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Pak-Iran Contemporary Relations: Challenges and Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Pak-Iran relations are of great importance for both states. Iran was the first state that recognized Pakistan following its inception, while Pakistan was among the first countries that recognized the new dispensation in Iran in 1979. However, there have been some stumbling blocks in bilateral relations: India-Iran ties, sectarianism, Jundullah, and the Taliban are all factors that have harmed relations in the post-9/11 era. However, the changing regional dynamics provide for opportunities following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. This article looks into the factors that did not allow the relationship to grow altogether despite the existing potential in the post-9/11 period. The growing India-Iran ties, their North-South Transport Corridor, and the Indian plan to include Chabahar in it are causing concern in Islamabad. The militant groups operating near Iran's border in Baluchistan are a cause of serious concern for Tehran. The article argues the mistrust needs to be bridged to augment cooperation. Moreover, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the China-Iran comprehensive cooperation agreement are good developments for both Pakistan and Iran to turn the relationship into a closer partnership. The changing dynamics in the region provide opportunities for both the states to adopt. It is time for both Iran and Pakistan to adopt a mutual approach to regional issues and make a new strategic partnership with Russia and China. The Pak-China-Russia-Iran Partnership Group will be a stronger one and of great importance to all members.

Keywords: Pak-Iran relations; Taliban; U.S. withdrawal; India; Jundullah.

INTRODUCTION

Iran and Pakistan share the same religion, geographical connection, and cultural resemblance. Hence, despite some issues, the relations between the two brotherly states are smooth both at the governmental and public levels. Iran is important in Islamabad's foreign policy as the latter sees the former as a vital stakeholder for regional economic prosperity and security. The first Muslim country that recognized Pakistan was Iran. On February 19, 1950, Iran and Pakistan signed a treaty of friendship. Liaqat Ali Khan, Pakistan's first premier, visited Tehran in 1949, while the Shah of Iran visited Pakistan in 1950—the first head of state to visit the newborn state (Khalid, 2020, p. 120).

Similarly, Pakistan and Iran became part of the U.S.-led Baghdad Pact in 1955. Iran gave Pakistan full political and diplomatic support during India's 1965 and 1971

wars. Iran helped in restoring diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 1963.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought substantial changes in Iran-Pakistan relations. Both countries condemned the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan but backed opposite Afghan factions. Iran supported the non-Pashtun section, while Pakistan supported the Mujahideen, primarily Pashtun. When the Soviets withdrew in 1989, the gap remained intact; the countries continued supporting opposite factions of the warlords, further widening the trust deficit. When the Taliban moved into Mazar Sharif after taking over Kabul, they killed several Iranian diplomats and Shia Hazaras in the north. This broke ties between the Taliban and Iran and harmed relations between Pakistan and Iran.

However, they were unanimous in saying that the

unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops solved the problem. Pakistan emerged as a "front line state" against Soviet aggression and received massive military and economic assistance from the international community, especially the U.S. Iran supported the Shia community in their resistance against Soviet aggression. However, Iran did not play an active role because it was engaged in a war with Iraq that continued for eight years.

Afghanistan's developments, particularly the emergence of the Taliban, Pakistan's Shia-Sunni conflict, and competing interests in Central Asian republics all harmed Iran-Pakistan relations in the 1990s. Iran openly supported the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban and non-Pashtun group in Afghanistan that did not allow Islamabad-Tehran relations to flourish. However, the fall of the Taliban in the wake of the September 11 attacks and Pakistan's earnest efforts to eliminate sectarianism in the country paved the way for close relations between Tehran and Islamabad. Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi visited Islamabad, and both countries vowed to take the same approach vis-à-vis the Afghan issue. Both the countries announced they wanted a multi-ethnic, broad-based government in Kabul under the auspices of the United Nations (Iqbal, 2001). It indicated they support the Bonn Process vis-à-vis the future of Afghanistan.

