

body, is in dire need. Pakistan also has its own energy requirements. And, of course, Pakistan has many options. The most important thing for Iran and Pakistan is their political commitment and the strength of their bilateral ties. The point that I'm hammering on is that we have to look at our larger geostrategic objectives.

The IP pipeline is just one part of them. Let us be very, very clear on this count. As you have articulated this issue very respectfully, I would like you to take a much bigger view of the challenges that both countries are confronting. Our original situation, the commitment of our leadership, the commitment of the Supreme Leader and the Pakistani leadership, and the broad stakeholders of both countries, how do they want to pursue this relationship? That's what we must be cognizant of.

Last year, Iran and Pakistan exchanged cross-border fire. Actually, Iran carried out a drone and missile attack on several terrorist strongholds in Pakistan, and the Pakistani government retaliated by targeting a town in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province. I would like to know the reason behind this exchange of fire. What should be done by both countries to prevent such incidents from taking place in the future?

First and foremost, we have gone beyond that stage, and the kind of political resurrection we have done this is just incredible, and that shows the vitality of this relationship, and the political military intelligence leadership of both countries played a very vigorous role in dealing with that situation. I do not want to get into the specifics of that incident. I would not characterize that there were strongholds in Pakistan. I have my own view, but since my relationship with Iran is very, very important, Iran is a great country, I would not like to portray it in that context; I want to go beyond that, and I want to create more trust between the intelligence leaderships of both countries.

In the past couple of years, cooperation between both countries has been extremely good, but the nature of the challenge is profound. We are living in a very complex region, and some external elements and countries want to imperil our relationship, and terrorism has assumed a transnational character. We have to be very careful and very cognizant of that.

We also must educate our masses about the context in which these things happen. The best recipe is development. I'm a very strong proponent of development between Balochistan and Sistan and Baluchestan. These are great historic areas with affiliations at borders running back into centuries.

We need to focus on those areas and development at a wider strategic level. We have to have greater cooperation. We have hosted intelligence officers. We have our intelligence officers in Zahedan. You have your intelligence officers in Turbat. That mechanism is doing very well. I think what we need to do is to have a very good and timely exchange of information in a very objective manner.

Do you categorically reject that Pakistan hosts anti-Iran groups?

I don't think I need to answer this question. I think you know

it. I think even an Iranian child knows it. And I think this is an affront to my country to be very honest to have this question. I mean, Pakistan has repeated time and again, and look at Pakistan's actions. And as ambassador, I have unequivocally stated that, you know, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Iran is critical. Pakistan would not support any action that can impact the security of Iran. I'm unequivocally telling you that I condemn the terrorist forces, you know, which threaten Iran's stability, and Pakistan will take a very decisive and strong action against any entity.

Fuel prices in Iran are relatively low compared with other nations, and Iran is grappling with a major issue on a daily basis, that is, the smuggling of at least 20 million liters of fuel out of the country. Pakistani media last year reported that the illicit trade brought some \$1 billion worth of fuel into the country through smugglers, and they even pointed out that several government officials were involved. Iran is losing between \$5 billion to \$10 billion annually because of this illicit trade, which is not limited to Pakistan. Is the government of Pakistan determined to help stop the trade, or is Pakistan actually benefiting from it?

Let me ask you the question if I agree with your assumption, although whatever media has said I would have to cross check and verify it. I have spent many years in Pakistan's diplomatic service, and I have to be very, very careful with every information that I collect. And unless there are government sources...

I'm just citing Pakistani media. They cited an intelligence report published by government agencies.

Based on the media, I cannot make any speculations. This is very, very clear. I would like to look at hardcore facts and what is the official position of the government because the government, you know, has the institutional mechanisms to make a case.

If I go by the media, then I can point to many things that Iranian media have been saying with a complete degree of irresponsibility, and I don't want to get into that. But if I agree with your assumption, then I think the blame also lies with Iran. How do those things go from Iran to another country? But let's not get into that debate. My answer to this question will be that, you know, both governments should sit together, try to find the way how we can make things more formal and the menace of smuggling can be curbed. For that, both governments need more cooperation and more understanding, and given the complexity of the border, it is really a challenge.

