

Pakistan-Iran relations: back on track?

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There is every conceivable reason for Pakistan to nurture the friendliest of ties with Iran. The two neighbouring Muslim nations' commonalities; ranging from factors of history, geographical location, culture, art, language, literature, to the belief system; are all well documented and need not be noted here. It may not be an overstatement to assert that Pakistan and Iran have, in historical terms starting with the advent of Islam in the seventh century, had a traditional linkage.

Most importantly in contemporary geostrategic terms that have since 9/11 come to be pivoted on mindless violence under misplaced religious inspiration – that the Sole Superpower has no less unthinkingly proclaimed an unending War on Terror – it is the quintessentially pacifist message of Islam that had transformed the minds and souls of the inhabitants of the Indus Valley in the first place.

That is where Iran comes in insofar as those professing Islam in the Indus Valley *were* concerned. For the uninitiated, Pakistan post-bifurcation from its eastern wing in 1971, is nothing but the Indus Valley, divested of course of a substantive; some would say strategically crucial; stretches that fell to India at the time of and in the manner in which the subcontinent was partitioned by the departing British colonial power in 1947.

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cultural and religious moorings of the inhabitants of the parts of the Indus Valley that constituted (West) Pakistan were mutilated at the time of the country's formation.

Coming to more recent times, 1979 proved to be a watershed year. It witnessed the success of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in the first place and came to a close with Soviet troops in occupation of Afghanistan. Pakistan found itself bang in the middle of these epochal developments. Any established order is less than enthusiastic at the prospect of its being rooted out. The case was no different for Pakistan at that stage, lashed as it was by the diametrically opposing tides of communist and Islamic orders.

To be fair to history, the entire credit for the initiation of the religious divide in Pakistan cannot be given to General Zia-ul-Haq, the then military ruler of the country who had staged a coup to oust and arrest Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977. The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan not only gave the country the oxymoronic title of 'Islamic Republic' but also passed down to parliament the clerical prerogative of deciding matters of an individual's faith; debatable as even any interference by the church in a human being's life remains.

The latter had been done through reserving the highest positions of the president and the prime minister for Muslims alone. That, in a nutshell, was the beginning to the process of the State's politicising religion – thus darkening the vision of the nation's Founder, Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

As though that was not enough, the Second Amendment to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, that came into force on September 17, 1974, declared that all those citizens of the country – or any individual, for that matter – who professes to be an Ahmadi shall be treated by the State as a non-Muslim. A substantial proportion of the nation was relegated the position of second class citizens, along with those already belonging to that category by virtue of professing to belong to the 'minorities' of the Christians, the Sikhs, the Hindus, et el.

The sum effect of this constitutional scheme has been the disenfranchisement of large sections of the national population on the one hand; and, on the other, the narrowing down of the political power base first to the Muslims and then those belong to the majority sect of Sunnis who too then in this religion-based scramble for legitimised authority were subdivided into any number of sub-sects.

Prime Minister Bhutto followed all that up with a number of legislative measures to further insinuate religious obscurantism in society and state to a vain attempt to placate the right wing that had been bitterly in opposition to the socialistic manifesto of his Pakistan Peoples' Party ever since its inception in late 1960s. The army chief, Zia, overthrew his government in July 1977 and set about his mission of 'Islamising' the fabric of the State to acquire a modicum of legitimacy for his 11-year-long dictatorship. The Shiite in Pakistan were in this process victimised through various means.

It was in such a political culture of bigotry and not just religious but also sectarian intolerance in Pakistan that the Shiite of the neighbouring Iran brought about the Islamic Revolution in their homeland. The present writer is a witness to that Revolution. It was by virtue of one's presence in Tehran during the revolutionary process of 1978-1979 that it was learned how sternly Ayatollah Khomeini had dealt with the first emissaries Zia had sent there to facilitate him and his nation.

Apart from the treatment being meted out to the Shiite of Pakistan at Zia's hands, there was no love lost between the post-Revolution Iran and the United States of America, with the latter having a history of cyclic ups and downs in its graph of amity with Pakistan almost as old as this country itself is. All that made for anything but the continuity of Pakistan's close friendly relations with Iran as also of the Persian socio-religious tradition in this country.

Then came the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan. There was a pre-existing basis of alliance between the West and the far-right Sunni factions within the Muslims that had in the first place been patronised by the British during their long colonial rule over most of the Third World lands in which Muslims were in majority.

The British objective here was two-fold. In the first place, it formed part of their dictum of divide and rule. Secondly, they had built their empire on the ruins of three Great Muslim empires through all means fair and foul, conquered and dismembered. Ever so conscious of the nascent movements of Muslim revival, they expended a lot of money and resources to advance, if not actually found, such attempts from within the Muslim communities that were designed to push them back to medieval times.

The axis formed by the United States, some of the Persian Gulf States with Sunni majorities and Pakistan was, therefore, but natural. Even as the Resistance in Afghanistan remained above any sectarian divisions throughout the decade-long Soviet Occupation, Pakistan and Iran started competing for influence in the immediately neighbouring country of both of them after the Soviet defeat and subsequent withdrawal.

