

NEIGHBOURHOOD DIPLOMACY PAKISTAN-IRAN

RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



AMBASSADOR MUHAMMAD HAROON SHAUKAT (RETD)

CENTRE for AEROSPACE & SECURITY STUDIES, LAHORE

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ABSTRACT

The research first establishes the importance of neighbourhood diplomacy. In that context, the research examines the trajectory of Pakistan-Iran relations, analysing their historical progression, contemporary challenges, and potential for future cooperation. The two countries enjoy common and strong bonds of religion, history, and culture. However, influenced by global geopolitics, regional dynamics, and internal factors, this relationship has had a chequered history, marked by periods of alignment and divergence. The research traces different periods and turning points in the history of their bilateral relationship. It delves into the contemporary challenges, including the US sanctions, sectarian pressures, and border security issues. The paper also explores opportunities for addressing the varied challenges and unlocking the potential of deeper cooperation, albeit within continuing constraints, especially through economic initiatives and leveraging regional cooperation frameworks. The study concludes with policy recommendations for further cementing relations with Iran.

Keywords: Pakistan-Iran ties, historical trajectory, global geopolitics, convergences and challenges

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1. INTRODUCTION

The paper sheds light on the significance of neighbourhood diplomacy in the contemporary conduct of foreign policy. For Pakistan, nurturing mutually beneficial relations with neighbouring countries is of special importance, given Pakistan's strategic location, the evolving global geopolitical trends, and the unique regional dynamics. (India, is an exception because of unresolved disputes and a long history of adversarial relations). This paper focuses exclusively on the course of Pakistan's relations with its important neighbour, Iran, a Muslim country with whom Pakistan enjoys deep religious, historical, cultural, and linguistic bonds. The two countries do not have any major dispute.

After briefly discussing the concept of neighbourhood diplomacy, the paper presents Iran's historical snapshot as a stronghold of culture and civilisation. The research then traces different phases of Pakistan-Iran relations from the independence of Pakistan to the present time, underscoring in detail the major turning points. The study maps the external and internal factors impacting different periods of the bilateral relationship. The research also briefly touches the more recent developments and trends.

The research questions of this study are two-fold. First, to determine, in a historical context, why Pakistan-Iran relations could not be strengthened to their full potential. Second, to study how far these bilateral ties can be deepened within the confines of existing constraints. The study is based on the hypothesis that given the seriousness and varied nature of limitations, Pakistan-Iran relations can improve considerably but cannot achieve their full potential in the short and medium term.

This research will employ qualitative methodology, benefitting from the guidance provided by three former Ambassadors of Pakistan to Iran, books and academic publications, policy papers as well as analyses available in the form of published studies, articles and news reports.

2. NEIGHBOURHOOD DIPLOMACY

Neighbourhood diplomacy, in general terms, refers to the foreign policy strategy that prioritises strengthening the full gamut of relations with a country's immediate neighbours. It fundamentally seeks peaceful coexistence and collaboration for a shared and prosperous future. For example, China regards Pakistan as a priority in its neighbourhood diplomacy. Russia's neighbourhood diplomacy is primarily focused on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. Despite maintaining a hostile posture towards Pakistan, India, under Prime Minister Modi has a policy of 'Neighbourhood First'.¹

In their book "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security" the co-authors, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver introduce the concept of "Regional Security Complex Theory" (RSCT), which maintains that security dynamics are primarily shaped by regional rather than global structures.²

This concept also underpins the EU's 'European neighbourhood policy' (ENP), which directs its relations with its closest partners in the East and the South. There is even a concept of "neighbours of the EU's neighbours", presented originally by the European Commission regarding relations with the countries

¹ Vance Hawkins, *Modi's Successful Diplomacy: Neighbourhood First* (Alpha Edition, 2018).

² Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

of 'the Middle East', Saharan Africa and Central Asia, to create a "ring of friends".³

Under Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, the United States followed a policy of "Good Neighbour" vis-a-vis Latin America.⁴ Most regional organisations have the same philosophic underpinnings.

Pakistan's foreign policy aims for peaceful, cooperative and good neighbourly relations with all its neighbours, based on 'sovereign equality', 'mutual respect' and 'non-interference in internal matters'.⁵ With the exception of China, Pakistan has had a chequered history of unstable relations with all other neighbours. With India, the relations in most of history have remained adversarial.

