies against Muslims in India. The increasing role of China in the region has also increased in the recent years leading to a new polarization. He predicted that some new alliances may appear in the region. Within last few years, President Trump has also shown an inclination of not having a solid policy for the region. He opined that the peace deal in Afghanistan is not going to be a long lasting one. He further added that there is a lot of optimism in the air but the world doesn't work on that, it works on supremacy.

**Ambassador Shamshad Ahmad** could not present his views because of technical difficulties with Skype.

**Hassan Ahmadian** stated that the Persian Gulf is considered to be a part of Iran's national security, economic lifeline and a secure and stable Persian Gulf has always been a part of its strategic objective and a priority in the foreign policy. Extra-regional powers also have an inherent interest in the well-being of the Persian Gulf. Inherent interest of regional actors will naturally push them towards security and stability of the region. Primary goal is to have a regional setting for a secure and stable Persian Gulf. This is why Iran has come up with a number of regional arrangements such as Iran's HOPE initiative for Persian Gulf security which are inclusive in nature unlike the US-led initiatives.

Iran has maintained good relations with the GCC countries. It has a very functional relationship with countries such as Oman, Qatar and Kuwait. However, lately, Iran's relations with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have deteriorated. Here lies an opportunity for Pakistan, to try and mediate

tensions between regional countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iranians appreciate Pakistani role, as an honest broker in this regard.

Extra-regional actors have not been successful in securing the Persian Gulf. The United States is a primary example of this since its main policy in the Persian Gulf besides stabilizing the Persian Gulf, has been to exclude Iran. These are mutually exclusive goals. Additionally, the United States' arms sales and its support of aggressive actors in the region, for instance in the war in Yemen, has created instability in the region. Lately, its pressure campaign against Iran has actually increased the imbalance in the region, with countries such as Saudi Arabia banking on the United States to change the balance of power in the region forever. All this has deteriorated the security of the Persian Gulf. Though some countries such as Saudi Arabia may view these incidents as beneficial, these are short-term. In the long run, it is targeting regional security and stability.

He also talked about the Iran-Pakistani potential of cooperation. He said that the two countries need to overcome the politics driven mentality when it comes to the Persian Gulf. Pakistan has the potential to bridge gaps and play a brokers role. It has already been doing that. Regional crises are challenging for all of us in the region, but they also present opportunities for cooperation in the region. Both Iran and Pakistan can also bank on these crises by furthering their regional cooperation. The US pressure on Iran is not exclusive to Iran but also targeting Iran-Pakistan relations such as economic and financial ties. Hence, it is also targeting regional cooperation and integration. Counters can be made to balance US pressure such as by making mutual projects trilateral in nature and having partners such as China on board so as to mitigate the pressure.

**Ambassador Asif Durrani** in his remarks stated that any instability in the Persian Gulf affects all the surrounding regions, including South Asia, especially Pakistan because of geographical congruity. Pakistan has maintained positive neutrality while engaging with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, it must be kept in mind that Pakistan has its limitations. Almost 4.5 million Pakistanis are working in the Persian Gulf states.

For Pakistan, Iran is a neighbor and a friend with whom we share a long history of mutual support. Both sides have stood by each other in difficult times. Examples can be seen in 1965

and 1971 wars with India. Pakistan voted in favor of Iran even at the IAEA in 2008 when even India voted against it. JCPOA is another example of mutual support.

He highlighted how Iran being the largest country of the Persian Gulf, entails that it has certain responsibilities to uphold. Almost all the Persian Gulf states are neighbors of Iran. In terms of economy, it is the second largest economy in the region - the first being Saudi Arabia. But the potential of these two countries is being wasted on issues of ideology and issues of security of the Persian Gulf.

He also raised the question of what Iran can do to raise the comfort level of its fellow Persian Gulf states. He pointed out how the increasing partnership between China and Iran is of immense importance to Pakistan since we are already a partner of China vis a vis the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

On the issue of the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline, he said that it was a peace pipeline until India was part of it. Once it withdrew from it, the IP was no longer a peace pipeline. This presents an opportunity to make China part of this project. Furthermore, the prospects of extending CPEC should also be explored.

