

Notes

Pakistan and Revolutionary Iran: The US Factor

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Introduction

Iran is the immediate neighbor of Pakistan. Pakistan shares 909 km of her common frontier with Iran. Pak-Iran relations are rooted in history. The geographical proximity, common historical heritage, and deep socio-cultural and linguistic affinities were the numerous factors which brought these countries close to each other. The two countries became close and enduring friends, partners, and allies soon after Pakistan's independence in 1947.

The paper primarily focuses on US factor in Pak-Iran relations since the outbreak of Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979. The change in the Iranian foreign policy after the Islamic revolution badly impaired US-Iran relations. Consequently, cordiality in Pakistan's relationship with America in the above mentioned period negatively impacted Pak-Iran relations.

However the coolness in Pak-US relations in the post cold-war period resulted in considerable improvement in Pakistan's relations with Iran. This friendship was, however, short lived, as the US soon started overt support to Pakistan in order to pursue its interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The research paper points out the differences between Pakistan and Iran in Afghanistan and Central Asia. It attempts to describe the US strategy of economic encirclement of Iran, and Pakistan's position in this respect; Pakistan's strong reaction against placing Iran in the 'axis of evil' paradigm, and its stance in US-Iran nuclear stand off. The paper also throws light to unearth different perceptions, approaches and policies of the two countries regarding US war against international terrorism.

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US factor in Pak-Iran relations since 1979

Developments in Pak-US relations since the outbreak of Islamic Revolution in Iran have left negative impact on Pak-Iran relations. The change in Iranian foreign policy after 1979 affected Iran's relations with almost all the countries of the world, especially Pakistan, a close neighbour. One of the guiding principles of post-revolutionary Iran was the identification of USA as the principle enemy. Pakistan's close relations with America whom Iran considered as 'great Satan' stood in the way of cordial relations.

During Zia's regime, due to developments in Afghanistan, Pakistan became 'frontline state' in the US global strategy. As a result, Pakistan became the major recipient of US economic assistance.¹ Syed Mushahid Hussain in his book, *Pakistan and the Changing Regional Scenario*, states that the relations of Iran with Pakistan since Islamic revolution have fluctuated from better than normal to not very good. He gives several reasons which include differing geo-political perceptions and Pakistan's inability to keep pace with the rapid speed of the revolution.² Coincidentally and ironically, this was exactly the time when Pakistan had once again started developing special political and strategic relationship with the US, that provoked hostile reaction from Iran.³

The Islamic revolution in Iran brought about a complete overhaul of the corrupt and obsequious system of imperial Iran. Now for all intents and purposes Iran tried to establish 'purely ideal Islamic state' independent of all external influences. The main objective of revolutionary Iran was to root out US influences from its country, once and for all. The termination of its membership from CENTO⁴ and the cancellation of the bilateral defense agreement were the most important decisions undertaken by Iran.⁵ While Pakistan, because of its past association with the discredited regime of Shah and due to its security links and friendship with the US, was viewed with great suspicion by the revolutionary leadership. Ayatullah Khomeini harbored personal dislike of General Zia-ul-Haq.⁶ On the other hand, USA was also not in favour of close and good relations between Pakistan and Iran. In the words of

¹ Personal interview with Director General of Cultural Centre, Islamic Republic of Iran, Peshawar, 15 June 2003.

² Mushahid Hussain, *Pakistan and the Changing Regional Scenario: Reflection of the Journalist* (Lahore: Progressive Publishers, 1988), p.85.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *The Frontier Post* (Peshawar), 18 March 1998.

⁵ *Kayhan International* (Tehran), 13 March 1979.

⁶ *Tehran Times*, 30 July 1979.

S.M Burke, 'Islamabad was the biggest listening base of CIA. The CIA base in Islamabad is said to have 150 Americans monitoring Central Asia, Afghanistan, and probably Iran.'⁷ In 1984, when US Vice President George Bush came to Pakistan, he made a formal proposal to General Zia-ul-Haq. During their walk together in Murree President House, he said 'that the US would help Pakistan to train the Afghan Mujahideen living in Balochistan and then send them to Iran with an object to destabilize it.'⁸ Before leaving Bush addressed a press conference in Lahore in which he called Iran as a 'terrorist state.'⁹

