

Event Report

Pakistan and the Evolving Regional Scenario

EIAS Briefing Seminar

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Pakistan's strategic location, at the crossroads of South Asia, East Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East makes it a country of crucial importance, and whose policies and development have a bearing on the region's stability. Pakistan offers excellent economic and trade opportunities to become a hub for connectivity and trade in goods and energy as well as a transit hub, especially to the countries of Central Asia since the accession of Pakistan as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In short, enhanced regional connectivity is vital for Pakistan to further its vision of regional peace and prosperity.

On the occasion of the delegation of the Pakistan Senate Standing Committee on Defence & Security headed by Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed visiting Brussels, EIAS was honored to host EU and Pakistan representatives to discuss the current state of regional stability, and the role Pakistan should play to proactively shape the complex geostrategic landscape, as well as to enhance regional security and stability.

Mushahid Hussain Sayed is a journalist, geo-strategic politician, and an avid writer. After completion of studies in the United States, he returned to Pakistan and became Member, Directing Staff of the country's prestigious training institution for civil servants, the Pakistan Administrative Staff College, where he trained new entrants to the Foreign Service. He then joined Punjab University, as Lecturer on International Relations. In 1982 he became the youngest Editor of a national English daily, The Muslim. As a specialist on international, political, and strategic issue, he has lectured widely and his articles have been published in various national and international publications including The New York Times, The Washington Post, International Herald Tribune, and Middle East International. He has also authored three books, and has served as Special Assistant to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Dr Alexander Spachis, Senior Associate at EIAS started his introductory remarks with saying that in the current evolving regional scenario of South Asia, Pakistan can play a crucial role, not only because of its geographical location, but also because of its growing relations with regional and non-regional powers. Dr Spachis underlined the importance of Indo-Pakistani relations, remarking that the two powers cannot afford to have a tense and hostile relation. On the contrary, Pakistan and India's mutual engagement and cooperative interdependence would undoubtedly help mitigate any potential conflict in the region. In this sense, he mentioned Modi's recent visit to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif as a positive development. After that, Dr Spachis moved on to talk about Pakistan's fruitful and enduring relation with the EU and observed that the 5-Year Engagement Plan represents a concrete platform to carry out strategies and plans aimed at improving EU-Pakistan mutual cooperation and friendship. According to Dr Spachis, as China will play a growing role in South Asia, Pakistan could also represent a pivotal country in the increasingly intertwined trading scenario envisioned by Beijing. The speaker also touched upon the CPEC, which if properly managed and implemented, could represent an extraordinary example of cultural exchange road able to link different nationalities, ethnic groups, religions and customs with the final aim of promoting greater understanding between the people of Asia. Dr Spachis concluded his speech expressing his conviction over the importance of ensuring that cooperation will prevail over competition and that the region will be heading towards a more secure and sustainable future for all its people.

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed began his keynote address by underlining that despite the controversial image that often appears on international media, Pakistan has a lot to offer regarding culture, creativity of its people and soft power. After that, he identified three main facts that have deeply affected and shaped his country in recent decades:

- 1) Pakistan has been hosting a considerable amount of refugees since 1979, hence it can understand the current situation in the EU;
- 2) Pakistan has been in the eye of the storm since 1979, often in the front line in wars;
- 3) Pakistan is the country that has sacrificed and suffered the most since 9/11 in terms of human losses during the so-called "war on terror".

As a result, the whole Pakistani society has become united to combat terrorism. And in this sense, he added that 'resilience' should be the key word when talking about Pakistan's population and society. Senator Sayed then went on to talk about Pakistan's agreement with Iran, which he believes to represent a very positive development in the relations with a country with which a few tensions still remain. Furthermore, he remarked the fact that relations between India and Pakistan have been improving too in recent years. With regards to the regional scenario and the challenges to face in the years to come, Senator Sayed mentioned three key areas. Firstly, he remarked that South Asia is no longer a mere geographical context, but it's increasingly driven by economic factors, and with that it includes Iran, China and Central Asia. In this sense, he mentioned CPEC as a pillar in this increasingly connected context, and highlighted that the original project of a pipeline belongs to Iran, Pakistan and India (IPI). Secondly, he stressed on the fact that peace, security and stability are intertwined, hence need to be dealt with in a comprehensive and effective way, and noted that the Kashmir issue in South Asia can be compared to the Palestinian one in the Middle East. Thirdly, he expressed his belief that cultural connectivity is a crucial issue for the future positive development of the region. Senator Sayed concluded his speech by touching upon the situation in the Middle East. On this subject, he explained how the mentioned region is unravelling because of wrong policies, forcing regime changes sometimes even going against

UN charters. According to Senator Sayed, in order to ameliorate the situation, future policies should be characterized less by the use of force and more cooperation and friendly competition while respecting fundamental principles such as the rule of law and gender equality.

