

Iran-Pakistan Relations: Political and Strategic Dimensions

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Abstract

Iran-Pakistan relations have had a distinct characteristic over the past five decades and Islamabad's clandestine transfer of nuclear technology and materials to Iran underlines its significance. Political and strategic imperatives have formed the basis of their close relationship despite divergence of interests and political outlook on regional and global issues. Both the countries have tried to reconcile the differences and consolidate their ties. Iran's concerns regarding the perceived dangers of containment by the US, the challenges flowing from developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the need to ensure balance of power with Saudi Arabia and earlier Iraq, and its concerns about the sectarian violence in Pakistan have deeply influenced the vitality of Iran-Pakistan relationship. This paper traces the evolution of Iran-Pakistan relations and argues that the politico-strategic contours of the South-West Asian region will be shaped as a result of divergent developments in Iran and Pakistan – Iran's improvements in ties with India and Pakistan's relations with the US.



Backdrop

Pakistan's political and strategic significance for Iran began with its emergence as an independent state following the Partition of India in 1947. Iran was the first to extend recognition to the new State. It established diplomatic relations with Pakistan in May 1948, and Pakistan's Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan visited Iran in May 1949. The Shah of Iran was the first head of state to pay a State visit to Pakistan in March 1950 and in the same month, a Treaty of Friendship was signed. With the emergence of Pakistan as an independent State in 1947, India lost its territorial contiguity with Iran that it had shared for centuries and it could be said that Pakistan emerged not only geographically between Iran and India but also became one of the major determining factors in Iran-India relations.

Despite Shia-Sunni divisions, Islamic identity became an important factor in shaping the Iran-Pakistan relationship, especially after the Islamic Revolution in Iran

in 1979. It was, however, a convergence of strategic goals facilitated by the Anglo-American alliance through much of the Cold War years that laid the foundation for a positive Iran-Pakistan relationship. The convergence continued through the post-Islamic Revolution period with the shared antipathy to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan further binding the two States.

The break-up of Pakistan in December 1971 convinced Iran that its eastern flank should be stable and its territorial integrity should be maintained.¹ With the emergence of Bangladesh as a separate State, the 'two nations' theory received a severe blow and questions even arose about whether the residual West Pakistan could hold together and would remain a single country. The events of December 1971 brought significant perceptual changes in Tehran's ruling elite and among Arab States regarding Pakistan. Iran was affected because Pakistan was an immediate non-Arab Muslim neighbour and both countries had toyed with the idea of a confederation in the 1960s.

With the Islamic Revolution and the end of Iran's close ties with the US, relations with Pakistan remained largely stable owing to their common concern about developments in Afghanistan, and the cooperation that they had built in nurturing anti-Soviet forces in that country through the 1970s, especially after the left-wing Saur Revolution April 1978 and the Soviet intervention in December that year. With the end of the Cold War, an entirely new environment in the Gulf dominated by the US emerged, giving shape to a new pattern of behaviour between the two countries. The deepening Iran-Pakistan defence cooperation, especially in sensitive areas including nuclear technology, emerged as an important factor in consolidating their relationship.

Yet, Iran's growing ties with India and the growing role of the US in Pakistan and Afghanistan can adversely affect Iran-Pakistan relations in the coming years. Moreover, sectarian violence in Pakistan has the potential to change Iran's public perceptions about it with negative consequences. The socio-economic and political conditions in both Iran and Pakistan have been under tremendous pressures. Iran has been witnessing an intense internal power struggle between the conservatives and the liberals/moderates for many years now. It has also been under pressure from the US and Europe on its plans to acquire nuclear technology for possible weapons capability. Pakistan has been facing ethnic, sectarian, and extremism problems. Externally, Pakistan is under pressure on the issue of transfer of nuclear technology to Iran, Libya and North Korea. The geopolitical and internal uncertainties facing the two countries have the potential to recast the relationship along uncertain pathways.

Security Perceptions

Both Iran and Pakistan define their security in terms of overcoming their social, politico-military and territorial vulnerabilities. Moreover, Iran's concept of security includes preserving its ideology and faith upon which the system as a whole is based. Security is seen as the ability to secure State survivability and territorial

integrity and ensuring political autonomy.² The interplay of geography and politics has an all-pervasive and deep impact on both Iran's and Pakistan's security perceptions and shape their security strategies.

Iran's main security interests lie in West Asia, especially in the Persian Gulf region and secondarily on its northern and eastern sides, whereas Pakistan's principal security concerns revolve around India and secondarily Afghanistan. Any development either in the Persian Gulf or South Asia will affect both countries due to regional contiguity. Security complexes play an important role in regional formations and alliances but they are not everlasting and free from deformation.³ Iran's friendly or unfriendly attitude towards the Persian Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, would have a direct impact on Iran-Pakistan relations. Likewise, Iran's relations with India will not go unnoticed by Pakistan. Iran-Pakistan relation will be also constantly influenced by the US and its involvement in Pakistan. Pakistan is a friend and ally of the US whereas Iran is its adversary. In the 1950s, Iran and Pakistan had entered into US-led security pacts whereas India pursued an independent foreign policy of non-alignment. Iran and Pakistan's pro-West orientations, especially for political and military support, were decisive in shaping their strategy of alignment.

