

TOWARDS HARMONIZATION OF PAK-IRAN RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

(Strapped in a historical correlation, Pakistan and Iran not only share geography and religion, but culture and civilization as well. For centuries, the area now constituting Pakistan remained the hub of the Indo-Persian civilization that produced remarkable works of art, poetry, literature and great intellect. After the creation of Pakistan, the natural affinity and closeness shared by these two neighbours was enhanced further and mutual ties of both flourished to the paramount level. For the last two decades, owing to some minor irritants, the two countries have been unable to take full advantage of available opportunities to bolster the Tehran-Islamabad relationship. Apart from the enormity of differences between two brotherly Muslim Countries, external powers and non-state actors have played a very significant role in undermining their ties. Nevertheless, notwithstanding these setbacks, there is a way forward to consolidate and revitalize their relations. Through an in-depth analysis, a sustained long-term strategy has been worked out to strengthen confidence between Pakistan and Iran with an aim to resolve their bilateral issues. This will result in further enhancing regional integration and developing a better understanding between the two states. The strategy, if espoused by both countries in letter and spirit as a guideline, may prove as a catalyst in minimizing trust deficit between two Muslim nations.)

Introduction

Besides being a neighbour, Iran is the only country with which Pakistan has “had age-old relations, based on cultural, ethnic, and spiritual links”¹. Pakistan shares over 900 kilometres of border with Iran. Traditionally Pakistani frontiers with Iran have always been peaceful, safe and secure. Both countries are bound by a strapping relationship and Iran was the first country which recognized Pakistan upon its emergence as an independent country

in August 1947. Indeed, there have been historical linkages between the people of Pakistan (then India) and Iranian people². Iranian migrants and Islamic preachers had left long lasting impression on the people and civilization of Indian Sub-continent.

The Muslim Sultanate of Delhi introduced the Persian influence in the subcontinent in 13th Century. This Persian cultural influence remained dominant till the end of Mughal Empire in India and thereafter, it gradually declined. Apart from Delhi, two additional Persian cultural centres were established at Lahore and Uchh in the initial days of Islamic history. Under the Mughals, the Persian language was adopted as an official language. The language was later adopted by the smaller and successor states of the Mughal Empires. The language and culture remained popular in subcontinent until late 19th Century³.

Since Iran had its security concerns arising from the expansionist designs of former Soviet Union and an uneasy relationship with Arab World, therefore, emergence of a non-Arab Muslim country (Pakistan) in its neighbourhood provided it respite and reinforced its security. Whereas, Pakistan, otherwise agonized over by Indian aggression and hostile Afghanistan, took Iran as its strategic partner and Iranian soil as its strategic depth. Iran, indeed demonstrated this by providing all out assistance to Pakistan during 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars. First Pakistani Premier Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan visited Iran in 1949 and Iranian Shah reciprocated in 1950, as the first foreign head of state.⁴ Pakistan's national anthem was played for the first time on the eve of the visit of Shanshah-i-Iran, Mr. Raza Shah Phelvi in March 1950⁵. In a way there came to exist a relationship of interdependence between both brotherly Islamic countries right from the inception of Pakistan. Thereafter both countries maintained their bilateral relationship in an atmosphere of Islamic brotherhood and as good neighbours, with mutual acceptability.

Along with Turkey, Pakistan and Iran established Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), an inter-governmental organization for socio-economic development in the member countries in 1964⁶. The organization was renamed as Economic

Cooperation Organization (ECO) in 1985 and its membership increased to ten in early 1990s with the integration of Central Asian States and Afghanistan. Following the Islamic revolution in Iran⁷ in 1979, Pakistan was the first country, which recognized Revolutionary Iranian Government. Besides sending a high-level delegation under Foreign Minister, the then President, General Zia ul Haq himself, visited Iran as a good will gesture in 1980 and 1981⁸.

During Iran-Iraq war, Pakistan made hectic efforts to negotiate a deal between the two Islamic countries to end the war. Pakistan also made its utmost efforts for the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.⁹ Moreover, Pakistan persuaded the United States away from a hostile stance on the issue of its hostages. Unfortunately, both countries developed minor divergences over the interim setup in Afghanistan upon withdrawal of Soviet Union and later on the issue of the support to Taliban by Pakistan and Northern Alliance by Iran. Considering these differences, Iran did not support Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir, once the latter was presenting a resolution in United Nations on Human Rights violations in Kashmir in 1996. It was a serious setback to Pakistani efforts and India which had already developed its relations with Iran, got an opportunity “to fish in troubled waters,”¹⁰ for its own strategic interests.

