**Pakistan-China-Iran Trilateral Cooperation**

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“Economy and environment are the same thing. That is the rule of nature”. (Mollie Beattie)

The significance of financial resources is central to the possibility of economiccollaboration among various countries all around the globe. However, the commercial linkages in state-to-state relations cannot be entirely independent of political and strategic environment of the region in particular and the world in broad-spectrum. Respective national interests may not always align when more than one country are involved and economic cooperation that has the potential to create a win-win situation for all the parties involved should not be neglected. China’s rise, Iran’s attempted economic isolation by the USA and Pakistan’s crucial geostrategic location are all factors that have the capacity to bring these three countries in sync. China and Pakistan have a long history of deep friendship. The evolving China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) hasfurthercreated prospects for adjacent regional countries to benefit from this connectivity.

The challenges to these initiatives are many as the security situation in the region has always remained worrying. Terrorism, religious extremism, sectarian clashes and interference of extra-regional actors are only a few challenges that stand in the way of this nexus. The internal challenges of political instability and socio-economic factors can also affect this relationship adversely. However, if the leadership, governments’ policies and public opinion in these three countries remain steadfast in support of this trilateral cooperation, there is no doubt, the success of this interconnection would change the economic and regional balance of Asia forever.

China’s economic rise, its status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), its widespread global influence and connectivity initiatives make it the next world power in making as a rival to the USA. South Asia, East Asia and the Middle East are regions that occupy Centre stage in world businesses. Their cultural diversity, natural resources, maritime routes, geography and conflicts have wideranging implications even for the day-to-day affairs of almost all countries worldwide.With such adjacent allies, Pakistan can surely achieve prominent stature in the regional and global arena.

Pakistan has been facing challenges to its national security due to the turbulent situation in Afghanistan since 1979. Iran and China also have serious security and economic concerns tied up at fag-end of global war on terror. Iran and Pakistan have not seen eye to eye on the solution to Afghan war in the past as Iran backed the Northern Alliance after the Taliban seized power in 1996 whereas Pakistan, on the other hand,recognised the Taliban government in Afghanistan. China has high stakes in Afghanistan as it seeks to link it to its grand initiative of the Belt and Road (BRI). The Chinese access to Central Asian states and their oil resources is thwarted by the constant state of turmoil in Afghanistan not to mention the fear of spillover from northern Afghanistan into Xinjiang.

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The peaceful Afghanistan is vital and stays a point of unification for these three countries, if they wish to effectively counter the Indo-US dominance in South Asia. They need to make sure that US withdrawal from Afghanistanshould not plunge the AfPak region into another civil war that would certainly upset the regional peace and any chances of further trilateral cooperation among these three countries. The significant role recently played by Pakistan in the Afghan peace process provides an opening for cooperation by Iran and China as their regional interests of keeping peace in Afghanistan align perfectly with those of Pakistan.

Iran and India enjoy a friendly relationship as the two have shared a cultural and linguistic affinity for a long time and further warmed up to each other when they signed a significantdefence agreement in the year 2002. Following that, the two have engaged in several trade contracts, the most prominent of which has been the Chahbahar Free Trade Agreement. In response to the launch of Gwadar port, as the sign of friendship between China and Pakistan, India pledged to assist Iran in expediting construction ofChahbahar port.

Iran is pivotal to the realization of China’s trans-continental, infrastructure-focused One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative in ways that Saudi Arabia is not. Iran’s oil and gas reserves, fourth and second largest in the world, spell out a boon for China’s exponentially rising energy needs. Out of the three markets that Iran’s massive piped gas reserves can be sold to, the closest and most accessible is China.

Gwadar is a deep-sea port with harbouring potential manifold that of the size of Chahbahar, which is only feasible for a transit trade arrangement via Afghanistan. Iran has quite tactfully declared Chahbahar a ‘sister port’ to Gwadar and managed to keep the option for cooperation with China open for all future ventures. Hence, it is evident from the Iranian stance that it wishes to bring its maximum resources to the CPEC for all practical purposes. Having stable economic cooperation with Pakistan, Iran can quite easily extend it further to China.

China and Iran also reiterated their deep strategic cooperation ahead of the expected Saudi investment in Pakistan, which means that China does not stand opposed to either Saudi or the Iranian participation in the upcoming CPEC projects. Rather itprovides China more avenues of participation and cooperation in the Middle East and Gulf region. China as a persuasive force in the SCO will make it easier for Pakistan to link energy corridors and, if Iran’s bid to join the SCO is also accepted, it will be another economic opportunity for the nexus among these three countries.

China as a rising economic power is making linkages worldwide and is offering monetary and commercial opportunities for developing countries with resources to join the wave of economic harmony. A potent economic force is expected to emerge in the foreseeable future having an anti-American agenda at heart. However, it will take serious concerted efforts from the regional players to resolve mutual differences and be determined to cooperate on economic fronts with one another to ensure regional harmony and prosperity. There are many avenues for cooperation and a huge amount of untapped potential lies in this trilateral collaboration that needs to be utilized to the maximum. Pakistan’s significant geographical locationstays central to this new emerging bloc.

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