

Pakistan-Iran Relations in the Evolving International Environment

Fatima Raza *

Abstract

Pakistan and Iran are two neighbouring countries with amicable ties however, the true potential of their relationship still remains untapped. This research aims to highlight the areas of convergence and divergence between Iran and Pakistan in the backdrop of the changing international environment. The US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has left many countries, especially Pakistan, in a limbo chimeral security regarding its projects with Iran. This development reflects the significance of the US factor in Pak-Iran ties. Other important factors are the situation in Afghanistan, India's engagement with Iran, Pak-Saudi ties and Riyadh-Tehran rivalry. Pakistan and Iran's relations lack depth and mutual trust due to their respective alliances of the past. This research observes that Iran and Pakistan, in light of new alliances and changing regional and international politics, can revive the lost trust.

Keywords: Iran-Pakistan Relations, Bilateral Ties, International Environment, US Factor, Afghan Factor, India Factor.

Introduction

The evolving international environment has given rise to a unique range of challenges for the states co-existing in this anarchical global order. In the same context, the current international system has entered a phase of transition where the lack of effective global leadership has played a major role in forging new alliances and fraying of old ones. The latest and most novel challenge at hand is the ongoing Corona virus pandemic wreaking havoc all over the world. Some believe the era of uni-polarity is over as multiple powers are emerging to replace the hegemonic designs of a single superpower. On the other hand, many ascribe to Samuel P. Huntington's ideas about uni-polarity which maintain that there has remained one

* The author is Research Associate, Centre for Middle East and Africa (CMEA), Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.

superpower in the world but there has never been any uni-polarity in the global political system.¹ This viewpoint is also in line with Fareed Zakariya's 'Post-American World' idea where he predicts that, in the near future, several major powers will emerge on the world stage making global politics a 'Post-American' affair.² However, this is not to say that the US influence has diminished entirely. It only means that there are now more than one significant stakeholders in international affairs.

On the regional level, instability has prompted countries like Iran, India, China, Russia and Pakistan to assume a more pronounced role. Similarly, in Syria, too, the regional countries have become active participants, besides the United States (US), as Turkey gears up for more ground operations and Russia controls airspace especially in the northwest Syrian region. China's emergence as an economic power with its increasing its engagement in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America is also a sign of changing political dynamics. This is a subtle indication power transition from its previously acknowledged center of the US and its Western allies.

For sustenance of its economic growth, China's grand plan of regional outreach is based on the idea of 'shared prosperity' evident in the form of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): a huge plan of investment including 68 countries connecting multiple regions. Such is the nature of shifting geopolitical trends in the current world that just when more and more countries are warming up to regional connectivity initiatives the US administration under President Trump is opting out of them. The US withdrawal from international agreements such as Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris Climate Treaty and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) have further destabilised the state of global politics. In this context of evolving international environment, Pakistan and Iran emerge as two neighbours situated in contiguous yet separate geographical regions: South Asia and the Middle East.

Pakistan-Iran bilateral relations have its roots deeply embedded in the religious, historical, ethnic and cultural commonalities. Their bilateral ties have enormous potential as mentioned often by the leaders from both sides.

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Council on Foreign Relations* 78, no. 2 (April 1999): 36.

² Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World: And The Rise of the Rest* (Westminster: Penguin Books Limited, 2011), 216-300.

However, in tangible terms, the progress to further enhance the ties has mostly remained slow. As for example, in words of the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, “Tehran sets no limitations for the expansion of ties with Islamabad,”³ it has been reciprocated by Pakistan as well but in practical terms the relationship needs quite a lot of work. The changing international system demands a more nuanced approach to manage their mutual relations so that the third-party impact can be minimised as much as possible. There are many global and regional factors that impact Pak-Iran bilateral ties such as: the troubling dynamics of US-Iran relations; Europe and India’s careful balancing act between Iran and the US; and the turbulent state of affairs in the Middle East.

Historically, the two countries enjoyed more than cordial ties as the pre-revolution Iran was also a strong US ally at the time. Iran provided Pakistan with resolute support in the two wars against India and was deeply shocked by the aftermath of the 1971 war that resulted in loss of the then East Pakistan. It is said that the Shah of Iran had listed the well-being of Pakistan as a key term on his foreign policy agenda.⁴ He was quoted saying, “He could not tolerate the (further) disintegration of Pakistan,” and that he had also told the Indians that Iran would come to Pakistan’s aid in case of further escalation.

