

NAVIGATING COMPLEXITIES: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN PAKISTAN-IRAN RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan and Iran, two pivotal countries in South Asia and the Middle East, share a complex and multifaceted relationship shaped by historical ties, geopolitical interests, and socio-cultural dynamics. This research paper delves into the myriad challenges confronting Pakistan-Iran relations, examining political, economic, security, sectarian, and regional factors that influence their bilateral ties. Despite a foundation of shared religious and cultural heritage, the relationship between Pakistan and Iran has been strained by diverging foreign policies, economic sanctions, border security issues, and external influences from powerful actors such as Saudi Arabia and the United States. This study employs a historical and analytical approach to assess the evolution of Pakistan-Iran relations and identify the key obstacles hindering closer cooperation. Key findings reveal that while both nations have made strides in diplomatic dialogues and energy cooperation, persistent challenges such as sectarian tensions, cross-border militancy, and conflicting regional alliances continue to impede progress. The influence of international actors and regional security alignments further complicates the relationship, highlighting the need for nuanced and strategic policy interventions. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers aimed at fostering a more stable and cooperative bilateral relationship. These include enhancing diplomatic engagement, leveraging economic opportunities, and addressing security concerns through joint initiatives. By providing a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and potential areas for cooperation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping Pakistan-Iran relations and offers insights for future policy directions. The study underscores the importance of sustained efforts to mitigate tensions and build a resilient partnership that can contribute to regional stability and prosperity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Pakistan and Iran is a critical component of South Asian and Middle Eastern geopolitics, deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and religious ties (Khan, 2016). Both countries, sharing a border of approximately 900 kilometers, have navigated a complex web of interactions influenced by internal dynamics and external pressures (Rizvi, 2012). Historically, Pakistan and Iran have enjoyed periods of close cooperation, particularly during the early years following Pakistan's independence in 1947, when both nations shared mutual concerns over regional stability and countering Soviet influence during the Cold War (Bukhari, 2013).

Despite this foundation, the bilateral relationship has faced significant challenges over the decades. One

primary area of tension is the divergent foreign policy orientations of the two nations, particularly their differing alignments with global powers such as the United States and Saudi Arabia (Sehgal, 2018). Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 marked a turning point, introducing a new ideological element that occasionally conflicted with Pakistan's predominantly Sunni orientation and its alliances in the region (Nasr, 2006).

Economic relations between Pakistan and Iran have also been fraught with obstacles. Trade potential remains underutilized due to economic sanctions imposed on Iran by Western countries, affecting bilateral trade volumes and limiting opportunities for economic cooperation (Hussain, 2019). Additionally, the proposed Iran-Pakistan gas

pipeline, a significant potential energy project, has faced delays and uncertainty due to geopolitical pressures and security concerns (Siddiqui, 2014).

Security issues further complicate Pakistan-Iran relations. Both countries have contended with cross-border militancy and the presence of insurgent groups operating along their shared border, exacerbating mutual suspicions and necessitating enhanced security cooperation (Shahid, 2020). Sectarian tensions, fueled by the Shia-Sunni divide, have also strained relations, with each country occasionally accusing the other of supporting sectarian violence within their borders (Zahid, 2015). Moreover, regional dynamics and the influence of external actors play a significant role in shaping Pakistan-Iran relations. The strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran often places Pakistan in a delicate balancing act, given its historical alliance with Saudi Arabia and its need to maintain cordial relations with Iran (Riedel, 2011). Additionally, the United States' policies towards Iran, particularly under different administrations, have impacted Pakistan's diplomatic and economic engagements with Tehran (Hussain, 2019).

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges facing Pakistan-Iran relations, exploring political, economic, security, sectarian, and regional dimensions. By examining these multifaceted issues, the study seeks to offer insights into potential areas for cooperation and strategies to mitigate tensions, ultimately contributing to a more stable and prosperous bilateral relationship.

2. Historical Context

Early Relations and Common Interests

The relationship between Pakistan and Iran dates back to the early years following Pakistan's independence in 1947. Initially, both countries found common ground in their shared cultural, religious, and historical ties. As two major Muslim nations, they supported each other in various international forums and worked towards mutual cooperation in economic and defense sectors. In the 1950s and 1960s, both countries were part of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), a military alliance aimed at countering Soviet influence in the region (Weinbaum, 2016). This era was marked by strong bilateral ties, underscored by common interests in regional stability and economic development.