In that decade, Pakistan witnessed weak civilian governments and an assertive military became convinced that a strategy of external alliance was essential in order to meet its security challenges. For Iran, the 1950s were one of political uncertainty. The nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) by Prime Minister Mohammad Mussadeq was considered by Britain as a hostile act that would erode its political, strategic and commercial interests in Iran, since the British company had a complete monopoly over production, supply, pricing and distribution of oil. Both Britain and the US collaborated and through a coup in August 1953 overthrew Mussadeq and restored the monarchy and the leadership of the pro-West Shah. This was the turning point in relations between Iran and the US.

Pakistan and the US signed a Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement on May 19, 1954, and in September 1954 joined the US-crafted Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) at Manila. The latter was an alliance that enabled the US to sell its arms to Pakistan. Though the aim of the alliance was to contain communism, the Soviet Union and China, Pakistan's goal was different - to arm itself to deal with India. In 1955, both Iran and Pakistan entered the US-led Baghdad Pact, which also included Iraq, Turkey, and Britain. After Iraq's withdrawal post-1958 revolution, it was renamed as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). In essence and content, CENTO intended to contain Soviet Union's influence in West Asia and the South Asian regions. In July 1964, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey – the three strongest US allies in the region - founded the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD).

Yet the SEATO and CENTO alliances did not help Pakistan fulfill its aspirations vis-à-vis India since these treaties were aimed at countering the Soviet Union and its potential influence in the region. When India faced economic difficulties in 1957, there was a sizeable increase in US aid, which was larger than what a smaller

Pakistan had received.⁴ Moreover, in the aftermath of the 1962 aggression by China, the US agreed to give military aid to India against Pakistan's wishes. To Pakistan's military government headed by Gen. Ayub Khan, "it meant strengthening of Pakistan's most determined foe by Pakistan's closet ally."⁵ In order to diversify relations, Ayub Khan visited Soviet Union in April 1965 and favoured Pakistan's relations with China. The Sino-Soviet problem and Sino-India conflict indicated a changed geopolitical situation: China became a chosen partner of Pakistan.⁶ America's game plan was to take advantage of the rift between the Soviet Union and China. The US also continued to provide military aid to Pakistan despite its growing ties with China. The US strategy in South Asia sought to ensure that there was no dominant regional player.

As for Iran, the 1960s started with severing diplomatic relations with Egypt, friction with Iraq and increasing anti-Shah propaganda by the Arab nationalists.⁷ For Pakistan also, the decade began with the suspension of diplomatic ties with Afghanistan. The failure of Islamabad-New Delhi talks over Kashmir resulted in military clashes and culminated in the 1965 Indo-Pak war. The Shah supported Pakistan morally, politically and materially but did not want any direct involvement in South Asia's volatile politics.⁸ During the decade both Iran and Pakistan sought broader and deeper relations with the Arab States. The Shah's implicit objective for having relations with Arab States was to counter the growing power and ambitions of Arab revolutionary leaders in the Persian Gulf. For Pakistan, closeness with Arab States was aimed at securing support against India.⁹

Convergence of Interest

In the 1970s, both Iran and Pakistan were struggling to ensure their security. In the early part of the decade, Iran began to expand its activity and presence in the Persian Gulf whereas this period marked contraction of power and status of Pakistan in South Asia. Pakistan was in search of its security and started to expand its relations with the West Asian countries.

The British Prime Minister announced on January 16, 1968, that British forces would be withdrawn from East of Suez before the end of 1971. Before the British forces were withdrawn from the Persian Gulf (December 1, 1971), three significant events took place. Iran's claim over Bahrain; the creation of the United Arab Emirates on July 17, 1971; and Iran's occupation of three islands in the Gulf - Abu Musa (administered by Sharjah) and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs (administered by Ras al-Khaimah) by force on November 30, 1971. The creation of the UAE was basically to ensure security of the small States. Iran's pro-active policy intended to expand its area of influence since these strategically located islands would increase its share of oil exploration right on the continental shelf.

Britain's withdrawal from the Persian Gulf created a power vacuum that was gradually filled by the US. Iran moved from being in the periphery to the core of the US strategic calculus in ensuring security of the Persian Gulf. President Richard

Nixon's policy of the early 1970s, intended to ensure that Persian Gulf security was based on Iran and Saudi Arabia – the 'twin pillars'. Despite Iran's emergence as a key pillar in US policy, the Shah had different ideas about the US. The Indo-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971 led the Shah to conclude that its allies and their security commitments were unreliable and had diminished the value of CENTO.¹⁰ The India-Pakistan wars reinforced a desire for self-reliance and confirmed the Shah's belief that military might was its most important component.¹¹

Pakistan in the 1970s was confronted with military defeat, territorial dismemberment, ethno-territorial separatist agitation and economic crisis. In the words of Benazir Bhutto:

...the loss of Bangladesh was a terrible blow to Pakistan on many levels. Our common religion of Islam, which we always believed would transcend the 1000 miles of India which separated East and West Pakistan, failed to keep us together. Our faith in our very survival as a country was shaken, the bonds between the four provinces of West Pakistan strained almost to breaking. Morale was never lower compounded by Pakistan's actual surrender to India.¹²

The 'two nations' theory was severely undermined, with the emergence of Bangladesh as a separate State. It became questionable whether residual Pakistan would continue to remain a single country. The separatist movement in Baluchistan and serious ethnic tensions in Sindh were virtually leading towards the collapse of the residual Pakistan. Territorially and psychologically broken Pakistan started to pursue new internal and external policies in search of its security.