What prompted the imbalance in their bilateral relationship was the regime change of 1979 brought about by the Islamic revolution led by, Ayatollah Khomeini. In those days, Pakistan was going through its own phase of ‘Islamisation’ under the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq. Perhaps, the two countries could have further enhanced relations if the sectarian differences had not been as pronounced as they were. Pakistan, being a Sunni majority nation, had been undergoing radicalisation at the hands of General Zia’s orthodox religious guidelines while the revolution had made Iran a Shi’ite Islamic republic. The sectarian rift widened between the two that led to sectarian clashes in Pakistan during the 90s when Iran started funding Shi’ite religious institutions in Pakistan⁵ while the Arab

³ Shireen Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 25-60.

⁴ Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 5-29.

⁵ Alex Vatanka, “The Guardian of Pakistan’s Shia,” *Hudson Institute*, June 1, 2012, <https://www.hudson.org/research/9863-the-guardian-of-pakistan-s-shia>.

countries such as Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) lent financial support to the Sunni outfits in the country.⁶ The situation turned dire as sectarian violence became quite common in the country.

However, even with the sectarian divergence, the Iran-Pakistan diplomatic relations remained cordial. The bond of trust, however, could not develop as the situation in Afghanistan worsened. Both Iran and Pakistan found themselves at the opposite sides of the conflict after 1998 when the Taliban executed Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif.⁷ Before the Iranian revolution of 1979, Iran, under the pro-Western Shah, and Pakistan had a common enemy: the Soviet Union. However, after the revolution with regime change in Iran and the Taliban takeover of the government in Kabul, Tehran lent support to the Northern Alliance while Pakistan was among the few countries in the world that recognised the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Remaining on opposite sides of the conflict had an adverse impact on ties between the two countries. However, the credit to maintain cordial relations rests with untiring diplomatic activity on both sides. In his book, the Former Ambassador to Iran, Javid Husain, elaborates how the foreign offices in both countries were more than willing to reduce divergences but the security establishments showed reluctance that contributed to the mutual distrust.⁸

Along with the Afghan factor, the state of US-Iran relations also affected the Pak-Iran equation quite adversely. The Islamic revolution estranged Iran's relations with the US. During the Iran-Iraq war, the US had sided with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries against Iran. Pakistan sided with Iran as opposed to its policy of neutrality towards the Middle East but what damaged their relations the most was their opposite alliances

⁶ News Desk, "Tsunami of Money' from Saudi Arabia Funding 24,000 Pakistan Madrassas," *Economic Times*, January 30, 2016, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/tsunami-of-money-from-saudi-arabia-funding-24000-pakistan-madrassas/articleshow/50781972.cms?from=mdr>

⁷ Nader et al., "Iran and Afghanistan: A Complicated Relationship," In Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the US Drawdown, 5-22, RAND Corporation, 2014, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287mjf.8.

⁸ Javid Husain, *Pakistan and a World in Disorder: A Grand Strategy for the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2016), 105-200.

in Afghanistan. Post 9/11 however, Pakistan became the frontline state to side with the US against Taliban. This situation could have brought Iran and the US on one page but it was right about the time when President George W. Bush called Iran, Iraq and North Korea, ‘the axis of evil.’⁹ Hence, the US factor that had once brought these two neighbours together was now widening the gulf between them.

Meanwhile, Iran had also forged friendly ties with India, an alliance about which Pakistan continues to have misgivings to this day. However, the Iranian response to Pakistan’s apprehension about its relationship is quite balanced and reassuring, at least apparently. The Iranian representatives, when asked about it, often reply by drawing parallels between their relations with India with that of Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia. There are several useful lessons for Pakistan in the example of India’s relations with Iran and its strategic partnership with the US as well. In the backdrop of asymmetrical ties between Pak-Iran relations, the current paper discusses the two main research questions: a) What are the current convergences and divergences in Pak-Iran relations with reference to regional and global politics? b) What are the challenges to and prospects for Pak-Iran relations in the changing international environment?

Convergences and Divergences in Iran-Pakistan Relations

“On paper, Iran and Pakistan are engaged in a number of efforts designed to further political and economic integration — from membership in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) to a host of bilateral agreements on trade[and]security cooperation. There is, however, relatively very little to show for all of this — and depth in the relationship is still missing.”¹⁰ This observation made by Alex Vatanka is an accurate description of the ties between these two neighbours that have deep cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic and historic bonds with each other.

