

An analysis of emerging Pakistani-Iranian ties

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■ Executive summary

Iran's Islamic revolution and the Soviet-Afghan war put Iran and Pakistan in divergent religious-ideological and regional geostrategic positions. Since 2001, however, the two countries have managed to maintain normal bilateral relations despite some persisting irritants such as border insecurity and their contrasting ties with Saudi Arabia, the U.S., Afghanistan and India. After showing a significant tilt towards Saudi Arabia and its stance on the Syrian conflict, the incumbent Pakistani government is trying to balance its ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Apart from the Saudi factor, international sanctions on Iran continue to put pressure on the two countries' economic and trade cooperation. Iran believes that Saudi Arabia and the U.S. are behind Pakistan's lukewarm response to completing the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project as per the agreement signed in 2013. Also, Iran has serious concerns over Iranian Sunni militant groups who are seeking protection in and operating from areas of Pakistani Baluchistan bordering on Iran, and the smuggling of drugs and arms from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Iran. The growing enthusiasm for the extremist anti-Shia and anti-Iran group known as the Islamic State among Pakistani and Afghan militant groups could add to Iranian concerns related to cross-border terrorism.

Iran was the first country to recognise Pakistan as an independent and sovereign state after the latter's independence on August 14th 1947. Strong alliances with the U.S. over geostrategic interests tied Pakistan and Iran together and both remained in the capitalist block after signing the Central Treaty Organisation treaty in the early 1950s and the Regional Cooperation for Development agreement in the 1960s (Din & Naseer, 2013). The Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) and the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-89) were two watershed developments that defined the renewed geostrategic positions of Pakistan and Iran in the emerging regional and global political and strategic alliances. During the Afghan war in the 1980s Pakistan and Iran supported their favourite mujahidin groups in Afghanistan. This trend continued in subsequent years. Iranian support for the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and Pakistan's for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s further affected the two countries' relations. However, since 2001, when Pakistan became a frontline ally in the U.S.-led coalition and war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, the two states have successfully managed to maintain relatively normal relations, despite some persisting irritants at the bilateral and regional levels.

Bilateral relations between the two countries significantly improved during the last few years of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government in Pakistan (2008-13), a period characterised by the extreme deterioration of Pakistan's relations with the U.S. after the latter's operation in Pakistan in 2011 that killed Osama bin Laden and the NATO airstrikes on Pakistan army posts at Salala in the same year.

Although Pakistan's majority population is Sunni, Pakistanis on the whole have a fair view of Iran. According to a survey released by Pew's Global Attitude Project in 2013, 76% of respondents from Pakistan gave a favourable rating when they were asked how they felt about Iran (Fisher, 2013). Similarly, a survey conducted by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies in 2013 revealed that Pakistan's religious and political parties have considerable convergence of opinion on the belief that Pakistan's ties with Iran should be determined by national interest and not by the dictates of the U.S. or any other country. Most of these parties believe that friendly relations with Iran can help improve Pakistan's economy, security and sectarian harmony (Din & Naseer, 2013).

Bilateral trade and economic cooperation

Despite the signing of a preferential trade agreement on March 4th 2004 – which became operational on September 1st 2006 – the volume of trade between the two countries in subsequent years remained much lower than its potential. According to the International Monetary Fund, Pakistan is Iran's 11th-largest trading partner (Akhter, 2013). However, the two countries have much higher trade volumes through smuggling and third-country transactions (Minhas, 2014). International sanctions on Iran, illegal trade, and inconvenient and indirect modes of business transactions, mostly done through the United Arab Emirates (UAE), because the two countries have no banking channels,¹ are the main reasons for the low volume of bilateral trade between Pakistan and Iran.

