

INDIAN FACTOR IN PAK-IRAN RELATIONS

Muhammad Sohail* & Hamid Iqbal**

Abstract

The anomaly in Pak-Iran relations started due to Afghanistan, and served as a stimulus for Indo-Iranian strategic convergence in the longer run. India's ties with Iran cater to its ambition of circumventing Pakistan in its western backyard. India has been trying to bring Afghanistan into its sphere of influence through Iran, to undermine Pakistan's interest. This has adversely impacted Pak-Iran ties and rejuvenation has become a formidable challenge. The paper argues that Pakistan and Iran have to resurrect mutual strategic relationship. Notwithstanding Chabahar and Gwadar projects, both need to recalibrate their bilateral ties with respect to regional dynamics, to explore the potential for entente, and to neutralize Indian factor in the relations. For Pakistan, Iran provides connectivity to Central Asian Republics (CARs). There is also a great potential for boosting energy trade, developing border security mechanism and a joint plan to address the issue of terrorism.

Key Words: *Pakistan, Iran, India, Afghanistan, Strategic Convergence, Persian Gulf, Chabahar, Gwadar, Energy Trade, Border Security.*

Introduction

In 2001, the Taliban rule ended in Afghanistan after the US invasion, and relations between Iran and Pakistan regained their friendliness of yesteryears. Pakistan and Iran have enjoyed a full-scale repertoire of relations till 1979. The Indian factor became a variable in Pak-Iran relations during Arab-Israel war, when there was boost in Indian

* Muhammad Sohail, is lecturer at Working Folks Grammar Higher Secondary School Hattar, Haripur.

** Hamid Iqbal is lecturer at International Relations (IR), Faculty of Contemporary Studies (FCS), National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad.

oil imports from Iran. That variable became significant for the first time during 1990s, with the broader contours of Indo-Iranian strategic and economic bond to be established only in early twenty first century. India seeks hegemony in South Asia and is pursuing this design by increasing its relative power vis-a-vis Pakistan. For that particular purpose, it has established deep linkages with Pakistan's western neighbours.

Now, India envisions geo-strategic and politico-economic ties with Iran to circumvent Pakistan, and therefore acts as an irritant in Pak-Iran relations. This paper is structured in two parts. It first provides a detailed account of the Indo-Iranian collaboration in different spheres since 2001 and its impacts on Pak-Iran bilateral relations. The second part provides a way forward on how to tackle these irritants effectively. Pakistan, out of necessity, must initiate the necessary counter measures - political, diplomatic, economic, and military - to neutralize this very potent challenge.

The Contours of Indo-Iranian Bilateral Relationship

One of the main reasons why this issue is worth pondering over is that there are multiple facets of India and Iran's bilateral relations. Provided the convergence is not limited to an area or two, the chances of their multifaceted bilateral dynamics effecting third party interests become ever larger. Some of the important areas of Indo-Iranian ties are discussed in the remainder of this section.

The Geo-political Dimension

The geographic proximity of Iran, by virtue of being located in West Asia, has been significant to India for carving a geo-political alliance. There are seven countries i.e. Iraq, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, that Iran shares long land borders with.¹ George Nathaniel Curzon has stated that, "Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia and Persia, to many these names breathe only a sense of utter remoteness or a memory of strange vicissitudes. To me I confess, they are the pieces of a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the domination of the world".² Iran's geography provides a gateway for regional powers to landlocked Central Asian Republics (CARs) and specifically to Afghanistan, the battle-ground for world powers.

Then the direct link that Iran has to Persian Gulf imparts greater significance to the country for manoeuvring the politics of Gulf region, since it provides access to Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz. Yet another

¹ World atlas, "Which Countries Border Iran?," <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/which-countries-border-iran.html>.

² George N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), 3.

pertinent feature of its geographical proximity is that it is linked to South Asian region through Pakistan. The land and sea routes of Iran allow West Asian states and CARs to access the prime markets of Europe, South Asia and South-East Asia. South Asia, being the most densely populated region of world with only India and Pakistan's estimated population of 1.5 billion, along with Iran and Afghanistan remains a prime target for world powers to pursue 'Realpolitik' interests.

According to Sunil Dasgupta, "currently, Pakistan enjoys a terrain advantage against India on its eastern front, which it would lose if India could attack from the western border as well".³ For that matter, Iran is the only country that counter balances Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan.