The Iranians were generally convinced that the US through CIA was engaged in covert operations designed to sabotage the Islamic revolution in Iran.¹⁰ This view has been confirmed by the recent disclosure in the *New York Times* regarding CIA's sponsoring of propaganda, radio broadcasts and laying foundation of the paramilitary and political groups including some of the left wing elements in a bid to undermine Islamic revolution.¹¹ Iranian suspicions were summed up by the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sheikh-ul-Islam, in these words: 'If any country offer bases to any Super Power, that may be the United States or Soviet Union, we will consider enemy similar to Israel.'¹²

Government of Pakistan clarified its position by saying that there is no question of giving bases to anyone, much less against the friendly country like Iran, which always proved to be such an immense asset for Pakistan's military and strategic depth in the southwest in the presence of ever threatening India, and equally unfriendly Afghanistan.¹³ Later on, Iran realized Pakistan's precarious position vis-à-vis Soviet intervention in Afghanistan which had placed it in a dangerous situation.

Post cold war US policies and its impact on Pak-Iran relations

The disintegration of Soviet Union and the emergence of USA as the sole power created new challenges for the countries of the world. Both Pakistan and Iran were directly hit by those challenges.¹⁴ The withdrawal of Soviet Union was followed by a civil war in Afghanistan among

⁷ Mahmood Farhat, *History of Pak-US Relations*, Vanguard, 1994, p.64.

⁸ *The Frontier Post*, 30 November 1988.

⁹ *Radio Tehran*, 2 June 1984.

¹⁰ *Newsweek*, 2 June 1983.

¹¹ *New York Times*, 19 May 1992.

¹² Mushahid Hussain, *op.cit.*

¹³ Riaz M. Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal* (Lahore: Progressive Publishers, 1993), pp.49-50.

¹⁴ Tahmina Mahmood, 'Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Post Cold War Period,' *Contemporary Affairs*, 1991, p.337.

different ethnic factions and Pakistan was left alone to face the consequences. Restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan became the main concern of Pakistan's foreign policy makers. After achieving its ultimate objective in Afghanistan, the US invoked Pressler Law in 1990, not only to stop all aid to Pakistan but to exercise policy of pressure.¹⁵ Moreover, the growing Indo-US relations in the post cold war period were not pleasing for Pakistan. There was also a US threat that Pakistan would be declared as a 'terrorist state'. During 1992-93 Pakistan was placed on the watch list. There was also pressure on Pakistan to sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT).¹⁶

Iran also continued to experience US pressure, notably because of its involvement with anti-Israeli faction in Lebanon. Washington tried to label Iran as a terrorist state. Iran's growing influence in the regional politics was seen by the US as detrimental to Israel, its principle ally in the Middle East. Like Pakistan, Iran was also directly hit by the US' emphasis on the issue of nuclear non-proliferation, human rights, and democracy. The US also strongly objected to the Russian-Iranian Bushehr deal and the transfer of sensitive nuclear technology from Russia to Iran.¹⁷ In the changing geo-strategic environment, Pak-Iran relations assumed great importance. Both the countries equally faced the challenges and problems of the new world order. The new situation provided an opportunity for fresh beginning of Islamabad-Tehran relationship. Iran strongly supported Pakistan's official stand for the resolution of the Kashmir issue in accordance with the UN resolutions and the wishes of the Kashmiri people.¹⁸

Moreover, the emergence of Central Asian States after the disintegration of the Soviet Union proved a blessing in disguise for Pakistan and Iran. This is the region where both enjoyed a long history of commercial and social associations. Their identical viewpoints and common policies strengthened their mutual relationship. Both Iran and Pakistan became the founding members of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). The inclusion of six Central Asian States and Afghanistan in ECO on 28 November 1992 increased the importance of the organization, which became the largest economic bloc after European

¹⁵ Dr. Syed Salahuddin Ahmed, *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: A Critical Study* (Karachi: Comprehensive Book Service, 1996), p.64.

¹⁶ Amit Barush, 'India Trying to Isolate Iran', *Hindustan Times*, 13 November 1992.

¹⁷ *Dawn* (Karachi), 21 October 1991.

¹⁸ Dr. Maqbool Ahmed Bhatti, 'A Critical Appraisal of Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Relations with Iran', *Regional Studies*, x:2 (Spring-1992), p.112.

Economic Community.¹⁹ Similarly, mutual exchange of visits of high leaderships and other dignitaries revived the old bonds of friendship between the two countries. Benazir Bhutto, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, was keen to establish friendly relations with Iran. Her two consecutive goodwill visits to Iran, first, on 14 May 1990, and then, on 12 September 1991, greatly improved relations between these two countries.²⁰ More significantly, the return visit of the Iranian President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani to Pakistan, on 6 September 1992, was yet another milestone which further created the spirit of trust and confidence between the two neighbours.