Pakistan however continued maintaining its brotherly relations with Iran and, on a number of occasions, pushed it towards reconciliation and shunning differences. Pakistan whole-heartedly supported Iranian viewpoint on the issue of its nuclear programme and maintained that Iran has the right to develop its nuclear programme within the ambit of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Through a progressive reconciliation and chaotic diplomacy, both countries come closer to each other in last few years. Unfortunately, on October 18, 2009, a suicide attack, allegedly of Jundallah militant group, killed over forty people in Sistan-o-Balochistan. Those killed include senior commanders of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and tribal elders of the Province. The people and the Government of Pakistan strongly condemned the attack and shared the grief and sorrow of the Iranian

people over the massive loss of innocent lives. Regretfully, immediately after the terrorist attack, a circle of Iranian high-ranking officials and leaders pointed fingers at Pakistan. Pakistan Government however strongly negated its involvement in the attack and assured Iran for its all out support to trace and punish all those responsible for the attack if they were found on Pakistani soil. After clearing the doubts, both brotherly countries have resumed progression in their relationship and have finalized a number of bi-lateral deals including Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline of \$7.5 billion, signed on May 28, 2010¹¹.

Fissures in Pak-Iran Relationship: Whom to blame?

In the initial years of Russian invasion in Afghanistan, 3.3 million Afghan refugees crossed over to Pakistani territory. Iran, however, hosted two million refugees. By 2002, the number of these refugees in Pakistan increased to five million¹². Still there live over 2.5 million Afghan refugees in various parts of Pakistan. Because of their traditional linkages, both countries tried to secure their interests in the post war Afghanistan during the closing days of the Russian withdrawal¹³. Since Pakistan played a major role during the conflict and in the eviction of Soviet Union, therefore, it had more influence over the Afghan warring factions. Moreover, Pakistan also played a major role in the interim setup of Afghanistan in 1990; therefore, Iran felt that perhaps, its interests had not been addressed with the appropriate consideration. Later Pakistan's support and recognition of Taliban Government and Iranian support to Northern Alliance¹⁴ has further deteriorated the bi-lateral relationship.

Nonetheless, it is a reality that the chill in the Pak-Iran relationship had its origin in Afghanistan, mainly because of inability of both to accommodate each other's interests. It was expected that following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which resulted in a momentary retreat of the Taliban, Iran and Pakistan would put aside their decade-old frosty relations for working together "to accommodate each other's strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan."¹⁵ Unfortunately, this did not happen. In the words of Sartaj Aziz, the former Pakistani Foreign Minister, "In the future shaping of things in Afghanistan, both

countries do not have much role to play. Pakistan has been saying repeatedly that it is for the Afghans to decide about their future. So now the environment is conducive to enhance economic and commercial cooperation.”¹⁶ Since Afghanistan became the cause for the gash in Pak-Iran relations, therefore, it should now become a factor for their convergence.

Prevailing Security Environment in Southwest Asia

Traditionally, Pakistan has always been worried about the security of its eastern borders with India. However, it was only after 2001, that an equal threat was perceived from the western borders with Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Pakistani frontiers with Iran are still considered to be peaceful. Indeed, with the passage of time, the security concerns of Southwest Asian countries have become extremely complicated. Since October 2001, Afghanistan is under foreign occupation in the garb of so-called global war on terror. The ill-fated country otherwise had a dreadful past of Soviet invasion and civil war since late 1970s. Security and stability in Afghanistan is indeed a linchpin in the security of Iran and Pakistan¹⁷. Owing to the presence of foreign forces in the region, Iran’s security concerns are primarily towards Gulf region and West Asia, with secondary threats from its north and east. Apart from intense terrorization, Pakistan is facing from within; it is managing security challenges on its eastern as well as western borders simultaneously. However, any development either from the Persian Gulf or from the Southwest Asia would seriously affect the security situation of Iran and Pakistan alike.

Vicissitudes in Pak-Iran Relations: The Current Phase

Following the unfortunate incident of a terrorist attack on IRGC by Jundollah outfit, President Asif Ali Zardari assured President Ahmadinejad that Government of Pakistan would provide all out assistance in arresting all those responsible for the attack if they are found on Pakistani soil. President Zardari declared the incident as, “gruesome and barbaric and bore the signatures of a cowardly enemy on the run”¹⁸. He said Pakistan would continue to support and cooperate with Iran in curbing militancy and fighting

extremism and terrorism. President Ahmedinijad though remained guarded in his statements about the carnage, however, Iranian Foreign Minister without naming the group responsible for the attack said, "They cross into Iran illegally. They are based in Pakistan ---and the hands of those behind the crimes in southeast Iran must be cut."¹⁹

