

Pakistan-Iran Relations in a Regional Context

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ABSTRACT

Since inception, Pakistan and Iran have been experiencing good relations but sometimes due to new requirements and changes in the global politics both the neighbours also witnessed some challenges as well. This paper will explore whether Pakistan and Iran will be able to develop close strategic relationship with each other in the near future. However, Pakistan has already established its strategic relationship with Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia. On the other side after 9/11, Iran has been trying to build closer relationship with Pakistan's enduring rival India. For how long, that trajectory would affect Pakistan and Iran relations. The paper will also highlight Iran's developing strategic relationship with Russia and China and it is expected that such development would prevent Iran from moving closer towards India.

Key Words: Strategic, Rival, Cold War, Revolution, Alliance, Alignment, Interests.

Introduction

Before Iranian revolution, Pakistan and Iran had a number of common interests which strengthened their relationship. But after Iranian revolution, especially after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan both sides got differ but strived to keep good relations. In post 9/11, Iran also cultivated its strong relations with Pakistan rival India and Pakistan is skillfully maintaining its relations with Saudi Arabia. Whereas Pakistan and Iran had different threat perceptions, former takes India as its enduring rival, while latter considers Pakistan's close ally Saudi Arabia as its competitor and rival. Besides that, Iran also perceives threat from Israel and US.

Pakistan and Iran have a good history of cordial relationship. Even, both countries also have difference of opinion on certain issues. Besides other factors, polarity is one of influencing relationship between two States. After the cold war, unipolarity affected the relationship between two states in one way or another. Now again, the rivalry between emerging powers, China and Russia with US is quite instrumental in realigning Pak-Iran relations.

Alignment is a broader term which deals with the expectations of the states concerned with the questions "who will defend whom?" or "who will support whom and who will resist whom to what extent and in what contingencies?" Expectations of assistance or opposition of states come from variety of factors which can be divided into three categories including, polarity, conflicts and

common interests among states, and past interactions. Polarity deals whether international political structure is a bipolar or multipolar. Both had different implications for the alignment of the states. States tend to expect assistance from other states when their interests converge. It also expects opposition from other states with whom it had a conflict. Expectation will be weaker when both states will not share common objectives on the different issues. Expectation will be stronger when both states will have same policies on different issues of their concern. Common or conflicting interests combine with strength inequality to produce pattern of alignment. The alliance reinforced the preexisting alignment, by making it more precise (Snyder, 1991).

In bipolarity, alliance relations are determined structurally whereas in unipolarity structural constraints are either absent or diminished which provide super-power a greater freedom of actions as it has a much less need of cohesive alliances. It is inclined to states with strong ideological affinity (Walt, January 2009). At the same time, most states revived a set of regional subsystem in which states interact with each other. Majority of states are concerned with capabilities and intentions of their neighboring states (Friedberg, Winter 1993-94). States gave more importance to their regional interests because of their security which is closely linked with each other. Geographical proximity has a high impact over security dynamics among neighbors than among the states at greater distance (Waeber & Buzan, 2003). In case of Iran and Pakistan, both sides have different threat perceptions but there is a room for both sides to converge their interests.

Historically Pakistan and Iran has had very good relations. Pakistan had no border dispute with Iran unlike with India and Afghanistan. In the beginning, both states faced local and regional threats. In May 1949, Iran became the first State to recognize Pakistan in the United Nations. Shah of Iran was the first foreign head of the State to visit Pakistan in May 1950. Throughout the 1950s, both sides developed closer relations with each other. In 1956 and 1957, both sides concluded cultural and air travel agreements. In 1958, both sides successfully demarcated their common border (Vatanka, 2015).

During that era, the US played an important role in bringing two sides closer. As both sides needed US military support to counter their regional threats and in return US needed strong partners to contain Soviet Union. Under those common shared interests, in 1954, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey signed an agreement to “increase security cooperation among pro-US States in South-West Asia” (Vatanka, 2015). In 1955, both nations joined the CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) with an objective to enhance mutual security cooperation. US sought partnership with Pakistan, Iran and Turkey because of its own economic and political interests. In a counter-move, Soviet Union aligned with the Arab States in the Middle East (Waeber & Buzan, 2003).

