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Summary Report

“Bilateral Dialogue between ISSI & IPIS”

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The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) and the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), Iran held their annual dialogue on bilateral and regional issues. The Dialogue was facilitated by the Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at ISSI. The dialogue was divided into two sessions. The first session was titled Pakistan-Iran Bilateral Relations and was moderated by Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA. The second session was on ‘Regional Developments: with a focus on current developments in Afghanistan and changing dynamics in the Middle East’ and was moderated by Dr Hossein Moulla Abdoullahi, Director for Asian Studies, IPIS.

The distinguished speakers included Ambassador Hossein Ebrahim Khani, Senior Research Fellow, IPIS; Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG ISSI and former Ambassador of Pakistan to Iran; Dr Hossein Moulla Abdoullahi, Director for Asian Studies, IPIS; Ms. Amina Khan, Director, Center for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA), ISSI; Ambassador Javed Hafeez, Former Pakistani Diplomat and Dr Alireza Miryousefi, Senior Research Fellow, IPIS.

The welcome remarks were given by Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI and Dr. Mohammad Hassan Sheikholeslami, President, IPIS.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI during his welcome remarks said that friendly ties between Pakistan and Iran are very important because they are not only close neighbours but also share a cultural linkage which bonds the people of Iran and Pakistan. He said that during this dialogue, various regional issues will be discussed which are of immense importance for both countries.

Dr. Mohammad Hassan Sheikholeslami, President, IPIS during his welcome remarks said that this interaction between the two institutions is very timely and will be very beneficial for furthering relations between the two countries. The two countries have a long-standing history of bilateral relations. Both countries share common concerns and common interests. Both institutions being part of their respective Foreign Ministries have a prime duty to consistently explore ways and means to resolve and manage the existing differences and misunderstandings between two countries. He said that this discussion is very important at this critical time because world politics is changing at a rapid pace and a number of new developments are taking place.

During the dialogue issues like Afghanistan, the impact of Russia Ukraine crisis and changing realities in South Asia will be discussed.

During the first working session, Ambassador Hossein Ebrahim Khani, Senior Research Fellow, IPIS was of the view that Pakistan and Iran share fraternal, brotherly and very close ties. Both countries have witnessed the resumption of bilateral consultations and dialogues recently. He said that the nature of bilateral relations between the two is very constant in nature and they will remain constant in future. Pakistan and Iran should focus on major aspects of bilateral relations including the expansion of bilateral trade and economic ties. Traditionally there are some major exports and imports between the two countries and there are various opportunities which should be explored.

He stressed that business communities in both countries should work together to enhance the trade and business. Moreover, both countries should focus on exploring the viable scope for enhancing bilateral relations, especially in the economic field. He said that energy is another important area on which both countries should focus. Currently, there are various energy-related agreements between the two countries and they should be materialized as soon as possible most importantly TAPI should be implemented. While talking about regional integration he said that peace in the region is highly dependent on a peaceful Afghanistan and for this purpose, various consultations should take place to resolve the issue of Afghanistan.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG ISSI during his remarks said that Iran is a very close friend and a good neighbour and both countries have enjoyed very close ties even before the independence of Pakistan. Moreover, Iran was the first country to recognize Pakistan after its independence and Pakistan has also supported the Iranian revolution in 1979. Pakistan and Iran have various multilateral collaborations at the United Nations in RCD (which was later on converted into ECO), OIC and recently in SCO. But at the same time, there have been some ups and downs in the relations but the overall tenure of our relationship is marked by mutual trust and mutual assistance.

While talking about the issues that have impacted the relationship between the two countries, he mentioned that developments in Afghanistan have a serious impact on the relationship between Pakistan and Iran. Secondly, sectarian issues have also impacted the relations but fortunately,

they have been overcome. Thirdly border issues, which include terrorist outfits on both sides of the border. However, this issue has been resolved between both countries through mutual consultations and mutual efforts. Fourthly relations with the United States have some serious implications for the relationship because both countries have always been on different trajectories which created discord in ties. But due to the unbreakable bond between the two countries, this relationship has survived and now the relations are on an upward trajectory. There is an exchange of high-level visits between the two countries. Recently the Foreign Minister of Pakistan visited Iran. The Prime Minister of Pakistan also met the Iranian President on the sidelines of the SCO meeting and UNGA. He also appreciated the humanitarian assistance given by Iran to the flood-affected areas in Pakistan. While concluding his remarks he said that some mechanisms like committees and commissions at the official and ministerial levels should be established to resolve the issues related to borders. Both countries should work on establishing border markets to enhance trade. Both countries should work on free trade and preferential trade agreements to enhance trade activity and reach the benchmark of 5 billion. Both Iran and Pakistan should benefit from emerging opportunities such as CPEC so trilateral cooperation between China, Pakistan and Iran may take some shape. Regional countries should cooperate to create a conducive environment for trade and regional development.

