

## Haroon Sharif: "Regional cooperation between Pakistan and Uzbekistan is more relevant today than ever before"



On 29 January, the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of Uzbekistan, together with the Institute of Regional Studies of Pakistan and with the support of the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Pakistan, organized an expert online conference titled “Uzbekistan-Pakistan: Strategic Partnership, Connectivity and Sustainable Development in a Changing World.”

Speaking at the conference, former Chairman of the Pakistan Investment Council, Haroon Sharif, highlighted that he has been observing regional cooperation processes in South and Central Asia for over 15-20 years.

“I have witnessed the development of these processes from within, having previously served as the World Bank’s regional head for South and Central Asia and other regions, and I want to share my experience,” he said.

Sharif structured his remarks around three key points: the timeliness of regional cooperation, the need for practical integration tools, and the significance of infrastructural connectivity.

He noted that now is a favorable moment for regional cooperation, emphasizing a global shift toward regional markets — a trend he described as “Globalization 2.0.” “After COVID-19, transportation and insurance costs have increased, and geographic proximity has become a key factor for competitiveness,” Sharif stressed.

According to the expert, Uzbekistan and Pakistan possess a strategic advantage in their proximity, which must be translated into economic benefits.

Sharif underscored the importance of practical mechanisms for integration. “Do we want to live only on expectations and talks about integration, or will we develop concrete tools that demonstrate real progress?” he asked.

He emphasized that political declarations and plans are one thing, while establishing cross-border economic institutions is another. “The words ‘sustainable’ and ‘competitive’ are extremely important,” he added, noting that trade between the countries must be complemented by mutual investments to ensure

resilience and protection against geopolitical shocks.

Infrastructure connectivity, Sharif said, is central to economic revitalization: “The question should not be framed as ‘how do we connect the two countries,’ but rather, ‘how do we make this connectivity work in the interests of both countries?’”

He proposed practical steps, including the creation of a market-oriented financial institution for the private sector and joint land ports with neutral management to shield the economy from geopolitical conflicts.

Sharif also stressed the need to harmonize business practices, accounting standards, and legal frameworks to attract investment from third countries. “Connectivity only works when it attracts private capital. Without it, it becomes just ‘bricks and concrete’ — a debt trap,” he noted.

In conclusion, he called for the implementation of small but concrete measures that can signal confidence to markets and investors: “It’s not money that solves everything — it’s the structures that can mobilize capital,” Sharif summarized, emphasizing that building institutional frameworks and engaging the private sector are key to a sustainable and competitive regional partnership.

The conference was attended by leaders and experts from leading think tanks and educational institutions in Uzbekistan and Pakistan, as well as representatives of business and diplomatic missions. The event was recognized as an important practical step toward establishing an expert platform for further strengthening Uzbekistan-Pakistan cooperation and regional integration.