Strategic Compulsion and Interest Accommodation

Two major developments – the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan - completely changed the geopolitics and a new game started in the region where the US lost Iran and the Soviet Union gained Afghanistan. These two developments brought substantial changes in Iran-Pakistan relations. Iran, a revolutionary State, emerged as a cardinal challenger to the *status quo* in the Persian Gulf whereas Pakistan with the US help emerged as the frontline State in the American-led coalition against Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was seen by the US as part of a consistent strategy by Moscow to secure its southwest border and project its power and increase influence in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, though Brezhnev had affirmed that intervention in Afghanistan was "no simple decision" for Moscow.¹³ But the US had convinced itself that the Soviet aspiration was to increase its influence:

...through Afghanistan, along Soviet-built highways, the Russians aim to achieve the traditional ambition - common to tsars and commissars - of ports on the Indian Ocean in which to base their ever-expanding blue-water navy. But beyond this is the real objective: control of the West's largest reservoir of oil in the Gulf. The ultimate Soviet goal here is not Afghanistan, nor Iran, and still less Pakistan, although all these countries - if the West allows it - will be stepping stones. The goal is Saudi Arabia...¹⁴

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan brought about a coincidence of strategic interests between Pakistan and the US. Pakistan's proximity to Afghanistan was a dominant factor in bringing them together again after the distance that had emerged through the post-Yahya and Bhutto years. Pakistan's importance in the US strategic calculation also increased because of the loss of Iran as a regional ally of the US. Resumption of defence cooperation with the US was one of the important gains for the military regime of Zia ul Haq.

The hostage crisis following the 1979 Revolution ruptured Iran's relations with the US. It generated hostility between the US and Iran. The US Gulf policy in general and its approach and attitude towards the Iran-Iraq war, reinforced further hostility. Washington considered Iran as a principal threat to its interests in the Persian Gulf. Iran's attitude and approach towards the Persian Gulf was different from both Pakistan and the US.

However, even before Gen. Zia ul Haq's visit to Iran in September 1978, his cabinet minister Khurshid Ahmed openly supported the revolution in Iran, though the Pakistani establishment objected to it. But the situation in Iran was changing so rapidly that Pakistan allowed Khurshid Ahmed in late December 1978 to see Imam Khomeini, who was then in exile in Paris. Ahmed met Imam Khomeini in Paris on January 14, 1979. His meeting was to convey the message that Pakistan was prepared to build its rapport with the emerging Islamic leader of Iran. Pakistan was the first country to recognise the Islamic Revolution in Iran, a very difficult decision. Pakistan's population was ethnically divided on the issue of Iran's Islamic Revolution. In the early days of the Revolution, the Shias in Pakistan supported the Shah, while the Sunnis supported Imam Khomeini. Despite tremendous external pressure, Pakistan gave moral and political support to post-Shah Iran.

When Vice-President George Bush visited Pakistan in 1984, he proposed a plan to Gen. Zia during his talks at the Murree government house, that the US would help Pakistan train some Afghan Mujaheddin in Baluchistan to destabilise Iran as well.¹⁵ Zia stoutly rejected Bush's plan. At a press conference in Lahore before leaving, Bush was clearly very upset.

Pakistan continued its support to the Islamic Revolution of Iran and it never openly supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War despite tremendous pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan also helped Iran at the operational level and financially.¹⁶ Owing to Saudi pressure on Pakistan, Iran-Pakistan relations felt the heat and created much discomfort for Islamabad. Pakistan, however, viewed Iran as a strategic friend with whom ties had to be strengthened. President Khomeini's official visit to Pakistan in February 1986 marked the close relationship between Iran and Pakistan.

However, both Iran and Pakistan had different and divergent views relating to the regimes in the Gulf. Pakistan sought a *status quo* while Iran was looking for major changes. Iran used bellicose rhetoric against the Gulf rulers while Pakistan

gave them support.¹⁷ American perceptions became Pakistani perceptions, especially in regard to maintaining the *status quo* in the Persian Gulf. However, on the issue of Afghanistan, they shared the same views. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was a source of concern for both though they had somewhat different priorities. Iran was passing through an Islamic Revolution and was pre-occupied with the war with Iraq. Iran could provide limited material support to Afghanistan.

With the Soviet withdrawal, rivalries started at the regional and trans-national level over influence in Afghanistan. The Saudi involvement in Afghanistan through support for the Mujaheddin created suspicion in Tehran, and consequently relations between Iran and Pakistan began to deteriorate.

Conflict and Cooperation in Afghanistan

Iran-Pakistan relations have been influenced by regional and global changing alliances. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, structural changes took place in the international system and the effects were felt on Iran-Pakistan relations. During the Cold War, their relations were strongly influenced by superpower rivalry. US hostility towards Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution continued while its ties with Pakistan as a strategic partner declined after Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The growing Iran-Pakistan strategic partnership was helped by the creation of institutions such as the RCD - renamed the Economic Cooperation Organisations (ECO) in 1985. It was expanded to include Afghanistan, five of the newly-born Central Asian countries, and one Caucasus country (Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan) in 1992. It can be said that Pakistan perceived the territorial configurations of the ECO and a web of strategic interests around it as a way to contain India's potential influence in the region.¹⁸

Following the Soviet military withdrawal Afghanistan emerged as a bone of contention between Iran and Pakistan over their respective influence and national priorities. Throughout the 1990s, Iran had been pursuing policies to increase its influence in Afghanistan. Political, economic, ethnic, cultural and ideological instruments were employed by Iran to increase and strengthen its position in Afghanistan and in the Central Asian region. Iran was keen that all ethnic groups be represented in the new government in Afghanistan, especially, the Hazara Shiites, who were major beneficiaries of Iranian assistance during the Soviet intervention. In contrast, Pakistan along with the US and Saudi Arabia had supported the Taliban. The installation of the Pushtun dominated Taliban government in Afghanistan did not go down well in Tehran.

