

# Breaking stereotypes, changing mindsets key to stronger ties: *Pakistani envoy to Iran*

## Ambassador Tipu calls for free trade agreement to help reach \$10bn target

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### INTERVIEW

**Pakistani Ambassador to Iran Muhammad Mudassar Tipu believes that sealing a free trade agreement (FTA) and tearing down long-standing barriers that have held back greater cooperation can help bring the two neighboring countries closer. As both neighbors are determined to boost annual trade to \$10 billion, Ambassador Tipu says an FTA could set the stage for a major economic upswing. Efforts to expand border infrastructure, keep**

**trade crossings open around the clock, and smooth out regulatory hurdles are already in the works to help trade surge.**

**However, the ambassador makes it clear that economic ties alone will not be enough. There is an urgent need to root out outdated perceptions that have stood in the way of people-to-people contact. He calls for a fresh approach, urging both nations to roll out cultural plans, promote academic exchanges, and use media and cinema to paint a more accurate image of each other. Whether through showing films, encouraging**

**tourism, or bringing business communities closer, he believes that "breaking down stereotypes" and "changing mindsets"—the way Iranians and Pakistanis see each other—are just as crucial as any trade agreement. Read his full interview with Iran Daily for an in-depth look at his vision for a more connected future.**



Pakistani Ambassador to Iran Muhammad Mudassar Tipu speaks to Iran Daily during an exclusive interview at the country's diplomatic mission in Tehran.  
● SAJJAD SAFARI/IRAN DAILY



**IRAN DAILY: Iran and Pakistan have set out to boost their annual trade volume to \$10 billion. What steps has the Pakistani government come up with to make this goal a reality? What obstacles stand in the way, and how does Pakistan plan to work through them?**

**TIPU:** Well, thank you. It's always a great pleasure to meet you and speak to the Iranian media. I always love it because the more outreach I have, the more Iranian people will know what Pakistan's ambassador is doing in their country. First of all, I must tell you that I have a great regard for Iran's political institutions. I think that the Supreme Leader is one of the greatest leaders of our times, and the quality of governance in Iran is really remarkable. And I think President Pezeshkian's leadership is navigating Iran through very complex times. That is the strength of his personality, the way you know, in a very complex geopolitical environment leading the nation. This is truly remarkable.

You talked about trade. Trade, of course, is very, very important because the financial viability of both countries is critical. We have a 900-kilometer border. Honorable Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and honorable late president Raisi were profoundly wise to understand the potential of trade, and they agreed that trade should be elevated to \$10 billion. Now, it is about \$3 billion. Of course, it can be done. It's not difficult at all if you are looking at the size of the economies. Pakistan is 240 million plus, and Iran is 80 million plus. We already have a huge market of 330 million. Demography, geography, and culture really help us. So, I think setting the target was very critical.

Now, the whole government has a clear target in mind. What we are doing: I am a very strong

advocate of signing a free trade agreement with Iran. It's going to help both countries a lot in the years ahead. We are having negotiations. Signing a free trade agreement, of course, entails complex negotiations. We are part of those negotiations. So, once the FTA is signed, that can be a big step forward.

We are trying to open more border crossings. We are trying to increase the timings of opening the border because there is so much potential. We have even proposed that the border should be open 24-7, particularly at Zahedan, because it is the main trade artery between Pakistan and Iran.

We are trying to improve infrastructure between Quetta and Zahedan. Between Quetta and Zahedan, there is about a 500 to 700-kilometer area on which we want to develop the roads. We want to build more facilities there so that in the

years ahead, trade flow can be facilitated. We have established a business council. Pakistan has proposed its name. Iran is also going to propose its name. Once the business council is going to meet, it will have many private individuals and many key companies. They will identify the areas through which trade can be promoted.

Pakistan's exports to Iran have increased. We recently started export of chilled meat. This was about a year and a year and a half ago. And we were able to export about \$120 million.

This is very good. I also want corn to be exported to Iran. Pakistan produces world-class corn. Pakistan produces world-class leather products, cotton-related products, and textile products. So along with corn, we export quinoa, bananas, and mangoes to your country.

And we want more cooperation between the governments of

both countries. Wherever regulatory reforms are required, both countries should do them. A very important element is improving infrastructure at the border: at Gabd, Mirjaveh, Taktan, and other border points. We are trying to improve the infrastructure there. Iranian traders often come to me. I also meet regularly with Iranian government individuals and trading bodies. They also propose different things to promote trade. So that is what we are doing. These are the practical steps that we are taking to promote the trade. I want Iranian people and Pakistani people to be part of this process. There are stereotypes between Iran and Pakistan, and these stereotypes have been created by certain elements. We need to break down those stereotypes. We have excellent populations that are very educated and very dynamic. People-to-people contacts, contacts

between chambers, between governments, FTA improving border structure, and wherever concessions can be granted to each other's commodities, are very important elements.

**The ground seems to be paved to reach this target, so what are the obstacles? Don't you see US sanctions on Iran as an obstacle?**

You know, obviously, wherever we live, we will continue to face obstacles one way or the other. The more important thing is the solution-oriented mindset. 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. That is what we have. And I have been here for about a year and a half. I have seen a great deal of interest being created within the Iranian business community about Pakistan and vice versa. Pakistani businessmen are planning to visit Iran. The Islamabad Chamber is bringing its own delegation in a couple of weeks. I am going to speak to the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industries next month, where I am going to make a very strong case to promote the trade. These are some incremental steps that will lead to a very substantial outcome over the years.

**The next question is about a sizzling issue, a pipeline that was supposed to deliver gas from Iran to Pakistan. The two countries signed an agreement in 2009. The pipeline was supposed to come online in five years, but Pakistan failed to meet its commitments mainly due to external pressure, including US sanctions. Last year, Pakistan started to lay part of that pipeline from the Iranian border to Gwadar. I'd like to know how far you have gone**

**and what you have done so far.** First of all, let me tell you two things. This is not a sizzling issue. The most important thing for Pakistan and Iran is to look at history, the future, and the depth of the strategic relationship. This pipeline would entail some billion dollars, naturally.

**Iran has already invested \$2 billion.**

I would not say that Pakistan has failed. It was a complex phenomenon. Moving from signing the agreement to putting it into practice involved many challenges, but the good thing is that now we are interacting with the Iranian government, and we hope we'll be able to find a solution to this issue.

**I'd like to know your solutions. At least you must have an idea about the main solution you're putting forward. How are you going to solve the problem? Have you started the construction?**

The two governments are involved. We are trying to see how we can solve this matter. I cannot go into the specifics because, you know, it's a technical project, a financial project, and a whole host of things. It's going to be very complex. But I am giving you a broad view that we are both having very constructive discussions.

**Pakistan is an energy-hungry nation and in dire need of gas. And Iran is very eager to start pumping gas into Pakistan. You know, the more the project is delayed, the more both countries will suffer losses.**

The whole world is energy-hungry. It's not only Pakistan, and you know the geopolitical context of the whole world is being defined largely by energy issues. There are energy needs, and there are energy-producing countries. Of course, there is a sort of need-based relationship between both countries. I would not say that Pakistan, but every-



Iranians work on a section of a pipeline linking Iran and Pakistan near the Iranian port city of Chabahar on March 11, 2013.  
● ATTA KENARE/AFP