Iran holds special importance for Pakistan. Following Pakistan's independence, the first Head of State to visit Pakistan was the Shahanshah of Iran.⁶ Friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries are important for both countries. However, there have been several compelling factors that have impeded the realisation of the full potential of this important relationship. These factors will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

3. IRAN A CITADEL OF CULTURE AND CIVILISATION

Iran has long been a citadel of culture and civilization, boasting a rich history that spans millennia. Formerly known as Persia, it has a recorded history

³ Sieglinde Gstöhl, Erwan Lannon, *The Neighbours of the European Union's Neighbours* (Routledge, 2018).

⁴ Irwin Gellman, *Good Neighbor Diplomacy United States Policies in Latin America, 1933-1945* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

⁵ Sattar Abdul, *PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY 1947-2009 A Concise History* (S a n i H .P a n h w a r, n.d.).

⁶ Abdul Sattar, *PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY 1947-2009 A Concise History*, n.d.

that dates back to 550 BCE, when Cyrus the Great founded the Achaemenid Persian Empire.⁷ The Sassanid Empire ruled Persia for nearly nine centuries. In 636 CE the start of a long-drawn rivalry between Muslim Arabs and Persians was witnessed. The two great institutions of Persia at the zenith of the Sassanid era, the monarchy and the Zoroastrian religion were nearly wiped away by the Islamic conquest. However, the Persian language survived, while adopting a considerable vocabulary from the Arabic language.⁸

The region was dominated by succeeding waves of Persian, Turkish, and Mongol conquerors until the rise of the Safavid dynasty, towards the beginning of the 16th century. The Safavids established Shia Islam, specifically the belief in the Twelve Imams, as the state religion. After the fall of the Safavids in 1736, Iran was ruled by a series of short-lasting dynasties until the emergence of the Qajar dynasty in 1796. Qajar rule was characterized by the increasing impact of European powers, which posed new political and economic challenges to Iran. Meanwhile 'Shia clergy', gained more prominence in socio-political matters. Iran's challenges paved the way for the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925. The dynasty's overthrow in the 1979 revolution.

There is considerable cultural and linguistic influence of the Persian heartland on the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent. Persian language was adopted as the official language of the Mughal court in the 16th century. Many of the leading poets of the sub-continent including, Ghalib and Iqbal wrote in Persian. Pakistan's national anthem is written in Persian.

⁷ "Ancient Persia - World History Encyclopedia," accessed October 21, 2024, <https://www.worldhistory.org/Persia/>.

⁸ Axworthy Michael, *A History of IRAN: Empire of the Mind* (Basic Books, 2008).

4. PAKISTAN-IRAN RELATIONS IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

4.1 Pakistan-Iran Ties in Pre-Islamic Revolution Period (1947-1979)

Pakistan and Iran have, by and large, enjoyed cordial relations over nearly seven and a half decades. Despite many ups and downs and a few lasting irritants, there is no major dispute between the two countries. During the pre-Iranian Islamic Revolution period (1947-1979), Pakistan-Iran relations were very close. After Pakistan's independence, Iran was the first state to recognise Pakistan. Iran also hosted the first Pakistani embassy abroad.⁹

Both Pakistan and Iran signed a Friendship Treaty (in 1950)¹⁰ and a Boundary Agreement (in 1958).¹¹ Iran supported Pakistan during times of crisis, particularly in the 1965 war. Both countries were strategically aligned with the "Western bloc" led by the US during "the Cold War". Pakistan and Iran were members of "the Baghdad Pact", which was subsequently converted into the "Central Treaty Organization" (CENTO) after the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy. The two countries enjoyed strong military cooperation and their economic and commercial exchanges further strengthened their relationship. The two countries were founding members of the former "Regional Cooperation for Development" (RCD) in 1964 which later in 1985, transformed into the

⁹ Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, "Pak-Iran Relations," DAWN.COM, 07:42:00+05:00, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1805690>.

¹⁰ "UNTC," accessed October 31, 2024, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=08000002801502f4>.

¹¹ "Address to National Assembly on Boundary Agreement with Iran — Relations with Afghanistan and Other Asian Countries — Kashmir Not a Settled Question — Relations with the West on July 24th 1963 — Zulfikar Ali Bhutto," accessed October 31, 2024, <https://bhutto.org/index.php/speeches/speeches-from-1948-1965/address-to-national-assembly-on-boundary-agreement-with-iran-relations-with-afghanistan-and-other-asian-countries-kashmir-not-a-settled-question-relations-with-the-west-o/>.

“Economic Cooperation Organization” (ECO).¹² The RCD provided a robust platform for fostering trilateral economic and commercial collaboration among Pakistan, Iran and Turkey.