Despite these positive overtures, differences remained in some critical areas, like Pakistan's coalition in the war on terror and the U.S. On the other hand, Islamabad was concerned about Tehran's close relationship with New Delhi. Another area of disagreement was the matter of access to the mineral-rich Central Asian states. Pakistan views Gwadar and Karachi's port of Qasim as the shortest routes, while Iran claims Chabahar and Bander Abbas to be the apt links for communication with the outside world. This paper will deal with three factors that hampered improvement in Pak-Iran relations after 9/11. These are Pakistan's strategic partnership with the U.S., Jundullah, and India's strategic partnership with Iran. Similarly, it will analyze how both countries' interests converge in Afghanistan following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021. Lastly, the paper offers a way forward for how both countries can resolve their issues.

PAKISTAN-U.S. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AND IRAN

Before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, both Pakistan and Iran had close relations with the U.S. However, after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, a chain of events, such as the

1979 U.S. embassy hostage crisis, the Iran-Israel tussle, U.S. support of Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, U.S. sanctions, and Tehran's contradictory role in the Middle East peace process, provided for bitterness in Tehran-Washington relations. Both adopted a confrontational approach toward each other. Though for a brief period, the 9/11 attacks provided an opportunity for cooperation between Washington and Tehran (Zammit, 2015). Iran openly condemned the attacks and later facilitated the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan in many ways as it closed its border to fugitive Al-Qaeda members, agreed to rescue American pilots in distress, allowed its territory to be used by the U.S. for carrying humanitarian supplies of food and other items to Afghanistan, provided intelligence to the Northern Alliance, and played a highly constructive role in the Bonn conference for creating an interim government in Afghanistan (Rubin, 2020). Barnett Rubin once told me that Iran's former foreign minister, Jawad Zarif, and General Qasim Sulemani, who got killed in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq in 2020, were instrumental in settling things between the Northern Alliance and Americans. However, U.S. engagement with Iran was short-lived, as in a 2002 State of the Union address, and President Bush declared Iran part of the "axis of evil" in line with North Korea and Iraq (Heradstveit, What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran, 2007).

The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan post-9/11 increased Tehran's insecurity. The U.S. blamed Iran for interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs. In addition, the U.S. also accused Iran of developing nuclear weapons. The U.S. military presence at the Shindand airbase, close to Iran, and in the neighboring Central Asian countries, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, critically augmented Iranian sensitivity to calculated encirclement. As one analyst noted:

For Iran, the most pressing security threat emanating from Afghanistan is not a local externality (such as the problem of Islamic fundamentalists or Afghan refugees) but the military presence of the U.S. Iran is threatened by the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, but not because of competing interests in Afghanistan. Instead, Iran is threatened because the U.S. is trying to stop Iran from becoming a world leader and because of the nuclear standoff in the Middle East.

On the other hand, Pakistan became a frontline state and

close ally of the United States after 9/11 in the war on terror. Pakistan's closeness with the United States was a severe concern for Iran. Iran claimed that the U.S. was using Pakistani soil to destabilize Iran (Kumar, 2008: 776). But no real proof was given, and Pakistan said again that the U.S. would not be allowed to use its land or airspace for a military attack on neighboring Iran (Afrasiabi, 2006).

Pakistan and Iran finalized a \$7.5 billion gas project pipeline in June 2010, which is expected to start natural gas supply to Pakistan in 2014. The project was initially started in 1994 between Pakistan and Iran, in which India later included the Iranian request (Khalid, 2020: 122). This is a megaproject in the energy sector between Pakistan and Iran. The U.S. had vehemently opposed the India-Pakistan-Iran (IPI) gas pipeline because this project would boost Tehran's economy and thwart its international isolation efforts (Kumar, 2008): 779). In addition to helping its economy, the pipeline project could be instrumental in boosting Iranian clout in South Asia. Thus, Washington tried to pressure Pakistan and India (both friendly with Washington) to back off the deal. India pulled out of the agreement in 2008 because Washington was so strong (Siddiqui, 2009).