Following the attack, Iranian Interior Minister Mr Mostafa Mohammad Najjar, visited Pakistan, where he was clearly told that Pakistan would never think of aiming such attacks against the territorial integrity of its traditional friend and that Abdolmalak Rigi, the head of militant outfit Jundullah, was not in Pakistan. Upon developing the consensus, both countries have inked a number of agreements to strengthen the security on both sides of the Pak-Iran border. The Foreign Office spokesperson of Pakistan, Mr. Abdul Basit later clarified that this attack was primarily aimed to damage the relations between two brotherly Muslim countries of the Southwest Asia. He said, "There are forces which are out to spoil our relations with Iran. But our ties are strong enough to counter these machinations."²⁰ While dismissing the charges that Pakistan was being used as a springboard by Jundullah to launch attacks inside Iran, the spokesperson said; "There is no question given the excellent relations between us, that Pakistani territory be allowed to be used for terrorist act against Iran."²¹ Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, while further elucidating the Pakistani position assured Iran that, "We have a good relationship with Iran and are committed in the fight against extremists. Why would we do anything that would damage and jeopardize our relationship?"²²

A few months prior to this deadly attack, Pakistan had handed over six militants including Hamid Rigi, brother of Abdolmalak Rigi, the head of Jundullah militant outfit. This Pakistani gesture was an ample evidence of its sincerity towards Iran. Otherwise, how could Pakistan support such outfits to destabilize Iran, once it is already in the grip of terrorism and militancy from all sides? This is believed to be the same terrorist organization that has killed many in Pakistan, including an attack on the motorcade of the former Corps Commander Karachi, who escaped the attack, while many others died. Moreover, Pakistan

cannot afford to destabilize its only safe and secure border running with Iran. Another consideration is that over the last few years, both countries have been hectically working for a gas pipeline, which was initially scheduled to run from Iran to India via Pakistan. The region of Jundullah attack and such terrorist acts might have been an attempt to impair the project that Pakistan can ill afford. In February 2010, the head of the Jundullah outfit, Abdolmalik Regi was arrested while en-route from Dubai to Kyrgyzstan.²³ It is heavily conjectured that he was arrested by Iran on the toe of Pakistani intelligence agencies or else arrested by Pakistani intelligence setup in Dubai and handed over to Iran. On June 20, 2010, he was hanged in Iran²⁴, after Iranian court declared him guilty of being involved in many criminal cases in Iran. His brother and some arrested militants of his outfit were also given death penalties by Iran.

Genesis of Jundollah and Implications on Pakistan-Iran relations

Both Iran and Pakistan view Jundollah as a terrorist organization. This outfit is officially banned in Pakistan. It originated in Sistan-o-Baluchistan but later stretched its network to the borders of Pakistani Balochistan and other cities. This militant outfit is fighting for the “greater autonomy for Baluchis in Iran and Pakistan.”²⁵ Iran strongly feels that the militant outfit was raised and is being funded by United States and Britain with the mandate to create internal split in Iran²⁶. This organization has so far claimed eight attacks in Iran, killing over 100 innocent people²⁷. It also carried out a number of attacks in Pakistan, including murder attempts on former President Musharraf, ex Corps Commander Karachi and recent attacks on the Shiite processions in Karachi, killing dozens of followers of Hazrat Imam Hussain. Regarding the October 18, 2009, attack of this militant group, Mr. Mohammad Ali Jafari, the Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC, said, “Behind this scene are the American and British intelligence apparatus, and there will have to be retaliatory measures to punish them”.²⁸ Another commander of the Guard said that; “The base of the terrorists and rebels has not been in Iran. They are trained by America and Britain in some of the neighboring countries.”²⁹

Nevertheless, the head of this militant outfit, Abdulmalick Rigi, before his arrest and death penalty by Iran, had categorically said that, “he considered himself an Iranian and the Baloch grievances must be settled within the present day Iran.”³⁰ He explicitly clarified his grievances and objectives of his outfit with Rooz News agency of Iran. Indeed this terrorist outfit has an indigenous Iranian origin and later stretched its activities into various parts of Pakistan too. It is just like Taliban, who had their origin in Afghanistan in early 1990s and post US invasion, made their way to the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan in 2002/3. Thereafter in the form of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as the terrorists renamed themselves in 2007, they are playing havoc in various parts of Pakistan under the direction of spying networks of various extra-regional countries.

The organization indeed comprises of locals of the Sistan-o-Balochistan who considered that Iranian Government has ignored them in every sphere of life. Guised in the Sunni sectarian group, the organization indeed has elements that are professional criminals and are part of drug barons having strong linkages with foreign intelligence agencies. As per an Iranian intelligence officer, the people of the drug baron had even offered Iran with \$1billion annually³¹ if unhindered flow of the drug and narcotics is allowed to pass through Iranian borders.