In his book, “Pakistan and the Geostrategic Environment”, Hasan-Askari Rizvi examines the early post-independence period when Pakistan and Iran, as key Western allies during the Cold War, cultivated strong diplomatic and strategic ties. Author Rizvi highlights how their relationship was shaped by mutual interests in stability, economic cooperation, and a common alignment with the US.¹³ In their book “Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: A Historical Analysis”, the authors S. M. Burke and Lawrence Ziring allude to the similar points, detailing the Shah of Iran’s support for Pakistan.¹⁴

The period since the independence of Pakistan till 1960s can be called the ‘golden era’ of Iran-Pakistan relations. In this period, both sides felt that they were more or less at the same level in major domains. Tehran was also Islamabad’s steadfast supporter throughout the 1971 East Pakistan crisis. As recorded by Alex Vatanka in Chapter 5 of his book, “Iran and Pakistan, Security, Diplomacy and the American Influence” following the removal from office of President Ayub Khan, the Foreign Minister of Iran Ardeshir Zahedi, in an airport meeting with a prominent Indian diplomat M.C.Chagla, made the following comment:

“Tehran wanted above all to keep relations between Pakistan and India on an even keel.... India knows about [Iran’s] affinity for Pakistan and

¹² “History – Economic Cooperation Organization,” <https://eco.int/history/>.

¹³ Hasan-Askari Rizvi, *Pakistan and the Geostrategic Environment* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1993).

¹⁴ S. M. Burke, Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: An Historical Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 1991).

our interests there. Iran will support Pakistan 100% if India [takes] any military steps against it".¹⁵

Iran was also involved in efforts to avert the break-up of Pakistan. Iranian leaders consistently urged Islamabad to pursue a political compromise within the country.

Following the creation of Bangladesh, the nature of this bilateral relationship started to transform. While Pakistan was weakened, Iran emerged as a power in the region. Its oil revenues multiplied, especially after the Arab oil embargo and the departure of the British from east of Suez. The Shah began to act like the bigger brother which created a degree of resentment in Pakistani leadership of the time. According to former US Ambassador Teresita Schaffer, at that stage, the United States regarded Iran as the more important of the two.¹⁶ Pakistani leadership kept looking at the Shah as a useful ally. He was also a very effective factor of goodwill towards Pakistan in Washington, having close relationship with eight successive American Presidents.

4.2 Impact of 1979 Revolution on Bilateral Relations

Professor R. K. Ramazani in his book "Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East" underscores how the shift from a monarchy to an Islamic republic altered Iran's foreign policy, making it more ideologically

¹⁵ Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (I.B. Tauris, September 30, 2015s).

¹⁶ "Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence," Middle East Institute, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://mei.edu/events/iran-and-pakistan-security-diplomacy-and-american-influence>.

driven and less aligned with Pakistan's US centric approach.¹⁷ Indeed, the Islamic Revolution (1979) had deep ramifications for 'Pakistan-Iran relations'. Iran abandoned the "Western bloc". Iran-US relations moved in the opposite direction, from friendship to hostility¹⁸. The hostage-taking of the US Embassy (1979-81) further plunged relations with the US to a low point. 'Michael Axworthy' in his book, "Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic" states that:

"The chaotic occupation of the US embassy in Tehran led Iran into a twilight zone of diplomatic breakdown and international isolation from which the country has never really re-emerged".¹⁹

The US-led backing of Iraq, in its long war with Iran (1980-88) further deteriorated ties with the West. Iran faced stringent US sanctions. Pakistan, meanwhile, remained aligned with the US.

Iran morphed from an absolute monarchy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to a Shia theocracy under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. On the other hand, under President Zia-ul-Haq a Sunni variety of religious extremism flourished in Pakistan.²⁰ This triggered a sectarian divide which became a major irritant in bilateral relations. A former Pakistan Ambassador to Iran contends that:

¹⁷ Professor R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, n.d.).

¹⁸ Javid Husain, *Pakistan and a World in Disorder A Grand Strategy for the Twenty-First Century* (Chapter 7: Iran: An Estranged Friend: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁹ Axworthy Michael, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁰ "2009.07.Islamization of Pakistan.Pdf," <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/2009.07.Islamization%20of%20Pakistan.pdf>.