The Defence Partnership

India and Iran first entered a defence and military pact in 1983 when they established an Indo-Iranian Joint Commission that spurred the defence coherence. Memorandas of Understanding (MOUs) on defence cooperation were signed in 2001, and the New Delhi declaration was a milestone in their defence and strategic partnership. The ground work was done by Tehran declaration as it paved the way for the historic Indo-Iran Defence Agreement signed on 19 January 2003; a week later, the 'New Delhi declaration' and related agreements were signed in New Delhi.⁴ This provided India with an opportunity to use Iran's bases in time of war against Pakistan. It was during the signing of MoUs in 2001 when Defence Secretaries of both India and Iran supposedly discussed arms sales to Iran including Indian Konkurs anti-tank guided weapons and spare parts.⁵

In 2017, New Delhi promulgated a 'Look West' policy to develop and sustain a multifaceted presence in the greater Middle East. Iran unquestionably is an instrumental player in this set up.⁶ This gamut of Indo-Iranian convergence and defence cooperation has left Pakistan in a quandary. These defence pacts and bolstered military connections gave an impetus to strategic congruence. While Iran was looking for a partner to provide advanced military technology to boost its defence, India is eager to

³ Sunil Dasgupta, "Pakistan Responds to New Ties between India and Iran," in Strategic Partnership between India and Iran, ed. Robert M. Hathaway (Special Report, Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center, April 2004), 20-26, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/asia_rpt_120rev_0.pdf.

⁴ Shah Alam, "Iran-Pakistan Relations: Political and Strategic Dimensions," *Strategic Analysis* 28, no.9 (2004):537.

⁵ Calabrese, "Indian-Iranian Relations in Transition"; "India-Iran Military Ties Growing," *Strategic Affairs* (June 2001):12.

⁶ Rasheeda Bhagat, "India's Well-Timed 'Look West' Policy," *The Hindu Business Line*, July 26, 2017. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/indias-welltimed-look-west-policy/article9789561.ece>.

have an extended outreach in West Asia for security purposes and more importantly, for becoming a key player in regional dynamics.

An Intertwined Geo-Economy: Comparative Analysis

India is the second largest country of the world in terms of population, and according to a 2017 report by World Economic Forum (WEF), it is the seventh biggest economy of the world, worth around \$ 1.8 trillion. Pakistan, on the other hand falls in mid-twenties on that list. Iran holds some of the world's largest deposits of proven oil and natural gas reserves, ranking as the world's fourth and second largest reserve holder for oil and natural gas respectively, thereby making Iran a natural attraction for growing Indian economy. Iran also ranks amongst the world's top 10 oil producers and top 5 natural gas producers.⁷ Its estimated oil and gas reserves are 7.5 percent and 15 percent of the world's total respectively.

India is the third largest crude oil consumer after US and China. India now imports more than 80 per cent of its oil requirements and 40 per cent of its natural gas needs.⁸ India imports most of its oil from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, but Iran was the 22nd trading partner of India in 2014. India and Iran have extended collaboration in other endeavours, with the two entering into a new round of negotiations in July 2009 regarding the development of the Farzad B offshore "gas field."⁹

Table 1:

Iran's Export and Import Share with China & India

Partners	Export %	Import %
China	25.5	29
India	4.6	11.9

As Pakistan factors in, on 4th March 2004, Pak-Iran Preferential Trade agreement (PTA) was signed. The ratification process took about two years and it was implemented by Pakistan on 1st September, 2006 and

⁷ US Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Brief : Iran," *IEEE*, July 21, 2014. http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2018/EIA_Iran_9abr2018.pdf

⁸ V. Raghuraman, "World Dependence on Iranian Oil: Sanctions on Iran and Impact on India," in *Troubling Tehran: Reflections on Geopolitics*, ed. Arun Vishwanathan and Rajaram Nagappa (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2013), 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*

by Iran on 6th November 2006.¹⁰ As per the data of Trade Map, Pakistan's export to Iran stood at \$ 32.29 million while Pakistan's imports from Iran stood at \$ 260.89 million during 2015.¹¹ Also discussions are underway for Free Trade Agreement (FTA) according to which trade will boost up to \$ 5 billion.”

