

Factors Shaping Pakistan-Iran Relations: Past, Present and Prospects for Future

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ABSTRACT

Iran and Pakistan enjoyed cordial relations before the Islamic revolution in Iran, Iran and Iraq War and Soviet led invasion of Afghanistan. Today both countries are not at daggers drawn with each other but relations between them have been marked by mistrust, competition and even hostility at times. This is owing to divergent interests of Pakistan and Iran in the region, cross border terrorism, sectarianism, varying economic interests, and conflicting partners in international domain. The future of Pakistan's relation with Iran would continue to be influenced by the regional and international scenario. The relations between both neighbors can deepen and solidify if Pakistan tries to balance its relation with Saudi Arabia and Iran as both countries continue to be of utmost importance for Pakistan. In doing so, an effort should be made on the part of Pakistan to refrain from entering the conflicts which have been initiated and supported by these rival countries. Cooperation in trade and energy has the potential to improve the relations between Pakistan and Iran. Iran and Pakistan relations are likely to increase in the future because of their geographical proximity, cultural and religious values.

Keywords: *Pakistan-Iran Relations, Gawader, Chabahr, Sectarianism*

Introduction

The relations between Pakistan and Iran date back to 1947 as the latter was the first Muslim country to officially recognize Pakistan. Pakistan immediately formed cordial relations with Iran and strengthened its ties in economic, political and technological fields. The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 by United States and its allies significantly improved the relations of Pakistan and Iran. A prime reason behind the improvement of these relations was the idea that Pakistan had renounced the support of Taliban regime. In 2010 and 2011 as the relationship between Pakistan and United States turned bitter, Pakistan and Iran relationship became much better as various meetings related to issues and concerns such as terrorism, trade relations, and narcotics control were held. Trade relations between Pakistan and Iran have also increased. Since 1990 Pakistan and Iran have made efforts to improve trade and cooperation in the energy sector. Currently, Pakistan is one of the top importers of Iranian products (AzerNews, 2018; IRNA, 2010). Iran, Pakistan and India gas pipeline is a project signed by these nations that has not been fully implemented due to sanctions imposed by United States of America. It is because of these sanctions that Iran despite being the second country with highest natural gas reserves lacks the capability to emerge as a developed country of the region. Iran, India and Pakistan gas pipeline is beneficial for Pakistan as it can provide considerable revenue to Pakistan in the form of transit fee besides solving the energy problem of Pakistan (Ahmad, 2014).

After 1977 Iran and Pakistan relations started turning sour because of conflicting interests in Afghanistan. Time and again, Iran has blamed militant groups and foreign intelligence agencies of carrying out hostile actions against it from the border. Even now both countries do not see eye to eye on the future of Afghanistan and continue to pursue divergent policies. While responding to these allegations, Pakistan has asked Iran to provide concrete evidences for proving these allegations. Besides it, Pakistan has also proposed that Iran should seek the help of border management committee of the two countries for the investigation of such allegations. Moreover, Iran has also blamed Pakistan of using its border to weaken the Sistan-Balochistan region of Iran. On the other hand, security officials in Pakistan have responded to such criticism by pointing out that Iran is itself involved in making interference in Baluchistan and Southern Afghanistan (Dawn, 2014). The tussle between Saudi Arabia and Iran has impacted Pakistan a lot because it has led to emergence of militant sectarian groups in Pakistan which have been involved in deadly acts of violence against each other. Though Pakistan has succeeded in neutralizing these sectarian groups to a great extent, they continue to cast their shadow upon Pakistan. Continuous attacks launched by Iran in Pakistan's province of Balochistan on the pretext of targeting terrorist, smugglers and drug dealers have led to bitterness between Iran and Pakistan. Though Iran repeatedly blames Pakistan of being tolerant to the presence of anti-Iran militants in Balochistan, Pakistan, Pakistan has always denied the allegations of Iran. It has labeled Iran's allegations as baseless because Iran has not provided any significant proof to Pakistan regarding the presence of anti-Iran militants in Pakistan. The construction of Chabahar port by India in Iran has raised the doubts of Pakistan because it is likely to increase India's influence in Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan which can impact Pakistan's relations with Iran (Khan, 2012; Siddiq, 2005).