But I would not like to comment on a media report. I am not sure if it was correct. I am not sure how the entire figures were collected because, in my experience, sometimes perceptions and realities are hugely different.

But it's common knowledge that fuel is smuggled out of Iran.

It may be smuggled. So many things happen all over the world. Even we hear that so many things happen in the

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If we have a solution-oriented mindset, we can always find a way out. I am not bothered about any particular international regime. The domestic strengths and the political commitment of both countries are very, very important.



Pakistani Ambassador to Iran Muhammad Mudassir Tipu poses for a photo after an exclusive interview with Iran Daily at the country's diplomatic mission in Tehran.

● SAJJAD SAFARI/IRAN DAILY



Iranian trucks are seen crossing the border into Pakistan at a checkpoint in southeastern Iran. ● IRNA

realm of nuclear technology. But I, as an ambassador, would only speak on issues where I have some very authentic information that cannot be challenged.

Don't you have any authentic information about this issue to share with us?

No, I told you. I said both governments need to sit, discuss, try to deal with this menace, and strengthen the border controls.

Let's move to the softer part of the interview, which is about tourism. Iran, as a great civilization, could be one of the world's top tourist destinations due to its historical places and monuments, but it mostly gets religious tourists from Pakistan: Shias who visit the shrines in Mashhad or Qom, or they just cross Iran to

reach Iraq. On the other hand, Pakistan's scenic landscapes could easily pull in more Iranian tourists. What can be done by both governments to increase tourism cooperation?

Change the mindset, change the stereotype, and educate the public.

What are the stereotypes regarding both nations?

If you read about Pakistan, there are so many negative stereotypes about terrorism. Terrorism is happening all over the world. There are wars in which tens and thousands of people have been killed. So, you know, episodic isolated incidents are transplanted on countries. This is not the right thing. We have to see what is the potential of Pakistan, what is the potential of Iran.

Iran is a very beautiful country, rich in history, culture, and traditions, and so is Pakistan. We need to have more films, exchanges between universities, sister city relationships, and relationships between the ports. More and more delegations should visit each other's countries. And we should give a constructive, positive and a beautiful view of each other's countries in the media.

That is going to inspire the people. We are culturally similar and have a very deep-rooted history.

What we need to change is the mindset. Even in Pakistan, people should change their mindset. They should know that Iran is a repository of history and rather than going to far-flung destinations they should visit this beautiful country. This will not only promote tourism and bring in more capital but also bring us culturally closer to each other.

What stereotypes do Pakistani people nurture in their minds about Iran?

They are all false. They think that traveling in Iran is very difficult, that maybe Iran is like some exclusive country. But traveling in Iran is not difficult. No. Iran is a remarkable country, so secure and so beautiful. These are the kinds of stereotypes that global media have placed in the minds of the people. We need to remove them.

Last but not least is cinema. I'm sure that you know Iran has gained fame in the world with its movies. Iranian cinema has already won two Academy Awards by director Asghar Farhadi, and just a couple of days ago, another Iranian director won an Oscar for a short movie. Pakistani cinema and TV series production is also booming and moving forward. Three years ago, this movie, Joyland, was shortlisted for the Academy Awards. That was great success for Pakistani cinema. So, what are the areas of cooperation between the two neighbors that are trying to disseminate a better image of their countries through culture and cinema?

I think our dramas can be played in Iran, and Iranian dramas can be played in Pakistan with translation. This is the first and foremost. This is very very important and exchange of culture troupes. I am trying to bring a well-known singer of Pakistan to Iran so that people in Iran know about Pakistan's culture.

I must admit that we have not done that much. Even as Pakistan's ambassador, I'm saying this is an area where we have not done that much, and we need to do a lot more, and perhaps we need to learn from the expertise of Iran. You have won two Oscars, this is incredible. It shows that your elegance and your contributions have been recognized, and we are fast chasing that idea. Actors can visit each other's countries. We need to have a broader cultural relationship to promote cinema and filming relations.