Table 3: Pakistan's Imports and Exports with Iran¹²

Year	Exports (Million \$)	Imports (Million \$)
2007-08	103.1	381.4
2008-09	400	900
2009-10	207	962
2010-11	162	572
2011-12	153	153
2012-13	98	168
2013-14	53	164
2015-16	32.2	260

The data shows that Pakistan's economic relations are lagging behind India on trade partner list. This raises a pertinent question as to why Pakistan could not manage to keep trade with Iran at a reasonable level.¹³ Also, Pakistan cannot match the statistics and terrain advantage that India enjoys with huge potential of consumer market. India has a population of more than 1.2 billion - five times more than that of Pakistan. The population will continue to increase in the next two to three decades and then this intertwined geo-economy and geo-strategy will play its part in enabling India to use these as strategic tools.

The basis of lack of trade between Pakistan and Iran largely relates to external factors i.e. western sanctions, US pressure and Pakistan's position as a strategic and ideological partner of Saudi Arabia. Despite sanctions, India continued to import oil from Iran on barter system. It was more of a geo-strategic compulsion that spurred Indo-Iranian geo-economic ties. Sanctions on Iran were lifted recently which led to a new era of hope and bolstering of ties with its neighbours.

Lack of clarity in Trump administration's Iran policy is a major hurdle for any agreement to work properly. India will benefit more as

¹⁰ Ministry of Commerce, "Tariff Preferences Granted by Iran to Pakistan," *Commerce*, http://www.commerce.gov.pk/PIPTA/TARIFF_PREFERENCES_GRANTED_BY_IRAN_TO_PAKISTAN.pdf.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Iran-Pakistan Trade on the Decline", *Financial Tribune*, April 07, 2017 19:58.

compared to Pakistan, with regard to natural resources, as soon as sanctions are lifted from Iran. India will also gain from the already established links in Afghanistan that provide another source of rich energy resources and minerals, stocked in places like Hajigak and Zabul province.

There are a number of reasons that contribute to the low trade volume between Iran and Pakistan. These include: high non-tariff barriers in Iran; high customs duty on items in which Pakistan has comparative advantage (e.g. textile); slow process of import approvals in Iran; lack of enabling infrastructure that can facilitate trade on Pakistan's side; poor rail, road and air connectivity between the two countries; and less number of land border trade posts. Despite the abysmal trade relations, Pakistan and Iran have, initiated a broad range of institutionalized steps under the ECO framework that provide tremendous opportunities for widening the scope of their trade relations.

Pakistan's Concerns

The Afghanistan Factor in Indo-Iranian Equation

Afghanistan has been at the centre of Indo-Iran nexus since USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan and this serves as a bone of contention between Pakistan and Iran. For maximizing their influence and strategic gains in the war-torn country, both India and Pakistan supported opposite groups. Afghanistan became an enabling factor for India-Iran ties, while Pakistan backed the Taliban. India and Iran started to cooperate closely on the Afghan question, much to Pakistan's alarm, which wanted to keep the Afghanistan question between Iran and itself. India was also invited by Iran in the conference 'Friends of Afghanistan' that was held in Iran in October 1996.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have rarely been at ease with each other even though both are neighbouring Muslim countries, and share over 2,500 kilometres long land border, called Durand Line - demarcated in 1893 following an agreement between the British Empire and the Afghan King. Pashtun tribes on two sides of that border are divided by this demarcation line. The Pakhtunistan and border-line issues have remained a hurdle for forging a stable bond, but Pakistan and Afghanistan, both familiar with each other's interests, have shown concerns towards each other.

In order to access the sea, landlocked Afghanistan has to pass through either Pakistan or Iran. Pakistan perceives strong Indian involvement in Afghanistan and on its western flank a potential threat. An Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP) was signed by India and Afghanistan in 2011. This agreement establishes strong links between Afghanistan and India against the interest of Pakistan. India now plays a proactive role in Afghanistan with the help of large aid packages, infrastructural and capacity building programmes.