With the establishment of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, Iran-Pakistan relations began to deteriorate and a climate of mistrust emerged. Pakistan's long-desired goal of gaining 'strategic depth' was sought to be attained through a favourable Taliban government in Afghanistan. Also, Pakistan's influence in Central Asia through

Afghanistan was bound to increase. At the same time, Iran was competing to increase its influence in Central Asia. Both countries had been struggling to increase their influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Pakistan's motive was to enhance its role and influence in the region, while Iran's main motive was to ensure its security, enhance its political and economic influence, and break its isolation. Iran did not like a regime in Kabul that would be friendly to its regional competitor, Saudi Arabia.

Iran argued consistently that Pakistan's support to the Taliban government, which had the backing of its arch-foe the US, would mean isolating Iran and posing serious challenges to its security and national interests. The factions supported by Pakistan and the US was viewed by Iran as an attempt at religio-political containment. In order to counter it, Iran pursued a pro-active policy towards Afghanistan by supporting the Shiite parties and the Northern Alliance. Iran coordinated with Russia, India and the Central Asian countries to counter Pakistani move in Afghanistan. The more Iran got involved in the Afghan conflict, the more it "turned into direct conflict with Pakistan."¹⁹

Iran-Pakistan relations had rapidly deteriorated with the fall of Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998. In the course of capturing Mazar-e-Sharif, the Taliban regime assassinated not only Iranian diplomats but killed thousands of Hazara Shiites too. The incident generated anxieties in Iran. Sectarian violence intensified in Pakistan as a result of conflict in Afghanistan and hundreds of Pakistani Shias, including Iranian diplomats and Iranian nationals, were killed.

The sectarian factor in Iran-Pakistan relation had also assumed greater geopolitical significance in Pakistan in the Iran-Iraq War context. Sadiq Ganji, an Iranian diplomat, was assassinated on sectarian grounds in Lahore in 1991 and came as a serious blow to Iran-Pakistan relations. The incident clearly had far greater import than being merely an internal security problem of Pakistan. The sectarian issue raised during the Iran-Iraq War was not only confined to the region but also extended to Afghanistan. The deteriorating 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 thorough out the 1990s. The continued sectarian violence in Pakistan became one of the most undesirable and contentious issues in the Iran-Pakistan relationship.

In order to contain the rising tension between Iran and Pakistan, Gen. Pervez Musharaf visited Iran in December 1999. His visit was also intended to secure legitimacy for his own regime. During his visit, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami described ties between Iran and Pakistan "as profound and unbreakable, noting the two countries' common cultural and Islamic foundations."²⁰ He further emphasised, "undoubtedly, the two countries' national interests are linked to one another and together we must strive to safeguard these interests."²¹ President Khatami's statement,

'national interests are linked to one another' means that both countries have similar political and strategic thinking in regard to their security and national interests.

President Khatami expressed his concern regarding the sectarian violence in Pakistan and emphasised the need for the people and officials of the two countries "to neutralise divisive conspiracies". He called on the Pakistani government and authorities to deal resolutely with the problem as it "... threatened that country's security and caused the martyrdom of several envoys of Islamic Republic of Iran in Pakistan".²²

Despite divergence of their interests and political outlook, Iran had expressed its support when Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif raised his concern with President Mohammad Khatami about India's nuclear tests. President Khatami said, "we regret what has happened and are concerned about India's nuclear tests."²³ He further added, "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."²⁴

Iran understood that India's nuclear tests in May 1998 had changed the 'geo-strategic situation' and the power balance. Despite divergence of their views on many issues, Iran hailed Pakistan's nuclear tests of May 28-30, 1998. Iran's Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi was the first foreign dignitary to visit Islamabad on June 1, 1998,²⁵ and congratulated Pakistan for its nuclear achievement by saying, "now, they (Muslims) feel confident, because a fellow Islamic nation possesses the know-how to build nuclear weapons."²⁶ Iran's UN Envoy in Geneva, Ali Khorram said, "India's blasts disrupted the strategic balance in the subcontinent...as a result of Pakistan following suite."²⁷ Iran supported Pakistan's nuclear tests while India's May 11-13, 1998 nuclear tests became source of concern for Iran and most West Asian countries and other regional states.²⁸

However, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) expressed 'deep concern' over the nuclear tests in the sub-continent by saying, "the international community must seriously encourage both India and Pakistan to expeditiously conclude a non-aggression agreement with the aim of ensuring the promotion of peace and security in the region,"²⁹ in Jeddah (Saudi Arab) on June 1, 1998. The OIC perceived these nuclear tests as a potential source of nuclear proliferation and arms race in the region. The underlying expectation of Pakistani help for Iran and Arab bomb programmes – as revealed later - could have also been a factor for this stance.

