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Conflict and Cooperation in Pak-Iran Relations Post 9/11

ABSTRACT

The relations between Pakistan and Iran, dates back to the early stages of Pakistan independence in 1947. These two neighbours in the South Asia exploited their natural resources and location in Indian Ocean Region to foster unity in the region and sub-region, essentially for the attainment of their national interests. However, convergence and divergence of interests affected the cordial relations between Pakistan and Iran. These concerns were broadly categorized as economic, political security/defence imperatives. The changing international environment where a nation's geographical boundary was no longer a restriction to international trade has necessitated the need for Pakistan and Iran to improve their relations in order to benefit from the international system. Therefore, the way-forward on Pakistan-Iran relations would entail a conscientious effort by both nations to tackle these concerns.

Key Words: *Pakistan, Iran, Baluchistan, Afghanistan, Economic Relations, Political Relations, Taliban.*

■ Introduction

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Pakistan and Iran has been of great geostrategic significance in the region and beyond because of its centrality in South Asia, abundance of natural resources and membership of several regional and international organizations. These opportunities provide a unique feature which could be exploited to resolve the several concerns such as sectarian conflict, relations with some Arab States, Kashmir issue and Indian influence in the region.¹

The US is considered as strategic partner to Pakistan and is seen to exploit the close ties to influence the decisions on several issues especially those that affect the US interests. Unfortunately, Kashmir issue which remains paramount to Pakistan's national interest have not received the desired attention from the US. Also, the Iran nuclear stand-off with the US and the international community is another lingering issue. Pakistan should employ suitable diplomatic mechanism to ensure balanced relations with the US, which remains the sole world super power.

The trade relations between Pakistan and Iran are considered to be in favour of Iran. In spite of the trade imbalance, strained relation between the two countries is militating against the realization of their true economic potentials. Major exports of Pakistan to Iran include rice, yarn, synthetic fibers, paper and paperboard among others. Pakistan on the other hand, imports petroleum and petroleum products, fruit, vegetables, ores and concentrates of iron and steel and raw cotton from Iran. The observed trade imbalance is caused by smuggling of mainly agricultural produce across the borders from Pakistan and lack of effective economic bilateral agreements between the two nations.²

Pakistan-Iran economic relations are primarily governed by the terms of Pakistan-Iran Joint Economic Commission (JEC), which was established in 1986. It provides a useful institutional framework in the identification of areas to promote economic and commercial cooperation between the two countries. It also periodically reviews and monitors the implementation of various decisions taken in this regard by the representatives of the two countries. Iran and Pakistan cooperate in a number of trade groups

and agreed in June 2008 on a list of 300 tradable items in an effort to stimulate economic relations. However, a trade imbalance still persists between the two countries. Therefore, JEC should adopt more proactive measures to check smuggling and ensure a favorable balance of trade between both countries.³

A major commonality of interest is the strategic security interdependence between Pakistan and Iran. The US States Department, in a policy statement, recognized the leading role of Pakistan in the Middle Eastern region and viewed it as a potential balancer in the South Asian power paradigm. These potentials present the capacity of Pakistan and Iran to resolve the security challenges confronting it. There is a lot of potential for cooperation in the defence production field between Pakistan and Iran. It will be more efficient and cost-effective in the long run. Both Iran and Pakistan should realize that they will continue to have problems acquiring weapons systems and spares from western sources at least in the foreseeable future.⁴

Iran and Pakistan have somewhat divergent perspectives with respect to the presence of Extra Regional Forces (ERF). Iran is particularly concerned about the post 9/11 military cooperation between the US and Pakistan. However, both countries share similar views on how to deal with the activities of the ERF. Both Iran and Pakistan, for instance, opposed the US unilateral action in Iraq, but preferred the UN to play a lead role. Notwithstanding, relations between Pakistan and Iran is being threatened as a result of diplomatic tension between Iran and the US and Pakistan's close relations with the US.

■ **Factor Affecting Pak-Iran Relations**

The issue of Afghanistan has always remained the major factor shaping Pakistan's relations with Iran. The differences exist since the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. Both countries have their own regional priorities and their policies have been contradictory on the Afghan issue. The post 9/11 scenario was seen as the real opportunity for both states to revisit their bilateral relations. The vital factors that effected their relations after 9/11, is dominating

by three issues, Afghanistan, Sectarian violence and Iran India relations.