Warmth and cordiality in Pak-Iran relations was short lived. There were differences between the two countries on Afghanistan, especially after the emergence of Taliban, and their competitions over the economic resources of Central Asia. Moreover the US State Department announced in 1993 to exclude Pakistan from the list of terrorist states. In November 1995 US Congress passed the Brown Amendment and lifted military and economic sanctions from Pakistan, and more significantly, United States adopted a flexible attitude towards Pakistan's nuclear program with the object to get Pakistan's sympathy and cooperation for the attainment of US interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Pakistan's support for Taliban (the bitter enemy of Iran) backed by USA had an adverse affect on Pak-Iran relations. The US provided whole hearted support and cooperation to Pakistan for strengthening and consolidating Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. It is generally believed that United States was the master-minded in the organization and the employment of Taliban for serving its own purpose in Afghanistan almost on the similar pattern which it employed in rising and employing the Afghan *mujahideen* to eliminate Soviet influence. This view was supported by Richard Machenzie, Editor-in-Chief of the *Global News Services* and a regular visitor of Afghanistan, who is in his paper 'The United States and Taliban' has successfully revealed the reasons behind US policy regarding Taliban. In this paper, he asserted that long before the Taliban began the thrust towards Kabul, US officials had high aspirations. They hoped that Taliban would serve their purpose in

¹⁹ Syed Amjad Ali, 'The Prospects of Cooperation in Central Asia', *Pakistan Horizon*, 46:2 (April-1993), p.23.

²⁰ Safdar Mahmood, *Pakistan's Political Root and Development 1947-49* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.283.

Afghanistan.²¹ The ideological differences between Pakistan and Iran on the issue of Taliban and whole hearted US support to Pakistan led to a major divergence in Pak-Iran relations.

Moreover, Pak-Iran rivalry and competition over the economic resources of Central Asia; Pak-US cooperation in Central Asia and the US strategy of economic encirclement of Iran further intensified bitterness and competition between Pakistan and Iran. Similarly, Washington's objection to gas-pipeline that goes through Iran and its preference for Central Asian oil and gas that flow through Pakistan and Afghanistan, made Iran feel that Islamabad was consciously becoming part of the US strategy to isolate Iran.²² Thus the US succeeded in creating rivalry and competition between Pakistan and Iran in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iran believed that by denying it to play a significant role in Afghanistan and Central Asia US was trying to contain Iran.²³

A considerable improvement occurred in Pakistan-Iran relations when Iran strongly supported Pakistan's nuclear test on 28 May 1998. The US, on the other and, showed its indignation and protest against Islamabad's entry into the nuclear club and announced military and economic sanctions against Pakistan. Moreover, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharzi's goodwill visit to Pakistan on 3 June 1998,²⁴ just after the conclusion of Pakistan's nuclear test, was enough to remove ambiguity, suspicions misunderstandings, and paved the way for the constructive and meaningful relations between the two countries.

Pak-Iran relations after 9/11

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on trade centre and Pentagon in New York and Washington D.C changed the political landscape of the world. In this changed environment, the world seems to be behind the US in its war against terrorism.²⁵ Almost all the countries of the world have condemned the tragic attacks which took the lives of hundreds of innocent people. Even a country like Iran which has had extremely

²¹ Richard Machenzie, 'The United States and Taliban', *The News* (Islamabad), 31 October 1995.

²² Dickey and S. Laving, 'The Fierce Competition Between Turkey, Iran and Pakistan', *Newsweek*, 27 June 1994.

²³ Dr. Talat Wazarat, 'US War of Terror: Implication for Iran and Pakistan', A Research Paper Presented in the International Seminar, Peshawar, 3-4 March 2003.

²⁴ *The Frontier Post*, 3 June 1998.

²⁵ Ahmed Ejaz, *Hindu Fundamentalism in South Asia* (Lahore: Area Study Centre, 2003), p.47.

adversarial relations with the US conveyed its sympathy for the aggrieved Americans. President Khatami of Iran was the first to lend his voice to the chorus of the world leaders condemning the terrorist attacks on the public centers of the American cities.²⁶ The Iranian magazine *Siyasat-e-Ruz* observed, 'any act that victimizes the innocent people, whatever their race or nationality, for achieving the goal of international politics is severely condemned and is, terrorist and inhuman act'.²⁷ Pakistan not only condemned the terrorist attacks in severe and harsh words but also played an active role in extending full cooperation to the US.