“Iran for about two decades after the Islamic Revolution allegedly provided funds, weapons, and training to Pakistani Shia radicals through covert means. On the other hand, some Arab countries of the Persian Gulf region reportedly extended covert support to radical Pakistani Sunni organizations, thus fighting a proxy war with Iran on the Pakistani soil”.²¹

Shuja Nawaz, in his book “Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within” argues that Iran’s support for Shia groups and movements in Pakistan led to increased sectarian tensions,²² a theme echoed by Hasan Abbas in his book “Pakistan’s Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror”.²³

4.3 Proxy War in Afghanistan

The most significant strain in relations arose during the Afghan civil war (1992–2001). Pakistan provided strong support to the “Pashtun Taliban”, while Iran supported “the Northern Alliance”, led by “Burhanuddin Rabbani” and Commander “Ahmed Shah Massoud”. Earlier, both Pakistan and Iran had collaborated in supporting the Afghan jihad against the Soviet occupation.

In July and August 1998, the Taliban launched a major offensive against the Northern Alliance, establishing their control over most of Afghanistan, including “Mazar-e-Sharif”. According to Human Rights Watch, during the Taliban's takeover of Mazar-e-Sharif, eight Iranian Consulate officials and one Iranian journalist, were killed.²⁴ News of this massacre shocked the Iranians.

²¹ Husain, *Pakistan and a World in Disorder: A Grand Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*.

²² Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

²³ Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan's Drift Into Extremism: Allah, Then Army, and America's War Terror*, 2004.

²⁴ “THE MASSACRE IN MAZAR-I SHARIF,” accessed November 21, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/afghan/Afrepor0.htm>.

An accusing finger was raised towards Pakistan. These developments brought the relations to a new low.

Despite serious tensions, Iran's reaction to nuclear tests by India and Pakistan was balanced. Before the debate in the Security Council on June 6, 1998, the Foreign Minister of Iran, Mr. Kamal Kharrazi visited India and Pakistan. Speaking at the UNSC he remarked:

“A number of issues could be blamed for the situation, including inadequate attention and the failure to adopt concrete actions on global nuclear disarmament... as well as the selective approach to the implementation of the provisions of the NPT could also be blamed for the situation.”²⁵

Mr. Kharrazi highlighted several areas that could serve as a foundation for initiatives between the two countries. These included a renewed commitment to resuming and sustaining a comprehensive dialogue on all outstanding issues, including Jammu and Kashmir, along with other confidence-building measures. From Pakistan's point of view, this was a balanced statement.

Shortly after taking power in October 1999, 'General Pervez Musharraf' visited Iran twice. Although these visits helped reduce tensions, the “Pakistan-Iran relationship” lacked the cordiality of the earlier times. Correspondingly, Iran's relations with India were warming up.

²⁵ “SECURITY COUNCIL CONDEMNS NUCLEAR TESTS BY INDIA AND PAKISTAN | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases,” accessed March 23, 2025, <https://press.un.org/en/1998/sc6528.doc.htm>.

Until the events of 9/11, Pakistan and Iran backed rival factions in Afghanistan. However, following intense pressure from the United States, Pakistan was compelled to review its policy.

4.4 Post 9/11 Period

The situation in Afghanistan changed dramatically after 9/11. The US declared war on the “Taliban and Al-Qaeda”. This led to the collapse of Taliban rule in the country. A pro-U.S. government led by the Northern Alliance was installed in Kabul.²⁶ This changed the situation on the ground. Pakistan was compelled to withhold its previous entirely pro-Taliban stance under American pressure. Consequently, Pakistan and Iran’s policies towards Afghanistan became less divergent.

The fall of the Taliban government was a gain for Iran. However, the US military presence in Afghanistan became a serious concern for Iran. Under President Musharraf, Pakistan became a partner of the US in Afghanistan and was regarded as a non-NATO ally. Close collaboration between Pakistan and the US on Afghanistan became an impediment to improving ties with Iran. The US opposition to implementing the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project also cast a dark shadow on Pakistan-Iran relations.