The Iran-Pakistan-China Triangle

The changing geopolitical and strategic environment and the constant influence of major extra-regional powers in the Persian Gulf and the South Asian regions are a dominant discourse in Iran and Pakistan. The constant changing alliances since the end of the Cold War have had wider ramifications for both Iran and Pakistan as well

as relations between them. New alliances began to take shape in the aftermath of 9/11. Pakistan is now a friend and ally of the US and has been granted the status of major non-NATO ally (MNNA) whereas Iran is still seen by the US as an adversary.

The regional security environment is further complicated by the web of strategic ties. Both West Asia and South Asia are politically complex. Whereas West Asia is seen as an 'arch of instability', South Asia has been under pressure for several decades now. The Afghan conflict, the rise of the Taliban, the emergence of two nuclear-armed states in South Asia in 1998, and the US-led global war on terrorism have completely changed the regional security profile. Moreover, China's pace of economic growth and military modernisation were laying the foundations of a rising major power. These factors have complicated the regional security matrix. In many ways, both the United States and China have played an important role in shaping ties between Iran and Pakistan.

Iran's relations with China were poor through most of the Maoist phase. However, it began to improve in the dying years of the Shah's rule as China strengthened its ties with the United States and took a strong anti-Soviet posture. China's close ties with Pakistan after 1965 facilitated the building of relations with Iran. However, the relations immediately became contentious as the Islamic revolutionaries deeply resented Beijing's strong backing for the Shah. The visit of Hua Guofeng to Iran in 1978 even as Shah's regime was collapsing became highly controversial. Hua Guofeng's visit to Iran coincided with the Shah's brutality against his own people, and was interpreted by Imam Khomeini and his associates as China's explicit support of the Shah's anti-national, anti-people despotic regime. Imam Khomeini stated, "this visit by Hua Guofeng was made over the corpses of our martyrs."¹⁰ The Islamists also viewed China's pro-US foreign policy with great disdain. Iran-China relations deteriorated rapidly after the regime fell in January 1979. In order to arrest it from further deterioration China apologised and said that it had made a mistake during that period. The Chinese apology was sent to Imam Khomeini through Agha Shahi, the advisor to the President of Pakistan on Foreign Affairs.³¹ Pakistan mediated between Iran and China and saved the relationship from collapse. Agha Shahi's successful mediation yielded results for Pakistan as well in the form of securing the trust of China.

After Pakistan's successful mediation, Iran-China relation began to improve gradually. From 1982 China began to supply arms to an isolated Iran then in the midst of a war with Iraq.³² Iran bought tanks, artilleries, armored personnel carriers, combatant aircrafts and small warships from Beijing and also bought missile systems and technologies. Tehran like Islamabad purchased ballistic missile technology from Beijing, and also received help for its nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) programmes.³³ China transferred nuclear technology and know-how to its civilian nuclear programme just as it was doing with Pakistan. According to French and US intelligence reports, Chinese experts had supplied technology for reactor construction and other related activities at Isfahan.³⁴ Iran was assisted by China in building its

large missile factory at Isfahan. Tehran received from Beijing not only military arms and materials but also scientific expertise and technology.³⁵ A strong triangular relationship among China, Iran and Pakistan had emerged by the early 1980s and was strengthened through the 1990s.

With the end of the Iran-Iraq War and low oil prices the volume of China's arms sales to Iran came down considerably while Beijing's overall trade rose sharply. Beijing too began to stress commercial as well as foreign policy gains in its arms sales. However, it has had strong political and strategic interests in maintaining its close relationship with Iran which had become a strong pillar of its policy in the Persian Gulf region. Beijing's dependence on imported oil has increased steadily and in order to ensure its energy supplies it has been investing in the exploration and development of oil and gas fields in many foreign countries. In October 2004, China signed a major energy agreement with Iran during Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zangeneh's visit to Beijing. Under the agreement, China will buy Iranian oil and gas and help in developing Iran's Yadavaran oil field.³⁶ The accord was also signed for the construction of a gas condensates refinery in the southern Iranian city of Bander Abbas. Iran is now China's second-largest source of oil after Saudi Arabia. China is now the second-largest oil consuming country in the world after the US.³⁷ China observers believe that maintaining close ties with oil-exporting countries such as Iran is in interest of Beijing's future energy security. In return, China will export to Iran manufacturing goods, including computer systems, cars, household appliances, and weapons technology. Energy could also become a binding factor in the triangular relations of Iran, China, Pakistan as Iran begins to export gas to Pakistan and India and the China-aided Gwadar port gets constructed. China could not only get involved in such trade but also open alternative land routes through Pakistan to ensure oil and gas supplies.

Analysts believe that Iran-China ties may be partly a response to the hostilities with the US. In the English-language *Kayhan International*, Ali Sabzevari wrote an editorial, "politically, the two countries share a common interest in checking the inroads being made by the NATO in Asia... The presence of outsiders does not bode well for peace and security."³⁸ Political and economic analyst Siamak Namazi opined that the US attitude towards Iran and China, made them 'natural allies.'

However, Iran's relations with China are not as deep as that with Pakistan. China had to terminate its nuclear cooperation with Iran in the 1990s under US pressure. The US received an assurance from China's President Jiang Zemin in January 1998 that Beijing would not further provide additional help to Iran's nuclear and missile programmes. But it did not fully give up its nuclear cooperation with Pakistan despite pressure from the US. With Chinese involvement in the construction of the Gwadar seaport at Makran in Baluchistan province of Pakistan, lying on the coast of the Arabian Sea and close to the Iranian border, we can see the emergence of an important strategic hub in the region that will further improve triangular relations and enhance China's role and influence. Gwadar is to be linked to China,

landlocked Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries by connecting it with the Indus Highway at Ratodero.³⁹ Gwadar can also be linked with Iran since both Pakistan and Iran have declared their two provinces - Baluchistan and Sistan-Baluchistan – ‘twin provinces’.

