



Pakistan and Iran – Changing Dynamics and Challenges

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Iran was one of the first nations to identify Pakistan as an independent sovereign nation in 1947. However, with the passage of time, and especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, there have been significant strains in the relations between the two nations. In view of the crisis that has set in West Asia with the advent of new State actors, tensions between Pakistan and Iran can pose a threat to peace and security of the region.



Brief History of Relations

The relation between Pakistan and Iran initially, was based on mutual understanding and brotherhood. Pakistan and Iran being linked to each other geographically (sharing appx. 909 kms of borders), share strong historical, socio-economic, ethnic and cultural similarities in the border areas. In May 1949, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan paid his first State visit to Iran while the Shah of Iran became the first foreign head of State to visit Pakistan in March 1950. Iran also signed the Treaty of Friendship with Pakistan in May 1950. Iran and Pakistan became members of the Baghdad Pact in 1955, which was later known as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). Both the nations also joined Turkey in 1964 to form a socio-economic and cultural organization called the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD). Later on, the regional integration was further strengthened by converting RCD into ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization) in 1985. This step was undertaken to institutionalize the long standing relations. Under ECO several bilateral trade agreements were signed which could have increased the size of trade between these two nations in the past years. However, the targeted progress was never achieved and remained marginal because of different political and economic differences. Iran openly supported Pakistan's position on the issue of Kashmir. It had sent humanitarian assistance to Pakistan along with bomber aircrafts (90 F-86 Mk.6 Sabre Jet Aircrafts) during the India- Pakistan war in 1965. Even during the 1971 war, Pakistan received full military and diplomatic support from Iran. It is also reported to have physically supported Pakistan in suppressing the Baloch insurgency erupting after the 1971 war.¹The support provided by Pakistani nuclear scientists in developing the Iranian nuclear programme is also well documented.²

Nonetheless, relations started getting strained after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Pakistani decision makers restrained themselves from making Iran a foe, while it relied heavily on United States as well as Saudi Arabia in training *jihadis* for Afghanistan under Soviet intervention. During the Soviet invasion, Pakistan supported the Sunni-Pashtun groups, whereas Iran supported the Shia-Tajik factions. General Ziaul- Haq's military regime also witnessed the rise of religious extremism, creating a rift in between the Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan. The high profile murder of Iranian diplomat Mr. Sadiq Ganji in Lahore and the brutal assassination of Iranian air force cadets visiting Pakistan in the early 1990s also widened the gap in the understanding in between Iran and Pakistan.³

Iran's security perception has grown on the history and nature of crisis that brews in West Asia. The threat that it perceives originates from the nations in the neighbourhood and from the bigger powers. This has impacted on the manner in which it has moulded and re-moulded its foreign policy for protecting its territorial integrity and identity. Whereas, Pakistan's security perception, grew from the enmity that it nurtured with India for the last seven decades, along with the Pak-Afghan policy that it had calibrated. Being a non-Arab nation, it had to push forward its Islamic identity, while protecting its geographical territory. Pakistan has been and still continues to support the Taliban. Iran, on the other hand, had been supporting the Northern Alliance under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Masood. Now, it is supportive of the Government of Afghanistan led by President Ghani, and former President Karzai, after the ouster of the Taliban.

Another major irritant between Iran and Pakistan has been the Sistan and Balochistan province of Iran and the Balochistan province in Pakistan. Without delving into its chequered history of instability, violence and mis-governance by both nations in their respective provinces, it can be stated that some terrorist groups, such as Jundullah, Jaish-ul Adl and Haraqat Ansar Iran, who have been fighting against the Iranian administration, have found refuge in the volatile Balochistan province of Pakistan. In 2014, Iran warned it would send troops to Pakistan to retrieve five Iranian border guards kidnapped by Jaish-ulAdl. Pakistan had stated that such action would be a violation of international law and warned Iranian forces not to cross the border. Iran refrained from sending troops when a local cleric stepped in and resolved the situation. Four of the guards were released a few months later, but one was killed by the militants.⁴

Existing Misunderstandings and Challenges

The present challenges in the relationship between the two nations is likely to be on: overt brinkmanship between Iran and the ‘Saudi military alliance’ emboldened by President Trump’s visit, Pakistan’s membership with the Saudi alliance (especially General Raheel Sharif heading the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT)), the instability in Afghanistan and the rise of Taliban, the Balochistan insurgency and the Iran-Pakistan border dispute.