Regional and international factors also positively influenced Pak-Iran relations. Military coup in Baghdad (1958) led to deterioration of Iran-Iraq relations. Subsequently, Soviet Union supported military regimes in Baghdad and Egypt. Iran was apprehensive about Soviet alignment with Egypt and Iraq. Iran, thus, became a closer ally of US. Similarly, Pakistan also sought support from US for deterring Indian and, to some extent, Soviet threats (Kheli, May 1977). In case

Pakistan-Iran Relations in a Regional Context

of Iran and Pakistan, the primary threat of Soviet Union and her regional clients in South Asia and Middle East became primary objectives for both to counter.

US alignment with Pakistan and Iran and Soviet Union alignment with Iraq, Syria and India directly linked regional rivalries with super powers rivalry. According to Buzan, “an indigenous rivalry between India and Pakistan provides opportunities or demands for the great powers to penetrate the region. Balance of power logic works naturally to encourage the local rivals to call in outside help, and by this mechanism the local patterns of rivalry become linked to the global ones (Waeber & Buzan, 2003).”

Iran also played a significant role in defusing tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. From the beginning, Pakistan and Afghanistan had tense relations because of the issue of Pashtunistan. Afghanistan claimed that northern parts of Pakistan were an integral part of Afghanistan and voted against Pakistan’s membership into the United Nations. In 1961, tensions between two states escalated and Kabul refused to accept any shipment from Pakistan. Despite the fact that Kabul is a land locked country. It was also dependent on Pakistan for its foreign trade. In 1963, effective Iranian mediation between its two neighbors resulted in an agreement to re-establish economic and diplomatic relations. During 1965 war, despite pressure from US and Britain, Iran provided air bases to Pakistan Air Force. Iran also provided small arms and ammunition in support of Pakistan’s war efforts against India. Iran supported Pakistan despite the fact that US ambassador to Tehran warned Iran that in such circumstances US would have to stop aid to Iran (Vatanka, 2015).

After secession of East Pakistan in 1971, Iran showed its commitment towards territorial integrity of Pakistan. During a visit to Pakistan in March 1976, Shah said, “we do not have to give any reasons for this friendship. It is normal and natural and it is in the interests of both countries” (Kheli, May 1977). Iran perceived that instability in Pakistan may spillover effect over Iran’s Baluch population. Moreover, Iran could also improve its relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE through Pakistan. At same time, Pakistan believed, if necessary, Iran would intervene militarily to protect integrity of Pakistan.

In mid 1970s, Iran also played mediatory role for normalization of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. During 1973-74, relations were tense between Kabul and Islamabad. But situation changed with the conclusion of ‘Algiers Accords’ in which Iraq and Iran committed to shun their support for proxies in Baluchistan and Kurdistan respectively. That development prevented Afghanistan from supporting the issue of greater Balochistan. It also helped Pakistan to act against Baloch rebels in coordination with Iran. In 1975, Shah of Iran announced \$2 billion aid to Afghanistan for the construction of Railway network connecting Kabul and Kandhar to Iran’s sea port. In 1976, Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited Afghanistan and in return President of Afghanistan, Daud visited Pakistan. Both states committed to an “honorable solution of their political differences and other differences (Kheli, May 1977).” The term dispute was changed to differences as a concession by Afghanistan.

During Shah Regime, Iran considered Afghanistan as her peripheral area of interests and facilitated Pakistan to maintain her influence there. Regional

dynamics changed with Iranian revolution and Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. As a result, Iran emerged as a revolutionary State which not only threatened regional security but also threatened US interests in Middle East. The new geo-strategic development adversely affected Pakistan alignment with Iran. However, Pakistan was the first State to recognize revolutionary regime in Iran (Alam, 2004).