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The fratricidal warfare continued till the Americans and their NATO Allies came to try occupying Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11.

Islamabad still found itself at odds with Tehran; forced as the former was into an alliance with the American war effort in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, time and circumstances have so conspired in favour of the present writer that he has continued to work on Iran all through the past ten years of the post-9/11 phase; first at the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Islamabad, till 2007, then at the South Asian Strategic Stability Institute (SASSI), London, for some months, and finally at the current assignment in the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI).

That has entailed, apart from penning down a number of published articles on various aspects of Iran's internal as also international and global affairs, numerous visits to Tehran over the past two decades.

It was with a lurking sense of apprehension that one travelled to the Iranian capital this past July as one among a four-member ISSI delegation to participate in the scheduled yearly roundtable with the Institute of Political and International Studies (IPIS) and to exchange views with some other officials of the host country.

Courteous as the Iranians are at even the most testing of times; these frank interactions, of which this was the tenth round in Tehran, the previous one having been held in Islamabad last year; are most beneficial in getting a no-holds-barred reality check on the actual state of affairs in our bilateral relationship in particular and on the Iranian view of their regional and global interests and concerns.

There was good reason for one's underlying unease as we set foot on the Iranian soil this time round. They had over the previous occasions of bilateral interaction minced no words in giving air to Tehran's discomfort at Islamabad's approach towards regional security aspects of direct concern to them.

Nevertheless, we had reached Tehran in the fourth week of July 2011 nearly three months after the May 2 U.S. air raid at Abbottabad that had reportedly taken out Osama bin Laden. Things were at last looking up in Pakistan's ties with Iran.

In view of the fast changing environment for the better, one made so bold as to sound a bit of regret at the lack of understanding shown by some of Pakistan's friendly countries for the constraints placed on Islamabad by virtue of the alliance imposed on it by Washington since the start of the latter's war in Afghanistan a decade ago.

The slightly edited text of the presentation made by the present writer at the 10th ISSI-IPIS roundtable in Tehran on July 27, 2011 follows:

It is always a pleasure and privilege to be among my learned Iranian brothers and sisters in this fraternal nation where it has been my good fortune to live the historic moments when you took destiny in your own strong hands to bring about the great Islamic Revolution that has changed the course of contemporary history.

Returning to this great nation ever since those epochal days of more than three decades ago is something of revisiting not only my second

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homeland but, more than that, a pilgrimage of learning and intellectual enrichment. The presence among you this time around, however, is with a feeling of no insignificant satisfaction that, after many a test and tribulation, the age-old ties between our two neighbourly lands are on the upswing once again.

Before I proceed with sharing with this august gathering some of my thoughts on the subject of my brief presentation, please allow me to make a small clarification — or, with your indulgence, to air something of a regret.

God alone knows the reality of the deadly happenings of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington, D.C., but some of us in Pakistan were anything but surprised when, as soon as the news of the first aircraft's hitting one of the twin World Trade Center towers was broadcast by the *CNN*, not just the likely, but the unquestionable villain was identified in an Arab warrior somewhere in the caves of Afghanistan.

We knew there and then that the Americans were coming for us to take their unilateral war to our brotherly nation of Afghanistan. But the point of lament I wish to place on record here is the unfortunate manner in which the compulsions under which my country was forced to enter into a marriage of strategic inconvenience with the United States were not fully appreciated by some of our Muslim brothers and sisters outside the country.

We have thus continuously been subjected to criticism, valid no doubt in ordinary circumstances, for acts of commission as also omission that were beyond our sovereign control. At the same time, little consideration was shown for our resolute and unflinching opposition to any measure contemplated by our supposed Western allies of the time involving the use of Pakistan's territory, ground or air; that was inimical or hostile to Iran.

That is not something new in the conduct of Pakistan's policy towards our great brotherly state of Iran. Those of us old enough to recall the days

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of Iraq's aggression against Iran in the 1980s would surely remember the tremendous pressure mounted on my country by the United States in particular to create difficulties on Iran's eastern border with Pakistan as well.

Did we then, and for some eight years at that, ever oblige in the slightest manner? On the contrary, Pakistan continued to serve as the lifeline for all manner of supplies needed by our brave brothers, sisters and children suffering from the travails of Iraq's long war of aggression.

Then, again, in the early 1990s, as the United States prepared to launch an attack on Iraq under the false pretext of President Saddam Hussain's possession of weapons of mass destruction, Washington's original scheme involved the use of Iraq's eastern, that is, Iranian, flank for the purpose. That entailed, in the first place, the use of Pakistan's territory. Islamabad did have the courage to say an unequivocal no to the sole superpower.

Times have, no doubt, changed a lot over the past two decades. Now our shared regions of West and Central Asia are rife with Western military presence. But, back then, in the early 1990s, America found it difficult to find a launching pad against Iraq anywhere in West Asia and the Arab world.

The purpose in narrating this history before the learned audience that knows the subject better than me is none other than to share an attribute of my people: to them, as to countless generations before them, Iran is not just another country to the west of Pakistan; it is the cultural capital of the region. Persian may not be as commonly understood by those in today's Pakistan as it was to just a generation or two before them that learned the language at school, but it still remains a major constituent of the lingua franca, Urdu, in my homeland.