The two countries established the Pakistan-Iran Joint Economic Commission (JEC) in 1986, an institutional mechanism to identify and promote economic and trade cooperation. But Pakistan's strong politico-economic and geostrategic alignment with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia in subsequent years offered negligible promises for Pakistani-Iranian bilateral cooperation, including in terms of trade and the economy. The JEC is still operational and its 19th session was held in Islamabad in December 2014, when both countries signed five agreements related to the establishment of a Joint Investment Committee, cooperation between Pakistan's Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority and Iran's Small Industries, and the establishment of a sister-port relationship between the ports of Karachi and Chabahar, in addition to cooperation in the field of investment, and economic and technical assistance (*Pakistan Today*, 2014). However, the implementation of these and other similar agreements such as for the construction of the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline has remained under question, partly due to external factors such as Saudi and U.S. pressure on Pakistan and international sanctions on Iran, and partly due to Pakistan's lack of clear foreign policy priorities in terms of trade and the economy, as well as policy inconsistency.

Progress on the IP gas pipeline has been inching forward since it was first conceived in the early 1990s as the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline. Finally, in March 2013, Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari and his Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, officially inaugurated the construction of the 780-kilometre pipeline from Iran to Pakistan² in the Iranian border city of Chabahar. By then Iran had completed most of its segment of the pipeline originating from the South Pars gas field. Pakistan said it could not complete its section by the stipulated deadline of December 2014 due to international sanctions on Iran,

because despite its best efforts, banks, international contractors and equipment suppliers were not ready to become involved in this project. Although the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government announced after coming into power in the May 2013 elections that it will complete the pipeline project (Bhutta, 2013), it did not allocate any funds for the project in the federal budget for 2013-14 (*The News*, 2013). At the same time the government has reportedly been under U.S. and Saudi pressure to abandon the project.

Pakistan also runs the risk of paying penalties to Iran over falling behind schedule in the construction of its section of the pipeline. In May 2014 Iran turned down Pakistan's request to invoke the force majeure clause because of U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran and defer the penalties for not completing the pipeline (Mustafa, 2014).

Some believe that it is more a matter of Pakistan's lack of political will and strategic priorities than U.S. sanctions that is delaying the completion of the pipeline. Pakistan could prepare a strong case to convince the U.S. that the Gas Purchase Agreement for the project was signed before the latest sanctions on Iran came into force (*Dawn*, 2015a). The Pakistani government's recent efforts to explore alternative options³ to meet its immediate energy needs suggest that the IP pipeline might not materialise in the near future, at least until a clear outcome emerges from the international community's engagement with Iran on the latter's nuclear programme.

Pipeline politics and Gwadar port

Iran appears to be convinced that Saudi Arabia and the U.S. are behind the incumbent PML-N government's lukewarm response to completing the IP pipeline project according to the agreement. The state-owned Iranian Press TV raised concerns about the future of the project after the change in government took place in Pakistan following the 2013 general elections. With reference to the close association of the current Pakistani premier, Nawaz Sharif, with Saudi Arabia, it said that the latter was pushing Pakistan on behalf of the U.S. to abandon the project (Press TV, 2013a). Also, during Sharif's visit to Iran in May 2014 Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei had asked him not to wait for "permission" from other governments to improve relations between Iran and Pakistan, with an implicit reference to the IP pipeline project (*Dawn*, 2014a).

India was also once a part of the project, but it quit in 2009, mainly due to its civilian nuclear deal with the U.S., which

1 Pakistani banks refuse to accept Iranian banks' letters of credit, mainly because Iran is not part of the international banking system due to international sanctions imposed on it. Pakistani importers and exporters have to pay extra commissions to indenting agents in Dubai, who have established letter of credits there in favour of Pakistani exporters and importers. A few years ago Iran proposed that its Bank Milli and Pakistan's National Bank should open branches on a reciprocal basis, but this has not materialised so far. Alternatively, opening a letter of credit through Iran's sister companies in Dubai also adds to the costs and only benefits Dubai's banks (Minhas, 2014).

2 Starting from the Iranian border, the Pakistani section of the gas pipeline will pass through Sindh and Baluchistan provinces to reach Multan in southern Punjab.