During the panel discussion, Mr Tomas Niklasson affirmed that South Asia is a changing subject with a growing population, and further added that it can't be considered anymore as a mere transit country between the East and the West. Overall, new possibilities and opportunities are emerging for Pakistan, together with new challenges and complexities. As for the latter he briefly mentioned the fact that getting China closer might cause troubles in the relation with India. According to Mr Niklasson, prosperity, power and peace are the key elements to take into account for Pakistan in the years to come. Regarding prosperity, the speaker underlined that trade is fundamental, especially knowing that South Asia is the least integrated region in the world in terms of intra-regional trade. Hence, it is an area with a huge potential and where developments can be made in order to facilitate trade. All in all, there are significant gains that would be brought about by expanding trade, as well as hurdles to overcome. In this sense, CPEC can represent a game changer, as long as it brings benefits to neighbouring countries too. In this regard, Mr Niklasson believes that there is a positive, although complex, link between trade and peace. Concerning power, CPEC is primarily an energy corridor, as 75 percent of investments within it regard the energy sector. For this reason, Mr Niklasson underlined once again the importance of the impact that the project will have on countries nearby, and he also highlighted the fact that questions remain over the sustainability of the Chinese mega project. On the subject of peace, the speaker noted that there is currently the risk of an arms race between India and Pakistan, and that the EU is quite concerned about that, in particular about the two countries' nuclear programmes. In conclusion of his speech, Mr Tomas Niklasson briefly mentioned the 5-Year Engagement Plan as a platform to broaden the dialogue between EU and Pakistan, and talk on a regular basis on a variety of issues.

Mr Peter Claes began his speech by underlining the fact that quite often there is a wrong perception about Pakistan, mainly because of the misleading image provided by the international media. Furthermore, according to Mr Claes, there is not enough interest in the West, Belgium in particular, about Pakistan, and he added that this might be due to a misconception about Pakistan's political system, often regarded as undemocratic. Instead, the country is characterized by a democratic, and vibrant civil society. Mr Claes also remarked the fact that Pakistan is self reliant on food, which represents an enormous strength. Likewise, the country has a lot of potential to be self reliant on energy. Mr Claes then went on to speak about important issues to be taken into account in Pakistan, and mentioned education as one of the most challenging ones. In this sense, he highlighted the fact that there are world class universities in Pakistan, and that issues mainly regard primary and secondary education. Moreover, Mr Claes underlined control of population's growth as a further challenge for Pakistan, which needs to be effectively managed in order to tackle potential issues concerning agriculture for instance. A further issue is the one of rising extremisms in the region: although South Asia has always been a tolerant region, radicalisation has been growing in recent years, as a consequence of internal and external factors. Mr Claes also touched upon the GPS+ and claimed that Pakistan might as well fully develop without it, as it is already a strong country with a dynamic economy and characterized by a population of traders. Mr Claes concluded his intervention by underlining the necessity to establish more nuclear cooperation and more dialogue on anti-terrorism with Pakistan.

During the **Q&A session** an important question was raised by the audience regarding how the EU could benefit from CPEC. According to Mr Niklasson, a stable and prosperous Pakistan will benefit the region broadly, and stressed on the fact that the corridor shouldn't be developed as

a mere bilateral project and that should contribute to a more committed China on the stability and development of the whole South Asian region. Thus, the EU will definitely take advantage of a project that will increase prosperity in such an important trading partner, and possibly in the entire region. Mr Peter Claes observed that the EU is also part of the One Belt One Road initiative, and that energy infrastructures are vital for Pakistan. Hence, the EU can capitalize on CPEC by enhancing the industrial capacity in Pakistan, and provide the country with more vocational training. All in all, as a consequence of a more competitive Pakistan, there will be more competitive companies capable of establishing fruitful trade relations with their European counterparts. Furthermore, the EU can strengthen its development and cooperation programmes already set in place in Pakistan.