After the Iranian revolution, the relations between Iran and Saudi-Arabia were deteriorated. In the beginning, differences were merely ideological but tensions between two sides spiked during Iran-Iraq war when Saudi Arabia along with the US supported Iraq against Iran. Saudi Arabia along with other Gulf Countries provided extensive financial support to Iraq. US also needed a strong partner in Middle East to compensate for loss of Shah Regime in Iran. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia gradually assumed that role and both states became close allies (Joffe, 2009).

Post-revolution, Pakistan-Iran relations were not as cordial as they used to be during pre-revolution era. New regime's anti US sentiments and its hostility towards Saudi Arabia affected relations between the two neighbours. Despite the emergence of new geo-strategic regional dynamics, Pakistan supported Iran in its ten years long war against Iraq despite the fact that her close allies, Saudi Arabia and US, were supporting Iraq (Khurram & Weinbaum, spring 2014).

Pakistan also provided access to Iran to its sea ports because most of Iranian ports in Persian Gulf were being threatened by Iraqi air force. During that war Pakistan gave more importance to its regional interests instead of global one. Barry Buzan and Olewar notes, threat perception is more effective over short distances (Waever & Buzan, 2003). According to Stephen M. Walt, "regional powers are more sensitive to regional threats rather than the global balance of power (Walt, January 2009)." Pakistan perceived threats from India at its eastern border and in order to balance Indian threats Pakistan wanted to have a friendly relationship with Iran.

With the emergence of new theocratic regime in Iran, US also influenced Pakistan to develop closer relations with Saudi Arabia. In late 1980s, the number of Pakistani troops deployed in Saudi Arabia reached about 40,000. In April 1981, Pakistan Foreign Secretary Agha Shahi visited Washington, State Department told him, and "We are gratified by the progress already made in establishing closer ties with Saudi Arabia. The Saudis recognize the magnitude of your military modernization needs. The Saudis are prepared immediately to make substantial funds available so that you can begin to fulfill your most urgent military needs (Vatanka, 2015)."

In December 1980, Crown Prince Fahd visited Pakistan and openly declared that his country considered security of Pakistan imperative for the security of Saudi Arabia (Khurram & Weinbaum, spring 2014). Pakistan and Saudi Arabia shared many common interests. In 1980s, both States along with US fought against Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Military of both states also developed very close cooperative partnership with each other. On many occasions, Pakistan Army helped Saudi Arabia in defending their kingdom. In return, Saudi Arabia provided financial assistance to Pakistan for continuation of its nuclear programme (Khan,

2012).

Pakistan closer ties with Saudi Arabia didn't hinder it from establishing a working relationship with a new regime in Tehran throughout the 1980s. Iran fully supported Pakistan's stance regarding Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Iran was also concerned about the Iraq's nuclear programme and considered that Pakistan might be a good source of getting nuclear technology to develop its own nuclear weapons programme (Vatanka, 2015).

Pak-Iran relations started deteriorating with emergence of Taliban Government in Afghanistan. To counter growing influence of Taliban in Afghanistan, Iran supported Shiite groups and Northern Alliance in coordination with Russia, India and other Central Asian states. In 1998, relations between Iran and Pakistan further deteriorated with the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan. Taliban killed several Iranian diplomats and hundreds of Hazara Shiite (Hussain, 2005). The relations between Pakistan and Iran touched an all-time low when an Iranian diplomat was assassinated in Lahore. Later on, five cadets of Iranian air force were also killed, in Rawalpindi, in 1997 (Kumar, September 2008).

The successive victories of Taliban in Afghanistan led Pakistan along with Saudi Arabia and UAE to recognize Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Pakistan considered new dynamics in Afghanistan with her own lens of security from India. Taliban regime also resolved Pakistan's long lasting problem of security at its western border. Taliban regime was liked by Pakistan because of their strong anti-Indian sentiment but its ideology clashed with Iran's Shiite based ideology. At one point prospect of a Taliban and Iran clash seemed very real. The changing scenario in Afghanistan, led Iran to re-evaluate her security priorities. According to Schweller, clash of the interests and new circumstances between the member states may lead to collapse of an alliance and it could be seen as a rational response (Schweller, Summer 1994). Walt notes that alliances were commonly formulated to counter external threats. But alliance had a tendency to deteriorate if the members revise new threats. Whenever there would be shifts in threats, it would directly effects alliance relations (Walt, Spring 1997).

