

Iran-Pakistan Relations

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Introduction

When senior diplomats in Vienna announced the lifting of sanctions against Iran after verifying from the UN that Tehran had complied with its obligations under the nuclear accord, new opportunities opened up for Iran and Pakistan to embark upon enhanced cooperation and resume the pending projects between them. Iran, which had been smarting under nuclear sanctions and global isolation, urgently felt the need to compensate for the lost time and restart the stalled energy projects. But little of substance has, so far, materialized. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit along with the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) to Iran in January, 2016, provided a good beginning in bilateral contacts but has proved to be merely a handshake and a smile¹. Similarly, Iranian President Hasan Rouhani's visit to Pakistan in March was a difficult one. Pakistan and Iran signed MoUs, committing to take the minuscule bilateral trade to \$5 billion and revive the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, but the way Pakistan played up the Yadav's issue did not just show a diplomatic faux pas on the part of Pakistan but was also an indicator of the level of distrust between the two countries². Contrast these visits to Modi's visit to Tehran in May 2016. Iran and India signed the transit agreement for the Chabahar Port and latter arranged a \$750 million payment to Iran owed to it from previous oil purchases. Moreover, Iran, Afghanistan and India signed a transit agreement between them³.

One positive sign has been the recent talk of reviving the IP gas pipeline between Iran and Pakistan. Pakistani Ministry of Petroleum claimed that Pakistan would build a LNG terminal in Gwader and construct its side of pipeline in collaboration with China. The project would likely be completed in 2018. But walking the talk has been the arduous aspect in Iran-Pakistan relation.

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This paper traces briefly the historical evolution of Iran-Pakistan relations and how the geopolitics and regional rivalries of the specific eras shaped the bilateral relations between Iran and Pakistan. Moreover, it also discusses the issues that have marred Iran-Pakistan relations in recent years. Among the issues that have been sources of tension between the two neighbors include: mutual distrust, economic disconnect, divergent regional security outlooks and the issue of sectarianism. As long as the genuine issues that are critical irritants impeding the full realization of the potential of Iran-Pakistan relations, are confronted with and tackled, Iran and Pakistan relations will lurch from one crisis to another.

Era of Cooperation

Iran-Pakistan relations have had certain distinct features and characteristics over the past six decades. They do not have contested borders. They have cooperated with each other in defense and military realm. Strategic imperatives made them part of regional military and economic alliances in the form of Central Treaty Organization and Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) respectively. But, on the contrast, the bilateral relationship has also fallen prey to distrust, been marred by divergences of interests on important regional issues and zero-sum game in Afghanistan and economic disconnect. A recurring feature that courses through the bilateral relations of Iran-Pakistan has been the influence of divergent regional developments and outside powers.

The significance of Iran-Pakistan relations can be gauged by the fact that Iran became the first United Nations member to extend recognition of the new state of Pakistan⁴. The Shah of Iran was the first head of state to visit Pakistan and sign a Treaty of Friendship with Pakistan in 1950⁵. Iran and Pakistan, being both allies of the USA and thanks to the evolving geopolitics of South-West Asia where they feared the expansion of the Soviet Union, became part of the US-led Baghdad Pact, which would be renamed as Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), as a result of Iraqi withdrawal after the revolution of 1958, led by Karim Abdul Qasim⁶. To

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boost regional connectivity, Iran and Pakistan along with Turkey launched Regional Cooperation for Development in 1964⁷. There was even talk of a confederation between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan⁸.

During the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, Iran expressed solidarity with Pakistan and extended military support by sending some arms and ammunition⁹. After the war, when arms embargo was imposed against Pakistan, Iran provided Pakistan about 50 F-86 Sabre jets to meet its security threat from its eastern neighbor¹⁰. It is pertinent to mention here that America had at that time considerably increased its military and economic aid to India after the Sino-China war of 1962, considering India as a potential counterweight to China¹¹. Despite purportedly maintaining his neutrality during the 1971, the Shah of Iran lent some helicopters and other defense equipments for use in West Pakistan¹². Moreover, during 1970s Shah not only rejected Daoud's irredentist claims over Pakistani territory but raised the matter of western Afghanistan, which had once been part of Persian Empire, to neutralize his rhetoric of Greater Pukhtunistan¹³.

When Zulfikar Ali Bhutto toppled the National Awami Party (NAP) government in Balochistan province in February 1973, Baloch leaders took to the hills and started an insurgency that would last for four years. The Shah, fearing an spillover effect of Baloch nationalism across the border in Iranian Balochistan, sent thirty Huey Cobra helicopters from Iran to nip in the bud the notion of 'Greater Balochistan'¹⁴. Thus, from the establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and Pakistan upto the advent of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, a combination of many factors ensured that Iran and Pakistan shared a relationship of cooperation and harmony. These included a shared political outlook on regional issues, closeness to USA and commonalities of the threat perceptions of the respective leadership of both sides.