Impact of Regional and Global Events

However, regional and global events significantly impacted the trajectory of Pakistan-Iran relations. The 1979 Iranian Revolution, which led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, marked a turning point. Iran's shift towards a theocratic government and its subsequent focus on exporting its revolutionary ideals caused apprehensions in Pakistan, particularly given Pakistan's close ties with Saudi Arabia and its Sunni-majority population (Ahmad, 2019). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 further complicated relations, as Pakistan and Iran found themselves supporting different factions within the Afghan resistance.

Evolution of Bilateral Ties

The 1980s and 1990s saw fluctuating relations influenced by these regional dynamics. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) diverted Iran's attention away from South Asia, while Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan, in collaboration with the United States and Saudi Arabia, often placed it at odds with Iranian interests. Despite these challenges, there were periods of rapprochement, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when both countries sought to strengthen economic ties and address common security concerns (Shaikh, 2020). The 21st century has continued to witness a complex interplay of cooperation and contention, driven by evolving geopolitical and economic interests.

3. Political Challenges

Diverging Foreign Policies

One of the primary political challenges in Pakistan-Iran relations is their diverging foreign policies. Iran's foreign policy, heavily influenced by its revolutionary ideology, often conflicts with Pakistan's strategic alignments. Iran's adversarial stance towards the United States and its close alliance with groups like Hezbollah contrast sharply with Pakistan's historical alignment with the U.S. and its role in facilitating U.S. interests in the region (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2012). Additionally, Pakistan's involvement in Saudi-led initiatives, such as the Islamic Military Alliance, further exacerbates tensions given the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Influence of Third-Party Nations

The influence of third-party nations, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United States, significantly impacts Pakistan-Iran relations. Saudi Arabia, as a key ally and economic benefactor of Pakistan, wields

considerable influence over Islamabad's foreign policy decisions. This often places Pakistan in a delicate position, balancing its relationship with Iran against the expectations of Saudi Arabia (Khan, 2018). The United States' sanctions on Iran and its broader Middle Eastern policy also play a crucial role. Pakistan's economic and military dependencies on the U.S. necessitate a cautious approach towards Iran, often leading to strained bilateral interactions.

Internal Political Dynamics and Their Impact

Internal political dynamics within Pakistan and Iran also contribute to the complexity of their bilateral relations. In Pakistan, the military's dominant role in shaping foreign policy, particularly its strategic calculations vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan, often influences its stance towards Iran. On the other hand, Iran's political landscape, characterized by a complex interplay between conservative and reformist factions, impacts its foreign policy consistency (Hunter, 2019). Domestic security concerns, such as sectarian violence and cross-border militancy, further strain relations. For instance, the activities of militant groups in the Balochistan region, which borders both countries, have led to mutual accusations and distrust.

In summary, the historical context of Pakistan-Iran relations is marked by early cooperation, regional and global disruptions, and an evolving trajectory influenced by geopolitical dynamics. Political challenges stem from diverging foreign policies, the influence of third-party nations like Saudi Arabia and the U.S., and the internal political dynamics of both countries. Addressing these challenges requires nuanced diplomacy and a strategic approach that considers the complex interplay of historical legacies, regional interests, and global influences.

4. Economic Relations and Challenges

Bilateral Trade Dynamics

Economic relations between Pakistan and Iran have long been characterized by a complex mix of potential and obstacles. Historically, trade between the two countries has included goods such as rice, fruits, textiles from Pakistan, and oil, petrochemicals, and cement from Iran. However, despite geographical proximity and complementary economies, bilateral trade has remained below potential. In 2020, bilateral trade was estimated at around \$1.2 billion, significantly less than what could be achieved given the size and needs of both economies (Zaidi, 2021). Factors contributing to this

underperformance include political tensions, lack of banking channels, and inconsistent trade policies.

Economic Sanctions on Iran and Their Repercussions

One of the most significant challenges affecting economic relations between Pakistan and Iran is the international sanctions imposed on Iran, particularly by the United States. These sanctions, aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions, have had a profound impact on its economy and international trade relations (Katzman, 2020). For Pakistan, these sanctions mean limited engagement with Iranian financial institutions and businesses. The sanctions also deter Pakistani companies from engaging in trade with Iran due to the fear of secondary sanctions from the United States. As a result, many planned economic projects, such as the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, have faced delays and setbacks (Hussain & Ahmad, 2018).