Nevertheless, Islamabad repelled Washington's pressure, and the agreement was finally signed in Turkey on June 5, 2009. The United States urged Pakistan to review its gas pipeline deal with Tehran. "We do not think it is the right time for doing this kind of transaction with Iran." The U.S. Secretary of State, Robert Blake, stated during a Washington briefing (Dawn, 2010). Abdul Basit, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesperson, responded that Islamabad would pursue the gas pipeline project with Iran as a sovereign decision, keeping in view our national interest. In March 2013, Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari and Iranian President Mehmdud Ahmedi Nejad inaugurated the pipeline despite U.S. pressure (BBC, 2013). On the inauguration, "Today is a historic day." "The gas pipeline project is the beginning of a great work," Ahmadinejad told reporters. It is to be mentioned that the pipeline from the Iranian side was mostly completed. Tehran was also ready to give Islamabad a \$500 million loan for the pipeline construction on the Pakistani side. Despite efforts and pressure, Islamabad did not take Washington's pressure regarding halting the gas pipeline project at that time, yet the project is incomplete in that Washington's reservation over it and the sanctions on Iran are prime causes. Similarly, other

factors like economic problems, insurgency, and the law-and-order situation in Balochistan have been a hurdle for the project.

SUNNI INSURGENTS: A BIG BOTTLENECK IN IMPROVING PAK-IRAN RELATIONS

Sunni insurgents who operate in Iran's Sistan-Balochistan province are a severe concern for Tehran. Iran blames Pakistan for extending support to these organizations or at least providing them with a haven in Balochistan. However, Pakistan has denied sheltering militants on its soil or turning a blind eye to them. Even more clashes occurred between Pakistani and Iranian border forces in October 2014, when Iranian guards entered Pakistani territory, claiming to be looking for militants who had fled to Pakistan. Jundullah (Soldiers of God), a Sunni militant group, was founded in 2002. The group was led by Abdul Malek Rigi alias Mullah Malik, based in Sistan-Baluchistan, which is connected to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The objective of this militant group is to protect the "human rights, culture, and faith of ethnic Baluchis" in Iran (Zahra, 2009). The group leader, Abdul Malek Rigi, was arrested in February 2010 on a flight from Dubai to Kyrgyzstan. He was hanged in June 2010 by the Iranian government over the charges of inciting violence in Sistan-Balochistan.

Jundullah is a violent movement against Iran, and many people blame it for terrorist attacks that happened inside Iran. In these attacks, Iranian citizens, government personnel, and security forces, mainly the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, were targeted. Some of the deadliest attacks included the February 2007 bomb attack that killed 11 Iranians, including Revolutionary Guards, and the March 2006 Zahedan bomb attack that killed 22; a suicide explosion in Sistan that killed around 40 people; the July 2010 bomb attack at a mosque in Zahedan that killed 30 while injuring 300 people; and a suicide attack in the Imam Husain Mosque in Chabahar in December 2010 that resulted in the killing of around 35 citizens.

Iran claims that Jundullah is a rebel group aiming to separate the Sunni-dominated area from Iran. However, the head of the Jundullah, Abdul Malik Rigi, denied these charges. Iranian media claimed that Abdolhamid, the brother of the Jundullah chief, had confessed to Rigi's meetings with U.S. officials in Islamabad. Official sources in Balochistan have firmly rejected it and maintained that Pakistan had not allowed its territory to be used for anti-

Iran activity. On October 18, 2009, seven members of the Revolutionary Guards were killed by a suicide bomber and 42 other people in Pisheen, an adjacent town with the Iran-Pakistan border. Ahmadi-Nejad, the then Iranian President, claimed that Pakistan's soil had been used for the attack. Ahmadi Nejad complained to President Zardari about the incident, claiming that the perpetrators were in Pakistan and requesting quake action. Pakistan and Iran have close brotherly relations, but the presence of anti-Iran elements on Pakistani soil is not justified. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, the head of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, said, "The group of Rigi has direct contact with the American and British intelligence services and, unfortunately, the Pakistani intelligence service" (Dawn, Iran blames U.S. and Pakistan for attack, 2009).