But as far as US' war against terrorism is concerned, approach and perception of Pakistan and Iran have been different. Under the hammer of Bush doctrine, Pakistan was forced to relinquish its long standing support for Taliban. Pakistan, once again, assumed the role of frontline state which could help safeguard US interest in the region.²⁸ Countries whose support was sought by coalition against terrorism were given two choices by the US, 'either you are with US or with terrorists, either you stand with civilization and good (US) or with the barbarianism and evil'.²⁹

Pakistan had to make a very tough decision. Given the socio-economic compulsions threat to its strategic assets, Pakistan opted to join the war against terrorism which, in the first phase, was United States war against Afghanistan. Pakistan announced that it would extend full cooperation in war without involving its forces in any action beyond its geographical boundaries.³⁰ Pakistan's offer of support and cooperation to the United States in its war against terrorism was, therefore, motivated by the immediate need to save Pakistan from being seen as the ally of Taliban. Pakistani analysts were of the view that Pakistan's influence over Afghanistan was exaggerated by the Indian propaganda, whose

²⁶ Cemeron S. Brown, 'The Hot Scene around the World', *The Middle Eastern Review of International Affairs*, 5:4 (December-2002), p.31.

²⁷ *Siyasat-e-Ruz* (Tehran), 13 September 2001.

²⁸ Nazir Hussain, 'Pak-Iran Relations in the Post 9/11 Period: Regional and Global Impacts', *Regional Studies*, xx:4 (Autumn-2002), p.52.

²⁹ The Text of President Bush speech cited in *Washington Post*, 21 September 2001.

³⁰ Khalid Rehman, *Terrorism: Challenges and the Way out Pre and Post 9/11 Scenario* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 2001), pp.47-48.

objective was to project Pakistan as a fundamentalist state by linking it with Taliban.³¹ As General Musharraf said,

...this decision was taken to avoid immense damage and loss that could occur to Pakistan if it did not cooperate with US. Pakistani nation, on the whole, has demonstrated the level of maturity in understanding the implications arising of this serious situation and helped the government by accepting, without any resistance, policy option exercised by the government in the largest interest of the country.³²

The case of Iran was entirely different. Unlike Pakistan, it followed the policy of 'active neutrality' in the United States' war against terrorism. Iran desired an active UN role in the war against international terrorism. Former President of Iran, Ali Akbar Hashmi Rafsanjani, said: 'If the US decides not to impose its own will, we are ready to join the anti-terrorist coalition under the umbrella of UN despite of our difference with US.'³³

While, it is true, that Pak-Iran relations have been generally cordial, they have been shaped by environment. This time the challenge appears to be stronger than before. However, the two countries have adopted different strategies to deal with the challenge. At the moment, the war against terrorism has overshadowed all the aspects of global security concerns. The war provided an opportunity to the US to push its covert agenda of restructuring the world security order according to its own long term strategic interests. The main US objective behind the war against terrorism was unilateralism and global domination, using the world organization, the UN, as the facilitator to the long standing American objective for global domination.³⁴

The US immediately launched a campaign of intimidation to bring the nations into its coalition. The US has two long standing objectives in its war against international terrorism which includes domination of the oil rich regions of Central Asia, Middle East, and Caspian Sea. In the past, US effort to acquire the oil and gas resources of Central Asia, Middle East and Caspian Sea and carry them to other points, bypassing Iran, caused tension in the region. Now, with the

³¹ Ahmed Montazeran and Kashif Mumtaz, 'Iran-Pakistan Cooperation for Regional Stability and Peace', *Strategic Studies*, xxvi:1, (Spring, 2004), p.78.

³² Yu Bin, 'Why Pakistan Sided with US in a War against Terrorism', *Pacific News Service*, 21 September 2001.

³³ Iran Ready to Join Anti-Terrorist Campaign, @ www.pavand.com.