However, successful bilateral relations especially between neighbours are judged through indicators like sound economic ties, alignment on political level, convergence in regional policies, bilateral visits and number

⁹ Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham, “What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran,” *Middle East Journal* 61, no. 3(Summer 2007): 430.

¹⁰ Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 5-29.

of active agreements of bilateral and multilateral nature. Apart from these indicators, it is also crucial that the irritants are also managed amicably. Unfortunately, in case of Pakistan and Iran, most of these indicators are less than satisfactory.

A Brief Appraisal of Bilateral Ties

a) Untapped Trade Potential

The bilateral trade volume between Iran and Pakistan stands at US\$1.26 billion which is very low as compared to the mutually decided target of US\$5 billion. However, according to the Iranian Consul General Lahore, Mohammad Reza Nazeri, total bilateral trade volume stands at US\$6.25 billion but only US\$1.26 billion is channelised through traditional means and the rest remains informal.¹¹ The Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) that was signed between the two countries in 2004 has still not been replaced by a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Talks have been held several times for finalising the FTA but no results have reached yet. Proper banking channels between the two countries that could help facilitate trade have not been established still which hinder the progress of commerce and trade. Business communities on both sides suffer greatly due to the lack of swift banking channels. However, there is a Joint Economic Commission in place that holds yearly meetings alongside the chambers of commerce meetings on both sides but, still, such major roadblocks in the way of propagation of ties remain.

b) Border Unrest

The border between the two countries was dubbed as the ‘border of friendship’ and has been frequently referred to as the only peaceful border of both Iran and Pakistan. However, it is not clear how veracious is this assumption. The border provinces of Balochistan in Pakistan and Sistan-Baluchestan in Iran have always seen disturbances. On the Iranian side, the population comprises mostly of ethnic Sunni Balochis who are often disgruntled with the central Shi’ite government. On the Pakistani side, the

¹¹ Khalid Abbas Saif, “Iranian Envoy Tells FCCI: Trade Volume of Around US\$6.25bn Exists with Pakistan Despite Pressures”, *Business Recorder*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.brecorder.com/2019/12/06/550875/iranian-envoy-tells-fcci-trade-volume-of-around-625bn-exists-with-pakistan-despite-pressures/>

population, apart from being ethnically related to the people on the other side of the border is also a marginalised minority who often remains at odds with the central government over unfair distribution of resources mostly. Thus, the shared border is easily exploited by the elements of discord that have grouped together under different terrorist organisations and disrupt peace on both sides.

While Iran may have its own complaints, according to the Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there have been increased incidents of firing and shelling from Iran into Pakistani territory in the past years.¹² The activities of Jaish al Adal, a Sunni Muslim militant outfit, which is an offshoot of Jundullah have added to the border unrest such as their abduction of 12 Iranian border guards from the Mirjaveh town in Iran.¹³ Some were recovered with Pakistan Army's efforts while others are still missing.¹⁴ Even more recently than that, six Pakistani soldiers were killed when a paramilitary convoy came under fire during routine patrol in the Kech district. Such disturbances when combined with the curious case of Kulbushan Jadev, the Indian spy who crossed over from the Chahbahar into Pakistani territory and carried out clandestine activities, also point to the external factors involved in further exploiting the situation.¹⁵

Now that a brief appraisal of the bilateral ties has been given, it is time that major converging and diverging factors from regional and international politics be laid out so that Pak-Iran ties can be analysed in the backdrop of the evolving international environment.

Regional and International Factors in Pakistan-Iran Relations

As mentioned before, it is a relationship that enjoys several points of convergence but remains deprived of fulfilling their potential and for that a

¹² News Desk, "Pakistan Protests Border Violations From Iran," *Dawn*, July 24, 2019
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1495875>

¹³ Sunni Muslim terror outfit on the Iran-Pakistan. An offshoot of Jundullah.
<https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/can-isis-gain-a-foothold-in-balochistan/>

¹⁴ Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan Rescues Kidnapped Iranian Border Guards," *VOA*, November 15, 2018,
<https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/pakistan-rescues-kidnapped-iranian-border-guards>

¹⁵ Amit Ranjan, "The Case of Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav: Legal, Political and Diplomatic Implications," *ISAS Insights*, no. 414(May 2017), 15.