Iran summoned Pakistan's envoy to Tehran to make a strong protest Pakistan's failure to dismantle Jundullah's network on its territory (Mir, June 1, 2009). However, the two countries adopted a policy of covering the issue. Asif Ali Zardari, the President of Pakistan, phoned his counterpart and assured him that Pakistan would provide the best possible facilitation to arrest the culprits behind the heinous incident if they were inside Pakistan (Khan, 2009). Mostafa Mohammad Najjar, Iran's minister of the interior, went to Pakistan to talk about how to fight the Jundullah Group.

Time and again, from Pakistan, Iran has been demanding concrete steps to contain Jundullah's activities. Pakistan has made sincere efforts in this regard. For example, to recover the Iranian diplomat, a raid was conducted by Karachi police in a locality to retrieve an Iranian diplomat who was abducted from Peshawar in November 2008. Though the diplomat could not recover, during the operation, two policemen died while 35 alleged militants belonging to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and members of some other banned outfits were arrested. Pakistan security forces freed 21 Iranian truck drivers held hostage by Jundullah members after heavy gun battles in the hilly area of Baluchistan in August 2007. Abdolhamid Rigi, the brother of the Jundullah Chief, was also arrested by the security forces of Pakistan and handed over to Iranian authorities. Earlier, when Abdul Malek Rigi was arrested in February 2010 while on a flight from Dubai to Kyrgyzstan, Mohammad Abbasi, Pakistan's then Ambassador to Tehran, claimed during a media conference that it was impossible without Pakistan's support. But the Iranian government denied these claims

and said that the whole operation was "run by Iranian authorities."

Similarly, on August 28, 2014, Abul Rauf Regi, the younger brother of Abdul Malik Regi, was shot dead in Quetta. Pakistan security forces arrested him, and they were supposed to hand him over to the Iranian authorities (Mir, 2014). However, Jundullah's issue has severely affected Pak-Iran relations in the new millennium.

INDIA-IRAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Iran has had close and cordial relations with India for a long time. During the post-Independence period, India's non-alignment policy and Iran's alignment with the West determined Indo-Iran relations to a great extent. However, India's interaction with Iran remained minimal during the first decade of the Islamic Revolution in Iran due to various reasons. Tehran's support of the Kashmir cause, its soft corner toward the Soviet-installed government in Kabul, and its policy on the miserable condition of the Indian Muslims caused strains over India-Iran relations. However, despite these irritants, cooperation between the two states in the economic, energy, and, to some extent, industrial sectors kept continuing. India is a big market for Iranian oil and gas, making them natural partners to cooperate in the energy sector. Iran became one of India's top five energy suppliers in 1999-2000. However, over time, India-Iran oil diplomacy got further momentum, and from 2007 to 2010, Iran remained the second largest exporter of oil to India after Saudi Arabia (Diplomatist, April 2, 2020). When President Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, the Indian imports of Iranian oil were affected.

The conclusion of the Cold War and the subsequent dismemberment of the USSR provided both India and Iran with several opportunities and challenges. Afghanistan, Central Asia, and energy security were significant areas of interest that brought these two countries closer. Afghanistan's situation after the Soviet withdrawal, especially when the Taliban took control of Kabul, drew Tehran and New Delhi closer. Both states viewed the growth of fundamentalism in the shape of the Taliban as a threat that could destabilize the region. They supported the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban coalition. Similarly, the energy sector has been a major driving force for India and Iran to come closer. India, a

larger energy consumer, and Iran, a giant energy producer, came close to each other as natural partners (Pant, 2004).

Central Asia was another area of cooperation for both states. Following the September 11 incident, India and Iran became even closer. In 2003, Syed Muhammad Khatami, who was President of Iran at the time, was invited as the chief guest to India's Republic Day Parade. This showed how close the two countries were. It is pertinent to mention that India invited its most trusted friends to that ceremony as chief guests. The visit ended with the signing of seven MoU, the declaration of New Delhi, and several agreements.

