**Iran and Pakistan**

**The trajectory of Iran-Pakistan relations depends upon the independent conduct of foreign policy by Pakistan.**

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On 22 April, Irani president Ebrahim Raisi paid three days of official visit to Pakistan. He became the first foreign head figure to visit Pakistan after the 8th February election in the country. His agenda for the trip has ranged from counter-terrorism to border security, economic ties, the future of the Iran-Pakistan Gas pipeline, and gathering support from Pakistan in favor of Iran in the boiling situation of the Middle East. However, many experts viewed that the timing of the Irani president’s visit indicates the gravity of Pakistan-Iran relations.

Pakistan and Iran, being neighboring countries, share everything from history to language, food, culture and architecture. History bears the testimony to the fact Iran was the first who recognized Pakistan soon after its independence. And Supported Pakistan throughout the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pakistan wars. Meanwhile, Pakistan was also the first country that immediately recognized a new Islamic regime after the Irani Revolution (1979). However, post-1979 events, shaped greatly Pakistan-Iran relations as Iran was out of the American camp. Nevertheless, a change of geopolitical outlook doesn’t strain relations between both countries in the long run.

Now, let’s talk about the agenda of Irani president’s visit to Pakistan. First, Pakistan and Iran are concerned about growing attacks of violent non-state actors between border areas of both countries. Pakistan, for a long time, has complained about the growing influence of Indian proxies near the Iran-Pakistan border, especially near Chabahar port. India has pumped billions of dollars into that port for the pretext of economic reasons. However, various intelligence reports by Pakistan and the capture of Naval officer of India Kulbhushan Jadhav in 2016 indicated espionage activities of India to create unrest in Baluchistan. Iran has shown similar concerns about the presence of anti-Irani elements near the Pakistani border.

However, the climax of mutual distrust broke out in January 2024. When Iran traded airstrikes inside Pakistan, and latter country responded with similar airstrikes against anti-Pakistani elements inside Iran. Despite unprecedented escalation, the situation was defused when the Irani Foreign Minister paid a visit to Pakistan and showed brotherly feelings towards Pakistan.

During the Irani President’s visit, he further defused the tensions between Pakistan and Iran by giving the notion of strengthening counter-terrorism mechanisms at the 900km long border between both countries. He further said that there is zero tolerance for any third party to sabotage brotherly relations between Pakistan and Iran. That’s a win-win situation for both Pakistan and Iran as Pakistan has been facing all-out insurgency and terrorism from various non-state actors and the alliance of TTP and BLA. Iran’s statement would improve the security situation in Baluchistan.

Second, the Irani president has talked about the future of the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline Project. Initially, this project was set up in March 2013 in the context of the energy crisis in Pakistan. However, despite the decade, Pakistan has not been able to uphold the promises of that project due to international pressure. We are also hearing the reports of fining $17bn on Pakistan in the case of non-compliance of the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline Project. However, both countries want to pursue the project as Pakistan’s government has ordered for completion of 80km of pipeline inside Pakistan while Iran, knowing the international pressure on Pakistan, is interested in giving more time to Pakistan for completion of the project.

The Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline is truly in Pakistan’s favor because of the growing energy crisis of the country and the expensive source of thermal energy. Last year, Pakistan’s energy import bail jumped to $17bn amid the worst economic crisis in the country. Pakistan, fully knowing that cheaper thermal energy would plummet energy import bail. But the real problem is America here. The USA has hinted at sanctions on Pakistan in the case of the completion of the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline as America wants economic isolation of Iran for undermining Irani influence and its proxies in the Middle East, a greater game is undergoing in the Middle East.

Third, the Irani president has vowed to jump the Iran-Pakistan trade volume up to $10bn for the economic prosperity of the region. Again, here the true winner is Pakistan as the biggest proponent of regional trade, Pakistan should boost economic ties with Iran to uplift the economic crunch. Pakistan through the help of China and Russia can send a message to corridors of Western powers that the economic relations of Pakistan with Iran is utmost for the economic survival of 250 million people of Pakistan. Meanwhile, Chinese investments in Iran and Pakistan could further act as catalysts for the peaceful expansion of CPEC from the Middle East to South Asia and Central Asia.

Apart from Western pressure, informal trade and smuggling are key issues in the economic prospects of both countries. Therefore, formal mechanisms should be devised on both sides to boost of economic prospects. Meanwhile, regional forums like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) should resurrect for economic growth and development of the entire region.

Lastly, Pakistan and Iran have supported the Palestine cause for ages and during the recent Gaza war since the 7th October attacks, Iran has been under tremendous pressure from Western powers and Israel to directly participate in the conflict for the initiative of regional war, which serves the interests of Israel. This month, Israel crossed a red line by attacking the Irani Consulate in Damascus, which violates all diplomatic norms and international law, including the Vienna Convention (1969). Aftermath, Iran responded to 300-400 airstrikes from Iran to Israel, the first time an attack on Israel from Iranian soil. In that context, Iran wants Pakistan to its side in the case of wider conflict in the Middle East. For the moment, Pakistan has well-calibrated its national and regional interests, showing sympathy with Iran in the case of growing aggression of Israel, without provoking its allies, USA and Gulf countries.

The trajectory of Iran-Pakistan relations depends upon the independent conduct of foreign policy by Pakistan. Given the nature of the global outlook, the economic crisis of the country and Pakistan’s dependency on the West, the prospects of full-fledged relations appear to be limited. However, Pakistan should act in its national interest as this country can’t abandon its important neighbor under the pretext of warning from the West.

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