combination of factors are responsible. A few bilateral factors have already been discussed but external irritants or divergences are to be discussed in the following section.

a) *American Influence: Estrangement and Discord*

Although the US factor played a rather unifying role in Pakistan and Iran's bilateral relations but that was the case before 1979. The advent of the Islamic revolution soured Iran-US ties and pushed them to their nadir during the hostage crisis of 79.¹⁶ Following this crisis, the ties between the US and Iran were on a downhill trajectory and Washington, soon, developed a strategy to isolate Iran diplomatically and economically in the international community. When Iran's development of the covert uranium enrichment program came to light, it became a major security concern for Israel and the US. This falling out between the two former allies made the US a diverging factor in Iran-Pakistan ties.

Post 9/11, the US made Pakistan a frontline state in its war against terrorism in Afghanistan which involved a complete shift in Pakistan's policy towards the Taliban. It seemed as though the Afghan factor of division could finally be removed from Iran-Pakistan's relations as now both were on the same side. However, Iran being a problematic factor in the US foreign policy due to the hostage crisis, Iranian government's strict posture towards the US and particularly a threat to Israel's very existence which is the US' most important outpost in the Middle East, the relations could not take a turn for the better. Despite Iran's strong condemnation of 9/11 attack, the temperature within the US remained high and President Bush dubbed Iran, 'the axis of evil.' The efforts continued to revive the US-Iran relationship throughout President Khatami's rule. However, the real blow was dealt when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assumed office. His strict anti-American stance sapped all hope for a diplomatic revival of Tehran-Washington ties altogether. Thus, relations between Iran and Pakistan also nosedived.

By choosing to be a US ally in their 'War on Terror,' Pakistan had clearly chosen a side. This distanced the two neighbours and pushed Iran more towards India with whom its relations already had been along tangible

¹⁶ Abbas Maleki and John Tirman, eds., *U.S.-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 34-70.

lines of cooperation. Alongside all these developments, the idea of Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (IPI) had also been since long conceived. However, as years passed, apart from Pakistan's internal political instability, the US factor also played a major role in hindering the project.

Majorly due to lack of funds, Pakistani side has been unable to work on the project. While talking about the US pressure, President of Islamabad Chamber of Commerce & Industry (ICCI), Zafar Bakhtawari stated, "It was unfortunate that due to the influence of the US, India has opted out of IPI project while the US was also pressuring Pakistan to shun this important project."¹⁷ Hence, it has been no surprise that the project remains stalled to this date. Successive Iranian governments have been patient with Pakistan's complacency up till now. Iranian Petroleum Minister, Bijan Zangeneh had warned that Iran could move the arbitration court against Pakistan for unilaterally shelving the gas pipeline project.¹⁸ The Pakistani officials used their good graces with Iran to resolve the issue for the time being.

What has further delayed the construction of the IP project has been the imposition of the US sanctions on Iran which had been briefly lifted after the JCPOA. It was then when Pakistan also started negotiations with the Chinese Petroleum Bureau to help build the pipeline on its side to be connected to the Nawabshah-Gwadar LNG terminal project under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).¹⁹ However, President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from JCPOA and imposition of even stringent sanctions on Iran again put Pakistan in quite a pickle. Currently, Pakistan is building a legal case for asking the US for exemption from the sanctions to construct the pipeline as the energy-starved areas in the country are in desperate need of this project. However, it certainly puts a damper on the

¹⁷ News Desk, "India opted Out of IPI Project on American Pressure: ICCI," *Nation*, December 18, 2012, <https://nation.com.pk/18-Dec-2012/india-opted-out-of-ipi-project-on-american-pressure-icci>

¹⁸ Khalid Mustafa, "Shelving of IP Gas Project: Iran Threatens to take Pakistan to the Hague," *News*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/286409-shelving-of-ip-gas-project-iran-threatens-to-take-pakistan-to-the-hague>

¹⁹ Zafar Bhutta, "Dumped by Sharif, Gawadar-Nawabshah LNG Terminal Project May be Revived," *Express Tribune*, August 10, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1777273/1-dumped-sharif-gwadar-nawabshah-lng-terminal-project-may-revived/>

state of Iran-Pakistan ties to a great extent if the project still fails to see the light of day.