3 During a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Energy chaired by Prime Minister Sharif held on February 12th 2015 it was decided to start negotiations with Malaysia, China, Algeria, Nigeria and Trinidad for the import of liquefied natural gas and also to take immediate steps for an early start to the 1,680-kilometre Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (Haider, 2015).

was approved by the U.S. Congress on October 1st 2008; other reasons were linked to issues of the gas price and transit fees, and insecurity in Pakistani Baluchistan. But after Iran and Pakistan inaugurated the construction of the Pakistani section of the pipeline in March 2013 India expressed interest in rejoining the project, apparently after becoming motivated by the seriousness of the other two countries involved in the project. An Iranian Oil Ministry spokesperson said in April 2013 that India was in talks with Iran to rejoin the project (Press TV, 2013b). In January 2014 India's minister for external affairs, Salman Khurshid, stated that India was considering rejoining the project (Yousaf, 2014a). But the possibility of India rejoining the pipeline is very unlikely because of persisting U.S. pressure, continuing sanctions on Iran, tense Indo-Pak relations, insecurity in the parts of Pakistan that the pipeline will pass through to reach India, and China's growing engagement in energy- and trade-related projects in Pakistan. Experts believe that if the IP pipeline project ever materialises, there are more chances of China joining it rather than India.

While China is currently developing and operating Pakistan's deep-sea port at Gwadar, the two countries have also agreed to construct the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) stretching from Gwadar to Kashgar in China. Besides the construction of a network of roads and railways, the option of laying a gas pipeline along the corridor is also under consideration. The CPEC is expected to "place Gwadar on the matrix of intense geo-strategic competition" (CPGS, 2014), with India looking to develop Iran's Chabahar port. In October 2014 Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's cabinet decided to develop the Chabahar port, which many believe is central to India's plans to open up a route to landlocked Afghanistan, where it has developed close security ties and economic interests, and to gain access to energy-rich Central Asian states (Dawn, 2014b).

The CPEC could also improve regional connectivity with Afghanistan, Iran and India, because links of this kind have been provided for in the planned eastern and western alignments of the corridor in Pakistan. A link from Taxila through Peshawar and Torkhum will connect the corridor's eastern alignment to Jalalabad in Afghanistan. Regional connectivity with India through the eastern alignment is planned through the Hyderabad-Mirpurkhas-Khokhrapar-Zero Point link and the Wagha border, Lahore. The western alignment will have an additional regional connectivity link to Afghanistan through Chaman and will connect to Iran through the Quetta-Kho-e-Taftan link (Sial, 2014). But it still remains to be seen whether or not the CPEC and Gwadar could become instrumental in forging and enhancing regional coordination and cooperation.

Border security and counterterrorism

Iran has serious concerns over Iranian Sunni militant groups seeking protection in and operating from Pakistan's border areas. Iranian Baluchi insurgent groups, including Jundullah and its breakaway factions JaishulAdl and Jaishul Nasr, are based in the Sistan-Baluchistan province of Iran and have developed a substantial presence in the Pakistani-Iranian border belt of Pakistan's Baluchistan province (Mir, 2014).

Jundullah, a nationalist sectarian group, emerged in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province in 2003 and launched an extensive campaign of violence mainly against Iranian security forces in subsequent years. Iran executed Jundullah's founder leader, Abdul Malik Rigi, in June 2010. Some reports suggested that the Pakistani authorities had handed him over to Iran after being picked up in Dubai in an operation launched by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (Rehman, 2014). Pakistan's ambassador to Tehran, Muhammad Abbasi, also claimed that "Rigi's arrest could not have happened without Pakistan's help" (Rehman, 2014). On August 28th 2014 Rigi's younger brother, Abdul Rauf Rigi,⁴ was shot dead in Quetta, in Pakistani Baluchistan. He had been arrested by the Pakistani authorities in December 2010 and was supposed to be handed over to the Iranian authorities (Mir, 2014).⁵