Pertaining to overcoming the domestic problems in Sistan-o-Balochistan, the province “poses a set of historical and strategic challenges that the IRGC - despite its best efforts - is unlikely to be able to overcome on its own. The province has been a headache for the modern Iranian nation-state for the past century and any multi-faceted strategic response must take stock of this troubled historical heritage.”³² Moreover, the border stretch of over 900 kilometers between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan is a rough terrain, making patrolling and surveillance extremely difficult.

Drugs and weapons smugglers are quite rottenly using this stretch. Because of the inhospitable terrain, Pakistani border guards might not have been able to monitor the activities of this terrorist outfit, which probably provided Iran the excuse of pointing fingers

on Pakistan. But whether Iranian border guards and highly trained troops of IRGC succeed in monitoring and bringing an end to the activities of Jundollah militants within Iran is a big question mark. After all, they must have crossed through them to reach inside Iran for undertaking this terrorist act. There are all the likely chances that someone from within could have known about the schedule of meeting on the fateful day of October 18, 2009. Otherwise, there are remote chances that someone had moved all the way from Pakistani soil to Zahedan.

IRGC as the Main Target of Jundollah

So far, most of the Jundollah attacks have targeted IRGC. In fact, over the years, because of the continuous disturbances in the province, Iranian Government has almost handed over the security of the province to IRGC which in turn has imposed strict security measures there. In some cases there are reports that the operatives of the group have been pushed up to the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan, from where they then carry out their terrorist activities all along the border and inside Iran especially targeting IRGC. There is no permanent stay of the Jundollah terrorists in the bordering areas, rather they follow the policy of hit and run. A dozen soldiers of IRGC even tried to find and reach the so-called bases of the Jundollah in November 2009, under the guise of hot pursuit, but were caught up by Pakistani guards on their way back. They however, could not find any such base in Pakistan.

It is pertinent to highlight that apart from 350,000 regular Iranian Army, the IRGC comprises of 125,000 all ranks.³³ It was established in 1979 and has components of all three services; Army, Navy and Air Force. It has played a very significant role in the development of Iran's advance missile system, Shahab-3 with a range of 2,000 km³⁴. Initially, its mandate was restricted to domestic security under the direct control of Supreme leader, but later its mandate was extended to external security duties as well. It contributed substantially during the eight year long Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988. It is widely believed that IRGC has a major role in the development and safety and security of Iran's nuclear programme.

Other Contributing Factors in the Destabilization of Pak-Iran Relations

Obstinate Roles of Extra Regional Forces. Apart from the aforementioned security scenario, there is yet another dimension of the relationship of the Southwest Asian countries, seriously impeding their bilateral relations. This particular aspect deals with their relationships with extra regional countries, who indeed 'are not friends of friends,' thus do not enjoy similar relations with all other countries of the region. These alliances indeed have been the main sources of deformation in the bi-lateral relationship of Southwest Asian countries. As an example; the closer partnership and strategic nature of Indo-Iran alliance³⁵ does not sound well for Pakistan and over the period has taken the form of an irritant in the Pak-Iran relationship. Indo-Iran relationship indeed started developing after 1971 and reached to excellence in early 1990s³⁶. In fact, India never missed a chance to harm Pakistan in the region as well as at the global level.

Throughout its post independence history, India has created numerous problems for Pakistan, which include; its internal destabilization as well as external threats to the extent of Pakistan's disintegration. The ever-growing Indo-Iran relationship over the last two decades has undermined the Pakistani position in the region. On January 25, 2003, on the eve of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's visit to India, both countries signed "The New Delhi Declaration"³⁷ which states that "the two sides recognize that their growing strategic convergence needs to be underpinned with a strong economic relationship. Cooperation in the energy sector was 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 defense in agreed areas, including training and exchange of visit."³⁸

Iran's tacit support of Indian role in Afghanistan also creates angst in Pakistan. Indeed, while being in Afghanistan, India is abetting the elements creating internal instability in Pakistan. India has unyielding plans to create a situation in the Balochistan province similar to that in East Pakistan by supporting the sub-nationalists

and anti-Pakistan elements, nurtured under its intelligence agency since many years. Nonetheless, these sub-nationalists are quite few, but they force their way by pushing the poor of the area to take up arms to challenge the writ of the state, while themselves remaining under Indian shelters, outside Pakistan. Indian consulate in Zahiadan is said to sponsor the sub-nationalist network operative in Balochistan³⁹. There have been reports where even Rigi's network had been found getting funds from the Indian spying elements active in the Sistan-o-Baluchistan⁴⁰. It suits India (whose motive is to work against Pakistani interests anyhow) that the basic aim of this group is to create a rift between Pakistan and Iran. Therefore, Iran should be mindful of Indian motives, which are cloaked in the garb of friendship.