Although, Russia has in recent years become the main supplier of conventional arms and military technologies to Iran and has also been continuing its cooperation on nuclear energy, the importance of the China factor to Iran remains. The emerging China, Pakistan, and Iran configuration could have important strategic consequences for India.

Changing Regional Realities

Notwithstanding the close ties, Iran-Pakistan relations are not without many dilemmas. Through the 1990s, the growing presence of US forces in the Persian Gulf and hostile bilateral ties with Washington have become key factors in determining Iran’s foreign and security policy stance. Since September 2001, US military presence has grown further as it has spread to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The Clinton Administration’s dual containment policy that covered Iran, President George W. Bush’s declaration of Iran as part of the so-called “axis of evil” in January 2002, and the war against ‘Islamic terrorism’ – have all been of great concern to Iran. Pakistan’s support of US policies on Afghanistan even while Iran perceived itself being encircled by the US, and the presence of US forces on Pakistani territory, created enough doubts in Teheran on the prospects of stable relations with Pakistan.

The growing India-Iran relationship in recent years clearly marks a shift in Iran’s policies toward India. Both countries have shown interests for close cooperation in the fields of economy and defence. ‘The New Delhi Declaration’ signed between President Khatami and Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee during the former’s visit to India on January 25, 2003, stated, “the two sides recognise that their growing strategic convergence needs to be underpinned with a strong economic relationship. Energy sector has been identified as a strategic area of their future relationship in which interests of India and Iran complement each other. India and Iran also agreed to explore opportunities for cooperation in defence in agreed areas, including training and exchange of visit.”⁴⁰

India’s cooperation with Iran on the Afghanistan issue has generated anxieties among Pakistani policy-makers. Pakistan’s anxiety is based on two factors. First, Pakistan’s so-called notion of ‘strategic depth’ eroded with the overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Its support to the Taliban government had made India and Iran united in support of the anti-Taliban alliance. Second, India’s increasing involvement in Afghanistan and its close relation with the Karzai government is perceived by Pakistan as detrimental to its interests. India’s presence in Afghanistan creates uneasiness among the Pakistani elites that had come to see Afghanistan as an ‘exclusive area of its influence’.

The establishment of a friendly government in Afghanistan is in Iran's strategic interest and would help in strengthening Iran's position in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Such a policy is also a part of its attempt to end the isolation sought to be imposed by the US.

Emerging Bilateral Ties

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 changed the politico-strategic equation in West Asia and relations between Iran and the West Asian countries deteriorated rapidly. The 1990s, however, required Iran to shed its earlier image as a challenger and build confidence among the West Asian countries, especially the Persian Gulf states. Iran's conciliatory attitude and its rapprochement with the Persian Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, paid dividend. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia's leaders visited each other's country and signed agreements relating to economic, political, and security issues. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been improving and are likely to strengthen if relations between the former and the US deteriorate. Iran is still seen as an adversary by the US. The improvement in relation between Iran and Saudi Arabia would have wider ramifications for the region as a whole as well as for Iran-Pakistan relations, since Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have cordial ties.

President Mohammad Khatami's three-day official visit to Pakistan in December 2002 after the fall of the Taliban government was seen as an improvement in relations between Tehran and Islamabad. During his visit, the two countries signed a Bilateral Trade Agreement; Bilateral Agreement on Cooperation in Plant Protection and Quarantine; a Memorandum of Understanding of the 13 Session of Iran-Pakistan Joint Economic Commission and Defence Cooperation.⁴¹ Both countries had earlier signed an agreement on defence cooperation, security, economy, sharing of intelligence and political issues. The President's visit to Islamabad and the signing of the agreements was significant since the Taliban issue had earlier strained relations.

As far as economic relation between Iran and Pakistan is concerned, the quantum of trade between them is relatively low. Iran exported US\$ 265 million to Pakistan where as Iran imported US\$ 92 million from Pakistan during the financial year 2003-04. But during the Iran-Iraq War, the quantum of bilateral trade was much more than today.⁴² The principal items of trade between Iran and Pakistan are textile, agricultural products, fruits, and iron ore. Pakistan was the first country to begin importing iron ore from Iran a couple of years ago. Iran has assured Pakistan that it would honour its contractual obligations to supply iron ore and would provide technical assistance of experts in the exploration, expansion, and modernisation of steel production plants at Pakistan Steel, Karachi. Iran has also shown keen interest to make investment in various economic, industrial, and mining sectors in Pakistan. Pakistan's wheat and rice export to Iran came to halt in 1996 when Tehran imposed restrictions on its wheat and rice by saying that these items carried disease. Since then Pakistan has been unable to export these crops to Iran. When Pakistani Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Jamali visited Tehran in October 2003, he had asked Iran to lift quarantine restrictions on rice, wheat, and some other items.

Pakistan and Iran signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) at Islamabad on March 4, 2004.⁴³ Under the PTA, both countries agreed to reduce customs duty on 647 tradable items where Pakistan will give duty concession on 338 items to Iran. In return, Tehran will give duty concession on 309 items to Islamabad.⁴⁴ The officials said that the agreement would be finally converted into a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The purpose of the agreement is to strengthen economic and political relations between the two countries and to promote a more secure environment for sustainable growth of trade and expand mutual trade by exploring new areas of cooperation between the two countries.