There are various reasons for Iran's closeness to India. The U.S., for decades, has been trying to isolate Iran in the community of nations and has imposed strict economic sanctions. To neutralize the effects of these measures, Iran adopted various strategies. One of them is to get closer to those countries that can afford the U.S. enmity and counterbalance the U.S. Therefore, Iran signed various military and economic agreements with China, Russia, and India. The China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, a 25-year-long agreement signed between Tehran and Beijing in April 2021, is considered a milestone for Iran to minimize the burden of its economic sanctions (Baharoon, 2021). Tehran's close defense cooperation with New Delhi has been a severe concern for Islamabad. A scholar described it as:

Any Indian presence on Iranian military bases, even if it is solely to train the Iranians, would allow India a more subtle "operational" use of early warning, intelligence gathering, etc., facilities against Pakistan. An Indian military presence in Iran, with or without strike capability, would enable India in the event of war with Pakistan to create a "holding threat" along its western borders. In fact, India's power over Iran has steadily grown as relations between Pakistan and Iran have gotten worse (Zeb, 2003).

In September 2000, Russia, Iran, and India signed the North-South Corridor Agreement to connect Mumbai with St. Petersburg via Tehran and Moscow. Azerbaijan later joined the agreement in 2005. It reduced transit costs and increased India's trade with participating countries. India has completed a 215-kilometer road from Kabul to Zaranj (Iran), constructed and funded by India. The goal of this project is to stop Pakistan from trading with Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics

(CARs) through Pakistan and to make it easier for India to send goods to Afghanistan and the CARs.

India has long been trying to get a strong foothold in Afghanistan to destabilize Pakistan from its western border. The opportunity they got in post-9/11 Afghanistan after Karzai became an interim president and the U.S. oversaw Afghan affairs. Several Indian consulates had been established in Afghanistan (near the Pak-Afghan border), which are closed now following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021 (Reuters, August 10, 2021). These consulates perpetuated insurgency in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan and FATA (Zeb, 2003). Professor Christine Fair writes about these consulates in these words:

It would be a mistake to completely disregard Pakistan's regional perceptions due to doubts about Indian competence in executing covert operations. That misses the point entirely. Furthermore, it is unfair to dismiss the notion that Pakistan's apprehensions about Afghanistan stem partly from its security competition with India. Having visited the Indian Mission in Zahedan, Iran, I can assure you that they are not issuing visas as the main activity! Moreover, India has run operations from its missions in Mazar and is doing so from the other consulates it has reopened in Jalalabad and Qandahar along the border. Indian officials have told me privately that they are pumping money into Balochistan (Kazmi, 2009).

Despite the nominal Indian population in Mashhad, Tehran also allowed India to set up a consulate there. Islamabad raised its concern; however, Tehran assured Islamabad it would not be used against Pakistani interests while Tehran would keep a check on them. Zahedan, bordering Pakistan, has a robust Indian consulate with around 100 Indian families (Montazeran, Mumtaz, 2004). Similarly, India established its Bandar Abbas consulate in 2002, a source of concern for Islamabad. Through this consulate, India can monitor the movement of ships through the Persian Gulf. One analyst summarized these concerns in these words:

Numerous analysts of South Asia infer that there are close security ties between Delhi and Tehran because of the Indian consulate in Zahedan, with a likely intelligence presence there. India also established a consulate in Iran's port city of Bandar Abbas in 2001, permitting India to

monitor ship movements in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. From a regional security point of view, the volume of defense trade, measured in dollars, may be less relevant than the activities that appear to be ongoing, many of which may be more qualitative. The presence of Indian engineers at Chahbahar and of Indian military advisors and intelligence officials in Iran confers on India significant access to Iran. This access is essential for India's ability to project power vis-à-vis Pakistan and Central Asia. It gives India a better way to keep an eye on Pakistan and even lets India use Iran to launch non-conventional operations against Pakistan (Fair, 2007).