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Despite their geographical proximity and cultural similarities, Iran and Pakistan have not reaped enough benefits from each other. Though a number of trade agreements, cultural exchange programs and cooperation accords in many fields have been undertaken between them, still there is enough room for the betterment of ties between these two countries. Relations between these two countries have witnessed many ups and downs. Iran and Pakistan initiated their relationship soon after the creation of Pakistan. Both countries remained members of mutual defense pacts such as Seato and Cento. In the wars of 1965 and 1971, Iran provided technical assistance to Pakistan. After the revolutionary regime came to power in Iran in 1979, Pakistan immediately recognized it. However, Pakistan and Iran relations deteriorated after 1977 due to divergence of interest between Iran and Pakistan in Afghanistan, hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the rise of sectarian violence in Pakistan, Jundullah attacks in Iran and the cross border attacks launched by Iran in Pakistan, rising competition between Gawader and Chabahar port and India's desire to increase its influence through Chabahar port in Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan. The purpose of this article is to explore these major and other minor issues that still cast a shadow on Pakistan and Iran's relations.

Iran-Iraq War

Iran-Iraq war was a tragic event which shocked the entire region. Hostilities on both side escalated and despite various attempts for ending the war, both countries remained at war for a decade. Out of the war came incalculable loss for both countries in terms of the casualties and resources. Moreover, the war fragmented Middle East along Sectarian lines. Though there was a lot of pressure on Pakistan to take a unilateral stance in the war, but Pakistan resisted such demands. In fact, Pakistan repeatedly urged ceasefire between Iran and Iraq. During Iran- Iraq war, Pakistan never tilted in favor of any one side. Though United States and Saudi Arabia tried to win the support of Pakistan solely for Iraq but they failed. Pakistan supported Iran financially during the Iran- Iraq war (Alam, 2004). Nonetheless, there was a major difference between Pakistan and Iran's policy towards the Gulf. Pakistan aimed at maintaining stability in the Gulf whereas Iran was in favor of revolutionary changes. This policy of Iran was evident form aggressive oratory against the rulers of Gulf (Hussain, 1993).

Divergence of Interests over Post-Soviet Afghanistan

Divergence of interests in Afghanistan turned Pakistan and Iran into competitors where they tried to gain maximum benefit through the groups supported and armed by them. Alam (2004) argues that Post-Soviet Afghanistan became a battle ground for various factions of feuding groups who were competing for power and influence. These groups were supported by other countries who wanted to ensure the maximum power for their groups. The Taliban were supported by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan whereas the Hazara were supported by Iran. The success of Taliban to set up their governmental structure after capturing Kabul embittered Iran. Influence in Afghanistan meant a lot to Pakistan and Iran because both of them saw it as a mean to increase their influence in Central Asia. A further fact that added to the worry of Iran was that the Taliban regime in Kabul was pleasant to Saudi Arabia.

The strength of Taliban regime was viewed with great concern in Iran. In order to mitigate the influence of Taliban, Iran started supporting the Northern Alliance and Shiite groups in Afghanistan. In these efforts, Iran enjoyed the coordination of other countries such as India, Russia and Central Asian countries (Alam, 2004). The militant warfare against Soviet Union in Afghanistan had given birth to competing and feuding sectarian groups in Pakistan. Armed with weapons, these groups engaged in sectarian killings which tarnished the social harmony of Pakistan. The fall of Mazar e Sharif in 1998 sent shock waves across Iran. In their bid to capture Mazar e Sharif, the Taliban murdered scores of Hazara Shiites. Moreover, Iranian diplomats were also killed by Taliban on this occasion. Sectarian violence which was triggered in Pakistan as a result of Iran-Iraq war gained a sudden boost as a consequence of these circumstances. It was due to sectarian conflicts going on in Pakistan that Pakistan and Iran relations suffered immensely.

Sectarianism and its Effect on Pakistan-Iran relations

Sectarianism is one of the chief reasons for ineffective and uncertain relations between Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan is a country where Sunni Muslims are in majority whereas in Iran Shia Muslims are in majority. In the past relations between these two countries were not governed by their sectarian identities, but this no longer remained the case after the religious policies pursued by Zia Ul Haq in Pakistan and the Islamic revolution in Iran. Saudi Arabia and Iran turned bitter rivals after the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran (Haqqani, 2006; Zahab, 2002). In their utmost desire to promote their sectarian ideologies, Saudi Arabia and Iran supported like-minded groups in Pakistan that tarnished its social harmony. The sectarian-proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran created sectarian militant groups that caused much damage to Pakistan. These developments paved way for the sectarian persecutions of Sunni and Shia Muslims in Pakistan (Haqqani, 2006; Zahab, 2002). It was owing to the sectarian policies of Iran in Pakistan and Pakistan's increasing tilt towards Saudi Arabia that Pakistan and Iran failed to develop a relation based upon trust and cooperation.