During the latter half of last decade, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Shiv Shankar's meeting showed a commitment to strengthen their hold in Kabul and back Hamid Karzai. India has already invested over \$960,000 over Route 606 which is also known as Delaram-Zaranj Highway inside Afghanistan.¹⁴ Pak-Afghan bilateral ties deteriorated in 2008 after Hamid Karzai's statement that he will send his military inside Pakistan to carry out an operation against Afghan Taliban.¹⁵

It is quite clear that Afghanistan is primed to be a strategic and political pawn of India. Iran provides a channel to India to bring in Afghanistan to carry out activities of sabotage. According to Saghafi-Ameri, "the main causes of the present situation in Afghanistan include lack of proper planning, shifting policies, inattention to geopolitical realities and over-reliance on military power without necessary attention to development and civilian assistance plans."¹⁶ US withdrawal from Afghanistan will create power vacuum and that is a source of concern for both Pakistan and India. Iran is just about to get free from some of US sanctions and is in embryonic stage to influence the regional politics. Pakistan is irritated by Indian ambition to completely overthrow Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan for which it has used all possible means. Pakistan has shown its concern over Research and Analysis Wing's (RAW) active involvement in Baluchistan and Sindh through Iran.

India's major aim is to counter and contain China, but regionally it has been an arch rival to Pakistan and its intransigence has always remained a major hurdle in mitigating tensions. Pakistan and Iran, being directly connected to Afghanistan, are disadvantaged due to the possibility of spill over of instability from Afghanistan whereas India remains aloof of it. Pakistan's envoy to the USA, Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry expressed the same concern to a Washington based think tank. According to him, India does have strategic interest in Afghanistan. It could be a part of the double squeeze strategy against Pakistan.¹⁷ India has shown its agitation and opposition over reconciliation process with Taliban because a stable Afghanistan does not serve its interest.

¹⁴ Fayyaz Hussain, "India Financing New Road Network to Connect Iran with Central Asia Via Afghanistan," *Daily Pakistan*, May 2, 2016.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Saghafi-Ameri, "Prospects for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan," *SIPRI* June 2011, <http://www.sipri.org/research/conflict/afghanistan-regional-dialogue-1/publications-1/ARD01.pdf>.

¹⁷ Correspondent, "US Audience LOL Safter Pakistan Diplomat says They Harbor No Terrorists," *India Today*, June 8, 2017 <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/pak-diplomat-laughed-at-for-saying-no-safe-sanctuaries-in-pak-981654-2017-06-08>.

Collaboration over Chabahar: Strategic Considerations

Chabahar is a warm water port just 72 km away from Pakistan's 'Gwadar Port'. The meaning of Chabahar - 'four seasons of spring' - itself describes its importance. Iran declared Chabahar a special economic zone in 1992 and later signed a deal with India and Russia to develop a North South Transport Corridor (NSTC) in St. Petersburg. In January 2003, the governments of Afghanistan, India and Iran met in Tehran to sign the Memorandum on Development and Construction of the Transit and Transport Infrastructure. That agreement also included the reconstruction the Delaram-Zaranj highway to connect Iran and Afghanistan. Pakistan perceives this as a threat due to Chabahar's nearness to the Makran Coast, to China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and its potential for to become a multi-purpose military base.

These ports are the focus of regional politico-economic alliances but the imperativeness of this mega project is its strategic aspect. During the 70s, Pakistan offered the port of Gwadar to US even though the Shah of Iran had already declared to invest in building the 'blue water' port of Chabahar. This development was meant to counter USSR and its ally 'India' strategically. The first project run by the Indians plans to link Chabahar by rail to the mineral rich area of Hajigak (its mineral assets are estimated at \$1-\$3 trillion) and the copper mines of Zabol Province. Afghanistan will also be linked to Turkey through Herat-Mashhad route.

Nirupama Rao, former foreign secretary of India, while talking about Chabahar at a conference, held by Tehran's Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) and New Delhi's Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA) in 2010 said that the project is "at the heart of the common vision that India and Iran have for Afghanistan and the region."¹⁸ Harsh Pant, took a similar line while sharing his thoughts on the matter and said that, "For Iran, Chabahar is a significant project because it portrays Iran as not entirely isolated." He further said that, "From India's perspective, Chabahar is crucial because of the access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The port is important for both sides."¹⁹

The port will take the Indo-Iranian relations to the next level and will conversely help India remain a key stakeholder in the gulf politics and the region at large. The development of the port will also ensure India's easy accessibility to Balochistan and Sindh, where its agencies and other sources perform espionage and sabotage-related activities.