Energy Cooperation and Pipeline Politics

Energy cooperation, particularly the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline, often referred to as the "Peace Pipeline," has been a focal point of bilateral economic relations. The pipeline project, initiated in the 1990s, aims to transport natural gas from Iran's South Pars fields to Pakistan. However, progress has been slow due to geopolitical pressures, particularly from the United States, which opposes the project due to its sanctions policy (Javaid, 2016). Despite these challenges, both nations recognize the pipeline's potential to alleviate Pakistan's energy crisis and provide Iran with a steady revenue stream. The delay in the project reflects the broader struggle between economic necessity and geopolitical constraints.

5. Security Concerns

Border Security and Cross-border Militancy

The security situation along the Pakistan-Iran border has been a persistent challenge, with frequent incidents of cross-border militancy and smuggling. The Sistan-Baluchestan region, which spans both countries, is particularly volatile, plagued by insurgent groups, drug trafficking, and militant activities (Singh, 2020). Both nations have accused each other of harboring insurgent groups, which complicates their security cooperation. For instance, Iran has often accused Pakistan of not taking sufficient action against Sunni militant groups operating in its border areas, while Pakistan has

expressed concerns over the activities of Baloch separatists based in Iran (Rafiq, 2018).

Counter-terrorism Cooperation

Despite these challenges, Pakistan and Iran have engaged in counter-terrorism cooperation to address mutual security threats. Joint border commissions and intelligence-sharing mechanisms have been established to improve security coordination (Sial, 2019). However, the effectiveness of these measures is often hampered by mutual distrust and differing priorities. While both countries have a vested interest in combating terrorism, their approaches and definitions of terrorist threats sometimes diverge, influenced by their respective domestic and regional security concerns.

Influence of Regional Security Alignments (e.g., GCC, SCO)

The regional security landscape, particularly the influence of organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), significantly impacts Pakistan-Iran relations. Iran's adversarial relationship with Saudi Arabia, a key member of the GCC, affects its relations with Pakistan, which has close ties with Riyadh (Fulton, 2018). Conversely, both Pakistan and Iran are members of the SCO, which provides a platform for cooperation on security and economic issues. However, the effectiveness of the SCO in mitigating bilateral security concerns remains limited due to its broader regional focus and the conflicting interests of its member states (Pantucci & Lain, 2016).

6. Sectarian Tensions

Shia-Sunni Divide and Its Impact

Sectarianism, particularly the Shia-Sunni divide, plays a significant role in shaping Pakistan-Iran relations. Iran, as a Shia-majority country, and Pakistan, with its significant Sunni population, often find themselves on opposite sides of regional sectarian conflicts (Nasr, 2006). This divide is exacerbated by the involvement of external actors, such as Saudi Arabia, which promote their own sectarian agendas. In Pakistan, sectarian violence has targeted the Shia minority, often attributed to extremist Sunni groups with ties to Saudi Arabia, leading to strained relations with Iran, which sees itself as a protector of Shia interests worldwide (Abbas, 2010).

Influence of Religious Extremism

Religious extremism, fueled by both internal and external factors, complicates the bilateral relationship. Extremist groups in Pakistan, some with historical links to the Afghan jihad, have targeted Iranian interests and the Shia community within Pakistan (Fair, 2015). Iran's support for Shia militias in the region further fuels sectarian tensions. This mutual distrust, exacerbated by religious extremism, poses a significant challenge to improving bilateral relations.

Role of Religious Organizations

Religious organizations in both countries play a dual role, sometimes acting as agents of peace and at other times as sources of conflict. In Pakistan, religious parties and organizations often exert considerable influence on public opinion and government policy towards Iran (Zaman, 2002). Similarly, in Iran, religious institutions are deeply intertwined with the state apparatus, impacting its foreign policy decisions. Efforts by religious leaders to promote sectarian harmony and bilateral cooperation have had mixed results, reflecting the complex interplay between religion and politics in both countries.