Conflicting Policies of Pakistan and Iran in Central Asia

Iran and Pakistan eye the Central Asian countries for boosting their trade opportunities. Central Asian countries possess abundance of unexplored resources which have captured the attention of different countries. Pakistan and Iran are busy constructing different ports in order to be linked with Central Asia. Divergence of interest over access to Central Asian countries has definitely embarked Pakistan and Iran on a competitive route. The competition for accessing Central Asia has been intensified by the fact that India also desires to reach Central Asian countries. The unpredictable and ever-changing relations between India and Pakistan have encouraged India to seek a reliable partner in the form of Iran for reaching Central Asia. Owing to this reason, India has thrown its entire weight behind constructing Chabahar port of Iran.

Iran enjoys a geographical location that endows it with much importance. The geographical importance of Iran can be gauged from the fact that Iran enjoys proximity to Central Asia, Persian Gulf and Oman Sea. Iran's geographical location makes it an ideal export way for the abundant natural resources of Central Asia. The geographical location of Iran increases its importance for India because

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through Iran India can be linked to Central Asia that can serve as a market for Indian products (Ebel & Menon, 2000). The construction of two different ports by Iran and Pakistan for the purpose of reaching the resource-laden Central Asian countries has been seen as the pursuit of two different ways to generate more benefit for them. Moreover, as both countries engage in an effort to gain maximum advantages from the construction of their respective ports, the emergence of bitter competition in the future cannot be ruled out.

Pakistan and Iran are constructing two different ports which have boosted economic competition between these countries. In its bid to be connected with Central Asia, Iran is constructing Chabahar port with the help of India in Eastern Iran. On the other hand, Pakistan is constructing Gawader port with the same objective. By helping Iran in building Chabahar port, India wants to decrease the importance of Gawader port for Central Asian States (Bleuer, 2007; Ramachandran, 2002). India aims to build a proper infrastructure that could link Chabahar ports with Central Asian States. Iran is actively working in Tajikistan by funding many transportation projects such as the Aznab Tunnel. India's interests in Chabahar port have rapidly increased the pace of its construction. Moreover, India wants to obstruct the better prospects for Gawader port by presenting Chabahar port as a better avenue of trade and transportation for other countries. The presence of India in Iran owing to the construction of Chabahar port has certainly added to the discomfort of Pakistan. Pakistan feels that India has greater goals to pursue at Chabahar besides trade and business. It feels that India is making an attempt to shroud these goals behind its visible goals of accessing the Central Asian countries for trade opportunities.

On the other hand, Gawader port promises immense benefits for the development of Central Asian countries and Pakistan. It has the potential to link Afghanistan, Central Asia and China. Pakistan aims the completion of Gawader port in Balochistan in order to be linked with Central Asian countries. Gawader port is being constructed by the Chinese assistance. Gawader serves the interest of Central Asian countries because it links these landlocked countries to other countries of the region (Haider, 2005). The port is beneficial for Pakistan because it can bring in a lot of investment. The importance of Gawader port for other countries lies in the fact that it is located two hundred and fifty miles away from the Strait of Hormuz making it an important shipping location. Moreover, the port will ensure the access of Afghanistan, Central Asian States and China to the Arabian Sea. The advantages that Gawader provides to Central Asian countries can be gauged from the fact that the under construction road from Gawadar to Saindak is the shortest route for connecting South Asia with Central Asian states.

Prospects for Improvement in Pakistan-Iran relations

Despite the fact that Iran and Pakistan relations are negatively affected due to a number of issues, there are enough reasons to suggest that prospects of better and friendly relations between the two countries are brighter. This is because both countries share border and the desire to develop peaceful and better relations is shared by them. Moreover, similar religion and culture are also a binding and cooperative force between them. Other reasons for cooperation are that both countries are well aware of their importance for each other. There is much that both countries can gain from cooperation on trade, security and other areas of

mutual concern. The benefits of cooperation between the two countries are far more powerful to overshadow the issues leading to hostility, malice and animosity between them. Moreover, these benefits are in themselves powerful enough to motivate them to look for ways to decrease the intensity of the issues leading to hostile relations between them.