The neighbour states kept overt relations, when in 1998, India tested nuclear weapons, and Iranian President Khatami strongly condemned it. When Pakistan tested its nuclear weapons on 28 May, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi was the first foreign dignitary to visit Pakistan in June 1998 and congratulated Pakistan for such achievement. Whereas Iranian UN envoy said, "India's blasts disrupted the strategic balance in subcontinent.....as a result of Pakistan following suit (Alam, 2004)."

Iranian support to Pakistan nuclear tests may be resulted of its nuclear cooperation. Pakistan assisted and provided some parts of nuclear centrifuges to Iran (Vimikov & Orlov, spring 2005). In 2004, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan Network of proliferation was discovered; it was revealed that it helped Iran in designing centrifuges based on outdated (P1) centrifuges of Pakistan. In 2006, Iran also revealed to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that highly enriched uranium particle came from Pakistan (Khan, 2012). It was highly embarrassing for Pakistan to find its leading scientist involved in nuclear proliferation network.

In 2007, relations between two sides deteriorated when dissident groups

started bombing, kidnapping and assassinating military personnel in Iranian province Sistan Balochistan. Iran claimed terrorists based in border Areas of Pakistan were behind such terrorists' activities. Reference was made to militant organization Jundullah. In 2007, Iran closed its Taftan border with Pakistan after which the Jandullah claimed responsibility of killing 11 Iranian revolutionary guards. Iran also accused Pakistan for not taking an adequate action against Jandullah (Kumar, September 2008).

In 2010, leader of Jandullah, Abdul Malik Rigi was captured from a Bishkek bound flight, when Iran forced the civilian plane to land in Iranian territory. It was believed that Pakistan intelligence agencies helped Iran in his arrest (Pakistan Played Key Role in Rigi's Arrest, February 25, 2010). Another important development occurred in 2009 when India completed a 218km road network linking Iranian port Chabahar with Arabian Sea. Its main objective was to provide an alternate to Pakistan transit route with Afghanistan (Vatanka, 2015). In the same year, President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari also signed an agreement with Iranian counterpart Ahmadinejad for construction of Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline (Vatanka, 2015).

Pakistan and Iran have their own security priorities in South Asia and Middle East respectively. Pakistan had India specific security policy whereas Iran perceived security threat from Saudi-Arabia, Israel as well as from US. Whereas both sides not following their regional security perspectives. However, extra-regional powers (Russia and China) alignment with Iran could smoothly work as their interests correlate with each other. The next part of the paper will focus on Iran's competition and rivalry with Saudi Arabia and as well as its alignment with China and Russia.

Iran and Saudi Arabia

Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is deep rooted. It has historical connotation which can be interpreted as Arabs versus others. Muslim history adds more complexity as it represents shia-sunni split within it (Waever & Buzan, 2003).

Rivalry between the two sides is also one of the reasons which prohibited Pakistan to develop close strategic relations with Iran. It started with the coming of Iranian revolution. In the beginning it was merely ideological but it intensified during Iran-Iraq war and certain events which followed afterwards (Yamada, winter 2015).

The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be characterized with antagonistic ideologies, clash on political and geo strategic interests and competition for regional hegemony. The first gulf war considerably reduced the power of Saddam's regime and allowed Iran to pursue her interests in Central Asia and Gulf. In 1992, Iran revived its old issue of sovereignty of Abu Musa and Tunb Islands and it also opposed US presence in Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) relied on USA for balancing emerging Iranian threat (Waever & Buzan, 2003).

The ousting of Saddam's regime by US forces in 2003, heightened Arabs concerns about growing influence of Iran and Gulf Cooperation Council sought

Pakistan-Iran Relations in a Regional Context

US assistance in responding to Iranian threat (Alterman, August 2007).

With the emergence of Arab spring, the tensions between the two sides intensified as both sides supported their proxies. Saudi Arabia pursued status quo and anti-revolutionary policies. It considered Iran as a main threat to regional security and political stability (Ersoy, March 2013).