³⁴ Nazir Hussain, *op.cit.*

stationing of the several US troops in Central Asian states as well as East Asian and Caspian Sea and the air base facilities provided by Pakistan, the US has gained a strategic advantage. Moreover, US desire to impose Israeli domination over the region to prevent the emergence of any challenge to US hegemony in the years to come was skillfully made easier by weakening Iran and Iraq, two regional players. Ironically, these US goals coincide with the Zionist agenda of expansion in the shape of 'Greater Israel,' encompassing Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran.³⁵ The 9/11 attacks occurred in favor of Israeli interest in the Middle East. Immediately after these attacks, the Jewish lobby in the United States attempted to urge the American administration to state that Iran was the principal agent behind these attacks. Failing the goal, Israel tried her best to make Iran the target of American attacks, depicting it the major supporter of terrorism in international relations. As an outcome of this attempt, Iran was placed as one of the countries in President Bush's 'axis of evil.' In other words, Israel played a key role in declaring Iran as one of the countries in the US axis of evil,³⁶ which comprises North Korea, Iraq and Iran. USA later attacked and occupied Iraq and, now, it is preparing the ground against Iran.

According to President Bush, Iran is clandestinely pursuing efforts to gain nuclear, biological and chemical capabilities. Improvement in Iran's missile delivery program is perceived as a threat to the US interests in the region.³⁷ Bush's 'axis of evil' and his policy against Iran constitute a challenge for Pakistan. As a strategic and close neighbour, there was a great concern over what Pakistan would do if US declared to go for a military action against Iran, especially, since Pakistan has given the US logistic support in the form of air bases. Iran is greatly concerned about close relations between Pakistan and the US, especially since 9/11. Iran had already perceived Pakistan along with Saudi Arabia and other Arab sheikdoms to supplement American foreign policy agenda in Southwest Asia and the Gulf. Close Pak-US strategic collaboration also constrained Pakistan to support Iranian policy of the security of the Gulf by the Gulf states.³⁸

³⁵ Khurshid Warsi, *The Cohweb* (Karachi: Ahmed Sons, 1993), p.185.

³⁶ David Pervin (ed.), *Building Order in Arab-Israel Relations, From Balance to Concert*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p.102.

³⁷ Elain L. Mortin, 'Thinking beyond the Settlement in US-Iran Relations', *Issues and Analysis*, @ www.acus.org.

³⁸ Personal Interview with Dr. Adnan, Chairman Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, 2 February 2005.

However, General Pervez Musharraf himself clearly stated during his official visits to US, UK, Germany and France, in mid 2003, that it worried and concerned him a lot when a country like Iran (so important to Pakistan) was pointed at and placed in the 'axis of evil' paradigm. He criticized the West for waging a battle against international terrorism on too many fronts. It bothered him a lot when he heard about countries like Iran being targeted.³⁹ This helped removing the misunderstandings of the Iranians about Pak-US relations which would never be at the cost of Pak-Iran relations. Pakistan's foreign policy on Iran has its own independent and permanent value, irrespective of its relations with any other country of the world. Pak-Iran securities are interlinked and indivisible, and that, according to General Musharraf, good relations with Iran have been in Pakistan's security interest.

As far as US resentment regarding Iranian nuclear technology is concerned, Pakistan can play a vital role in reducing tensions between them. With its close relationship with the US, it can offer its good offices for rapprochement between the two. Pakistan fully supports the right of Iran to develop its peaceful nuclear program concomitant to the adherence of its obligation under the arms control and disarmament agreement that it is a party to. Pakistan has adopted a correct and well-considered official position with regard to the US-Iranian nuclear stand off. As a friend of USA and Iran, Pakistan should play an active role to foster a diplomatic solution of the crisis. Admittedly, Pakistani effort in this direction can only have a limited impact, yet given the stakes, it is an option worth exploring.⁴⁰

Regarding Iranian nuclear program the government of General Musharraf urged that all the differences between Iran and the US should be resolved peacefully through diplomatic negotiation. On the occasion of sixth summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), held on 15 June 2006, President Musharraf met the Iranian counterpart and expressed his full cooperation and the hope of peaceful resolution of Iran's nuclear stand-off.⁴¹ Apparently, Washington's outright refusal to engage Tehran in diplomacy, even after the Iranian President's laudable initiative, is likely to be a precursor of worse to come. The world is for obvious reason, astonished by Washington's unrealistic and myopic attitude in letting a rare moment of opportunity pass.⁴²

³⁹ *The News*, 20 June 2003.

⁴⁰ Tanvir Ahmed Khan, 'Iran's Deepening Nuclear Crisis', *Dawn*, 1 May 2006.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16 June 2006.

⁴² Tariq Fatemi, 'A faint Glummer of Hope', *ibid.*, 17 May 2006.