Pakistan and Iran can benefit greatly by expanding their trade. Though both countries equally cherish the idea of expanding trade, Pakistan has remained reluctant because of the sanctions imposed on Iran by the United States (Minhas, 2014). Though Pakistan has refrained from boosting trade with Iran owing to the fear of antagonizing United States, other countries like Russia, India and China have paid little heed to U.S sanctions and continue to trade with Iran. It is because of U.S sanctions that despite sealing the preferential trade agreement in 2004, trade has not raised significantly between the two countries. Improved trade relations between both countries are the need of the hour. Effective and increased trade relations between both countries are the only way forward for improving their ties.

Cross border attacks by Iran in Pakistan have proved to be a major irritant in Pakistan and Iran relations. Iran asserts that the purpose behind these attacks is to safeguard its province of Siestan and Balochistan against the attacks of anti-Iran militant group based in Pakistan's province of Balochistan. Continuous attacks by militants in Iran have increased Iran's frustration. Iran has maintained that Pakistan is harboring these groups for causing damage to Iran. Pakistan has denied the allegations of Iran. On many occasions, the crossing of Iranian border guards in territory of Pakistan has been seen as a violation of territorial sovereignty but Pakistan has not resorted to replying Iran with aggression. Instead Pakistan has made an effort to resolve the issue peacefully with Iran. Though such issues have strained relations between both countries, the will to resolve the issues peacefully remains evident in the attitude of both countries.

Both Iran and Pakistan have set their eyes on all the development taking place in Afghanistan. Both countries cannot afford to leave Afghanistan in isolation because of their pivotal interests in it. Afghanistan shares a border with Iran and Pakistan and therefore its fate is quite crucial for the future of Iran and Pakistan. In the past, Iran and Pakistan had supported their own proxies for maintaining influence in Afghanistan. For sure, the pursuit of divergent interest in Afghanistan led to great bitterness between them. But now Iran and Pakistan are ready to play their part in bringing the feuding groups in Afghanistan to the negotiating table. Despite their divergent interest in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan cherish the desire for bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan.

The incumbent government of Pakistan has expressed its resolve to boost trade ties with Iran despite the sanctions imposed on the later by the US President Donald Trump. In doing so, Pakistan has maintained that it remain cognizant of attaining its commercial and economic interests within the ambit of International legal regime. However, the resumption and boosting of trade ties with Iran would be challenge for the incumbent government of Pakistan as President Trump has pledged to impose sanctions on the countries aiming to foster economic ties with Iran (Express Tribune, 2018; Dawn, 2018). Pakistan's growing cold relations with the Trump administration have also been an important factor in Pakistan's support to Iran on the issue of Nuclear Deal with the Western Countries and United States

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which was abandoned by United States. Resultantly, Iran continues to suffer under the baggage of sanctions imposed by the regime of President Trump. Iranian Foreign Minister Jawed Zarif's maiden visit to Pakistan after the election of Imran Khan as Prime Minister has rekindled hopes of better relations between the two neighbors. Pakistan has expressed its gratitude to Iran for supporting Kashmir's struggle for self-determination and for publicly celebrating Pakistan's Independence Day in Iran.

Pakistan has expressed the hope that other signatories to the Iranian Nuclear deal would not exit from it unlike the United States. The future of Pakistan's relation with Iran would continue to be influenced by the regional and international scenario. The relations between both neighbors can deepen and solidify if the sanctions imposed by the United States are lifted from Iran. Moreover, Pakistan has to balance its relation with Saudi Arabia and Iran as both countries continue to be of utmost importance for Pakistan. In doing so, an effort should be made on the part of Pakistan to refrain from entering the conflicts which have been initiated and supported by these rival countries. A departure from neutrality on the part of Pakistan can have serious ramifications for its internal security.

Conclusion

Iran and Pakistan enjoyed cordial relations before the Islamic revolution in Iran, Iran and Iraq War and Soviet led invasion of Afghanistan. Today both countries are not at daggers drawn with each other but relations between them have been marked by mistrust, competition and even hostility at times. Perhaps this is owing to divergent interests of Pakistan and Iran in the region. The aforementioned changes in the region sent Iran and Pakistan to different routes of action. Trust deficit exists in Iran related to the sincerity of Pakistan in targeting anti-Iran militants present in Balochistan, Pakistan. Pakistan should try to address the concerns of Iran. In addition, Pakistan and Iran should take joint measures to safeguard the border between them for stopping the infiltration of militants, smugglers and drug dealers. Cooperation in trade and energy has the potential to improve the relations between Pakistan and Iran. Iran and Pakistan relations are likely to increase in the future because of their geographical proximity, cultural and religious values. Furthermore, the cooperation between the two countries is likely to increase because of the desire to increase collaboration in various walks of life.

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