There are many reasons why the US seeks to block this pipeline project as its operation would spell a symbolic victory for Iran in the field of energy exports. It also creates a possibility of China's increased association with Iran particularly with reference to Iran's desire to participate in CPEC. If somehow, the project was to be put under the CPEC umbrella, it would be a practical step towards Iran-China-Pakistan's trilateral cooperation which is antithetic to the US interests in the region. The Indo-Pacific strategy of the US since quite a few years has materialised to prop up India as a competitor to China's economic growth in the region.

b) The Afghan Ordeal: Distrust and Apprehension

Despite shared security concerns in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan have rarely ever agreed upon a joint course of action to address the issue. Both Iran and Pakistan have paid the highest price from the spill over of refugees from the Afghan conflict. Other socioeconomic problems have been drugs and human trafficking, smuggling and increased crime rates on both sides. Iran has faced water crisis and border management issues while Pakistan grappled with spill over of terrorism through the porous border when Afghan terrorists fled into the already unstable tribal areas within the country.²⁰ However, instead of cooperating over the shared threat, the two found themselves supporting different groups in Afghanistan: Pakistan supported Taliban pre-9/11 and Iran provided resolute assistance to the Northern Alliance.

However, it is not as if there were no efforts by both to bridge the gap that the Afghan conundrum had created. The Foreign Office officials from both sides made numerous attempts to facilitate meetings to discuss the Afghan problem. In 1998, after the unfortunate Mazar-e-Sharif incident when Iranian consulate members were killed by Taliban and Iran also blamed Pakistan for breaching its trust, the then Foreign Minister of Iran, Kamal Kharrazi suggested shuttle diplomacy to resolve differences between

²⁰ News Desk, "Pentagon Admits Iran's Key Role In Restoring Calm To Afghanistan," *Press TV*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.presstv.com/detail/2018/12/27/584088/iran-afghanistan-us-pentagon-taliban-shamkhan>

Taliban and Northern Alliance.²¹ In November 2001, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Abdul Sattar, issued a statement from Islamabad that "the two countries had decided to collaborate in Afghanistan's stabilisation."²² However, the US factor once again overshadowed Iran and Pakistan's joint efforts to resolve differences in Afghanistan. Also, it managed to isolate Iran from all forums and regional initiatives to bring about peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's predicament has always been its deep dependence on the US support. For a country that has remained financially dependent on the powers bigger than itself, the only option was to comply with pressures that the US put on it. Pakistan ignored its relationship with Iran as its primary concerns were to meet the US demands at home and in Afghanistan by fighting terrorism, sacrificing precious lives and spending its own limited resources. Iran, on the other hand, deemed it fit to move closer to India and Russia when it faced such consistent resistance and enmity from the US. Eventually, after the years of spending its taxpayer's dollars and losing precious lives in the conflict for territorial control with Taliban, the US came under immense domestic pressure to wrap up its presence in Afghanistan.

The question of a dignified US withdrawal came under doubt when several reports and surveys indicated that the Taliban still controlled a significant percentage of territory in Afghanistan. The US also believes that Pakistan had not fully supported their cause against the Taliban and was seeking to maintain its own influence in the region which created differences between these two allies. Particularly after the Trump administration announced its new Afghan strategy, it became clear to Pakistan that the US no longer considered it an ally in Afghanistan and encouraged India to play a more pronounced role there. Meanwhile, the regional countries like China, Russia and Iran had also since long worried over the instability in Afghanistan. Thus, the American negative attitude towards Pakistan in Afghanistan has once again made the atmosphere conducive for Iran and Pakistan work with other regional stakeholders.

²¹ Ellen Laipson, "Engaging Iran on Afghanistan," *Stimson Center*, (Washington D.C: Stimson Center), 2012.

²² Harsh V. Pant, "Pakistan and Iran's Dysfunctional Relationship," *Middle East Quarterly* 16 no. 2 (Spring 2009), 50.