In the next working session, while talking about Afghanistan, Amina Khan said that since the takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan situation in Afghanistan has evolved at a rapid pace. Taliban came into power through a process which is Doha Agreement and it is important that this process and agreement should be respected, acknowledged and implemented. Both stakeholders Taliban and the US have a responsibility to honor their commitments and pledges which they both have made and were endorsed by the international community at large. Now one year of Taliban ruler has passed and it has somewhat set the tone and it is an indication of how the Taliban intend to rule the country. She said that there has been some improvement in security but governance is still an issue because the Taliban does not have the manpower to govern the country and a major brain drain is a key factor in this regard.

She was of the view that the Taliban should ensure the pledges of reforms which include women's education and counter-terrorism assurances. Counter Terrorism is a major issue of concern, especially for regional countries and in this context, Pakistan and Iran are no exception.

Because since the Taliban takeover there has been a spike in terrorist activities by this particular group in collaboration with other regional transnational terrorist groups such as ETIM, TTP and TIP. Taliban should realize that without ensuring these counter-terrorism measures Taliban cannot move forward and it is very important for them to focus on immediate neighbours and then the international community.

She also mentioned that the Taliban should move towards setting up an inclusive government which they had claimed earlier. Moreover, regional countries should engage with the Taliban under a regional framework and there should be regional ownership. There should be a regional forum to engage with the Taliban that should not only focus on humanitarian aid but also on economic connectivity and counter-terrorism framework which is also pivotal. Because the issue of Afghanistan has global ramifications and the problems of Afghanistan are not only limited to Afghanistan but to the entire region.

The international community should also step forward in resolving the issue of Afghanistan and collective and shared responsibility is needed. A quadrilateral framework can also work in this regard where the US is also part of this. Most importantly onus is on the Taliban to deliver and the international community and region should play their role. It is a historic opportunity for the Taliban to rewrite the history of Afghanistan and bring peace and stability to the country through national reconciliation.

Dr Hossein Moulla Abdoullahi, Director for Asian Studies, IPIS was of the opinion that the current situation in Afghanistan is alarming. Taliban and other Jihadist groups consider the US withdrawal as a victory. But unfortunately, the Taliban has lost the support of the people of Afghanistan and they are ruling with no popularity. They failed to make a legitimate government. They are unable to fulfil the commitments of inclusive government as they agreed in the Doha Accord. They are unable to provide the security to people of their country. A number of attacks have taken place after their takeover. They failed to treat people equally and they failed to deliver equal and basic rights to women.

The economy of the country is collapsing and food security is an emerging concern in the country. The overall situation is very complicated and there is a ruling with no legitimacy no parliament, no public support and education.

He said that regionally, Taliban are failed to get recognition from the neighbouring countries and from the international community as well. Growing terrorist activities by ISIS, ISKP, and TIP are the major concerns for regional countries as the number of transnational terrorist groups is increasing in Afghanistan. The spread of terrorism, the influx of refugees and the increased flow of drugs and weapons are very dangerous.

The spread of terrorism is an important issue for the neighbouring countries including Iran and Pakistan. He said that a proper and strong establishment is needed in Afghanistan to avoid security challenges. The Afghan government should prevent the jihadist group to spread terrorist activities in the region. He stressed that recognition is an important issue for the group. Taliban should fulfil their commitments to get international recognition and they should act as responsible government.

Ambassador Javed Hafeez, a Former Pakistani Diplomat was of the view that the neighbours of Afghanistan, especially Iran and Pakistan have been greatly affected by the situation in Afghanistan, especially with regard to the refugee inflow. While some Iranians considered the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as a good omen and tried to leave doors open for dialogue with the Taliban, however, border tensions have continued despite this. Factional and political divisions within the Taliban have caused upheavals as well. Due to the prominence of ethnicity in Afghanistan, if the ground is provided for dialogue and inclusive participation by the government, it will undoubtedly result in peace and stability in the country. Talking about the refugee crisis he said that thousands of academics and intellectuals and other groups related to the Afghan middle class have started new lives in other countries. These are socio-economic assets in the host country and can become the basis for dialogue of cooperation with the Taliban. The start of such a dialogue between thinkers and experts from the region could play a key role in bringing Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran closer. There are social, cultural, economic, and linguistic commonalities between the people of these three nations who can contribute to flourishing the future of these states, they can interact and move toward common solutions. She hoped that if dialogues continue the intellectuals from the regional states will also participate in dialogue to contribute to the increased provision of culture-based security in the region.

Dr Alireza Miryousefi, Senior Research Fellow, IPIS said that the Taliban are a reality in Afghanistan. Two decades of US presence in Afghanistan has created a crevice between the opinions of the Afghan public and the Taliban. The group also needs to give assurances that Afghan soil will not be used to target regional countries because there is a real threat that there may be a revival of terrorist threats. He went on to highlight that Afghanistan is a vulnerable point for the entire region which the US can exploit and misuse. He concluded by underlining the importance of the provision of international aid to Afghanistan without any preconditions attached. The legitimacy of the Taliban will depend on how they face current challenges.