

43 Years of Iranian Revolution: Opportunities, Challenges, and a Way Forward for Pakistan

Aiza Salik*

Introduction

Iran has successfully celebrated 43 years of its Islamic Revolution last month. The transition of Iran from a Western-backed monarchy to an anti-West theocratic republic has led to significant changes in Iran's approach towards the international system and neighbouring states. The Iranian revolution was a sharp contrast to the Shah's White Revolution of 1963 which led to social change, rapid urbanisation, and the adoption of Western values that alienated the traditional and religious elements in Iranian society. During Shah's regime, the pressure from opposition forces and protests paralysed the country which eventually led to the demise of Shah's autocratic rule.¹ The Iranian nation believed that Shah's revolution of Westernising Iran only benefitted the privileged and modern elite of the country.² Due to the overwhelming role of the West, mainly the US, over the political spectrum of Iran, its relations with Pakistan also prospered since Pakistan's inclination towards the US was evident. The Pak-Iran relationship, however, saw a major shift after the Iranian revolution due to opposing regional trajectories. The anti-US stance of Iran due to the former's support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in contrast to the pro-US policy of Pakistan which was further consolidated in the wake of Afghan jihad, ensued further differences between Pakistan and Iran. The 1979 revolution also escalated the sectarian tensions in Pakistan

which resulted in violent confrontations and extremism.³ During Zia's era, Pakistan was also going through a major phase of Islamisation which was in a stark contrast to the Iranian model. The idea of Islamisation in 1979 given by Zia was inclined overwhelmingly towards the Sunni interpretations of Islamic law while Iranian revolution was essentially Shi'ite. Due to the religious affinity of Pakistani Shi'ite community with Iran and the influx of Saudi influence during and after Zia's rule, Pakistan witnessed persistent waves of sectarianism within the country which negatively impacted Pak-Iran ties. Nevertheless, in the context of contemporary regional scenario, Pak-Iran ties are imperative to be discussed amidst the challenges which are present and the opportunities that can be worked upon.

Challenges for Pakistan

Iran-Saudi Rift

Sectarianism in Pakistan and the imbalance of relations between Pakistan and Iran were not just limited to Zia's and Khomeini's divergent policies but were also impacted by different external factors. Saudi Arabia being a close ally of Pakistan has offered generous assistance to Pakistan over decades.⁴ During the Afghan jihad, Saudi Arabia provided funding to far-right religious seminaries in Pakistan, some of which later on became recruitment centres for sectarian outfits. Anti-Iran Saudi interventions in Pakistan led to

* Ms Aiza Salik is an Intern at the Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad.



distrust between Pakistan and Iran. Iran and Saudi Arabia's proxy-war for geopolitical supremacy resulted in an unfortunate competition inside Pakistan.⁵ The hegemonic interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia worked in Pakistan through funding to two different religious groups: Iran being the supporters of Shi'ites while Saudi Arabia sponsored radical Sunni organisations. With the rise in the fight for regional dominance, sectarianism put Pakistan's peace at stake. As Pak-Saudi ties were close owing to Saudi economic aid, the consequential effects were borne by Pak-Iran relations which increasingly spiralled.

Indo-Iran Relations

With the end of the cold war, India required energy for its reformed economy to support its industrial base. Therefore, India drew closer to Iran to support its energy needs.⁶ Some major factors like Parsi community in India, a large number of Indian Shi'ites, geopolitical location of both countries, and bilateral energy trade dominated Indo-Iran relations.⁷ For India, close relations with petrodollar states like Iran are immensely beneficial because of the need for foreign capital and credit facilities for its massive industrialisation program. The relationship between both countries has evolved into a significant partnership in the areas of trade, energy, south- north trade corridor, and security. In 2001, both sides agreed to launch a new phase of constructive and mutually beneficial cooperation, covering, in particular, the areas of energy, transit and transport, industry, agriculture, and the service sector.⁸ Specifically in energy sector, the ties of the two countries are so strong that despite his 'maximum pressure campaign', the former US

President Donald Trump, granted India the exemption in order to purchase oil from India. Similarly, India also invested in the Chahbahar port of Iran, hence, ensuring its access to Central Asia while consolidating its footprint in the Iranian economy. Due to the Indo-Iranian ties, Pakistan has always remained apprehensive that India might use the Iranian soil to sabotage Pakistan's interests and cause instability inside Balochistan.

US Sanctions on Iran

The US factor has played a significant role in Pak-Iran ties. With the increased sanctions placed by the US on Iran after the withdrawal from Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Pakistan was unable to continue its trade terms with Iran. The rising demand for energy makes Pakistan could make Iran a good trading partner. But pressure from the US has prevented Pakistan to have any bilateral trade agreements with Iran. The classical example of it is the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline which is still pending. On the other hand, Pakistan is more focused on Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline that has the US support. This inclination of Pakistan towards the US made Iran sceptical about closer ties with Pakistan.