President Trump during his address at the Riyadh Summit, stated clearly that “Iran was responsible for training armed groups in the wars in Syria, Yemen and Iraq...Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate it ... and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they so richly deserve”.⁵ Saudi Arabia's new crown prince and likely next king, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, shares U.S. President Donald Trump's view of Iran.⁶ Such direct targeting of nations in an international summit perturbed Pakistani decision makers, as they, till date, have tried maintaining a neutral stand on the issue. The Saudi and US leaders pointed out clearly that the main objective of the IMAFT would be to counter Iranian interests in the region. Prime Minister Sharif had to clarify in the Pakistani National Assembly that General Sharif was heading the IMAFT on a personal capacity⁷ and was not representing Pakistan. It should be noted that Pakistani Defence Minister Khawaja Asif had previously stated that Pakistan agreed to issue No-Objection Certificate (NOC) to Gen Sharif to join the post.⁸

The blockade on Qatar by the Gulf nations (led by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt) for “harbouring a multitude of terrorist and sectarian groups that aim to create instability in the region”, its links with Iran and the Iran backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, has become another challenge for Pakistan. Pakistan chose to remain on the difficult path of neutrality even after King Al Saud of Saudi Arabia, gave an ultimatum to Prime Minister Sharif of either aligning with the Saudi alliance or Qatar after meeting him in Jeddah on June 12th. Prime Minister Sharif chose to mediate between the two factions to defuse the ongoing crisis. As per the statements made by Adviser to Prime Minister Sharif on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan will follow the resolution adopted by the National Assembly in 2015 during the Yemen crisis which stated that Pakistan “should maintain neutrality in the conflict so as to be able to play a proactive diplomatic role to end the crisis”.⁹

The present imbroglio is the terrorist activity that is emanating from Pakistan's Balochistan province targeting Iran. Jaish-ul-Adl, a Sunni terrorist group, killed 10 Iranian border guards in a cross-border attack in April 2017. It has, in the past, clashed with Iranian Army, killed civilians and paramilitary personnel in Iran and was also involved in the kidnapping of five Iranian guards in February 2014. The group had also claimed responsibility for attacks that killed eight Iranian guards in April 2015 and 14 guards in October 2013. The recent killing had forced the head of the Iranian Army, Major General Mohammad Baqeri, warning Islamabad that Tehran would not hesitate to hit terror safe havens inside Pakistan, if it does not punish those terrorists who killed the 10 Iranian border guards, who were shot with long-range guns, fired from inside Pakistan.¹⁰ Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Islamabad on 4 May to press Pakistani authorities to take action against terrorists involved in the attack on the Iranian border guards and adopt necessary measures to prevent such attacks in the future. Mr. Javad Zarif had meetings with Prime Minister Sharif, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan, Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa, and National Security Adviser Lt. General (Retired) Nasser Janjua. During these meetings, the Iranian Foreign Minister was assured that Pakistan would take steps to prevent cross-border attacks, including the deployment of additional troops along its border with Iran. The two sides also agreed to ensure better coordination, greater intelligence sharing, and frequent interactions at political, military and security levels.¹¹