Apart from causing the Baloch turbulence, Indian spying network is sponsoring militancy and terrorism in FATA, NWFP and other areas of Pakistan. A number of the militants arrested for their involvement in the bomb blasts, attacks on security forces and other sensitive installations and public places have confirmed their connections with Indian spying network, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)⁴¹. There is solid evidence about huge inflow of financial capital and latest Indian weaponry for the use of terrorists operating against Pakistan under the guise of Islam. Pakistani Prime Minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani has handed over the proofs of these Indian activities to his counter-part during Sharm el-Sheikh Meeting in July 2009, on the sidelines of NAM conference⁴². It was based on this evidence that India got ready to delink the terrorism from the Indo-Pak dialogue process.⁴³ Indeed, over the years, Pakistan has been critically viewing the Indo-Iran alliance, because it feels that behind the scene India is playing a dangerous game of blemishing the Pak-Iran relationship.

Another irritant in the bilateral relationship of Pakistan and Iran has been the former's closeness with United States. Although both Pakistan and Iran have been the allies of U.S until Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, however, in the post revolution era, there erupted a tension in the bilateral relationship of Iran and US. Pakistan, however maintained its essential relevance for the US, initially because of the Russian invasion in Afghanistan and

subsequently owing to the ongoing global war on terror. The prolonged Pak-US partnership has become an irritant for Iran. Besides, Pakistan's relations with Arab World, particularly Saudi Arabia, and the chill in Iran's relationship with Gulf countries also had an undesired and negative impact on Pak-Iran relationship. Iran however, should have realized that Pakistan's relationship with US, Arab World or Saudi Arabia, has been a stabilizing factor for Iran. In 1980s, owing to a chill in US-Iran relationship, Pakistan was persuaded the western world to support them against Iran. Nevertheless, then President General Zia ul Haq strongly refuted the plan, at the cost of spoiling its strategic partnership with US and western world for which Pakistan had to pay in the form of repeated economic and military sanctions as well as denial of market access until 2002.

During the recent Iran-US nuclear standoff, Pakistan supported the Iranian stance and clearly told US that it will neither allow its territory to be used against Iran nor would it support any action against it. On the other hand, its strategic ally, India has voted against Iran in the Security Council on the nuclear issue, which paved the way for imposition of additional sanctions on Iran in 2008-2010. In order to espouse its strategic partnership with US, India has decided not to become part of IPI gas pipeline. Conversely, Pakistan adopted a clear policy of providing all out support for having a peaceful nuclear programme by Iran and at the global level stressed for the peaceful resolution of Iran's nuclear crisis, as per the provisions of NPT.

The Ethnic and Sectarian Factor

Historically, neither Iran nor Pakistan has ever posed a security threat to each other. The configuration of Iranian population is as such that over 50% people are Persian and remaining includes; ethnic Balochis of Sistan-o-Balochistan and Arabs of Khuzestan, located in the southwest of Iran, bordering Basra Province of Iraq⁴⁴. According to Mustafa El Labbad, Director of the Cairo based research institute; "With regards to Sistan-Baluchistan area, there is an ethnic and sectarian nature to the issue, ----there is the Baluchi versus Persian, and there is Sunni versus Shiite."⁴⁵ In such a

polarized society, there is always a possibility of ethnic or sectarian violence, similar to Jundallah attacks. In the October 2009 attack, Jundalloh killed over thirty Sunni tribal chiefs' along with the personnel of IRGC for having negotiations with Iranian authorities. The militant outfit was apprehensive of the Iranian authority's strategy for a possible "plotting 'to sow divisions among Baloch tribes and clans.'"⁴⁶ In this context, the group though veiled in sectarian dress, but in reality, has ethnic grievances against the Government in Tehran. In all eventualities, Pakistan cannot possibly shore up any ethnic or sectarian divide in Iran, especially when it is fully aware of the consequences of such actions. Pakistan, in the past, has faced and is still encountering security and political crises in Balochistan and in other parts of the country as well as a consequence of the spill-over effects of Taliban insurgency. Therefore, common enemies of Iran and Pakistan may have agendas to exploit the volatile situation to their advantage.