Strategic Friends, Strategic Foes

The Iranian revolution of 1979 had a significant impact on the bilateral relations between Iran and Pakistan. Khomeini withdrew Iran from

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CENTO, severed diplomatic relations with the USA and his supporters took American mission in Tehran hostage¹⁵. His policy of exporting the Iran's revolution created a wave of fear in the neighboring states. Zia-ul-Haq, who had toppled the democratic government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto through a military coup, supported sectarian outfits in Pakistan to 'neutralize' the threat from its neighbor, trying to export its revolution. His Islamist policies like helping Sunni sectarian factions and making zakat a legal obligation on all citizens, further vitiated social stability and exacerbated sectarianism in Pakistan¹⁶. The backdrop of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan made Pakistan the hub of religious militants, coming from all over the Muslim world. The injection of Saudi money further tilted the balance against certain religious sects in Pakistan. The Shiite community of Pakistan was not in accord with Zia's Islamisation program and they launched a campaign through the Nifaz Fiqah Jafferia, a Shiite political cum religious organization for implementing Shiite laws.

Despite these problems and difficulties, Pakistan-Iran relations remained largely stable thanks to the geopolitical turbulence in the region after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Both were against the expansion of Soviet Union in South-West Asia and nurtured anti-Soviet resistance forces to make Afghanistan a 'bleeding wound' for Moscow. Khomeini, to ameliorate Iran's isolation, tried to lend a new lease of life to RCD, later renamed as Economic Cooperation Organization. During nineteen eighties Pakistan became Iran's second largest trading partner. Moreover, the severing of diplomatic relations with US and the hostage crisis were followed by arms embargo and sanctions on Iran. Meanwhile, Iraq had waged what Khomeini called the 'whirlwind war' against Iran and the latter urgently needed weapons to resist Iraqi aggression, which had the backing of Gulf countries and USA. Pakistan became the conduit for Iranian arms imports from China and North Korea¹⁷.

Policy convergences on Afghanistan soon transformed into divergent political outlooks on post-Soviet Afghanistan. Jockeying for greater influence in Afghanistan led Iran and Pakistan to support different Mujahideen groups and factions in line with their ideological inclinations

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and interests. Pakistan, then pursuing a policy of 'strategic depth', wanted a friendly government in Afghanistan and regarded its support to anti-Soviet forces as the determining factor for the defeat of Red Army in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Iran relied on Shiite factions and largely non-Pushtun groups as a counterweight to the Taliban who were Sunnis. Taliban were ideologically close to Saudi Arabia which, along with UAE and Pakistan, was one of the few countries that recognized Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan after internecine war in the aftermath of Soviet withdrawal from that country. Their hatred for Shiite community was clearly demonstrated in Mazar-i-Sharif, where close to 2000 Shia Afghan nationals were massacred along with a few Iranian diplomats.

To assess the nature of bilateral relations in recent years between Iran and Pakistan, this paper will focus on the following four critical issues.

Economic Disconnect

A basic yardstick to determine the economic relations between Iran and Pakistan is to compare Iran's trade volume with Pakistan with its other neighbors. According to the Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP), the current trade volume between Iran and Pakistan is \$830 million, a pittance out of Tehran's 127 billion Euros worth of international trade¹⁸. In 2013, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) placed Pakistan as the 11th largest trading partner of Iran¹⁹. Compared with Pakistan, Iran's trade volume with Iraq and Turkey stood at \$12 billion²⁰ and \$22 billion²¹ respectively. China, with whom Iran does not share any border, is Iran's biggest commercial partner, their annual trade volume being a whooping \$40 billion. Even the war-torn and limping Afghanistan's business of \$2.5 billion dwarfs and humbles Pakistan's trade statistics with Iran.

It is not that Iran and Pakistan have not tried to boost economic ties. They both are part of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). In 1986 they signed Pakistan-Iran Joint Economic Commission (JEC). Moreover, in 2005 both countries signed Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA),

agreeing to reduce tariffs on 647 items to promote trade, ultimately creating a Free Trade Zone (FTZ). In its 19th session in Islamabad in December 2014, delegates discussed the need of cooperation between small and medium enterprises and the establishment of sister-port relationship between the ports of Chabahar and Gwader²². These efforts have however failed to deliver any substantial results.

Illegal smuggling, absence of banking channels between the two countries and trade through a third party has made a bad situation worse. Then, there is the issue of outside influence, which is partly undermining the prospect of greater regional connectivity. Nothing illustrates this assertion better than the fate of Iran-Pakistan Pipeline (IP).

