**Javad Zarif in Pakistan**

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Foreign Minister of Iran was here for a two days official visit to Islamabad. During his visit, Javad Zarif met with the top brass of Pakistan including Prime Minister, President, Foreign Minister and Chief of Army Staff apart from having a public talk at Ministry of Foreign Affairs think tank. The aim of the visit was to discuss and build trust and ties on the regular basis on the issues of bilateral and regional nature including security and economics.The visit was not only to renew the trust but also to build the reciprocal trade and border cooperation between both countries lingered for quite some time. It’s the fourth time that Foreign Minister of Iran was here in Islamabad reflecting the significance that Iran place on its relations with Pakistan especially as an important neighbor. The visit was important as there is a tumultuous change happening in Washington after the historic elections where Joe Biden and Kamala Harris,after beating Donald Trump, are ready to set foot forth to lead world’s super power.  However how would the new outlook of US will work towards the politics in Middle East and how that Washington’s policy might be towards Iran, time will tell. Before leaving for Pakistan, Javad Zarif tweeted about the significance of neighbors as regardless of outside powers or intrusions, neighbors remain the same signaling towards Pakistan, Afghanistan and others. Global and regional milieu is changing clearly and Pakistan needs to play its card right especially in the grand global chessboard with carefully formulating the policy to have comfortable political and economic benefits.

Javad Zarif was heading a high powered delegation that included Iran’s special envoy on Afghanistan, political and economic experts of high levels. The arrival of Javad Zarif to Islamabad reflects Iran’s doctrine of “neighbors first ” came in a time when hawkish Donald Trump will no longer be in the office. Trump’s departure has brought new hopes to the government in Iran to restructure Iran’s nuclear issue and economic sanctions. The visit is also important in the backdrop of the fact that several middle eastern and Gulf States are being to warm the ties with Israel. Iran is seeking new option to mitigate the Israeli influence in the region to build Iran’s national interests in the region. Both Iran and Pakistan do not recognize Israel and consider this illegitimate.

The current trade volume is US $ 392.08 million which is beyond low as compared to the potential that exists on both sides. Pakistan share only 1 % of the total Iran’s imports.  As a result of the sanctions against Iran, absence of proper financial system, high tariff rates, smuggling are few of the bottlenecks

On Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran share similar perspectives and support the just resolution of the conflict. Earlier in July there was high level visit from Afghanistan to Iran and from Pakistan to Afghanistan resulting in the triangular improvement in the relations. This is a crucial time in Afghanistan where intra-Afghan talks are ongoing with emphasis on finding Afghan led and Afghan owned solution. While on the other hand, Iran put weight on Taliban in order to undercut the US while feel the threat from the other groups including Islamic State and several others. In case of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the threat is still looming large as how the entire peace framework will work within Afghanistan when Afghans will be on their own. In case of the death of GeneralQasimSolemani there as perception in Tehran that the US forces operated from Afghanistan but although there is a likelihood that the Afghan soil may be used for this operation but Afghans do not have a control over the US forces and their motivations to operate against any state.  In this complex situation of Afghanistan, Pakistan has always been trying to strike a right balance. In order to maintain steady engagement in the Afghan quagmire, Iran has appointed Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian, as Special Envy for Afghanistan. While writing these lines he was in Afghanistan to meet with officials to talk about the recent development in the region. Last week he was with Javad Zarif in Pakistan to meet with the officials to talk about issues of the region especially Afghanistan. Apart from Afghanistan, security cooperation between Iran and Pakistan is comprehensive as there is a regular telephonic contact between Pakistan and Iranian military chiefs to coordinate and cooperate on maintaining border security and other common threats. There is also deeper cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan creating an environment where the states can further cooperate to enhance partnership in future.

During Foreign Minister of Iran’s presence in Islamabad, he has also announced the opening of the Rimdan border crossing point from Iranian side while expressed the desire thatGabd crossing point as a reciprocity from Pakistan. This opening will help the traders and economic activities between both states will grow manifold. Rimdan border crossing is believed to be suitably located for export and import of fruits, livestock, construction material, and petroleum products. The Iranian side of the crossing point has been equipped with modern communication systems, livestock and vegetable quarantine and other required facilities for import of mango and livestock. The current trade volume is US $ 392.08 million which is beyond low as compared to the potential that exists on both sides. Pakistan share only 1 % of the total Iran’s imports. As a result of the sanctions against Iran, absence of proper financial system, high tariff rates, smuggling are few of the bottlenecks. Despite these challenges, early this year a delegation of Tehran Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Mines and Agriculture was here to find the partnership with meetings to business hubs in Sindh and Punjab. As an important economy of the Middle East with reliance on oil, Pakistan Iran gas pipeline project is a potential to build the economic and strategic partnership with both states. IP pipeline has been built on the Iranian side and only Pakistan needs to complete it as per the agreement. IP pipeline can be linked with CPEC and can help transport the gas from Iran to China, creating a huge opportunity for Pakistan to be an energy corridor and trade hub at the same time. With recent announcement of the 25 years long strategic deal between Iran and China aiming to work together closely in the coming decades including economic and military sphere as well. This gives Pakistan an important leverage here as Pakistan enjoy deep rooted relations with China and is resuming and building on the trust with Iran.

With a neighbor sharing 959 Km long border, Pakistan should be playing carefully in keep all the options and through a balance approach be that the question of US-Iran tensions, Afghanistan situation, China-US  strain relations or Iran-Saudi Arabia struggle for power in the middle east and gulf region. There might be pressures and jolts on the way however Pakistan needs to keep in mind that we can *change* your friends, but *we cannot change* our *neighbors*. Iran will always remain significant in our foreign policy priorities of Pakistan.