The Gulf between People and Governments

For an astute dealing with the issues like Jundallah attacks in Iranian territory, or the anti-state activities of sub-nationalists in Pakistan, authorities of both countries must realize that, "If the Balochs were taken on board in the first place, possibility of infiltrating the harsh terrain of Balochistan by foreign actors would have been a much difficult, if not impossible, a task."⁴⁷ Hence, accommodation of all political, ethnic, and religious forces active in the politics of Baluchistan is mandatory to ensure stability in the region. This would, inevitably, stabilize affected areas of both Balochistans. Like Iranian Balochistan, over past few years, there has been a widening of the gulf between the successive Federal Governments and the people of Baluchistan in Pakistan. Adequate preference has not been provided to social development, political participations, and poverty alleviation of the people of Baluchistan. Provincial governments and provincial representatives in the federal governments were mostly feudal who preferred their personnel interests rather than the social and economic uplift of the people of Balochistan. These biases subsequently gave way to deprivations, which were effectively cashed by handful self-centric sub-nationalist sardars on the provocation of the foreign spying networks.

Exploitation of Masses

These poverty ridden people over the years felt deprived and became an easy target available to be exploited, either by the foreign powers through their intelligence apparatus, or by some of the local Sardars, who otherwise had historical connections with outside powers since the colonial rule in the region. Quite a few of those Sardars were even enjoying the status of the heads of autonomous princely states, therefore had the anguish of losing the power to a central authority. There have been similar problems in the Sistan-o-Balochistan of Iran. Being outlying and tribal society by nature, Iranian Government like Pakistan could not pay worthwhile attention for the improvement of the living standard of the people of Sistan-o-Balochistan. Hence, both provinces; Pakistani and Iranian Balochistans are sparsely populated with poor infrastructure and vast inhospitable areas, difficult to be maintained without keen interest by the local representatives.

In spite of being the subjects of two sovereign states, the masses of both provinces still maintain their historical linkages and therefore share their common distresses⁴⁸. Over the years, both have become conscious of the fact that they are being exploited, and no serious efforts have been made by either government to improve their living standard through the development of the area. The unremitting sentiments of deprivation led them to be used by sub-nationalists, whose real agendas were anything but not the local development and uplifting of the Baloch masses. Similarly, the religious organization like Jundallah, who indeed maintained its connection with international spying agencies, is being used for numerous purposes like; creating a rift between Iran and Pakistan, domestic destabilization of Iran and finally harvesting ground for the unification of both provinces as an independent state of Balochistan. Some of the think tanks and strategic analysts of United States⁴⁹ have already envisaged such a scenario, and the Indian spying agency along with its partners is on its way to pave way for the implementation of that planning.

Isolation and Alienation in Nobody's Interest

The question arises that for how long non-state actors and extra-regional powers, particularly those who have been friends to none but portraying as such, would drive Pak-Iran relations. At the governmental level, why cannot the wisdom prevail and both countries reconcile the bad patch in their mutual relationship for taking a fresh and more promising start. It is pertinent to mention, that at the level of the people, there have been no differences at all. Rather, the less-warmth in their bilateral relationship at the level of governments, have been taken unenthusiastically by the masses on both sides, who because of religious and cultural affinities desire an easy access to either country.

Indeed, with the post-Taliban Government in Afghanistan, there is hardly any basis left for maintaining animosity between Pakistan and Iran for any long. NATO and U.S forces are pursuing their interests and they have taken along India, a geographically non-contiguous and non-Muslim country to become their successor state, if at all they like to leave Afghanistan in a foreseeable future. Otherwise, it appears that U.S and NATO have a long-term plan to stay in the region. The situation thus calls for an enhanced level of cooperation and joint strategy between Iran and Pakistan to tackle with the challenges, rather getting embroiled into blame game without any logical conclusion.

Areas of Cooperation in Pak-Iran Relationship: Meeting Common Challenges

Indeed, the presence of NATO and United States in the region contiguous to Pakistan and Iran is not only keeping both countries under watch but is pressurizing them on various gambits. Iran is being pressurized to give up the development of its nuclear programme and anti-Israeli policy, whereas, Pakistan is being pressurized for the safety and security of its nuclear weapons from getting into the hands of the terrorists. Moreover, Pakistan is repeatedly asked to do more in the so-called global war on terror. Through a number of misleading electronic and print media reports, many misgivings have been spread against Pakistani nuclear

programme in a systematic manner. The extra regional forces, from ground as well as through U.S naval armada, are surrounding both countries. “Given the military links between the US and India, as well as the Indo-Israeli military nexus, the threat is multiplied for both Pakistan and Iran. In addition, along with the military build-up, US will also try to re-assert its economic interests in the region, especially in the energy sector. This will also impact both Pakistan and Iran.”⁵⁰

Participation in Afghan Reconstruction.

In order to meet the common challenges, Iran and Pakistan in coordination with Karzai Government, should take active part in the re-construction of the Afghanistan and make long-term investments in various projects for the human resource development and boosting economic activity in that country. Both should assure Afghan people that they have not abandoned them and are making earnest efforts to rehabilitate them. Through a close collaboration of Afghan Government and its masses, Afghan territory should be constricted for all extra-regional forces, which in the guise of supporting the Afghan people are indeed, promoting their own long-term interests at the expense of region’s interest. In such an equation, Iran will have to say good-bye to its trailblazer ally India, and Pakistan will have to limit its ties with its seasonal friend, the United States of America.