Opportunities for Pakistan

Balochistan Factor in Pak-Iran Ties

In the large tracts of remote areas in Balochistan, Pakistani security forces have come under attack from armed separatist groups while civilians have lost lives in sectarian violence. On the other side, Iran has also experienced the killing and kidnapping of its border guards at the Iran-Pakistan border. With



presence on both sides of the border, separatist groups find sanctuary inside Iran while radical Islamist groups establish their cells inside Pakistan. Since Pakistan and Iran share a long border, the two countries are also planning to fence it off as a move against terrorism and smuggling. Furthermore, Pakistan and Iran also intend to declare Gwadar and Chabahar ports as sister projects especially after the involvement of China in Chahbahar that can reduce Indian influence.

Economic Prosperity

As Pakistan experiences shortage of energy, it is unable to provide the optimum level of energy and gas to its industrial sector. On the other hand, Iran is an oil and gas abundant country with ample reserves that can be traded across the border with Pakistan in the shortest possible time and distance. An agreement was signed in 2013 between both states for provision of Iranian gas to Pakistan. The Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline is a gateway to prosperity in the energy sector for Pakistan. The agreement will boost the bilateral trade between Iran and Pakistan which will eventually help in building strong relations of the two countries.⁹ Moreover, the China factor is a major element that will inhibit the delay in the completion of Iran-Pakistan pipeline as a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed between Iran and China for a \$400 billion worth of Chinese investment in Iran over the next 25 years. Hence, if the pipeline is successfully laid and extended to China, Pakistan could also benefit through its transit fee.¹⁰ Furthermore, there is also a possibility that the nuclear deal between Iran and the world powers will be revived. If that happens, Pakistan and Iran will eventually be in a better position

to extend their energy cooperation with each other.

Cooperation between Pakistan and Iran on Afghanistan

With Afghanistan's current situation, the security risk to Iran and Pakistan has increased because both countries share a border with Afghanistan. Both states have a convergence of interests on maintaining stability inside Afghanistan due to two reasons: refugee influx into both countries and Afghanistan's potential of becoming the safe haven for radical and terrorist organisations which pose a threat to both Iran and Pakistan. Therefore, Pak-Iran cooperation on Afghanistan is critical to induce a comprehensive relationship between the two states.

Conclusion

Iranian revolution was a shock to the entire world. In the last 43 years, Iran has been through a dynamic process of change in its foreign policy. Islam being a strong thread of ties between the Muslim nations of the world plays a significant role, so is the case with Iran. In the context of Pak-Iran ties, they are marred by not only less economic exchange but also political differences. However, in contemporary times, common goals and threats present the opportunity to both states to collaborate with each other. More often than not, the complicated history becomes an obstacle in the way of any long-lasting harmony in the region. Conflict and instability do not exist in a vacuum. They are influenced by multilateral relations across the region. The strong ties of Pakistan with the United States and Saudi Arabia hampered regional cooperation between Pakistan and Iran. But recent imbalance



between Indo-Iranian ties—mainly due to the boost in Indo-Israel relations—is said to be a way forward for regional reorientation and cooperation between Pakistan and Iran. The Chabahar and Gwadar ports can also contribute to cooperation between the two countries.

Finally, the recent visits of high level Pak-Iran delegations in each other's countries are said to be a step up in strengthening ties between the two. Therefore, it can be predicted that the prospects of cooperation between Pakistan and Iran are high in the foreseeable future.

Notes and References

- ¹ D. Paraz, "Iran 1979: the Islamic revolution that shook the world," *Al Jazeera*, 11 February 2014. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/2/11/iran-1979-the-islamic-revolution-that-shook-the-world>.
- ² Stephen Jones et.al., "The Islamic Republic of Iran: An Introduction", *House of Commons*, Paper No. 09/92 (London), December 2009. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/RP09-92/RP09-92.pdf>.
- ³ Safdar Sial, "An analysis of emerging Pakistani-Iranian ties", *Norwegian Peace Building Resource Centre* (Oslo), April 2015. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/190006/d7f90a473ca2847f0ccf74f31d02fb8e.pdf>.
- ⁴ Muhammad Muzaffar, Robina Khan and Zahid Yaseen, "Saudi – Iran Strife: Complexities for Pakistan", *Global Regional Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2017): 119 – 134.
- ⁵ Zulqarnain Sewag, "Sectarian Rise in Pakistan: Role of Saudi Arabia and Iran", *South Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2015): 1 – 19.
- ⁶ Mahwish Hafeez, "India-Iran Relations: Challenges and Opportunities", *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Autumn 2019): 22 – 36.
- ⁷ Kashif Mumtaz, "Changing Patterns of Iran-India Relations," *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer 2006): 7 – 32.
- ⁸ Vinay Kaura, "India and Iran: Challenges and Opportunity," *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/india-iran-relations-challenges-and-opportunity/>.
- ⁹ Muhammad Khan, "Prospects of Pak-Iran Energy Cooperation," *Tehran International Studies and Research Institute*, January 31st, 2022. <https://tisri.org/en/?id=p1dw3lg5>.
- ¹⁰ Fraz Naqvi, "Future of Pak-Iran Gas Pipeline", *Regional Rapport*, 18 August 2019, available at <https://regionalrapport.com/future-of-iran-pakistan-gas-pipeline/>.