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The India-Pakistan Agenda: For Mutual Benefit and South Asian Advantage

Discussion Session

Panel: Conflict Resolution 1

As mentioned when I, with encouragement and help from the East-West Center, set up our website of "ewc-indopakfriendship.org", improved bilateral understanding was the need of the hour for both countries.

For long India-Pakistan relations have been poised on a tinderbox, vulnerable to isolated flashpoints that lead to grave political (and, at times, military) misunderstandings. It is better to prevent such build-ups through improved bilateral understanding of the need for cooperation rather than competition, than firefighting a problem that has already ignited. There always has been need for increased efforts in this direction, considering the complexity of the problems between the two neighboring countries.

The intractable hostility has led both countries to invest disproportionate shares of their scarce capital into their defenses, India having grown into one of the world's largest arms importers over the years. It is evident that a softening on this account if the two-way ties were to improve would release much of these resources for more immediate needs such as education, public health and nutrition, and infrastructure.

An improved relationship would also release the people of the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, and its breathtaking splendor, from a perpetual state of siege. The same situation obtains in what the Pakistanis call Azad Kashmir and India terms Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. Mutual understanding could also prove gainful to the Afghan imbroglio, this strife-wracked country standing much to benefit from greater political and commercial involvement from India and Pakistan.

China has hitherto been a staunch supporter of Pakistan, at times even on military issues that have a bearing on Indian security. Better partnership between India and Pakistan would naturally draw in Beijing as a major benefactor in the triad, this vast country already having enormous trade links with both India and Pakistan.

Pakistan and India would be enabled to set aside their conflicts if they find a vested interest in enhanced commercial and business interests in each other. Increasing bilateral trade could be the best step towards bettering ties. Once the economic relations are strengthened, there will be little chance – or reason - of war. After all, the issues among Japan, Germany and other European countries had also been resolved primarily because of trade.

On a more personal note, it is time we, the EWC alumni from both India and Pakistan, give shape to our objectives as regards a bi-national platform. It is an idea whose time has come. And it is time we took the first stage of this joint initiative that has provided us a platform for communication to establish ourselves as a credible Track II organisation.

Such an exercise will help us bring into focus the most pertinent issues that need to be addressed in our bilateral relationship. Our endeavour should be to be an influential,

and level-headed, lobbyist grouping whose voice would be heard by the decision-makers and policy-makers.