It is determined to reduce the power of Shite's axis in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, thus, supported various rebel groups in Syria to weaken Assad's regime. Such approaches by Saudi Arabia are more assertive and forceful to realign her alliances in the region with an objective to weaken Iran and its regional allies. Saudi Arabia also resented US policies that it is not proactively making efforts to weaken Iran and Assad regime in Syria.

In contrast to the previous role of Saudi foreign policy as an arbiter between Arab and Israel conflict, today Saudi Kingdom is behind the scene player in Arab politics. The change in traditional foreign policy of Saudi Arabia occurred because of the changing regional strategic environment especially after 2006. During 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia blamed Hezbollah for all the bloodshed. Saudi Arabia perceived Hezbollah as an influential agent of Iran. The other matter of concern for Saudi Arabia was the Iran's increasing influence in Iraq after the fall of Saddam regime. In 2006, all the Sunni leaders including Egypt, Jordan Joined King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia publicly opposed the Hamas actions in Lebanon. Such posture by Saudi Arabia strategically aligned them with Israel (Aarts, 2007).

Pakistan is trying to maintain a balance in its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Before Saudi strikes in Yemen, Pakistan politely declined Saudi request for sending her forces in Yemen. It was a wise decision because according to renowned scholars it would be a strategic blunder for Pakistan to involve herself in Saudi-Iran conflict (Fatzpatrick, August-September 2015).

In March 2016, Saudi Arabia also proposed a military alliance like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) comprising on a number of Muslim countries from Middle East to Africa excluding Iran, Iraq and Syria. Interestingly Pakistan is also member of that Alliance (Saudi Arabia Planning NATO-like Military Alliance of Muslim States, March 16, 2016). Development of Pakistan strategic relationship with Iran's rival Saudi Arabia and their alignment of interests on Afghanistan, compel Iran to seek closer relationship with Pakistan's rival India.

Iran and India

Historically Iran and India did not develop strategic ties with one another for decades. Iran's active participation in US led alliances and its strategic relations with Pakistan foreboded her to develop close relations with India. India's friendly relations with Egypt and particularly its leader Gamal Nasser and Baathist regime in Iraq further strained relations between the two nations. The relations between the two sides started improving with the coming of new theocratic regime in Iran. Iranian revolution was viewed favorably by India and after the revolution; India sent an unofficial delegation to establish new contacts with revolutionary regime.

The relations could not move beyond formal recognition of new regime. India's support for Saddam regime, Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and Iran's stance for plebiscite in Kashmir remained irritants in bilateral relations. However, the end of cold war and convergence of their interests in Afghanistan became stepping stone for strengthening their strategic relations (Yazdani, August 2007).

After 9/11, Pakistan's closer military cooperation with the Bush administration and its assent to US forces to access military bases in Pakistan, increased security concerns of Iran. In 2003, Bush administration declared Iran, along with North Korea and Iraq, as Axis of Evil. US invaded Iraq in 2003. Iran perceived all these developments as its encirclement. In order to balance emerging threats, Iran deepened its strategic relationship with India (Yazdani, August 2007).

Iran has strategic importance for India as it may provide access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Improving ties between India and Iran received no attention from the US until 2005 when Bush administration sought to change US laws, by allowing India to engage in cooperation in nuclear technology. According to Christine C. Fair, "Iran India ties are benign to US interests even if they imply future policy disagreement between New Delhi and Washington" (Fair, 2007).

In the post-cold war era, Indian and Iranian interests converged in Central Asia and Afghanistan. After the fall of Taliban's regime, Iran and India vehemently opposed Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan. Both States supported US back government in Afghanistan after fall of Taliban regime. Both sides shared their interests in stability of new Afghan regime (Yazdani, August 2007). India is relying on Iran for supplying aid to Afghanistan as it is the third largest donor to Afghanistan. Besides engaging in joint exercises with the Iranian navy, India is also interested in access to Persian Gulf through Iranian sea ports. India believes that in case of war with Pakistan, she may be in a position to outflank Pakistan armed forces on their western border. Indian government defended Iran nuclear enrichment programme as its right to seek technology for its civilian use. Some of the Indian companies were also sanctioned by US for providing assistance to Iran's nuclear programme (Twining, January-March 2008).