As many peace brokering initiatives on the regional level are operational, Pakistan has once again helped in the process of facilitating US-Taliban dialogue which took place in UAE in December 2018.²³ However, Iran was not asked to be a part of it, yet again and it has also announced its own ongoing talks with Taliban factions with Afghan government's approval.²⁴ Once again, an opportunity to include Iran as an important stakeholder was squandered owing to perhaps the US pressure or maybe due to mere complacency and lack of foresight. This again makes Afghanistan a diverging factor in Iran-Pakistan relations as these individually pursued peace initiatives will only lead to further fracturing of the region than before and will impact Iran and Pakistan ties in an adverse manner.

c) Indo-Iran Engagement: Opportunity or Challenge

The difference between Indian and Pakistani methods of policy formulation is that of mere rhetoric and actual substance. Pakistan and Iran have several official channels of cooperation in place but very little practical cooperation actually takes place between the two. However, the case with Indo-Iran engagement is that of tangible progress more than mere words. An example is that of 2003 when Pakistan, once again, had sided with the US at the expense of its ties with Iran while Iran and India signed the New Delhi Declaration which contained the following words:

“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.”²⁵

²³ Sayed Salahuddin, “U.S. diplomats hold talks with Taliban on ending Afghanistan war,” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-diplomats-hold-talks-with-taliban-on-ending-afghan-war/2018/12/17/c25be5d0-01f3-11e9-9122-82e98f91ee6f_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0132ea352371

²⁴ News Desk, “Afghan Taliban were in Iran for peace talks: Foreign ministry,” *Channel News Asia*, December 31, 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/afghan-taliban-were-in-iran-for-peace-talks-foreign-ministry-11075556>

²⁵ Shah Alam, “Iran-Pakistan Relations: Political and Strategic Dimensions,” *Strategic Analysis* 28 no. 4 (December 2004), 500.

In fact, the two had decided, even during the time of the Shah of Iran that their interests overlapped particularly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) which has now finally been practically implemented in form of the Chabahar port deal signed between the two in 2016. India views this as more than an opportunity of developing better ties with not just Iran, but as a passage to Central Asia via Afghanistan that also bypasses Pakistan. If one is to look at this cooperation from an even wider angle, the idea of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) conceived by Russia, India and Iran connects Russia through the Central Asian states to India and even Southeast Asian region.²⁶ This makes Iran a major link in this transit and energy rich corridor which completely bypasses Pakistan. The opportunity and will for practically realising this dream exists on both Iranian and Indian sides and this could be a matter of concern for Pakistan.

The Chabahar port project owing to its central place in development of Afghanistan has been given a free pass by the US government by exempting it from sanctions. This port is being propped up as a competitor to the Gwadar port in Pakistan being developed by China under CPEC which could also be seen as an American move to counter Chinese influence. Iran's close engagement with India does not only manifest itself through this port project. Now that the Indian influence in Afghanistan has been encouraged by the US, it also presents an ideal opportunity to both Iran and India to align their interests in Afghanistan and could end up isolating Pakistan fully from the peace process. It has not been beyond India to sabotage the already fragile Pak-Afghan relationship. If Pakistan does not engage with Iran in a comprehensive manner to counterbalance the Indian influence in the region and Afghanistan in particular, it could end up in regional isolation.

d) Saudi-Pakistan Fraternisation: Balancing the Relationship

Pakistan's close ties with Saudi Arabia were strengthened during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime in the country when the 'Islamisation' era was in full swing which shifted the balance away from Iran.²⁷ The sectarian factor was incorporated into the relationship, perhaps inadvertently, as 98 per cent of

²⁶ "The North-South Transport Corridor," *Brookings*,

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-north-south-transport-corridor/>

²⁷ Masood Zahid, "Dictatorship in Pakistan: A Study of the Zia Era (1977-88)," *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture*, 32 no. 1(May 2011): 45.

the Muslim population in Pakistan is Sunni. During this time, Zia-ul-Haq's policy of promoting Sunni Islam was aimed at infusing a spirit of Jihad to promote the war against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Reportedly to counter the onset of Sunni Islamic beliefs, Iran also provided radical religious and financial support to Shi'ite organisations in Pakistan while many Arab countries poured in money to counter this Iranian move. The result was destructive as it turned Pakistan into a sectarian proxy battleground for Shia-Sunni rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This led to a wave of sectarian violence that started in the late 1980s and continued well after the 1990s.

Many steps were taken to discourage such aid from both sides to stop Pakistan's descent into a boiling cauldron of sectarian strife. After year 2000, this wave of sectarianism somewhat subsided but the seeds of radicalisation had been sown that still plague the Pakistani society to this day. Following that, the Saudi-Iran relations have remained in a downward spiral that has prompted Pakistan to offer mediation several times as their increased enmity could lead to the exploitation of the sectarian factor in Pakistan but to no avail. Currently, the two sides are embroiled in two different proxy wars in Syria and Yemen where they target each other by remaining on opposing sides of regional and international alliances. US-Saudi romance has also further aggravated their relations. For Pakistan, this is a difficult aspect as it wishes to maintain good ties with both but to keep a perfect balance is quite an uphill task.