Politics of Pipelines

The genesis of Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline can be traced back to 1990s, but it was only in June 2009 when Iran and Pakistan signed the Gas Sale and Purchase Agreement (GSPA)²³. The gas pipeline would initiate from South Pars gas field in Iran and end at Nawabshah in Pakistan's Sindh, covering a distance of around 1,900 kilometer. Iran would provide 250 million cubic (mcf) of gas to Pakistan in the first year, which would be doubled in the next year, reaching up to 700mcf in the subsequent years. This could possibly help Pakistan generate 4000 MW of electricity²⁴. It was to be completed in late 2014. Though, in March 2013 Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardar and his Iranian counterpart officially inaugurated the construction of the Pakistani side of 780-km Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline but the pipeline work never materialized due to internal policy inconsistencies and external pressures²⁵.

Pakistan claims that it was unable to construct the Pakistani side of pipeline due to American sanctions against Iran because of which Pakistan could not get international banks and financial institutions to finance the project. Sanctions against Iran were imposed in 2002 following reports by International Atomic Energy Commission (IAEA) regarding Iran's non-compliance with the safety agreements. Several

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rounds of sanctions by UN, US and EU included: an asset freeze on individuals and companies, restrictions in equipments used for uranium enrichments and a ban on the import, purchase and transport of crude Iranian oil and gas import²⁶. Sanctions, no doubt, made it difficult for Pakistan to meet its side of the bargain, but the cloak of sanctions hides many a reason for not pursuing the IP gas pipeline proactively and enthusiastically. Some economists claim the Gas Sale and Purchase Agreement (GSPA) with Iran preceded sanctions against Iran that provided Pakistan with a legal loophole to pursue the project. Moreover, internal policy inconsistencies have been manifested in different approaches of different governments in Pakistan to the IP gas pipeline. People's Party's government only showed its 'keenness' to build the pipeline when its tenure was about to end, the succeeding government of Nawaz Sharif followed suit but did not pursue IP gas pipeline with any rigor. Add to it the 'critical irritant' in Iran-Pakistan relations: Saudi Arabia and its \$1.5 billion in aid to Pakistan²⁷. For Pakistan the importance of Saudi Arabia emanates from the latter's support to Pakistan during its critical phases. Saudi Arabia had stood by Pakistan when sanctions were imposed against it in the aftermath of nuclear tests. Saudi Arabia not only financially supported Pakistan, but also provided it with cheap oil at deferred payment. Thus, for Pakistan it is not just an ideological tilt towards Riyadh but has as much to do with the history and the critical support it got from Saudi Arabia when the world had abandoned Pakistan.

The revival of IP gas pipeline projects in the aftermath of the post-Iran nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions against Iran is a positive sign. Pakistan too has lifted its sanctions against Iran and both have reportedly agreed to amend Gas Sale and Purchase Agreement (GSPA) and to extend the timeframe for the completion of IP Gas Pipeline Project²⁸. According to Federal Minister of Petroleum, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, the IP gas pipeline would be completed in 2018 and the work on a LNG terminal in Gwader and the 700-kilometer Gwader -Nawabshah gas pipeline would commence soon in collaboration with China²⁹.

Sectarianism and Iran-Pakistan Relations

The 650-mile Iran-Pakistan border area of rugged mountains and deserts has been the hub of a secret war by Sunni militant groups against Iran for over a decade. Over 70 percent of global opium smuggling controlled by the militants also passes through these areas. It is also the epicenter of oil smuggling and human trafficking between the two countries³⁰.

On 14 December, 2005, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was visiting Iranian province of Sistan-Balochistan, when his convoy was ambushed by gunmen³¹. Though, he survived the attack, his bodyguard and his driver were killed. Responsibility for this audacious attack was accepted by Abdelmalek Regi, founder of Jundallah (Soldiers of Allah). Jundallah had surfaced as a Sunni militant outfit in Iranian Balochistan in 2003. Consisted largely of Sunni Baloch militants, Jundallah claimed that it was fighting for the rights of ethnic Balochs and Sunni minorities in Iran³².

Its brazen and audacious attacks against Iranian border post and security guards rattled Tehran. Iran has blamed Pakistan for supporting Sunni sectarian groups and giving them sanctuaries. Abdelmalek Regi was arrested in February 2010 when a Kyrgyztani passenger plane, which he had boarded, and was diverted to Sharjah, Iran. After a few months of investigations, Tehran aired his video 'confession', in which Regi specifically mentioned that the West and Pakistan were Jundallah's sponsors and supporters³³.

Besides Jundallah, other sectarian groups, like Jaish ul Adl (Army of Justice), led by Mullah Omer, an ethnic Baloch from Iran and Sipah-e-Rasul (the Army of the Prophet), formed by Maula Baksh Darakhshani, an Iranian banker, have also operated in areas straddling Pak-Iran border. These groups have targeted Iranian forces and civilians. From 2005 to 2014, more than 600 Iranians, mostly civilians, lost their lives in violent attacks³⁴. At times, these attacks have provoked Iranian incursion into the border towns of Pakistan to hunt down militants, who flee across the border after launching attacks. Iran has also built a 400-mile long

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border fence to halt entry of militant groups and drug smugglers. In March 2014, Iran announced that it would construct 120 new army posts along its border with Pakistan to check cross-border movements of militants.