■ **Afghanistan**

After the rout of the Taliban, the two side who have been on the opposite sides during the Taliban years sought a stable Afghanistan for their own interests, and came together to support the idea of a broad-based government in Afghanistan. However, Iran soon found itself cornered, with the presence of US troops on both its borders, and became ambivalent about the role of the United States in Afghanistan. Pakistan, on the other had, has continued to support the US and NATO presence in Afghanistan, if only publicly. Tehran continues to blame Pakistan for the US presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and is contemptuous of Pakistan's pro-American title.⁵

■ **Sectarian Factor**

Sectarian conflict figured as another factor in straining Iran's relations with Pakistan. Though, a domestic problem for Pakistan, the issue had led to some Iranian diplomats and other Iranian citizens being killed in Pakistan. In 1990, Sadiq Ganji, the Iranian Consul-General, was assassinated in Lahore. Later in 1997, five cadets of the Iranian Air Force were killed in Rawalpindi. The wanton sectarian killings raised official and public concerns in Tehran. The failure of Pakistan's judicial process to take conclusive action against those responsible for the murders, contributed greatly to the deteriorating Pak-Iran relations.⁶ Pakistan on the other hand concerned over these developments, regarded the issue a domestic problem. At official levels, Pakistan began to exert an increasing pressure that other Muslim states should not fight their proxy sectarian wars on Pakistani soil.⁷

The failing situation in Afghanistan and the killings of people, officials, and diplomats on political/sectarian grounds intensified sectarian clashes in Pakistan. During Shia-Sunni clashes in Pakistan, a number of Iranian nationals and Pakistani Shias died

in the 1990s. Pakistan feared that Balochistan could go the FATA way following the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, a dangerous scenario, to say the least. Afghan militants also wreaked Balochistan launching attacks inside the province against the small Shi'a community, a frequent object of radical Sunni Islamist ire. In fact, Balochistan saw a spike in sectarian attacks over the last few years.⁸

The continued sectarian violence in Pakistan became one of the most undesirable and contentious issues in the Iran-Pakistan relationship. However, President Khatami realizing the difficult situation said, "we regret what has happened and are concerned about India's nuclear tests⁹ adding further, "we regard your security seriously and understand your position and the position of our brother, Pakistani nation. The security of Pakistan, as a brother, friendly and neighbouring state, is crucial to us. We consider their issue to be extremely important and will stand by you."¹⁰

■ **Baluchistan Factor**

Baluchistan with the largest territory in terms of area and population, comprising 42 per cent of the total territory and inhabited by about 7 % of its population, is among Pakistan's poorest and least developed regions. Paradoxically, it is rich in natural resources including copper, uranium, and gold¹¹, having a special importance in Pakistan's energy profile with its sizable reserves of coal, 19 tcf natural gas and large untapped petroleum reserves, along the route of the proposed Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline - dubbed the "peace pipeline".

Beginning 1839, with the installation of an unpopular Khan, the British, consolidated power in Balochistan through a number of treaties. With Iranian expansionism in Balochistan on the rise, the British adopted appeasement towards the Iranians against the Russian influence. In 1871, the a Perso-Baloch Boundary Commission arbitrarily drew the 'Goldsmith Line' dividing the cultural, social, and economic unity of Baloch, leaving behind a deep sense of injustice, discrimination, and alienation among the Baloch people. In 1876, Kalat was brought under the British

administrative control. In 1893, the areas of Outer Seistan and Registan were handed over to Afghanistan by the 'Durand Line', further aggravating the Baloch anger.¹²

The people of Baluchistan have always expressed strong resistance against any attempt to dominate them through foreign rule or by interfering in their traditional cultural way of life. The end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century saw the rise of resistance against the Iranian and British colonizer. Baloch resistance was suppressed with a heavy hand. The accession of British Baluchistan and the Khanate of Kalat to Pakistan after independence and merger of with Pakistan on 27 March 1948 catalyzed the Baloch national struggle. The Baloch found their aspirations and traditional nomadic life frustrated by the presence of national boundaries and the extension of central administration over their lands, Inspired in part by the Sardars who felt loss of power if the province developed economically.¹³