India tried to maintain strong relations with Iran irrespective of its growing relations with US. Before the Indo-US nuclear deal most US policy makers were apprehensive about growing India-Iran relations. US were appalled by India's decision to conduct joint naval exercise with the Iran in 2006 on the eve of President Bush visit to India (Fair, 2007).

In 2003, both sides formed a Joint Working Group on countering terrorism. India is also helping Iran in upgrading its military hardware. It also helped Iran in building advance submarine batteries. In March 2003, India conducted naval exercise with the Iran just before US invasion of Iraq. India also established new consulates in Iranian cities of Zahedan and Bandar Abbas. India's strategic relations with Iran and its presence in areas bordering Pakistan may play a significant role in any future conflict with Pakistan. Pakistan claims that Indian intelligence official are spoiling peaceful environment in Baluchistan by accessing from Iran (Fair, 2007).

The recent Iranian nuclear deal with P5 and Germany would help India to further consolidate its relations with Iran. Before it, India remained under constant

Pakistan-Iran Relations in a Regional Context

pressure to balance between its growing ties with Washington and Tehran. However, India enjoys significance importance in new US policy towards Asia (Fair, 2007).

When Indian Prime Minister Modi visited Iran in May 2016, both sides signed number of MoUs including development of Chahbahar Port and construction of a railway track from Chahbahar to Zahidan. Later on, Afghanistan will also be linked with that railway track. But there are problems in transforming these agreements into any effective political clout. Iran has also established relations with Taliban in Afghanistan and it also plans to benefit from China's signature development initiative, One Belt One Road project (Raghavan, May 26, 2016).

The growing India-Iran relation is a matter of grave concern for Pakistan. Pakistan defense policy is India specific. India-Iran cooperation in Afghanistan and Central Asia is one aspect of straining relations between Iran and Pakistan in recent years (Kutty, June 2014). Whether in near future Iran will succeed in developing closer strategic and military relations with India? Before answering that question, it is important to have a look at Iran's strategic relations with other two important powers i.e., China and Russia.

Iran and China

According to Barry Buzan, "the regional patterns of conflict shape the lines of intervention by global level powers. Other things being equal, the expectation is that outside powers will be drawn into a region along the lines of rivalry existing within it (Waeber & Buzan, 2003)".

The relations between China and Iran started improving during last years of Shah's regime in Iran. The common threat of Soviet Union played an important role in normalization of relations between two states. But relationship started deteriorating when China vehemently supported Shah's regime during his final days. However, after Iranian revolution, China apologized to Iran and letter of apology was sent by Aga Shahi, Foreign Affairs Advisor to President of Pakistan. Pakistan played an important role in reviving relations between its two friendly neighbours. After this episode, relationship between the two countries gradually improved. During Iran-Iraq war, China supported Iran and supplied military equipment and it also assisted Iran in developing its missile programme (Alam, 2004).

However, China's opposition to US policies in Middle East aligned her with Iran. China has its own interests in building strong relations with Iran as it wanted to have an uninterrupted supply of oil and gas. China is also planning to build a gas pipeline from Western Iran through Pakistan with an objective to overcome Chinese energy vulnerabilities by circumventing "Malacca Predicament" (Lawson, & Matteo, summer 2015).

Besides this, China is also cooperating with US in its efforts to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons. Whereas, China remained as the biggest investor in Iran's oil and gas industry and an important source to military supplies. It considers dominant role of US in Middle East as a potential threat to its oil supply lines. By establishing strong relations with Iran, It would have a land route access

to huge oil and gas reserves.