Iran blames Pakistan for the latter's alleged failure to check the presence of Iranian insurgent groups on Pakistani soil and their free cross-border movement. Iranian border security forces have launched dozens of cross-border attacks inside Pakistan's Baluchistan province purportedly against Iranian Jundullah militants and others crossing over to Pakistan after carrying out terrorist attacks inside Iran. The Iranian government threatened to send its troops into Pakistani territory after JaishulAdl militants reportedly kidnapped five Iranian guards on February 6th 2014 in the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan and took them across the border to Pakistan.⁶ After this incident, in late March Iran announced a decision to construct 120 new army posts along its border with Pakistan to prevent militants' cross-border movements (Express, 2014). Later, on May 6th, the two countries agreed to establish a hotline between the Frontier Corps in Pakistani Baluchistan and the Iranian border security forces to counter cross-border militancy (Khan, 2014b).

A considerable number of the nine bilateral cooperation agreements signed between Pakistan and Iran in Tehran during the Pakistani prime minister's visit in May 2014 included provisions for countering terrorism and enhancing border security, such as one for the establishment of a High Border Commission; one for the prevention of

⁴ Rauf Rigi was the founder of the Iranian insurgent group Jaishul Nasr, which he launched in early 2014 after leaving another militant group, JaishulAdl. He had succeeded his elder brother, Abdul Malik Rigi, as head of Jundallah after the latter's execution in Iran in 2010.

⁵ The Iranian government had demanded that he be handed over on December 25th 2010, saying: "Abdul Rauf Rigi's arrest reflects the decisive resolve of the Pakistan government to confront terrorism."

⁶ Four of the kidnapped Iranian border guards and the body of the fifth whom the militants said they had killed were handed over by JaishulAdl militants to Iranian representatives in Pakistan in April 2014.

money laundering and financial support for terrorist groups; two more for the exchange of financial information on money laundering; and one for the exchange of prisoners (IRNA, 2014a). Earlier, in February 2013, the two countries had signed a very comprehensive bilateral security agreement to combat and prevent cross-border terrorism and organised crime; smuggling and illicit trade, including of drugs and weapons; and activities posing threats to the security of either country (*Dawn*, 2013).

Iranian border security concerns are also related to the smuggling of drugs and arms from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Part of this concern arises from the fact that anti-Iranian militant groups such as Jundullah are largely financed by drugs and arms smuggling.

The Saudi Arabia factor

A marked warming up of Pakistani-Saudi relations in the first quarter of 2014, which entailed some high-level bilateral visits and \$1.5 billion in Saudi aid to Pakistan, was seen by some analysts as a critical irritant in Pakistan's relations with Iran.

The changing power equilibrium in the Middle East in the wake of the P5+1 group's⁷ diplomatic engagement with Iran on the latter's nuclear programme; the Syrian civil war; the rise of the Islamic State and mounting terrorist threats on Saudi borders with Iraq and Yemen; and Pakistan's close relations with Iran during the PPP-led government's term in office were the main factors that made Saudi Arabia feel insecure in the emerging geostrategic environment in the region. Saudi efforts to strengthen ties with Pakistan mainly entailed military or security and political objectives. During Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud's February 2014 visit to Pakistan, the latter fully supported the former's position on the Syrian conflict and asked Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to form "a transitional governing body" (Syed, 2014). There were also reports that Saudi Arabia was in talks with Pakistan to provide arms, including anti-aircraft and anti-tank rockets, to Syrian rebels, a claim that Pakistan denied (*Dawn*, 2014c). Pakistan also denied reports that it would send 100,000 Pakistani troops to Saudi Arabia (*The Nation*, 2014).

These Saudi efforts were also seen as an attempt to weaken Islamabad's links with Tehran, which had strengthened during the PPP's rule (2008-13): the PPP government, led by Asif Ali Zardari, was closer to Iran than Saudi Arabia. According to a 2009 cable revealed by Wikileaks, King 'Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had described Zardari as "the rotten head that was infecting the whole body" (Siddiqi, 2014).