The admirable aspects of the Pak-Iran relationship are such that, even during the period of less camaraderie of 1990s, there has never been a diplomatic impasse in their bilateral relationship. In order to perk up the old warmth in this relationship, former President General Pervaiz Musharraf visited Iran in December 1999. On that occasion, Iranian President, Mohammad Khatami, declared the relationship between the countries as, “profound and unbreakable, noting the two countries’ common cultural and Islamic foundations, -----undoubtedly, the two countries’ national interests are linked to one another and together we must strive to safeguard these interests”⁵¹. President Khatami further accentuated that both countries should be able to “neutralize divisive conspiracies”⁵² against them. Earlier in May 1998, upon Indian nuclear tests, Iran

showed its concern and President Khatami in a statement said that; “We regard your security seriously and understand your position and the position of our brother, Pakistani nation. The security of Pakistan, as a brother, friendly and neighbouring state, is crucial to us. We consider their issue to be extremely important and will stand by you.”⁵³

More so, once Pakistan conducted its nuclear tests, Iranian Foreign Minister Mr. Kamal Kharrazi was the first foreign envoy who visited and congratulated Pakistan on successful conduct of its nuclear tests on June 1, 1998. He said that “now, they (Muslims) feel confident, because a fellow Islamic nation possesses the know-how to build nuclear weapons.”⁵⁴ Mutual visits of the heads of states and high officials of both countries continued thereafter. In December 2002, Iranian President visited Pakistan and later Pakistani Premier Zafarullah Khan Jamali visited Iran in October 2003 and Finance Minister, later Prime Minister, Shoukat Aziz in 2004. More recently, President Asif Ali Zardari and Speaker of National Assembly Dr. Fahmida Mirza, have also visited Iran and both countries signed a number of agreements of the mutual understandings. President of Iran Ahmedinijad visited Pakistan in April 2008⁵⁵. Both sides reiterated that future of Pakistan and Iran is linked with each other; therefore, more cooperation is needed to boost economic and strategic relationship.

Joint Ventures in Central Asia.

Apart from Afghanistan, both countries have been pursuing their strategic interest in Central Asian region. By virtue of their membership of ECO and Islamic Character, CARs have to be supported by their nearest neighbours and they have to decide their future course of action accordingly. As Dr. Shireen M. Mazari provided an accurate spot-on analysis in the beginning of the global war on terror that, “Within this new environment, it suits both Pakistan and Iran to build a closer, strategic relationship. Given the manner in which the strategic map is currently unfolding in Afghanistan and Central Asia, there are now common issues of concern for Pakistan and Iran. The major issue is the military presence of the US and its Western allies not only in Afghanistan

but also in Central Asia. It is clear that the US bases in the latter are going to be of a permanent nature – at least for the foreseeable future. At the same time, the external presence of naval forces has also increased tremendously in the Persian Gulf region.”⁵⁶

Prospects of Revival of Pak-Iran Relations

Considering the historical references, the current situation, and the ground realities, there is no way that Pakistan and Iran would continue living in seclusion. More so, their divergences are of insignificant nature hence can be alleviated with mutual consent. Both are the prominent and leading countries of the Islamic World. Harmony and synchronization among Tehran and Islamabad would act as a bridge in bringing the dotted Muslim World together, which is the need of hour. In their bi-lateral relationship, they have to shun their minor differences, created by external forces, indeed friends to none or because of their vested interests, centred elsewhere. Adoption of a joint strategy for the security of common border, trust building, and increase in the volume of bi-lateral trade through economic cooperation would act as the catalyst in bringing them together. Failure to reconcile would provide space to extra regional countries and non-state actors to exploit both countries in the areas of respective weaknesses. Some recommendations are underlined below as a guideline to be followed by both countries for their better and harmonious future.

The Recommended Future Course

Following steps can help revive Pakistan-Iran relations in the right direction that would benefit both the countries politically, economically and strategically.

- **Restoration of Trust.** The most critical phase in the Pak-Iran relations is the restoration of trust, which for one reason or another has been a missing link since late 1980s. Restoration of trust is of paramount importance because the level of trust determines the perception of the two capitals about each other, and that perception works as a guideline during policy formulation stage. And for

the restoration of the trust, it is a prerequisite to respect each other's sovereignty in true sense. The recently concluded agreement on joint monitoring of the border should be implemented in true letter and spirit. There should be no recurrence of deliberate incident of border crossing by the forces of any country as a hot pursuit. To avoid the chances of illegal trade and smuggling by criminal gangs, there is a need to enhance the legal and formal trade between both countries. The enhanced volume of trade would increase the stakes and bring interdependency between both states. In this regard, perking-up the 1949, 'Treaty of Friendship to Initiate Trade Relations'⁵⁷, between both countries will be a step in the right direction.