However, Iran says that its relations with India are not at the expense of Pakistan. In November 2001, during his visit to Islamabad, Dr. Hassan Rouhani stated that Tehran's close relations with New Delhi could help create an environment of talks between India and Pakistan to help resolve the Kashmir issue (Montazeran, Mumtaz, 2004). Similarly, Hassan Rouhani, as a president, visited Islamabad in March 2016 and called Iran and Pakistan "intertwined and interdependent" (Husain, 2016). Certain factors have the potential to restrict the further consolidation of Iran-India ties. India has a close partnership with the U.S. and close ties with Israel. India supported the UNSC resolutions that put sanctions on Iran and voted twice in favor of the IAEA resolution that called for sanctions against Iran.

PAKISTAN-SAUDI RELATIONS AS A FACTOR

Iran's close relations with India concern Islamabad, like Saudi-Pakistan cooperation, and this closeness is a bother for Tehran. Iran and Saudi Arabia have been rivals for a long time. Whenever there is closeness between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, we see a bonhomie between New Delhi and Tehran. The Arab Spring for more than a decade has further broadened the gap between Riyadh and Tehran, which has led to proxy wars in the Gulf. Iran has been supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen, damaging Saudi-Iran relations considerably. However, Pakistan must maintain balance in its relations with both Riyadh and Tehran. When the Yemen issue surfaced in 2016, Pakistan tried to play the role of mediator rather than taking sides (Vatanka, 2016). Pakistan does not want to antagonize its relations with either state because of its weak economic situation, fraught relations with

India, and its connectivity in the region that will boost its economic condition. Pakistan wants to thwart any Indian effort against Pakistan from the Iranian side. Pakistan cannot afford to allow India to make its political, strategic, and economic foothold strong in Iran, which will threaten Pakistan's interests and security. Hence, it wants good relations with Tehran for strategic and economic factors. With Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has brotherly relations, and the former extends aid and loans to Pakistan during financial hardships that keep a bonhomie between Riyadh and Islamabad. However, balancing relations with both states is not an easy task to handle.

Shia-Sunni factor

Among other irritants in Pak-Iran relations, the Sunni-Shia rift is also a cause of divergence between the two states. Iran, a country with a Shia majority, believed in supporting Shias in Pakistan and employing them in conflict zones to serve its interests. Alex Vatanka writes about how this factor hampers Pak-Iran relations:

The menace of Shi'a Sunni violence is not only a catastrophe for the Pakistani nation, but it is also a yardstick to measure the readiness and abilities of Tehran to act as a protector of the Pakistani Shi'a. The Iranian authorities go out of their way to bear the mantle of the global champion of Shi'a Muslims. However, while the plight of Pakistani Shi'as has become a rallying cry for some aspects of the Iranian regime, Tehran's actions rarely match its most fervent rhetoric about the suffering of Pakistan's Shi'a (Vatanka, Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence, 2015).

Iran believes the Shia community is under repression in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and they shall be helped. Iran has a sense of historical superiority based on its Persian empire established in the sixth century B.C. that lasted for centuries. Hence, Iran has regional designs and wants to dominate the region. The Iranian Quds Force, one of the eight branches of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), operates in Syria, Iraq, and other regional countries to serve Tehran's interests. Similarly, Iran, since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, has been supporting Shia groups in Syria. When a Salafi militia launched a rocket on the shrine of Zainab in Damascus, it led to the formation of the Zainabiyon Brigade (Zahid, 2016). Iran recruits Shias from the Kurram tribal district

for the war in Syria (author's discussion). However, a local once told me that those killed in the war are buried in Iran or Syria, and those are not brought to Pakistan due to the fear of Pakistani authorities. The Quds force has been active in Syria and Iraq, and its leader Qasim Sulemani got killed by the U.S. in a drone strike on the outskirts of Baghdad in July 2020. Hence, the Shia factor profoundly impacts relations between both states.