China is strategically transforming herself by building 'One Belt, One Road' project to open new trade route at land and sea. It includes three major land based routes (China-Pakistan, China-Magnolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia). It also include sea based 'Twenty First Century Maritime Silk route'. According to China, these projects will cost about \$900 billion and would affect lives of about 4.4 billion people. The primary objective of One Belt, One Road project is economic development of 65 countries by providing access to Chinese industry and economy. The strategic purpose of One Belt, One Road initiative is to secure uninterrupted supply of natural resources to China, especially oil and gas. By taking such initiatives China is also interested in directly accessing oil and mineral rich regions. Whereas India perceives construction of CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) as direct infringement to its interests and has raised concerns (Dargnat, June-July 2016).

China also proposed to build a high speed train joining western part China to Iran through Central Asia. Both sides have also signed comprehensive strategic partnership during the President Xi's visit to Tehran (Wuthnow, February 2016).

Iran's economic as well as defense dependence over China would make it difficult for her to cultivate strategic relationship with India in the long run. Both sides share a common objective of countering the influence of US in the Middle East. China unlike Pakistan has least developed strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia. Both sides are also aligning their policies in the Syria. China also opposed Saudi strikes over Yemen.

Iran and Russia

During cold war, Iran joined US led alliance as a bulwark against communist Soviet Union. But after Iranian revolution, and especially during Iran-Iraq war relations between two countries started improving. In the post-cold war era, Russia became an important source of military equipment to Iran (Flanagan, winter 2013).

Russia perceived Iran as a stabilizing factor in regional politics and it made sincere efforts to resolve Nagorno Karabakh disputes and supported Russian ally Armenia. Iran also endorsed Russian policy in suppressing Islamists elements in Chechnya. After 9/11 both sides shared common interests to keep a check on expansion of NATO and rise of religious extremism. In 2007, President Putin made an unprecedented visit to Tehran, it was made during a time when US was contemplating to take military action against it. Russia unnecessarily delayed development of Bushehr Nuclear Plant and its support to economic sanctions had negative repercussions over relations between two sides. In 2009, Russia halted its military cooperation with Iran because of its nuclear programme (Dunaeva, 2013).

Russia categorically made it clear that its nuclear cooperation with Iran is purely for civilian purposes whereas it was interested in boosting its conventional military cooperation with Iran (Vimikov & Orlov, spring 2005). Russia and Iran joint efforts during Syrian civil war further cemented their relations. Both are coordinating their activities in Syrian civil war. Iran is also providing air bases to Russian fighters' jet for airstrikes over Syria. Russia is also providing advance S-

Pakistan-Iran Relations in a Regional Context

300 air defense systems to Iran. Russia has economic and geo strategic interests to develop its relations with Iran. It will provide her access to Persian Gulf and promote its interests in Central Asia and Middle East (Tarock, 1997).

It is obvious that Iran will continue to be an important player in Russian Foreign policy (Dunaeva, 2013). Iran's close cooperation with Russia in defending anti-US Assad regime in Syria would have an implication for her engaging in closer cooperation with India which is considered as an important US ally. Therefore, Russia is also expanding her relations with Pakistan because India is building a strong military relationship with the US.

Not only Iran and Russia are coordinating their military activities in Syria. But their policies are also backed by China. China along with Russia also vetoed two UNSC resolutions which could have paved the way for international intervention to remove Assad regime in Syria (Yamada, winter 2015).

It is interesting to note that Pakistan is also supporting the policies of Russia, China and Iran over Syria. Pakistan categorically stated that it is against any attempt to topple Assad regime in Syria and Pakistan fully supports the territorial integrity of Syria (Haider, December 24, 2015).

Iran is also pivotal for EU because of its strategic location and huge energy reserves. It may also help EU in diversifying its energy resources to reduce its dependency from Russia. After JCPOA, some of the US sanctions are still imposed on Iran which prohibits EU financial institutions to make transactions with Iran. If this situation continues then there is a strong probability that Iran would come under the influence of non-western Countries (Hossein, October-November 2016). JCPOA provided an opportunity to West to rebuild economic and political relations with Iran and reduce its dependency from China and Russia (Vukovic & Shirvani, 2015).