The movement has at times threatened the integrity of the Pakistani state. The Baloch resistance of the 1970s arose into the most widespread bloody civil unrests. The year 1973 saw another eruption of nationalist anger in Baluchistan when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, ignored Baloch demand for provincial autonomy, encouraged and aided militarily by the Shah of Iran who was weary of the possible spillage of Baloch nationalist upsurge in Iranian Baluchistan, during the ensuing years from 1973-1977. General Zia-ul-Haq's coup quelled the insurgency through amnesty. In 2005 insurgency again erupted around the same demands. Instead of giving due consideration to the recurrent Baloch demands, the government, resorted to high-handedness initiating a full-fledged civil war.¹⁴

Baloch grievances stem from economic deprivations, Baluch economic exploitation of resources without acknowledgement of their contribution to the nation and recompense in monetary measures. Baloch gas caters in a very large measure to provide energy all over Pakistan with next to negligible royalties. Demand for greater political rights, autonomy and control over their natural resources, have led four insurgencies - in 1948, 1958-59, 1962-63 and 1973-77, 2005 suppressed by the army. A fifth is underway

and this time the insurgents have gone a step further and are striving for secession.

Violence in Baluchistan historically has been the product of several factors: a fiercely independent Baluch people that eschew outside interference; the lasting legacy of British policy; mismanagement by ruling Pakistani regimes; and historical grievances that have allowed Baluch leaders to mobilize support for their nationalist cause. The most recent surge of violence in Baluchistan was a result of a change in the relationship between the centre and province, brought about by the province's growing strategic significance. Baluchistan remains notorious for cross-border smuggling and has more recently been infiltrated by former members of the Taliban and Al Qaida operatives. The provincial capital has experienced serious ethnic violence that has led to gun battles in the streets and the imposition of curfews. The Baluchistan-Punjab border the IP proposed route has been a battleground for private Baloch tribal militias in recent years. Sporadic armed clashes resulted in attacks against water pipelines, power transmission lines and gas installations and necessitated sending of troops to protect the gas installations.¹⁵

The centre must do more than make half-hearted attempts to restore confidence of the people of the province. To calm the situation Islamabad has substantially increased development projects in Baluchistan. The president on February 25, 2010, at Quetta again allayed the fears of the Baloch populace, reiterating the government all efforts within its means to help meet all their demands and build trust through dialogue with the people. The Prime Minister recently unveiled a package “ Agaz e Haqooq e Baluchistan” with a wide range of incentive measures, conveying constitutional, administrative, political and economic aspects to enhance provincial autonomy, eliminating sense of political, economic and social injustice to woo political forces and dissidents into mainstream politics.¹⁶ Further the Energy and Power Policy 2009, perceives a 27 % rise in wellhead gas price.

The deep sense of deprivation has contributed to the distrust by the Baloch, resultantly the rural tribal communities oppose energy projects in their area which the pipeline would traverse, a

wide variety of conflicts may emerge from this encounter, as many in the region believe that the recent attacks in the province are meant to sabotage the pipeline. The assassination of Nawab Akbar Bugti became yet another turning point in the Baloch resistance and the estrangement of Baloch population, adding fuel to fire, violence resurfaced, as in other parts of the world where pipelines are under attack. Ending the onslaught may well prove to be difficult. However arrest of Abdul Malik Rigi the alleged most wanted Jundullah chief on February 23, 2010, accused of killing members of senior Iranian revolutionary guards in a brutal suicide bombing, by Iran has negated their claim of his presence in Pakistan¹⁷. Though, the confrontation is defused but the underlying grievances of the locals are yet to be addressed, rising Instability and secessionist feelings in Baluchistan merit special consideration, as any disruption in the energy infrastructure would seriously affect Pakistan's wavering economy.¹⁸

■ Growing India-Iran Ties

The existence of Pakistan was a major blow to the traditional Indian relations with Iran. India lost its physical contact with Iran but its policy makers showed strong commitment to keep its relations with Iran very close.