A WAY FORWARD FOR COOPERATION

Pakistan-Iran relations can be further improved following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Several factors could lead to close cooperation between both states. One, the Taliban factor, has been critical in both states' relations. There was divergence in the past over the Taliban. However, there has been close contact between the Taliban and Tehran for the last several years because their interests converged in Afghanistan. The Taliban's modest approach towards other ethnic groups, especially Shias, was vital for Tehran.

Similarly, Iran and the Taliban wish for the United States to leave Afghanistan. This convergence has positive impacts on Pakistan-Iran relations. Afghanistan is now a place where Tehran and Islamabad can work together and get closer to each other.

Second, the sectarian conflict in Pakistan is under control, which has been a severe concern for Tehran. Jundallah activities are minimal, and Pakistan's border with Sistan-Baluchistan is relatively secure. Previously, Iran was concerned about the Jandallah insurgency in Sistan-Balochistan. In the same way, there is a problem with the Zainabiyoun Brigade, and Tehran needs to rethink its policy of sending Pakistanis to fight in Syria.

Third, the China-Iran 25-year Comprehensive Partnership will bring Tehran close to Beijing and Pakistan. The China-U.S. competition brought China and Iran close to each other. Similarly, a close friendship between Pakistan and China could bring Tehran and Islamabad onto the same page. China, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan can work for connectivity and trade with each other.

Fourth, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is a positive development for Pakistan and Iran. The United States posed a serious threat to Iran in Afghanistan because the Shindand Airbase in Herat Province bordered Iran. On the other hand, the change of regime in Kabul is a good development for Pakistan, as the previous government had nothing to do but blame

Pakistan for every failure and instability in Afghanistan at the behest of India. The Taliban have good relations with all the neighboring states, and they assure the world that they will not allow any state to use Afghan soil against any state. For their stability and legitimacy, they will keep their commitments.

Fifth, a gap between Iran and India could change Pak-Iran relations. When China and Iran come close, it affects Iran-India relations. Hence, China-Iran closeness and a gap between India and Iran could provide prospects for Pak-Iran relations.

CONCLUSION

The post-9/11 strategic environment of the region brought new opportunities and challenges for Iran and Pakistan, affecting their bilateral and multilateral relations. Pakistan and Iran's interests and concerns are interlinked in the new regional and global environment. Although Pakistan was a close ally of the US, it did not allow the US any facilities for any adventures against its neighbors, such as Iran. Iran-U.S. confrontation is not in the interest of Pakistan. The region was volatile, which badly affected Pakistan's internal security. Both Iran and Pakistan are the victims of terrorism. The appropriate way to eliminate this menace is to promote close bilateral cooperation, intelligence sharing, and mutual trust between the two countries. Besides, they should work for the socio-economic uplift of the deprived class of society, where terrorism constantly thrives. Pakistan never opposes Tehran's relationship with New Delhi; however, being a Muslim state, it considers awareness of the Muslim Ummah its responsibility against Indian designs. India desires to create a split in the Muslim world. One of the objectives of India's coming close to Iran was to create misunderstanding between Iran and Pakistan to establish her hegemony over the entire region.

The current changing situation in Afghanistan is complex yet provides an opportunity for Pak-Iran relations to share a common approach by supporting a neutral government in Afghanistan that does not allow Afghan soil to be used against any country. Following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, regional players are adjusting their policies to obtain the best possible deal. It would be a challenging task again for Iran and Pakistan to have a unanimous foreign policy toward Afghanistan. Both countries have had bitter experiences with past Afghan policies. Pakistan and Iran are also the most affected countries because of four decades of war in

Afghanistan. It is time for both countries to start working on a plan to support a broad-based government in Kabul to bring stability to the region. In Afghanistan, Iran has more influence over Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, while Pakistan holds sway over Pashtuns. Both countries can play a substantial role in bringing Afghans closer without having any great power in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Iran have no territorial or other significant disputes, and their relations are traditionally friendly. Pakistan's threat perception is from India, not from Iran. Iran stood by Pakistan in times of trouble. However, any step Iran takes in collaboration with India must keep Pakistan's concerns in mind. The friendship between China and Iran will also help make things better between Pakistan and Iran.

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