Pakistan, therefore, did what it did regarding Iran ever since my country's creation over six decades ago not for the sake of Iran but for its own sake. Islam has, no doubt, further cemented the ageless ties between those in Persia and those in the Indus Valley just across the Sulaiman range in your Sistan-Baluchistan province. At the same time, and the less recognised, element to this fraternity is the non-Arab identity, history and tradition of the two peoples.

Getting back to my narrative, these past nine years and more post-9/11, Pakistan was variously constrained in the pursuit of some of its key national and strategic interests — and one would not be exaggerating to

place our relations with Iran among the top few — due to our alliance of unequals with the United States. It could perhaps stand a reminder of the Bush administration's warning, since reproduced in General Musharaf's published memoirs, *In the line of Fire*, sounded to Pakistan in the aftermath of 9/11 for the latter to either allow the use of its territory for the Afghan offensive or be prepared to be bombed back to the stone age.

Even so, Pakistan, while allowing the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces the use of its territory for supply of non-lethal material for the war effort in Afghanistan, together with availing the infrastructural facilities of a couple of our air bases, held ground — and continues to do so till date — on some crucial geostrategic areas. One of them, pertinent to what I am presenting here, is the disallowing of right to hot pursuit to the forces in occupation of Afghanistan.

The good news, however, is that, in my view, Pakistan has regained most if not all strategic ground lost to the United States and NATO consequent to its one-way alliance with the Western powers after the reported killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2 this year.

Just imagine the catastrophic consequences Pakistan's dithering on that account would have entailed for our region.

To project a hypothetical scenario, the United States, for example, may well have contrived a case; and they are exceptionally gifted in that dubious art, Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction already referred to, being a case in point; for some of the Afghan Mujahedeen and/or their leaders having taken refuge in, let's say, somewhere in your Sistan-Baluchistan province and America uses one of our air bases, Shamsi, for instance, that is in any case not far from the targeted area, to launch an air strike against Iran.

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A most prompt and welcome consequence of our regaining greater space in geostrategic decision-making and policy actions, as I see it, has been President Zardari's second visit to Tehran within a month.

It is also my pleasant duty to inform this meeting that, even as I speak, people back home, in many spheres of life, perhaps most notably Pakistan's businessmen and industrialists, are zealously pursuing follow-up action by the Pakistani side on the decisions taken bilaterally by Pakistan and Iran during President Zardari's high-level meetings in Tehran.

An outstanding agreement in this context is on currency swap between the two countries for payments of imports from the other side. This arrangement is to extend with time to bring in its fold China, Sri Lanka and Turkey. Prospectively, it could also attract Afghanistan and other South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and the Maldives. Who knows to what geographical outreach this commercial and trade hub of Pakistan-Iran in Afro-Asia may ultimately stretch.

There are, however, apprehensions being voiced by the exporters of Pakistan's abundant yield of agricultural produce, depending largely on the rain pattern in any cultivating season, which are not without basis. They point to any number of agreements in principle, even signed memoranda of understanding, between Pakistan and Iran that, unfortunately, do not see light of the day in the form of actualisation. We must at our respective levels of interaction with the policy-makers of the two countries make all-out efforts that the same is not the fate of this particular accord between the top executive leaders of the two sides on currency swap.

Please also allow me to briefly take into account on this occasion an observation I had made in my last interaction with the worthy scholars of the IPIS in April 2009 roundtable here at the same premises as now. That had to do with the imperative need for enhanced defence, particularly naval, cooperation between our two brotherly states.

What I had then submitted, but feel can stand repetition, was something to the effect of linking up our still developing port of Gwadar at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, for which our Chinese friends are extending help, with the Iranian port of Chah Bahar, again, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, but on your side of the Strait of Hormuz.

The basic idea here is for a direct channel of sea transportation being established so that goods can be shipped from South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia, China and the eastern zone of Central Asia from the Gwadar port on our side for onward transmission to the western stretch of

Central Asia, Russia, Eurasia, Europe and West Asia to Chah Bahar and vice versa.

One may point out that while Iran already has in place an excellent road communication infrastructure for the northern route to Central Asia and beyond as also to West Asia, Pakistan's road link to western China is planned to be developed so as to enable even the transmission of railway freight to China along the Karakoram Highway.

Finally, a bit on our other big neighbouring country, India, to the east. One can no longer be sure of the existing nature of India's autonomy of decision-making and policy implementation that the country would traditionally and quite justifiably pride itself at. The situation on that count has taken a qualitative change in certain areas, its relationship with Iran in particular. You are well aware of the turnabout taken by New Delhi on voting at the IAEA on Iran's peaceful nuclear programme ever since it has entered into the strategic alliance with the United States.

Despite all that, however, Iran still is in a position to wake New Delhi up to the changing world, and that privilege Iran still enjoys with reference to the trade linkages between your country and India, where no country can afford any longer to remain isolationist in its neighbourhood.

India needs to be shown the example of China that readily comes to my mind, which has put its vital territorial and other disputes aside for the time being to benefit from the tremendous opportunities the fast opening world offers for economic development and growth.