- **Promotion of CBMs.** In spite of differing point of views of the two counties on some issues, there have been innumerable confidence-building measures (CBMs), both at the level of states and the masses. Indeed these measures did not let the derailment of the Pak-Iran relationship. Strategists in both countries acknowledge that, owing to factors like religious affinity, cultural linkages, and economic compulsions, both nations cannot afford detachment from each other. In the changed strategic environment emerging from the concentration of global players in the region, Pakistan and Iran must come closer to each other for taking a common stance on issues of strategic significance, like security that impinge both with different faces. There is a requirement that both countries should undertake steps for deeper cooperation in the field of economy and security. Signing of project like Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline in-spite of Indian refusal at the critical stage is a very welcoming one. Pakistan has also refused to accept any Western/ US pressure on the subject. Even in the event of US unilateral sanctions and a repeated number of UN imposed sanctions on Iran; Pakistan has decided to go ahead with the project.
- About Afghanistan, both countries are maintaining good relations with the government of Mr. Hamid Karazai,

who has been re-elected as President of Afghanistan. Furthermore, President Karzai, has recently initiated a reconciliation process with Taliban and would welcome the help from Pakistan and Iran at this crucial moment. Both countries also recognized that people of Afghanistan should have right to decide their future as per their own wishes. Dealing with sectarianism in Iran and Pakistan may be left at the discretion of both governments as their domestic matters. Otherwise, people of both countries have never considered inconsequential difference of opinions in religious matters as a hurdle in their bilateral relations. In all eventualities, had wisdom prevailed, the anti Muslim lobby should not have been allowed to play among the Muslims of various schools of thoughts (sects).

- **Cooperation in Defence Production.** Cooperation in the field of defence production is yet another area that can be jointly undertaken by both countries and would address the security concerns of each. This cooperation can be extended to the Gulf countries on a later stage, which would bring them closer to Iran, thus the existing differences between Iran and Gulf region would be abridged amicably. Depending upon the level of cooperation, the existing dependency on western weapon system by these countries could also be reduced in a future scenario. For the provision of technical expertise, China could also be incorporated in the joint venture of defence production as a partner.
- **Stabilization of Afghanistan.** Afghan Government and people should be taken into confidence by redressing their years old grievances with Iran and Pakistan. Through their cooperation, Iran and Pakistan must contribute in the re-construction of the war-ridden country. This step would help in stabilizing the region and minimizing the chances of sporadic violence of each other's territorial limits. Moreover, this would also keep the extra regional forces away from the region. In the reconciliation process, each state must respect the national interests without compromising the Afghan

interests. The nut results should be that; ‘diplomacy must get supremacy over the rhetoric and peace over the conflict’.

- **Cooperating Apparatus.** Think tanks, academia, and media are some useful means that can play a very positive role in bringing Iran and Pakistan closer to each other. Scholars must visit each other’s country more frequently. The existing level of people-to-people contact must be enhanced for the development of confidence among the masses. The platform of the ECO should be mobilized for the regional interaction, economic harmony, and overall prosperity of the region. Over and above, the existing low profiled security and confidence building measures need to be set off on war footings.
- **Regional Integration.** Over the years, Afghanistan has been considered as a ‘strategic rear’ both by Iran and Pakistan, which perhaps misled both in 1990s, as they were endeavouring to secure their respective interests. Now once that phase is over, there is a need to learn from the past for a positive forward-looking approach through consensus building. Under the changed global environment, there is a growing need for both countries to forget past annoyances and “forge a new long-term common vision reflecting their common security and economic interests.” The fleeting rip in the Pak-Iran relations has no sound basis, thus can be revamped through enhanced interactions at all levels including masses from both sides. Renaissance of cultural and religious affinities would go a long way.

Conclusion

The long and arduous route to defeat organized criminals, armed secessionists, political and religious extremists along Pak-Iran and Pak-Afghan borders lies in enhanced cooperation, trust building, respecting each other’s sovereignty and cooperative security measures by the Southwest Asian countries. Upon consensus building, between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, there would be a requirement of active lobbying for the gradual exit of

foreign forces from the region and enhanced level of understanding on the long terms basis. Since Afghanistan is under foreign occupation, therefore, there is a need that Pakistan and Iran being the sovereign states should put all their energies with positive attitude for the revival of their mutual relationship while incorporating Afghanistan by adopting a regional approach.

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