¹⁸ Vijay Prashad, "India's Iran Policy: Between US Primacy and Regionalism," *Working Paper Series 19, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs American University of Beirut*, November 2013, 6.

¹⁹ Harsh V. Pant, "India-Iran Cooperation at Chabahar Port: Choppy Waters," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (March 2018):1-2.

Iran's ambassador to Pakistan Mehdi Hunar Dost declared that the project is not limited to just Iran and India, Pakistan and China can also join the project. According to him, Gwadar and Chabahar is not a case of rivalry. Iranian ambassador's approach is based on extending the regional coherence and establishing Iran as pivot of regional politics. The CPEC on the other hand will boost the regional connectivity and economic development of the region and beyond. The project was launched in 2015 with a worth \$46 billion but now Chinese investments under the flagship Belt & Road initiative have reached almost \$62 billion.²⁰

The development of Gwadar is destined to serve China's interests, boost its influence in the region, and to help it reach the markets of Africa and Europe through cheaper means. Additionally, Pakistan is also expected to gain in terms of development of infrastructure, energy projects and enhanced employment opportunities. The work started on the port in 2002 but due to unforeseen circumstances, the progress could not meet the standard, causing delays. Later in April 2015, 51 MoUs were signed including the one to develop Gwadar port, the 'heart of economic corridor'.

Gwadar port provides China with a direct access to Indian Ocean. This will enable China to overcome the hurdles in staying connected with this part of world and to Europe and Africa. It will be a strategically prime route for China, and in any worst-case scenario or time of conflict in the South China Sea, will serve as an alternative. It is also important for Pakistan as it lies at the mouth of Strait of Hormuz and provides Pakistan a space to strategically manoeuvre the politics of the region to its favour.

Soon after Pakistan and China joined hands to establish the deep-sea port in early 2000s, India showed its reservations. Robert Kaplan writes that, "the Indians' answer to Sino-Pakistani cooperation at Gwadar was a giant new \$8 billion naval base at Karwar, south of Goa on India's Arabian coast, the first phase of which opened in 2005."²¹

CPEC will become the juggernaut of Pakistan's economy and India's inclusion in the project is India's choice. According to Ambassador Fauzia Nasreen, India would have shown signs to join the CPEC if it would see it as solely economic project rather than as a strategic blueprint.²² Iran is also concerned over the delay in Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline, whereas, Pakistan feels restricted in this regard due to international sanctions on

²⁰ Sajjad Hussain, "China's CPEC Investment in Pakistan Reaches \$62 Billion," *Live mint*, April 12, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/dB5tQKISoKNrvl7EwDPFbP/Chinas-CPEC-investment-in-Pakistan-reaches-62-billion.html>.

²¹ Christophe Jaffrelot, "A Tale of Two Ports", *Yale Global*, January 7, 2011, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/tale-two-ports>.

²² Interview by the author with Amb. Fauzia Nasreen, Advisor (SDGs), COMSATS (Islamabad, June 12, 2017).

Iran. Iran's distress can also be due to Pakistan's alternate gas projects such as Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) and Qatar LNG.

Potential for Indian Influence in the Persian Gulf

India's growing interest in the security of Strait of Hormuz and its growing military relationship with Iran (to use it as a counterweight to Pakistan in the Persian Gulf), is a source of concern for Pakistan.²³ Furthermore, India's strategic posturing in the Indian Ocean Rim continues unabated. Its acquisition of port facilities at Duqm, Oman and Chabahar poses real threats to Pakistan and its interests in the region. These positions straddle the Strait of Hormuz and place Pakistan's Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) and Makran Coast within India's strategic reach. Indian presence in the Gulf would enable it to manoeuvre the power politics of the region and control the channel especially in a potential war time scenario.