Pakistan and Iran on Afghanistan Issue

Afghanistan remained as one of the area of conflict between Pakistan and Iran since withdrawal of Soviet forces. However in mid 90s, Pakistan failed in comprehending Iranian interests when Taliban factions captured Kabul. Pakistan also aligned her Afghan policy with Iran's rivals i.e., Saudi Arabia and UAE. In the wake of 9/11, Taliban regime was removed by US. As a result, Pakistan cooperated and supported US war against Terrorism in Afghanistan. Later on, differences were emerged between Pakistan and US.

The main the difference which is yet to be resolved is Pakistan's concern about the expansions of Indian investment and its influence in Afghanistan. In order to counter Indian influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan is relying on Pukhtun factions especially Taliban. Pakistan has expressed concerns about US role in giving more space to India and its policy of limiting Pakistan's role in Afghanistan (Huasheng, January 2014).

After removal of Taliban regime from Afghanistan, it was expected that Tehran and Washington would share common interests in prevention of outbreak of Sunni militancy in Afghanistan. Iran also invested heavily in the process of

rebuilding of Afghanistan (Kutty, June 2014). Iran currently working on two pronged policy regarding Afghanistan; firstly, it is pursuing stability and supports current regime in Kabul. Secondly it calls for withdrawal of all the external forces from Afghanistan. The presence of US forces in Afghanistan is a source of potential threat to Iran. It also believes that presence of US forces has a broader strategic objective to strengthen its position in Central and South Asia.

China and Pakistan have the same policies over Afghanistan, as China believes that US forces in Afghanistan are occupying strategic point which provides them opportunity to monitor China, Pakistan, Iran, Russia and Central Asia. US are not going to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan until it is compelled to do so. Taliban should be recognized as an important organization and should be incorporated in Afghanistan government. China also stressed that Afghanistan should cultivate strong relations with Pakistan (Fair, 2007).

Whereas Pakistan, Russia and China issued joint statement in which they raised their concerns about the deterioration of security situation in Afghanistan. They also issued joint statement which said “flexible approach to remove certain figures from sanction list as part of efforts to foster a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and Taliban movement”. US, in turn, also raised its concern regarding Moscow’s support to Taliban movement (Pakistan, Russia, China Warn of Increased IS Threat in Afghanistan, December 28, 2016).

Now Iran is also aligning her Afghan policy along with Russia, China and Pakistan. According to Michael Kugelman of Woodrow Wilson Center, “we cannot rule out the possibility that Russia and Iran are trying to hedge against the future possibility of a stronger Islamic State in Afghanistan by expanding their ties to the Taliban (Russia, Iran Ties with Taliban Stoke Afghan Anxiety, December 29, 2016)”. Iran considers presence of US forces in Afghanistan as a bigger threat than the Taliban factions. Owing to which Iran expressed her desire to join Pakistan, Russia and China for regional security and stability especially in Afghanistan (Yousaf, January 28, 2017).

Conclusion

Alliances are commonly formulated to counter external threats and protect common interests. Alliance has a tendency to deteriorate the situation if the members receive new threats. Whenever, there will be shifts in threats, it will directly affects alliance relations (Malt, spring 1997).

Pakistan joined war against terrorism for keeping a balance against the Indian threat. Later on when it realized that US is trying to strengthen Indian’s role in Afghanistan it perceived it as a threat to its security. Shift in threat perception regarding US presence in Afghanistan aligned Pakistan with Iran. It is also expected that the current regime in Kabul may not be able to sustain her for a long period of time because of the ongoing insurgency. Despite a nuclear deal with Iran, normalization of relations between Iran and US seems uncertain (Khalaji, fall 2015). As a result, Iran will continue to align her policies with Russia and China.

It is expected that Iran’s strategic relationship with China would prevent Iran from developing closer relations with India as India enjoys important role in US’

Pakistan-Iran Relations in a Regional Context

Asia rebalancing policy with an objective to counter growing influence of China (Silove, spring 2016). India also has strong defense cooperation with Israel whereas Iran has not recognized the status of Israel as a state in Middle East. These two aspects of Indian policies may create hurdles for developing any closer relations with Iran in near future.

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