Some media reports nevertheless suggested that Saudi Arabia had sought the assistance of Nawaz Sharif's

government in its efforts to improve Saudi relations with Tehran (Khan, 2014a). Iran's state-owned news agency, IRNA, claimed that Sharif's coming to power could have a positive impact not only on bilateral ties, but also on cooperation among Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, thus raising the prospects of trilateral cooperation. This claim was based on two factors: reportedly an emerging change in Riyadh's policy towards Tehran and Sharif's cordial relations with Saudi leaders (IRNA, 2014b).

After speculation that Pakistan was changing its Middle East policy under Saudi pressure, the PML-N government took immediate steps to balance its ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Firstly, Prime Minister Sharif paid a visit to Iran in May 2014 that helped reduce the mounting trust deficit between the two countries. Secondly, the government convened a conference⁸ of Pakistani diplomats in the Middle East and the Gulf in Islamabad on May 6th 2014 ahead of the prime minister's visit to Iran. Sharif told participants that Pakistan would maintain its policy of non-interference in the Middle East, remain neutral and pursue an independent policy of "economic diplomacy" with countries in the region (Yousaf, 2014b).

In a way, the incumbent Pakistani government has been successful in reviving the country's traditional policy of non-interference in Middle East, which has also helped to normalise its relations with Iran. Pakistani media, intelligentsia and civil society also played a role by criticising the government's growing tilt towards Saudi Arabia in early 2014.

Sectarianism and the IS factor

Saudi Arabia and Iran started to actively support the Sunni and Shia groups in Pakistan, respectively, after the 1979 Iranian revolution. This led to increased sectarian violence in the 1980s and 1990s. Pakistani and Saudi support for Sunni militant groups during the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-89) and for the Taliban in the 1990s was also seen by Iran as efforts to strengthen anti-Shia groups in the region. Also, many among the Shia community in Pakistan saw the Islamisation project of Pakistani president General Zia-ul-Haq (1978-88) as a means to make the state and society more Sunni (Rafiq, 2014).

Although the persisting Sunni-Shia sectarian violence in Pakistan is not exclusively linked to external factors, it has implications for the country's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Experts believe that balanced Pakistani relations with the two countries are imperative to improve sectarian harmony in the country. The continued terrorist attacks by Sunni sectarian militant groups, mainly Lashkar-e-Jhagvi, on the Shia community in Pakistan "resonate negatively in Iran and are viewed as an indicator of a proxy war being carried out in the region" (Aftab, 2014). In 2015 Tehreek-e-

7 The U.S., Russia, China, Britain and France, plus Germany.

8 The three-day conference was attended by Pakistan's ambassadors in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Qatar, the UAE and other countries of the region.

Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its splinter groups such as Jundullah⁹ and JamaatulAhrar have also claimed responsibility for some sectarian-related bombings of Shia places of worship (*imambargahs*). For instance, JamaatulAhrar claimed responsibility for a January 9th attack on an *imambargah* in Rawalpindi, while Jundullah claimed responsibility for a lethal suicide blast at an *imambargah* in Sindh's Shikarpur district on January 30th and a gun and bomb attack on an *imambargah* in Peshawar's Hayatabad area on February 13th. Reportedly, TTP militants were involved in a sectarian-related suicide blast in an *imambargah* in Islamabad on February 18th. At least 100 people, most of them adherents of a Shia sect, were killed in these four attacks.¹⁰

Iran is also concerned about Iranian Jundullah's gradual "resort to sectarian-imbued rhetoric against Shia Islam" (Zambelis, 2014). Jundullah, which, as stated earlier, has a presence in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, "recruits its cadres largely from Sunni religious seminaries and its core militants are from the Rigi tribe who live on both sides of the Iranian-Pakistani border" (Rehman, 2014). Although it claims to be a nationalist insurgent group fighting for the rights of the Iranian Baluchi people of Sistan-Baluchistan, because it operates across the border there is a likelihood of its forging alliances in the future with violent Pakistani Sunni groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and TTP.

