**Reappraisal of Pakistan Iran relations**

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In the second week of November, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Pakistan on a two-day visit. His delegation included political, strategic, and economic experts. During this brief but busy stay, he had detailed meetings with the Pakistani civil as well as military leadership and discussed issues relating to the security and peace in the region, including enhancement of trade and economic partnership. This is Javad Zarif’s tenth visit to Pakistan as Foreign Minister, while his fourth contact with Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government in the last two and a half years. It conveys a strong message that in the rapidly changing regional context, it becomes imperative for two brotherly neighbours to assess the fast-changing regional, political, and economic alignments, which seriously affects both the countries to readjust their strategic placement.

Before going further in assessing the significance of this visit, it is relevant to comprehend the historic, religious, cultural, and geographic relevance of Iran and Pakistan for each other. After 1947, Iran, along with Turkey became a focus of attention for the founding fathers and the subsequent leadership paid special attention to forging an alliance based on trust and respect, embedded in cultural and historic similarities and interdependence. It was realised that for its strategic needs, Pakistan could trust these two vital non-Arab Muslim nations of the Middle East. It is no coincidence that Quaid’s close companion Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan was carefully chosen and appointed as Pakistan’s first Ambassador to Iran (1948-1952) and subsequently to Turkey (1952-1953). His assignment was to lay a solid foundation of close ties with these two natural allies of Pakistan.

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After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran received widespread blessings from the people of Pakistan, and during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), Pakistan tilted towards Iran and understood that Saddam Hussein was the aggressor. Even in the subsequent difficult circumstances, both the countries felt comfortable enough to resolve any glitches that came their way.

In recent days, Pakistan firmly condemned the assassination of Iranian scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. In a strong-worded statement Pakistan extended “sincere condolences to the family members of Mr Fakhrizadeh and to the Iranian people.” The statement further warned that “such acts not only run contrary to all norms of interstate relations and International Law but also threaten the peace and stability of an already fragile region”.

Similarly, taking religious and cultural connections into consideration, around 0.3 million pilgrims from Pakistan visit Iran every year, on a regular basis. Secondly, a considerable number of Urdu words are derived from the Persian language. The historic parallels between the two languages can also be gauged by the fact that 60 percent of Allama Iqbal’s poetry is in Persian, and nearly all of Pakistan’s national anthem is in the same language. This deep connection between the religion and culture of both countries has played an important role in keeping them connected. Despite these deep ties, the volume of trade between the two countries has remained low. It is expected that the recent visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister would lay a foundation for the enhancement of trade and investment collaborations. According to the joint statement, the most important steps to boost mutual trade include plans to open new markets on the Pak-Iran border and an agreement to open border markets and various border crossings. It will not only boost trade but also facilitate people-to-people contact. In this regard, Pakistan has announced the opening of Rimdan- Gabad and Pishin-Mand crossings, while Iran is to open Rimdan crossing point, located about 130 km from Chabahar port in Sistan and Baluchistan province. Both countries have decided to name the common border, “Border of Peace, Friendship, and Love”.

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It is hoped that all these measures will increase the volume of trade between the two countries, which currently stands at USD 392.08 million, of which Pakistan’s exports are only 22.86 million. However, one cannot deny the fact that this trade volume can only increase if trade routes are best protected.

Apart from the prospects of economic and political improvements, the visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister has significance due to change in the American administration. During the Trump administration, the US unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran in 2018 and cruel economic sanctions not only ruined the peace of the region but also severely damaged Iran’s economic interests. Many countries, including Pakistan, postponed trade and economic agreements due to the threat of US sanctions. Thus, a gigantic gas pipeline Iran-Pakistan was deferred.

It is to be hoped that Joe Biden’s policies towards the Middle East would not be lopsided, and “hateful” US attitude towards Iran would be managed, in a fair manner. Moreover, Iran will be able to play a more active role for peace in Afghanistan. It is also likely that Pakistan and Iran can work together to overcome a difficult situation in Afghanistan as these countries strongly believe that peace arrangements must be by mutual consent of the domestic political forces.