Both countries share a vast convergence of interests due to their political and strategic considerations in the region.¹⁹ Both states have tried their best to have good diplomatic relations. India is heavily dependent on Iran, which arises from Iran's capacity to provide India with the energy it requires. According to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran and India "must get prepared through strengthening bilateral ties for big changes in the world and filling the power gap in the region."²⁰ President Ahmadinejad congratulating Iranian on his June 2009, reelection, Indian Prime Minister Singh stated "bilateral ties between Iran and India would further enhance in a way that will serve the two countries' national interests."²¹ Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao held extensive discussions with Iranian leaders on bilateral relations her recent visit to Tehran including on regional issues,

Afghanistan, cross-border terrorism, and matters of regional and global importance. Rao was on 7th round of Consultations/Strategic Dialogue between the two countries at the invitation of her counterpart, Ali Fathollahi.²²

Much of India and Iran's economic cooperation centers on hydrocarbon trade, to help feed its energy needs. The two countries have been exploring the Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline (IPI), for a steady source of natural gas, though India has been hesitant to commit. India said it was still unsure about joining the IPI, despite Iran and Pakistan signing a deal that month to begin construction without India's participation²³ in May 2009. Despite these impediments, Iran-India bilateral trade has increased in recent years, reaching \$9 billion per year in 2008; hydrocarbon exports to India constitute most of this trade²⁴. An Indian oil consortium is planning on investing \$4-5 billion in the Gulf. In June 2009, India's Reliance Industries halted gasoline exports to Iran to avoid possible restriction on sales in the United States, which has increased pressure against companies selling gasoline to Iran. As a result Iran reduced India's involvement in the Iranian South Pars gas field. Iran continues to court India to join the peace pipeline²⁵. Indian officials cited 'security' and 'non viability' for declining to participate in the project.

India has publicly supported Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology, but India has said that Iran must pursue a nuclear enrichment program "in accordance with the international commitments and obligations, and its peaceful use²⁶. India has repeatedly insisted on a peaceful resolution to the conflict although India it voted in 2005 in favor of a resolution by the IAEA imposing UN sanctions against Iran, It does not support threats against Iran's nuclear program²⁷.

In February 2010, Iranian Ambassador to India Seyed Mehdi Nabizadeh expressed Iran's support for India's opposition to the concept of "good" and "bad" Taliban, dismissing recent western overtures to the Taliban at the London conference. "Our experience is not to believe in the 'good-and-bad' Taliban theory. Taliban is Taliban. Extremists should not be part of any government in Kabul"²⁸, and cautioned the return of the Taliban

would further deteriorate regional security, and advocated a regional approach involving India to address the Afghan issue.

The New Delhi Declaration' stated, "India and Iran agreed to explore opportunities for cooperation in defence in agreed areas, including training and exchange of visits²⁹. 'There were some reports of India's willingness to sell its nuclear energy technology and a possible offer to supply Iran a 10-15 MW nuclear reactor in the early 1990s³⁰, India did not go through with it and has officially denied any such deal. Indian officials have denied a growing military relationship with Iran, assuring the United States that the two countries' joint working group on defense has not met since 2003. In November 2009, India held discussions on the expansion of military cooperation with Iran. The improved military relations would include Indian training of Iranian troops, satellite services, and joint naval exercises in the Gulf³¹. Iran's growing relations with India has been observed by Pakistan with concern.

■ **Iran-China-Pakistan Relations**

China's pace of economic growth and military modernization as a precursor to a rising major power, complicating the regional security matrix. China's close ties with Pakistan facilitated the building of relations with Iran. became contentious as the Islamic revolutionaries deeply resented Beijing's strong backing for the Shah and viewed China's pro-US foreign policy with great disdain. Chinese apology was conveyed to Imam Khomeini through Agha Shahi, the advisor to the President of Pakistan on Foreign Affairs³², whose successful mediation saved Iran and China relationship from collapse, securing China's trust for Pakistan.³³

From 1982 China began to supply arms to an isolated Iran in the midst of a war with Iraq, transferring ballistic missile technology and assistance towards its nuclear programme³⁴. The triangular relationship among China, Iran and Pakistan emerged in the early 1980s strengthened through the 1990s. Iran is now China's second-largest source of oil. China has taken significant

interest in the pipeline, and has held talks with Iran and Pakistan in 2008³⁵.