Meanwhile, the growing enthusiasm for the extremist anti-Shia and anti-Iran Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which now calls itself the Islamic State (IS), among Pakistani and Afghan militant groups could add to Iranian concerns. While many militant groups and individuals from the region had announced their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, IS has recently formally accepted the allegiance of Hafez Saeed Khan, a former TTP leader from Orakzai agency, and appointed a former Afghan Taliban leader, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim,¹¹ as al-Baghdadi's deputy (Rana, 2015). Media reports suggest that IS is recruiting militants in parts of Pakistan (Zaidi, 2014) and Afghanistan (Withnall, 2015).

The IS factor poses a threat to all the countries in the region, including Iran, in terms of its anti-Shia violence and terrorism. Although there is a only small likelihood of IS itself coming to Pakistan or Afghanistan, the region runs the danger of some IS-inspired or -associated militants forging alliances and concentrating in Afghanistan or Pakistani-Afghan border areas. If Afghanistan achieves some sort of reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban, hardline factions or commanders among the Taliban who do not believe in political reconciliation and their Pakistani associates could try to link up under the IS umbrella. While the violent Pakistani Sunni sectarian groups will be more than ready to join such an alliance, the possibility of Iranian

Sunni insurgent groups joining such an alliance, or at least developing a nexus with it, cannot be ruled out.

Afghanistan and India

Pakistan and Iran have vital stakes in peace and stability in Afghanistan. An insecure and unstable Afghanistan after the drawdown of the International Security Assistance Force could have serious implications for the internal security of the countries in the region – mainly Pakistan, India and Iran, which have been competing in Afghanistan in terms of geopolitical, economic and national security interests since the Soviet-Afghan war. While Pakistan and Saudi Arabia backed the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s, Iran and India supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Later, when Pakistan became part of the U.S.-led alliance against the Afghan Taliban, Pakistani relations with Iran started to improve.

In recent years there has been a growing convergence of trilateral interests among Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, such as in the areas of counterterrorism, border security, preventing drug trafficking, etc. Also, Iran's grievances vis-à-vis Pakistan's support for the Taliban in the past have been addressed to a considerable extent in recent times. While Pakistan does not support the Taliban's return to power, it has also tried to reach out to non-Pashtun communities in Afghanistan and has repeatedly said that it has no "favourites" there. After the Pakistani Taliban attacked a school in Peshawar in December 2014 Pakistan took a sterner position against militants of all hues and colours operating in Pakistan, including those of Afghan origin. Pakistan's decision to ban the Haqqani network following U.S. secretary of state John Kerry's visit to the country early this year (*Dawn*, 2015b), coupled with Pakistan's current efforts to revive the Afghan government's talks with the Afghan Taliban, indicates its growing commitment to help achieve peace in Afghanistan.

However, what might disturb Pakistan is Iran's partnership with India in many strategically significant construction projects in Afghanistan. Besides the construction of the Zaranj-Dilaram road link to the Iranian port of Bander Abbas, Iran, in conjunction with India, is also building a road and railway system to link western Afghanistan with the Iranian port of Chabahar to compete with the Pakistani port of Gwadar. Because Pakistan thinks that India is using Afghan soil to support the Baluch nationalist insurgency in Pakistan's Baluchistan province and anti-Pakistan Taliban militants in Pakistan's tribal areas, Iranian cooperation with India in Afghanistan could serve as a major irritant in Pakistani-Iranian ties.

⁹ This is different from Iranian Jundullah, which is a Sunni Baluch insurgent group based in the Sistan-Baluchistan province of Iran and operates across the Pakistani-Iranian border.

¹⁰ Statistics are based on the Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database on conflict and security.

¹¹ Mullah Rauf was reportedly killed in a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan on February 9th 2015.

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