With regard to Afghanistan, he said that there has been a history between Iran and Pakistan regarding the situation in Afghanistan. During the Taliban times, Iran and Pakistan were on opposite ends, which was unfortunate. However, Taliban have matured after 20 years of being out of power and they are quite aware now of what kind of relationship they expect in the neighborhood. Hence, it is better to have a consolidated relationship within the region to resolve problems. Also, not to be forgotten is how the United States is talking about Russian assistance to the Taliban. We should be mindful of the problems this might pose.

He expressed his views on Iran's policy regarding Taliban where at one point they are maintaining relationship with the Taliban at the same time it is expressed by the Iranians that they have to uphold allegiance to the Afghan constitution (which has been framed by the US). He also talked about how there is a need for an institutional mechanism in place between Iran and Pakistan, with the goal of ensuring peace in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, there should be no favorites and peace and stability in Afghanistan should be the ultimate objective.

## Closing Remarks

In his closing remarks, **Dr. Kazem Sajjadpour**, President IPIS praised the speakers and applauded the efforts of both the institutes. He emphasized on the importance of institutional and foundational continuity. Continuity is very essential, he said. Pakistan and Iran share a very solid relationship, it is important to keep in mind that in order to further this foundational continuity, we acknowledge the interests of each other, nurture this relationship through more discussion and maintain different mechanisms of solving and managing the differences. Moreover, we should add new dimensions to the existing relationship,

There are fundamental changes happening in the international landscape and these will have an impact on Pakistan and Iran as well. Examples are how the Sino-American relationship has been identified as the most important organizing concept of new international interactions, the role of China and its increasing impact on our neighborhood, the role of increasing Indian nationalism and the changing landscape of the Afghan issue.

These issues require framing of regional views and visions. In order to achieve a more comprehensive regional vision, it is important that institutions on both sides work together by addressing and analyzing the changes which are taking place. Iran and Pakistan have to frame a common vision for Afghanistan, which is why an Iran-Pakistan dialogue on Afghanistan should be broadened to involve think tank cooperation to discuss the issue. On the topic of India, he said that it is vital to understand the nature of the situation on ground, since it has far reaching consequences of a global nature. We also need a new regional vision for the solution of Kashmir and create a comfort level in the Persian Gulf, he said.

He went on to say that Iran Pakistan dialogue on the Persian Gulf is important. For Iran, more than the comfort level of the Persian Gulf states, it is more of how these states are combined with foreign forces, for instance what transpired in JCPOA. However, it is needed that we devise a type of regional vision. In this regard, Iran, Pakistan and China should move towards more cooperation and redefine the region. We have to really take care of foundational continuity and nurture it more. It is important that we address the fundamental changes that are happening in our surroundings and work together in the spirit of cooperation which exists between Pakistan and Iran.

**Ambassador Khalid Mahmood**, could not make his remarks because of technical difficulties with Skype. His remarks are being reproduced here for record.

Based on my personal dealing with Pakistan- Iran relationship as former Ambassador of Pakistan to Iran, I can readily affirm that the two countries are tied to each other in a time-tested fraternal bond anchored in shared history, culture and religious affinity. Like with other countries, at times, in pursuit of national interest their path might have diverged, but in the ultimate analysis they always stood with each other. They never could even think of acting against each other's core interests.

Reviewing the recent history, the differences over the Afghanistan situation and the occasional sectarian strife as well as the different trajectory of their respective relationship with USA did cause some strain in their bilateral relationship, but now in the changed situation these inhibiting factors have been overcome to a large extent. However, regrettably, the state of bilateral economic and commercial cooperation and the security situation along the border remain as the weak links. Removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers and finding ways to early implementation of Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline project and synchronization of Gwadar and Chabahar ports require their urgent attention. As regards the Border security, the existing bilateral mechanisms should be better utilized for their effective use.

The growing collaboration between China and Iran would surely further reinforce Pakistan- Iran bilateral relations, especially with the likely prospects of Iran's participation in the CPEC. Concurrently, the two countries should make serious efforts to energize the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

In the geopolitical context, happily Pakistan's constructive role in ameliorating the Iran-Saudi rift is appreciated by both sides. Pakistan is confident that in its relations with India, Iran will always keep in mind India's patent hostility towards Pakistan and reject its mounting repression in the Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir and the wanton pogrom of Muslims and other minorities in India generally.