Gwadar is a deep-sea port located in Pakistan's Balochistan province at the mouth of Persian Gulf. The port is 553 km away from Karachi and 72 km from the Iranian border. It is placed just outside the Strait of Hormuz, the gateway to Persian Gulf and is a key sea trade route. For that purpose, it can prove to be Pakistan's economic hub with all the regional strategic importance ensured. The issue at hand that leads to a potential conflict of interest is the Indo-Iranian joint venture - Chabahar port, and the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) it entails; it becomes an issue because a strong Indian presence in the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz is a pre-requisite for meeting these ends. India and Iran conducted naval exercises in 2003 and 2006 in the Indian Ocean with the latest one conducted in January 2016 code-named 'Velayat 95'. The exercises were held in an area of 2 million square kilometres, spanning the Strait of Hormuz, the Sea of Oman, north of the Indian Ocean and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.²⁴ The exercises were aimed at boosting the defensive capabilities of India vis-a-vis Pakistan.

Indo-Iranian ties and External Interference in Balochistan

The political dimension of Indo-Iranian nexus and RAW's active involvement in Pakistan, apart from their strategic coherence is evident from the defence cooperation. India has got a direct route through Iran to reach Pakistan and plan activities to promote instability in Pakistan. Iran shares a common border with Pakistan connecting Baluchistan, the largest

²³ Siddharth Ramana, "The Pakistan Factor in the India-Iran Relationship," *Strategic Analysis* 36, no. 6 (2012): 941.

²⁴ "Iran Launches Major Naval Exercise in Northern Indian Ocean," Press TV, Feb 26, 2017 08:59AM, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/02/26/512124/Iran-Indian-Ocean-Habibollah-Sayyari>.

province of Pakistan by land area, which is also rich in mineral and energy resources. Although the border issue was settled back in 60s, but the sectarian entanglement still halts relations as Iran often alleges Pakistan of providing sanctuaries to anti-Shia militant groups such as 'Jundullah' and 'Jammat-ul-Ahrar' based in Pakistan. Iran also perceives a threat from the Pakistan-Saudi alliance as a counterbalance to Iran's role in Middle East.

Pakistan is facing problems in its security domain due to the insurgencies led by Baloch separatist organizations along the Iran-Pakistan border. Pakistan views this as an outcome aided by Indian intelligence agencies that aim to destabilize Balochistan and deteriorate its law and order situation. The geostrategic location of Balochistan has gained significance with the initiation of CPEC as it focuses on making Gwadar a trade hub and to develop industries in Balochistan.

The Kalbhushan Jadav case raised serious concerns in Pakistan, as it proved the use of Iranian soil by Indian agencies for perpetrating illegal activities in Pakistan. Prime Minister Modi has provoked such intentions and came straight by crossing red lines during media appearances. In an address to the nation on India's Independence Day in 2016, Modi talked about the situation in Balochistan and later urged Indian diplomats and media to highlight this issue in world capitals.²⁵ His stance over Balochistan is supported by some of Baloch insurgent leaders such as Khalil Baloch, Chairman of the Baloch National Movement and Brahamdagh Bugti, leader of separatist Balochistan Republican Party (BRP), thus reinforcing the evidence of Indian efforts to destabilize Pakistan by creating havoc in the province.

The responsibility equally lies with Pakistan because it has failed to solve the conundrum of Balochistan. There certainly is a lack of true leadership in the province, but the Indian narrative and direct involvement have proved to be catalysts for the situation in the province. In March 2016, Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) head Major General Asim Bajwa, briefed on the arrest of Indian Navy officer and spy Kalbhushan Jadav, and stated that his goal was to disrupt development of the CPEC, with Gwadar port as a special target. He maintained that, "this is nothing short of state-sponsored terrorism... There can be no clearer evidence of Indian interference in Pakistan."²⁶

Kalbhushan Yadav held an Iranian passport and was guilty of involvement in activities of espionage and sabotage against Pakistan. The alleged spy was impeding the law enforcement agencies' efforts to restore peace in Balochistan and Karachi. RAW is the chief source of all the material aid given to destabilize the peaceful environment and plan,

²⁵ News correspondent, "US Refuses to Support Modi's Position on Balochistan," *Dawn*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1284025>.

²⁶ News correspondent, "Govt Airs Video of Indian Spy Admitting Involvement in Balochistan Insurgency," *Dawn*, March 29, 2016.

coordinate and organize such activities inside Pakistan. The agent himself confessed about his active involvement in such activities and about being funded by Indian embassy in Zahedan.