In order to further enhance their economic cooperation and bilateral trade, both Iran and Pakistan have declared two of their border regions as 'twin provinces' in their recent agreement. An agreement to this effect was signed by Governor of Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, Hussein Amini and his counterpart from Pakistan's Southwest Baluchistan province, Owais Ghani.⁴⁵ After signing the agreement, both governors addressed a joint press conference where Amini said, "we will not allow the criminal elements to use Iranian land for any activity against Pakistan and expect same from it."⁴⁶ Ghani said, "the declaration of two Baluchistans as twin cities will further improve the trade, economic and cultural ties between the two countries."⁴⁷ It reflects from the nature and kind of the agreement that both Iran and Pakistan have attempted to integrate geographically divided people through exchange of trade and other means. Moreover, both countries have tried to address their security concerns and trade related issues through integration of the two provinces. The declaration of the 'twin provinces' would have large political and social ramifications.

The changing regional and global environment would have implicit and explicit affect on Iran and Pakistan. Both countries have shown their interest to cooperate. They agree that "trust and cooperation should be at a level that it is naturally accepted as addressing the national security concerns of both Iran and Pakistan encompassing their core concerns related to economic development, political imperatives, military defence, territorial integrity and global stature."⁴⁸

While economy is a major instrument in influencing and strengthening ties between Iran-Pakistan; it is issues relating to security and politics that dominate their relations. It is evident that India's trade with Iran is far larger than Pakistan's trade with Iran but Pakistan is politically more entrenched in Iran. Throughout history whenever Pakistan's security has been clouded, Iran has extended its hands – seeing in Pakistan's security its own security.

Defence Cooperation

Defence cooperation is one of the most important ingredients in Iran-Pakistan relations. It reflects shared perceptions in the security arena. The depth and significance of these ties are reflected in the Pakistan-Iran Defence Agreement of July 1989. Iran is involved with Pakistan in the joint production of the Pakistan supplied Al-Khalid

tanks. Other areas for joint defence cooperation are under considerations such as helicopters, commercial vehicles, and APCS.⁴⁹

However, Iran's growing relations with India especially in defence has been noticed by Pakistan. Admiral Madhavendra Singh, Chief of the Indian Navy and the Chairman of the Chief of Staff Committee, visited Tehran in January 2003 before the Iranian president's visit to India in the same month. The Admiral also met Iranian Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani in Tehran where the Indo-Iran Defence Agreement was signed on January 19, 2003. President Khatami's visit to India in January 2003 was significant in the sense that both countries signed several agreements, including one on defence cooperation. Indian Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee and Iranian President Mohammad Khatami signed 'The New Delhi Declaration' on January 25, 2003, which stated that, "India and Iran also agreed to explore opportunities for cooperation in defence in agreed areas, including training and exchange of visits."⁵⁰

'The New Delhi Declaration' of January 25, 2003, by India and Iran also covered defence. It was a continuation of the earlier defence cooperation agreement between the two countries. However, India and Iran have only taken initial steps to 'explore opportunities', and have not yet launched defence cooperation in 'agreed areas' such as 'training and exchange of visits'. While 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 1990s,⁵¹ India did not go through with it and has officially denied any such deal with Iran or any other country.

In contrast, the deepening defence cooperation, especially in nuclear ties, between Iran and Pakistan is a politico-military and security reality. Pakistan's transfer of nuclear technology to Iran can be regarded as a product of their long nourished relationship. Pakistan-Iran nuclear cooperation began in the 1980s during Zia ul Haq's regime and continued through to the early period of Musharaf's rule. The transfer of technology to Iran was continued even under the elected civilian governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

The type of centrifuge found by the IAEA in Iran is similar to those acquired by Pakistan in the 1970s, which is now used in its civilian nuclear programme. But much of the actual transfer took place in the early 1990s. It seems that Pakistan's external intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), not only knew about it but it also helped. Lt. Gen. Asad Durrani, the ISI chief in the early 1990s, knew about Qadeer Khan's visits to Iran in 1991 and 1992. Qadeer Khan visited Iran and held talks with officials at the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI).⁵² A report in Pakistan's daily newspaper *Dawn* on December 20, 1994, had mentioned about Iran's offer of \$3.2 billion as assistance to Pakistan's nuclear programme in exchange for the transfer of nuclear technology. It appears that not only Durrani was involved in such activities but also other high-ranking officials.

Gen. Aslam Beg, as Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff visited Iran in February 1990. During his visit to, he was reported to have been involved in some exchange

on nuclear issues and some agreements.⁵³ Robert Oakley, then the US ambassador to Pakistan, referred about his conversation with Gen. Beg in which the latter accepted he had talked about nuclear cooperation with members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Former Pakistan cabinet minister Chaudhary Nisar Ali Khan said that Gen. Beg had negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran. Gen. Beg is said to have stated that, "Iran is willing to give whatever it takes, \$6 billion, \$10 billion. We can sell to Iran at any price."⁵⁴

During President Khatami's three-day official visit to Pakistan in December 2002, both Iran and Pakistan decided to strengthen their defence ties through exchange of high-level visits. This was a continuation of the earlier Iran-Pakistan Defence Agreement. Iranian Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani, called on his Pakistani counterpart Rao Sikandar Iqbal, and they exchanged views on defence cooperation.