Pakistan's decision to stay out of the Yemen conflict and not side with Saudi Arabia was a wise step in balancing this relationship. However, joining the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), spearheaded by Saudi Arabia excluding Iran and Syria has been a decision that was frowned upon in Iran.²⁸ Pakistan has clarified that being a member of this coalition will be subject to reassurances that the IMCTC will not turn into an anti-Iran front in the Muslim world. However, more care is needed to deal with this relationship as Iran is an important neighbour while Saudi Arabia's unwavering support (financial and political) is also indispensable to Pakistan. This factor could quite easily end up souring Pakistan's ties with its western neighbour.

²⁸ Sanober Sultan, "Pakistan and the Islamic Military Coalition: Need to Balance Interests," *South Asian Voices*, March 13, 2018, <https://southasianvoices.org/islamic-military-coalition-pakistan/>

Prospects of Pak-Iran Ties

Having discussed major factors that create divergences in the Iran-Pakistan ties, there are converging factors, too, that provide the two countries a sound basis for cooperation. This section contains future prospects for Iran-Pakistan relations. Some of the diverging factors described above have also provided ample opportunities to both sides for enhanced cooperation but certain factors bilateral, regional and international could act as points of convergence and will chalk out future trajectories which are as follows:

a) Shared Ethnic Minorities

The border provinces of Balochistan and Sistan-Baluchistan harbour Baloch ethnic populations on both sides that have cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious and even familial links with one another. This region makes for the most important factor of convergence between the two countries as this area is what makes them neighbours in the first place. The two countries share about 590 miles (909 km) common frontier known as the Goldsmith Line.²⁹ Along this line, there exist centuries-old socioeconomic and racial affinity between the tribes that live on both sides. Capitalising on this factor would have positive implications for Iran-Pakistan ties. Among all, the borders shared by both Iran and Pakistan, this one is the least turbulent. Still there are many serious security and economic concerns issuing from this border that have the potential to damage the relationship. However, what is important to consider here is how to utilise this point of commonality to the best of both sides' advantage.

Respectively, on both sides the Baloch population has grievances with the governments for many different reasons. However, a few grievances that must be overlapping in both Iran and Pakistan are related to socioeconomic development. Both provinces remain relatively less developed although they provide geo-strategically significant transit points and unlimited natural resources to both countries. This is why both regions are also exploited abundantly by external elements while they are prone to drug trafficking, smuggling, illegal trade and terrorist activities. Most of Iran and Pakistan's trade is also unofficial due to this very reason. Hence, it is imperative that,

²⁹ Zahid Ali Khan, "Balochistan Factor in Pak-Iran Relations: Opportunities and Constraints," *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 27 no.1 (June 2012): 130.

without further ado, both sides realise the need to cooperate in this shared ethnic region so that this becomes a unifying factor instead of a point of difference. In order to do that, following mentioned recommendations must be considered:

- i. Minorities in Iran and Pakistan especially in Balochistan area need to be made part of the mainstream socioeconomic development and be given more adequate political representation.
- ii. The issue of border markets must be practically implemented so that the people on both sides of the border in Balochistan provinces can delve into their local economic progress.
- iii. Border security must be made a priority with hotlines established between Balochistan Frontier Corps (FC) Inspector General and the Sistan-Baluchestan Commander Guards, FC commanders and their Iranian counterparts and on other levels, too.
- iv. Immigration offices must be set up to facilitate legal border crossings and to keep a check on illegal border crossings. This would also facilitate secure passage of Pakistani pilgrims going to the holy places in Iran.
- v. In order to curb drug trafficking, a joint anti-narcotics force can be formulated which could have both Iranian and Pakistani personnel to put a stop to smuggling of drugs. This step would also help uncover third party exploitation of the shared border.

b) Iran's Participation in CPEC: China Factor

Although this proposal only remains on paper, its practical manifestations are numerous. The China factor in Iran-Pakistan relations has been rather subdued although its respective relations with both Iran and Pakistan are quite friendly. China is the largest importer of Iranian crude oil in the world. It is also among the few countries that have been granted exemptions from the US sanctions. According to a study by the famous energy scholar, Michael Tanchum, China will position itself to be the major recipient of Iranian and Turkmen oil to execute the completion of the energy corridors that are a part of the bigger One Belt, One Road (OBOR) dream.³⁰ It fundamentally points to the fact that owing to the energy equation between the two of them, Iran becomes a natural ally to China. China had been

³⁰ John W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2011), 56.

trading with Iran even during the previous sanctions regime. Thus, this is an important converging factor in Iran and Pakistan's relationship.