That was the point of concern and debate when President Hassan Rouhani paid an official visit to Pakistan last year and met with top military and political leadership. At the occasion Pakistan's top brass military issued a clear statement by General Raheel Sharif saying that, "there is one concern that RAW is involved in Pakistan, especially in Balochistan, and sometimes it also uses the soil of our brother country Iran."²⁷

On his return to Iran, the Iranian President denied Pakistani stance and said that India is a friend and no further discussion was held over Pakistan's concern by stating that, "whenever Iran comes closer to Pakistan such rumours are spread."²⁸ Uzair Baloch, a Lyari gangster, also confessed before Joint Investigation Team (JIT) about his connection with Iranian Intelligence. He fled to Iran after the Rangers launched an operation in Karachi in 2013. He was living with his friend, Malik Baloch, in Chabahar, where he met Haji Nasir who held dual nationality, adding that Haji Nasir offered Baloch to shift him to Tehran permanently where he would be provided a residence with no cost as he [Nasir] had "good relations with Iranian intelligence officers and he can arrange his meeting with them."²⁹

The Iranian soil has proved to be a safe haven for RAW to operate in Pakistan especially in Balochistan. Indian agitation is obvious as it tries to hinder normal state of affairs in Pakistan so that the latter can't obstruct Indian interests in the region.

The Way Forward

While suggesting any way forward for Pak-Iran convergence of interests in regional dynamics and bilateral relations, it is pertinent to mention that there are other major irritants such as US and Saudi factor in the Pak-Iran relations. These major irritants also needed to be dealt with rationally. To neutralise India factor, Pakistan has to balance the equation by enhancing its ties with Iran. Under President Rouhani, Iran has displayed pragmatism that provides an encouraging environment. In March 2016, President Hassan Rouhani concluded six MoUs, including a "Five-Year Strategic Trade Cooperation Plan" with Pakistan to bolster

²⁷ Azam Khan, "Iran's Help Sought to Stop RAW-Backed Terror," *The Express Tribune*, March 27, 2016.

²⁸ "Rouhani Denies Discussing 'RAW's Involvement in Balochistan' with Pakistani Leadership," *Dawn*, March 26, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1248078>.

²⁹ Imran Ayub, "Uzair admitted to Espionage a Year Ago, Reveal Documents," *Dawn*, April 13, 2017.

bilateral relations in the areas of trade, economy and energy. The two sides have also agreed to deliberate on the ways to boost bilateral trade by means of preferential trade and to move forward for a free-trade agreement through an opening of two additional crossing points along their border to encourage and facilitate trade and people-to-people contacts that have suffered due to sanctions.

Strategic Coherence

Both neighbours should understand each other's stakes in the regional dynamics and promote a trust-worthy environment for developing a strategic entente. Pakistan and Iran should adopt a moderate policy that serves strategic coherence. As India is establishing a deep relation with Israel - much to the dismay of Iran, and US is also tilting towards India, China and Russia, considering this shift will knit stronger bilateral bonds. This provides an opportunity for bridging Pak-Iran divergences by adopting collective mechanisms and determining one's friends and foes in the backdrop of regional realities. .

The Indo-Iranian alliance in Afghanistan is yet another counterweight to Pakistan but it will also hurt Iran consequently due to the spill over effect. Iran should minimize and check the Indian agencies' free access to Afghanistan, which is exacerbating the complexity of the situation. India is moving towards US strategically which will bring Iran and Pakistan closer to Russia and China in geo-strategic terms. Pakistan and Iran should reduce the trust deficit and use Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as the platform.

Iran should be added in quadrilateral coordination group as it is a direct stake-holder in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Iran must try to convince the militant groups within their reach, not to act against each other. Moreover, Pakistan and Iran have to tone down the sectarian militancy and sectarian-backed groups from acting against each other.

Both Iran and Pakistan see the so-called Islamic State, which has an embryonic presence in South Asia, as a threat. Still, balancing Iran-Arab relations will be a difficult and an uphill task for Pakistan, especially when Pakistanis' are employed in the Gulf and it is mostly their remittances that keep the country's economy afloat. Notwithstanding these difficult circumstances, Pakistan will have to remain neutral and alert against the import of toxic ideology of fresh violence at home.