One of the principal architects of Pakistan's nuclear bomb programme, Abdul Qadeer Khan himself stated in his 11-page confession document that he had provided Iran, North Korea and Libya with designs and technology to develop nuclear weapons during the last 15 years.⁵⁵ All doubts over Pakistan's transfer of nuclear technology to Iran clearly end with Qadeer Khan's acceptance. But it is yet to be fully revealed how Qadeer Khan transferred nuclear technology to Iran and who were the other principal actors involved. Clearly, it could not have taken place without the involvement and full backing of the Pakistani military top brass.

The IAEA during its investigation in Iran has found substantial transfer of technology and materials. It has found that Pakistan had transferred nuclear technology designs for an advanced centrifuge called p-2 to Iran – which Iran has accepted as having obtained in 1987.⁵⁶ IAEA sources after the findings said that a sample of uranium enriched to 54 per cent found at one Iranian site had come from Pakistani equipment.⁵⁷ But its confirmation was only possible when Pakistan provided data to the IAEA to verify the uranium source and the US provided a computer simulation of Pakistan's nuclear programme that matched that sample. The IAEA also found a sample of 36 per cent enriched uranium contamination derived from Russian equipment that Russia had supplied earlier to China. Beijing had passed it on to Pakistan as part of its nuclear assistance and Qadeer Khan had passed it on to Iran.⁵⁸ This indicates a circle of nuclear transfer where China, Pakistan and Iran are all involved. It seems that Pakistan is the source that provided centrifuge designs and components necessary for uranium enrichment.

There are a number of factors that convinced Pakistan to assist Iran's nuclear programme. First, its geopolitical and strategic calculation had impelled it to believe that a powerful nuclear-armed Iran would thwart manipulation of regional conditions by extra-regional powers. Both nuclear-armed countries, Pakistan and Iran would play as a balancing role in the region. Second, huge financial assistance from Iran was an incentive that Pakistan needed to continue and sustain its own nuclear-arms programme. Third, the emergence of more Muslim countries with nuclear weapons would ease external pressure on Pakistan's bomb-making efforts, by deflecting US

and Western attention from nuclear Pakistan.⁵⁹ But the question arises why Pakistan transferred nuclear technology to North Korea? Apparently Pakistan as part of a barter deal supplied centrifuges to North Korea in exchange for missiles and missile technology. Fourth, it forcefully convinced Pakistan that the emergence of a number of nuclear weapon states would make these nuclear armed Muslim countries less vulnerable to Western and American pressures. The emergence of several new nuclear states would also deflect the attention of America from Pakistan. Fifth, Pakistan also appears to have been convinced that by transferring nuclear technology to Iran it would thwart the prospect of India's close relations with Iran.

Iran's nuclear policy is motivated by several goals - its desire to ensure and maximise its security; to make the regional environment conducive to the pursuit of its objectives; to be a preeminent power in the Persian Gulf; deterrence *vis-a-vis* the external powers in the region; and to be an influential regional player. Iran is already an influential player in the region. It has a larger population than any other Gulf country and it is relatively the most powerful militarily in the Gulf. If Iran was to acquire nuclear capability, it could emerge as a more credible regional player. In such a scenario, Saudi Arabia would be impelled to take a new look at its security strategy: either it would try to acquire its own nuclear capability or seek a nuclear umbrella from the US.

However, it is important to note that despite Pakistan's special relation with Saudi Arabia, Islamabad has transferred nuclear technology and materials to Iran knowing fully that the latter aspires to be a regional power and there is a clear Iran-Saudi rivalry in the region. It should be noted that in the course of Iran-Iraq War, Pakistan supported Iran at the operational level, economically and otherwise, despite pressures from Saudi Arabia and the US.

Iran has adopted an off and on nuclear build-up strategy. It had postponed its uranium enrichment process after signing the Additional Protocol with the IAEA in October 2003. Under US and European pressure, Iran suspended its uranium enrichment process on November 22, 2004. Iran, also, signed an agreement with three European countries – France, Germany, and Britain - in order to avert reference of its nuclear programme to the United Nations Security Council for possible strictures and sanctions.

Conclusion

Iran-Pakistan relations have not always been smooth; they have fluctuated over the years. Iran supported Pakistan whenever it faced a serious crisis and was in danger. It extended moral, political, diplomatic, and financial support to Pakistan. However, the events of 9/11, the growing US-Pakistan relations, and wars on Iran's two flanks have had their effect on the relations between the two states. The rise of the Taliban created a lot of acrimony between the two.

Despite some potential contentious issues, Iran-Pakistan relations remain close.

Pakistan's nuclear cooperation with Iran indicates that both countries have some geopolitical and strategic congruence. For Iran, India's nuclear tests became a source of concern whereas Pakistan's nuclear tests in May 1998 were hailed. Iran perceived that India's nuclear tests would enhance its stature and its 'orbit of influence' would increase. Clearly, Pakistan would like to keep Iran on its side and not have a situation where it is sandwiched between two difficult neighbours - Iran and India.

In the coming years the evolving socio-economic and political conditions in Iran and Pakistan would have a considerable impact on their external policies. Social tensions are likely to continue in both the countries owing to many reasons. 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. Shia-Sunni sectarian clashes, in particular, could have far-reaching impact on Iran-Pakistan relationship. More importantly, Iran's growing relations with India, particularly in defence, could affect Iran-Pakistan relations in the coming years.

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