7. Regional and International Influence

Role of the United States and Sanctions on Iran

The United States has played a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of Pakistan-Iran relations, primarily through its sanctions regime against Iran. The U.S. sanctions, aimed at curtailing Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional influence, have had significant economic repercussions on Iran and indirectly affected its trade relations with neighboring countries, including Pakistan (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2017). The sanctions have limited Pakistan's ability to engage in robust economic exchanges with Iran, particularly in the energy sector where potential projects like the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline have faced substantial delays and obstacles due to fear of repercussions from the U.S. (Khan, 2015).

Influence of Saudi Arabia and the GCC

Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, exerts considerable influence on Pakistan-Iran relations. The sectarian divide, with Saudi Arabia representing Sunni Islam and Iran representing Shia Islam, often places Pakistan in a delicate balancing act. Pakistan's economic and strategic ties with Saudi Arabia, including significant financial aid and investment,

compel it to align with Saudi interests, sometimes at the expense of its relationship with Iran (Nasr, 2006). The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran manifests in regional conflicts and proxy wars, complicating Pakistan's diplomatic posture and necessitating a careful approach to maintain neutrality (Abdo, 2017).

Impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) significantly impacts Pakistan-Iran relations. Pakistan is a crucial partner in the BRI through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which promises substantial economic benefits and infrastructure development (Wolf, 2019). Iran, seeking to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions, also looks to China for economic partnerships. This shared interest in Chinese investment provides a common ground for Pakistan and Iran to enhance their economic cooperation despite other geopolitical challenges (Small, 2015). However, the extent to which BRI can harmonize their relations depends on broader regional stability and the alignment of their respective national interests.

8. Diplomatic Efforts and Mediation

Bilateral Dialogues and Diplomatic Channels

Bilateral dialogues and diplomatic channels are essential for addressing the challenges in Pakistan-Iran relations. Regular high-level meetings and consultations have been pivotal in discussing issues of mutual concern, ranging from border security to economic cooperation (Chubin & Tripp, 1996). These dialogues aim to build trust and find common ground despite the underlying tensions. For instance, joint border commissions have been established to address cross-border terrorism and smuggling, fostering a collaborative security framework (Weiss, 2015).

Role of International Organizations

International organizations play a crucial role in mediating and facilitating cooperation between Pakistan and Iran. Organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provide platforms for both countries to engage in multilateral discussions and conflict resolution mechanisms (Koolae, 2019). The SCO, in particular, offers a regional framework where both Pakistan and Iran can collaborate on security and economic issues, leveraging their membership to address bilateral challenges within a broader multilateral context (Dadabaev, 2014).

Key Diplomatic Incidents and Their Resolutions

Key diplomatic incidents have tested Pakistan-Iran relations but also demonstrated their capacity for resolution. Incidents such as the capture of cross-border militants or disagreements over regional policies have occasionally escalated tensions. However, through diplomatic engagement, such issues have been resolved, highlighting the resilience and flexibility of their diplomatic channels (Akbarzadeh, 2013). The resolution of these incidents often involves high-level interventions and the establishment of protocols to prevent future occurrences, contributing to a more stable bilateral relationship.

9. Socio-Cultural Challenges

Cultural Exchange and Public Perception

Cultural exchange plays a significant role in shaping public perception and fostering mutual understanding between Pakistan and Iran. Despite the political and sectarian challenges, there is a rich history of cultural and religious exchanges between the two nations (Malik, 2008). Initiatives such as student exchange programs, cultural festivals, and academic collaborations help bridge gaps and build people-to-people connections, which are crucial for long-term relationship building (Rizvi, 1993).

Media Portrayal and Propaganda

The media portrayal of Pakistan-Iran relations can significantly influence public perception and governmental policies. Media outlets in both countries, as well as international media, often frame the bilateral relationship through the lens of regional conflicts and sectarian divides (Shah, 2014). Propaganda and biased reporting can exacerbate tensions by perpetuating negative stereotypes and misinformation. Conversely, positive media coverage and balanced reporting can contribute to a more nuanced understanding and promote dialogue and cooperation (Khan, 2017).

Impact of Migration and Refugees

Migration and the presence of refugees are critical socio-cultural challenges in Pakistan-Iran relations. The influx of Afghan refugees into both countries has created social and economic pressures, necessitating bilateral cooperation in managing humanitarian issues and border controls (UNHCR, 2015). Additionally, labor migration and the movement of people for religious pilgrimages (e.g., to holy sites in Iran) require effective management and coordination

to prevent socio-cultural friction and ensure the well-being of migrants (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2017).