Iran Pakistan Existing Border Check Posts¹²

Iran and Pakistan has two basic border check points, one at Mirjaveh (Iran)-Taftan (Pakistan) area and the second at Pishin (Iran)-Mand (Pakistan) area. The Taftan border check post is regulated on both sides. Pakistan built a 'Pakistan Gate' on the post at 2016. There had been a proposal to regulate and create and border post in the Pishin Mand border region as well as create

another border post at Rimdan (Iran) region, which is close to the Makran Coastal Highway in Pakistan. There is still no road connectivity in the area. Expected discussion regarding the two new check posts are scheduled to take place in the 21st Session of Iran Pakistan Border Commission to be held in Gwadar in September 2017.¹³

It should be noted that, after the visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif, there has been



intermittent cross border shelling (especially in retaliation for the recent killing of the Iranian guards) from both sides on the borders near the Panjgur border area.¹⁴ On June 21, Pakistan Air Force fighter (JF-17 Thunder) shot down an Iranian unmarked spy drone in the same Panjgur area of Balochistan, alleged to be 3-4 kilometers inside Pakistan territory. The Pakistan Foreign Office informed Teheran about the drone.¹⁵ The Pakistan foreign office categorically stated that drone attacks remain to be a violation of Pakistani sovereignty and will not be tolerated.¹⁶

Pakistan and Iran have tried to build economic relations on the sidelines of the existing misunderstandings and challenges. Pakistan is Iran's eighth largest trading partner. Pakistan's major exports to Iran include rice, meat, paper, textiles, and fruit. The major commodities Pakistan imports

from Iran include organic chemicals, plastic, minerals, oil, iron, and steel.¹⁷ At the request of Chairman of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee Awais Leghari, who visited Iran in January 2017, Iran lifted a ban on import of kinnows (a citrus fruit grown extensively in the Punjab area) from Pakistan after six years for two months.¹⁸ The two countries have signed a preferential trade agreement in 2004, with the hope of converting it into a free trade agreement.¹⁹ Pakistan and Iran aimed to increase annual trade volumes between the two countries to \$5 billion by 2021, which was announced by Prime Minister Sharif during Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Islamabad in 2016. Trade between Pakistan and Iran fell to \$432 million in 2010-11 from \$1.32 billion in 2008-09.²⁰ In the financial year 2013 Pakistan's export to Iran was 69 million US Dollars whereas Iran's import from rest of the world stood 54 billion US Dollars leaving Pakistan's share to mere 0.2% of the total imports. Furthermore, Pak-Iran trade faced a serious decline of around 26% from FY-2012 to FY-2013.²¹ Pakistan's **exports stood at \$318 million in 2015-16.**²² However, with the growing lack of trust, such relations have not been able to gain any momentum. Even after the western sanctions were lifted, which had a detrimental impact on Iran-Pakistan economic relations; there was not much improvement in the volume of trade in between the two nations, though the potential remains high. Similar was the fate of the pipelines

and corridors, which either have been abandoned or remain dormant, that were envisaged to uplift the relations between the two nations. The Iran Pakistan Gas Pipeline remains to be such a project that remains incomplete, with inordinate delays and misunderstandings. The Pakistan portion (of the total length of 1,931 kilometer, 1,150 km portion lies in Iran and 781 km in Pakistan) remains incomplete as it was mentioned that international sanctions impeded its implementation.

If the present situation is not handled diplomatically by Pakistani decision makers, the present misunderstanding can become very challenging for them. The Balochistan insurgency can also trigger violence in an already volatile border region spiraling into a minor or major border clash that could complicate the existing status quo. The deepening cleavages based on ethnicity, language, religious sectarianism, and economic disparities in Pakistan would have wider ramifications and hamper the performance of the domestic political system as well as the pursuit of its external policies. The weakening Afghanistan peace process, rising religious violent extremism and the nature of the borders in between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran will remain to be a challenge for the future. Iran's and Pakistan's concerns and interests are deeply interlinked in the new regional and international climate. New problems as well as new opportunities will usher their relations into various new phases of bonhomie, or face challenges, impacting their bilateral and multilateral relations. It now depends on both the countries to find out ways for betterment and prosperity of the two sides.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

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