■ Conclusion

Notwithstanding some tentative recent attempts by Pakistan and Iran to improve their bilateral ties, they continue to have a difficult relationship. For some time it seemed as if the challenges in Afghanistan might bring the two states together, as both had been adversely affected by the collapse of Afghanistan. But it now looks as if the rivalry between the two is once again making its presence felt in and around Afghanistan. The Obama administration is hoping that an increase in troop levels and an Iraq-like surge of troops will be able to stabilize Afghanistan enough to make it possible to withdraw the majority of US Troops by 2014. But only a comprehensive approach that includes a constructive engagement of the key regional players such as Iran and India along with Pakistan can improve the ground realities.

Though the collapse of governance after the overthrow of the Taliban regime has been rightly identified as the main factor behind the rising turmoil in Afghanistan, the problem in Afghanistan remains a regional one, as throughout its history Afghanistan has been a battleground for its neighbors, who have exported their conflicts to the Afghan territory. Even today all the regional countries are interfering in Afghanistan by backing their proxies and hedging their bets as they see the US effort failing. It is clearly in the interest of the regional states to have a stable Afghanistan. The opportunities offered by trade and transit, energy market integration and road and rail infrastructure should dominate bilateral and multilateral agendas, along with cooperation to combat terrorism and the illegal narcotics trade. This may lay the

basis for regional cooperation over the long term, which is vital for Afghanistan's sustainable recovery. While both Pakistan and Iran seem to have concluded that a stable, independent and economically strong Afghan state is preferable to a weak and troubled one, they remain very sensitive to their position relative to each other.

Conflicting interests over Afghanistan have tended to play a pivotal role in the formation of the policies of Pakistan and Iran towards each other, and that continues to be the case even today. Afghanistan's predicament is a difficult one. It would like to enhance its links with its neighboring states, especially Iran and Pakistan, so as to gain economic advantages and tackle common threats to regional security. Yet such interactions also leave it open to becoming a theatre for the neighboring states where they can play out their regional rivalries. Peace and stability will continue to elude Afghanistan so long as its neighbors continue to view it through the lens of their regional rivalries and as a chessboard for enhancing their regional power and influence. And these regional rivalries will only intensify if the perception gains ground that the security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating.

Iran would view a re-Talibanization of Afghanistan as a ploy by Pakistan to keep Afghanistan under its sphere of influence, and if this occurred, Iran-Pakistan ties would deteriorate further. The potentials for regional cooperation on trade and energy, something which is critical for the future of all the states in the region and towards which some tentative steps have been initiated, would become difficult to realize. Security would become the foremost priority of Iran and Pakistan, forcing both to actively support their clients in Afghanistan to gain strategic leverage over the other. In many ways, it is a paradox. The situation in Afghanistan can only improve if its neighbors start to act responsibly, but a significant deterioration in Afghanistan's security situation will force them to worry about their own security interests, thereby further

intensifying regional rivalries. Iran will only play a positive role in Afghanistan if it feels its vital interests are not under threat, and a deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan will only make Iran feel more vulnerable, forcing it to take steps to safeguard its interests, and further spiraling the conflict.

In the short to medium term, it is therefore highly likely that the situation in Afghanistan will continue to determine the contours of Pakistan-Iran ties. Pakistan can play a vital role in decreasing tension between Iran and the US. With its close relations with US, Pakistan is well placed to use its good offices for rapprochements between the two and also there must be realization on the part of the leadership of both countries (Pakistan and Iran) that in the emerging strategic environment of the region, the security concerns of Pakistan and Iran are mutually indivisibly interlinked. As the American threatening posture against Iran which President Bush described as the part of an 'Axis of Evil', Pakistan should make its point clear to the US that any military action against Iran would be extremely dangerous for the region. The US notion of Iran being the sponsoring state of terrorism is baseless and it would adversely affect the war on terrorism. Pakistan should advocate that US must engage Iran as its role could be very crucial to fight the terrorism in the region.

It is indeed required that Iran and Pakistan should neutralize all those factors that threaten their cordial relations. However this would require a vigilant and competent leadership at both sides who understands the regional dynamics and importance of the socio-economic development of their nation. Within this new environment, it suits both the countries to build a strong, closer relationship in order to meet the challenges of the time. Since 9/11, on one hand new problems and challenges, coupled with new conditions on the other hand have also provided an opportunity for an increased cooperation between Iran and Pakistan.

■ Notes

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