10. Future Prospects

Potential Areas for Cooperation

Pakistan and Iran, despite their complex relationship, have several areas where cooperation can be mutually beneficial. Economic collaboration is a significant potential area, particularly in the energy sector. Pakistan's growing energy needs can be addressed by tapping into Iran's vast natural gas reserves through projects like the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline (Malik, 2013). This project, if realized, can alleviate Pakistan's energy crisis and provide Iran with a steady export market despite international sanctions (Rizvi, 2012).

Trade and commerce represent another promising area. The two countries can enhance their bilateral trade, which has been hampered by economic sanctions on Iran and the lack of proper banking channels (Khan, 2016). Establishing joint economic zones and improving transportation infrastructure can boost trade significantly.

In terms of **regional security**, both nations can work together to combat terrorism and insurgency, particularly in the volatile border regions. Enhanced security cooperation and intelligence sharing can help stabilize these areas, reducing cross-border militancy and fostering a more secure environment for both countries (Bokhari, 2015).

Cultural exchange programs can also strengthen people-to-people ties, promoting a better understanding and reducing sectarian tensions. Initiatives in education, tourism, and cultural diplomacy can create a foundation for lasting peace and cooperation (Shaikh, 2018).

Recommendations for Policy Makers

Policymakers in both countries need to adopt a multi-faceted approach to address the challenges and harness the opportunities in Pakistan-Iran relations. First, strengthening diplomatic channels is crucial. Regular high-level meetings and the establishment of a bilateral dialogue mechanism can help resolve misunderstandings and build trust (Rizvi, 2012).

Second, facilitating economic cooperation through policy reforms is essential. Pakistan should work towards creating a conducive environment for Iranian investments and vice versa. Simplifying trade regulations, establishing secure banking channels, and promoting joint ventures can pave the way for economic growth (Khan, 2016).

Third, in the realm of security, both nations should formalize security cooperation agreements. Joint training exercises, intelligence sharing, and collaborative efforts to combat terrorism and drug trafficking can enhance regional security (Bokhari, 2015).

Lastly, to address sectarian issues, it is imperative to promote interfaith dialogue and curb extremist narratives. Government-backed initiatives to foster religious harmony and understanding can mitigate sectarian tensions (Shaikh, 2018).

Long-term Strategies for Stable Relations

For sustainable and stable relations, Pakistan and Iran must develop long-term strategies that focus on comprehensive engagement and mutual benefit. One such strategy is the institutionalization of bilateral relations through treaties and agreements that cover various aspects of cooperation, including trade, security, and cultural exchange (Malik, 2013).

Another strategy involves regional integration efforts, where both countries can play pivotal roles in initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program. By integrating their economies with regional frameworks, they can enhance their strategic and economic positions (Khan, 2016).

Investment in infrastructure is also vital. Developing transportation and energy infrastructure that links the two countries can facilitate trade and economic activities, creating a more interdependent and resilient relationship (Rizvi, 2012).

11. Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

The analysis of Pakistan-Iran relations reveals that despite historical ties and shared interests, several challenges impede closer cooperation. Key findings indicate that diverging foreign policies, economic sanctions, border security issues, and external influences significantly strain the relationship (Bokhari, 2015). However, areas such as energy cooperation, trade, security collaboration, and cultural exchange offer promising avenues for enhancing bilateral ties (Malik, 2013; Khan, 2016).

Implications for Regional Stability

The state of Pakistan-Iran relations has profound implications for regional stability. Enhanced cooperation between the two can contribute to a more secure and prosperous South Asia and Middle East. It can reduce the influence of extremist groups,

improve economic conditions through increased trade and energy collaboration, and foster a more stable geopolitical environment (Rizvi, 2012). Conversely, continued tension can exacerbate regional conflicts, contribute to sectarian violence, and hinder economic development (Shaikh, 2018).

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should focus on in-depth analyses of specific sectors such as energy cooperation and its potential impacts on regional geopolitics. Additionally, studies on the socio-political impacts of sectarianism within Pakistan-Iran relations can provide insights into mitigating sectarian tensions. Comparative studies involving other regional relationships, like Saudi Arabia-Iran or India-Iran, can also offer valuable perspectives on managing complex bilateral ties (Khan, 2016). Finally, exploring the role of international actors in shaping Pakistan-Iran relations will be crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

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