Resolution of Afghanistan Imbroglio

Afghanistan is a pivot point for South Asian politics. It has proved a catalyst for Pak-Iran divergences and must be resolved by adopting collective mechanisms. The Indo-Iranian alliance in Afghanistan is to counterweigh Pakistan but it will also hurt Iran consequently due to spill over effect. India's relations with the US are now reinvigorating to

strategic engagement, which encourages Iran and Pakistan to join hands on geostrategic issues with Russia and China, on the SCO forum. A growing alignment in how Iran and Pakistan view stability in Afghanistan can now be seen. . Iran's approach is more pragmatic now as evident from shift in Tehran's stance over reconciliation talks with Taliban. Iran, disapproving any kind of negotiations with the Taliban till 2009, has offered to play its role in mediating with Taliban. It has now not only expressed support for the Pakistan-backed reconciliation process in Afghanistan but also hosted multiple Afghan Taliban negotiations.

Iran as a Partner in CPEC

Iran has shown interest to join the CPEC. While India is currently halting the building of Indo-Iranian joint venture Chabahar, Pakistan should welcome this Iranian move whole-heartedly as it will be a game-changer for bilateral economic ties. Iran also invited Pakistan on the inauguration of Chabahar port, which was much regarded as a positive gesture.

Cooperation on Border Security Mechanism

Pakistan and Iran have to negotiate on border security issues. The fencing of a porous border needs to be done in order to check the cross-border movement of anti-state elements. Joint security forces can be the best option and intelligence sharing can also help reduce it. To this end, border control technologies need to be incorporated in manning cross-border check posts and streamlining rules against smuggling and illegal cross border traffic.

Working on Economic Ties

Pakistan and Iran can use the platform of ECO (Economic Cooperation organization) and SCO for forging better economic linkages. India has continued to trade with Iran despite sanctions and recently France has signed a deal of gas export from Iran worth \$ 1 billion. Pakistan should build its side of gas pipelines and establish banking channels.

Gwadar will also provide an opportunity to spur deep economic ties with Iran if Iran joins CPEC. An agreement like FTA should be streamlined for encouraging local businesses and industrial units to get advantage of each other's commodities and manufactured products. The economic interdependence and intertwined interests will bring fruitful convergences and will establish strong political and strategic bonds. The growing ties between China and Iran is an important factor that needs to be weighed by the leadership in Pakistan to immediately take necessary steps for bringing up a trilateral cooperation framework between Pakistan, Iran and China.

Enhancing Social and Political bonds

Pakistan and Iran share a common religion and culture that provide huge potential to bolster their relations in this domain. Working in this direction will not only integrate the society but will also help shun the coldness. Religious scholars from both sides should sit together to revamp and recalibrate the religious harmony leaving behind the curse of sectarianism. There should be free and easy access to community on either side of border. Scholars and political leaders' regular visits from either side will also enable understanding of each other's cultures and strengthening of bilateral bonds. This social and cultural stage will provide an impetus to better collaboration and coordination in other spheres as well.

Conclusion

The Indian presence on Pakistan's western border and its strong ties with Iran has now become a catalyst for the other major irritants that have not only scuttled the Pak-Iran relations but also considerably threaten Pakistan's sovereignty and security as well. The cross-border terrorism that affects both states' relations also gives India the opportunity to exploit the Pak-Iran equation in its own interests. The sectarian divide is also a discouraging factor for Pak-Iran ties; it distracts the two states and provides India a further opportunity to exploit the situation and get closer to Iran – something counterproductive to Pakistan's interests.

There is thus need for Pakistan to find ways to address the India factor in its ties with Iran, since vital interests are at stake due to the increasing Indo-Iranian closeness. A number of potential avenues of bringing betterment have been discussed in the segment on 'the way forward'. Pakistan must sit with Iran to find a durable and acceptable solution to remedy the fractured relations. Both states must correspond to challenges of cross-border infiltration and Shia-Sunni divide accordingly.

The major areas of bilateral strategic convergence are the economic and security sector; cooperation in these two would mutually reinforce each other. Strong trade and business ties with Iran will not only help improve Pakistan's economic situation, but will also lead to greater stability and economic prosperity in the region. Pakistan and Iran are bound to share the neighbourhood, which compels both states to foster healthy relations by utilizing the opportunities in economic, societal and strategic realms – thus engendering greater cohesion. There is a need of deconstructing the security paradigm based on the values of strategic competition and reconstruct one based on ideals of strategic cooperation.