Previously, Iran had expressed its desire to join CPEC which is also in line with China's regional connectivity initiative. Iran and China have also been on the same side of the Afghan conflict. Pakistan must make sure that its relationship with China is utilised to initiate a regional initiative for peace in Afghanistan in which Iran could also be an important partner. Afghanistan's inclusion in CPEC has also been hinted by China which makes this connectivity project even more effective and can eventually strengthen Iran-Pakistan relationship even more. The IPI project had also been proposed to be made part of CPEC by giving the construction to Chinese companies. The proposition has not materialised due to China's trade spat with the US and Chinese apprehension to avoid antagonising the US further. However, this does not mean that there cannot be more avenues of cooperation among these three countries.

c) Nurturing Russo-Pakistan Ties: Prospects for Iran-Pakistan Relations

Russia and Pakistan's relations have had a tough and turbulent history but, in the recent years, their relationship has normalised and turned into a budding friendship. In the post-CPEC period, Russia and Pakistan's ties have taken a turn for the better as the changing geopolitical atmosphere has brought China and Russia closer to each other, too. Previously, during the time of the Shah of Iran, the Soviet Union was considered an enemy due to Iran's close alliance with the US. However, in recent years after the Iranian revolution, the two sides have seen eye to eye on many regional and global political issues. However, it was particularly in Syria how the two opposed the US strategy of militarisation and regime change and supported President Bashar-al-Assad's regime so that a peaceful political solution can be sorted out. In fact, Russia, Iran and Turkey have been in several rounds of talks to negotiate peaceful settlement of the issue between the pro-government forces and the US-led rebel forces. Furthermore, the latest announcement by President Trump to withdraw troops and ground support from the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) has given Iran, Russia and Turkey an even wider role to play in the conflict.

Apart from that, Russia has also been sanctioned time and again by the US just like Iran and has devised ways to go around the sanctions, Russia

and Iran had also developed an oil-for-goods programme as a way to avoid using dollar in their transactions. Hence, the two have been involved in trade despite the US pressure to stop all countries from doing trade with Iran. Now that Pakistan and Russia have warmed up to each other, this rapprochement can also play a converging role in Pakistan-Iran ties. Pakistan must ensure that any regional energy corridor or transit initiative that is conceived among Iran, Russia, China, Turkey or even India is not used to make it irrelevant. Pakistan must stress the significance of its geostrategic location through diplomatic activity and lobbying efforts so that it is not cut out of future regional initiatives.

Recommendations for Pakistan

In the background of multidimensional and complex Pak-Iran ties, following recommendations have been drawn up to include all regional and international factors that can be utilised for betterment of both countries:

- a) Pakistan must take this opportunity to build a compelling legal case for securing exemption from the US on the IP gas pipeline issue for example which can be a beginning to a balanced way forward in all of Pakistan's foreign policy decisions.
- b) The Afghan factor has done enough damage to the mutual trust between Iran and Pakistan and as now the two countries support a regional peaceful settlement to the dispute, they should work together for peace in Afghanistan.
- c) The Indian engagement with Iran must not discourage Pakistan from strengthening ties with its western neighbour. Similarly, it should learn from this relationship to balance its ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Conclusion

The most important pre-requisite to strengthen Iran-Pakistan ties is to sort out bilateral issues at the domestic level. To create economic capacity at home, to build better business community ties, to form central banking channels between the two countries and most importantly make sure that external factors do not impact the bilateral relationship. Any bilateral

relationship can be impacted by regional and international politics but it is important to keep managing the relationship in a way that it survives adversity.

The devastating global pandemic gripping the world at the moment; has already modified methods of cooperation among countries and Pakistan and Iran will also need to adapt accordingly so that it does not create distance between the two neighbours. Pakistan needs to learn from its past mistakes and start balancing its relations with different countries in the region in a way that they do not impact ties with its neighbours. It is also important that a long-term policy be drafted to deal with transitions that keep happening in regional and global politics including establishment of sound economic ties that are absolutely essential for durability of state-to-state relations.