Officials in Iran blame Pakistani complicity, whereas Pakistan considers this as Iran's attempt to externalize its homegrown issues of ethnic and religion disharmony. Moreover, the precarious security situation in its eastern border and tribal region necessitates the deployment of a large chunk of its military forces to these areas. Hence, the inability of Pakistan to monitor militant groups that straddle the Pak-Iran border. Pakistan also claims that it has taken action against some of the leaders of these groups. In 2008, Pakistani forces raided a house in border town of Turbat, Balochistan, to arrest Abdelhamid Rigi, the brother of Abulmalek Rigi and handed him over to Iran³⁵. On August 28, 2014, Rigi's younger brother Abdul Rauf Rigi was shot dead in Quetta. He had been arrested by Pakistani authorities in December 2010³⁶.

Pakistan has its own security concerns against Iran. Tehran's increasing cooperation with New Delhi in Afghanistan and the latter's support of separatist forces in Pakistani Balochistan, is a source of concern for Pakistan. The arrest of Kulbhusan Yadav, a Raw spy who had supported Baloch separatists in Pakistan, had spent time in Chabhar, gives further credence to these allegations.

When Operation Enduring Freedom, led by US forces, toppled the government of Taliban in Afghanistan, which was supported by Pakistan, its notion of 'strategic depth' stood eroded after the political ascendance of Northern Alliance. When Taliban were not in power Pakistan had an option of exploiting anti-Iranian groups to strengthen its bargaining position in Afghanistan. This small but important digression is to allude to the connection of these issues with the evolving geopolitics of the region.

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The strategic importance of Afghanistan for both Iran and Pakistan emanates from the different security concerns of the respective states. Pakistan has pursued a policy of having a friendly government in Afghanistan that would deny its regional rivals influence in its immediate geographical proximity. On the other hand, for Iran the establishment of a 'friendly' government has meant denying anti-Iran forces and Taliban, ideologically close to Saudi Arabia, to be the dominant power in Afghanistan. It would not only further Iran's strategic interest in Afghanistan but would also strengthen its position in Central Asia and ameliorate its isolation.

For Pakistan, the notion of 'strategic depth' stands eroded after the Operation Enduring Freedom; but more significantly the growing influence of New Delhi in Afghanistan and its increasing partnership with Tehran in strategically important construction projects have been sources of concerns for Pakistan. India along with Iran is constructing the Zaranj-Dolaram road link that would connect Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas³⁷. They also intend to build a road and railway system to connect western Afghanistan with Iranian port of Chabahar. Pakistan thinks Indian activities are not just confined to construction works nor are its consulates limited to issuing visas. The clandestine role these consulates have been playing in fomenting instability in Balochistan is an open secret³⁸.

Besides these divergences of interests, Iran and Pakistan have also found common ground to cooperate in Afghanistan. Both Iran and Pakistan supported the Bonn Conference in the post-Taliban Afghanistan and both of them seek a peaceful and stable Afghanistan and a prosperous region. They were also part of Heart of Asia peace initiative to help stabilize Afghanistan by seeking a peaceful resolution of the Afghanistan conundrum.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, contemporary Iran-Pakistan relations have been a prey to some critical irritants. Lack of bilateral trade and different security outlooks have barred the realization of full potential of Iran-Pakistan relations. However, the geostrategic location of Iran and Pakistan, particularly, endow them with potential to become centre of regional energy markets. A positive step in this direction has been the CASA 1000, which would carry electricity from Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan via Afghanistan during summers to Pakistan. This pioneering project to create an electricity basket in the region could possibly be replicated with Iran by building the IP gas pipeline, which might be extended to include other regional states. The potential of Iran and Pakistan becoming hubs of regional gas and electricity markets is huge. Moreover, Iranian President Hasan Rouhani in his meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on the sidelines of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) session in September 2016, expressed Iran's desire to become part of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Before that, Pakistan and Iran had also called Chabahar and Gwader as 'sister ports'. Most importantly, greater regional connectivity will likely increase the volume of trade and services.

On the security front, Iran and Pakistan, as discussed above, have different outlooks and sources of threats, but they have no incentive to antagonize and alienate each other. The thin deployment of Pakistani armed forces on Iranian border is indicative of the level of threat it perceives from its neighbor. Moreover, a greater realization seems to have dawned upon the leaders of both states that a chaotic and tumultuous region is of benefit to no state and no state can be immune to its spillover effects. To put it succinctly, there are many areas, both on the economic and security fronts, on which Iran and Pakistan could build a sustainable relationship.

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End Notes

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