Iranian authorities repeatedly raised their concerns regarding periodic terrorist attacks in Iran’s Eastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan by “Jundullah” and later by “Jaish-ul Adal”. Iran alleged that such groups were using the Pakistani territory, with the clandestine backing of “Western intelligence

²⁶ “Pakistan and Iran in Afghanistan: From Soviet Intervention to the Fall of Taliban,” accessed November 21, 2024, https://asc-centralasia.edu.pk/old_site/Issue_64/02_Pakistan_and_Iran_in_Afghanistan.html.

agencies". The Iranian leadership also believed that third parties were creating difficulties in Pakistan-Iran relations.²⁷

4.5 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and Deeper China-Iran Ties

On July 14, 2015, the Joint 'Comprehensive Plan of Action' (JCPOA) was signed to ensure Iran's nuclear program remained peaceful. The agreement was concluded between:

"Iran, the P5+1 nations (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), and the European Union (EU)."²⁸

After verification by the IAEA, which was later endorsed by the US Secretary of State, the US and EU sanctions were lifted. This provided considerable relief to Iran, at least in the short run. China had played an important role in concluding the JCPOA, which marked a new chapter in its relations with Iran. After the implementation of JCPOA in 2016, President Xi Jinping visited Iran and the Chinese investments in Iran rose significantly.²⁹ In 2018, the US withdrew from the JCPOA.³⁰ Subsequently, the US sanctions were re-imposed in November 2018, and expanded in scope twice in 2019 and 2020. The reasons cited by the US included the "Iranian nuclear programme" and Iran's support to its proxies e.g. "Hezbollah and Hamas", declared terror-

²⁷ Agencies, "Pakistan, Iran Vow to Strengthen Ties," DAWN.COM, 06:20:23+05:00, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1105926>.

²⁸ "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal? | Council on Foreign Relations," accessed November 6, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

²⁹ "China-Iran-Relations-Memo-213-51-59.Pdf," accessed November 6, 2024, <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/china-iran-relations-memo-213-51-59.pdf>.

³⁰ Anna Schumann, "A Worthless Withdrawal: Two Years since President Trump Abandoned the JCPOA," Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, May 11, 2020, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/a-worthless-withdrawal-two-years-since-president-trump-abandoned-the-jcpoa/>.

outfits by the US.³¹ Some countries were given temporary waivers to import reduced quantities of oil from Iran until 2019. Iran was added to the “FATF blacklist” in February 2020.³² In October 2020 the UN arms embargo on Iran expired. In 2021, China and Iran agreed on a 25-year “Roadmap for Cooperation” within a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”, including commitments for long-term investments.³³ China maintained steady import of Iranian oil by routing shipments through third countries and using ‘ship-to-ship’ (STS) transfers to circumvent restrictions.³⁴

The repeated sanctions on Iran continued to create hurdles in the deepening of Pakistan-Iran ties, including the implementation of the IP project.

5. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

5.1 Enhanced Chinese role in the Middle East

China has also been steadily expanding its footprint in the Middle East. In December 2022, President Xi visited Saudi Arabia and attended three summit meetings, namely, “China-Saudi Arabia summit, China-Arab States summit and the “China-GCC summit”.³⁵

This visit marked the biggest diplomatic initiative by China in the Arab world. Currently, the largest destination of Saudi oil and its petroleum products is

³¹ “- IRAN’S DESTABILIZING ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST,” accessed November 6, 2024, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhrg88732/html/CHRG-113hhrg88732.htm>.

³² “Iran,” accessed November 6, 2024, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/countries/detail/iran.html>.

³³ “The 25-Year Iran-China Agreement, Endangering 2,500 Years of Heritage,” Middle East Institute, accessed November 6, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/25-year-iran-china-agreement-endangering-2500-years-heritage>.

³⁴ “The Axis of Evasion: Behind China’s Oil Trade with Iran and Russia - Atlantic Council,” accessed November 6, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-axis-of-evasion-behind-chinas-oil-trade-with-iran-and-russia/>.

³⁵ “Xi Jinping to Attend China-Arab States Summit and China-GCC Summit and Pay State Visit to Saudi Arabia_Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China,” accessed November 6, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2022/xjpcxfh/202212/t20221207_10986290.html.

China (\$68B).³⁶ China also played an important role in facilitating a “rapprochement” between “Saudi Arabia and Iran” in March 2023. This development reflected a geopolitical shift in which China is gradually assuming a larger politico-economic role in a region.³⁷

5.2 Hamas-Israel war

The Middle East was plunged into a protracted genocidal war, triggered by a surprise attack on Israel, by Hamas on October 7, 2023. Following Hamas’ shock blitz, Tel Aviv went on a rampage. Over a period of around thirteen months, the war expanded to Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Iran. As of November 25, 2024, Israel’s murderous actions in Gaza had resulted in the deaths of at least 44,211 Palestinians.³⁸ Around 70% of those killed were women and children.³⁹ Despite the ICJ’s provisional rulings against Israel, the US-led West has firmly stood behind Israel.

5.3 Iran-Pakistan Spat

In mid-January 2024, Pakistan-Iran relations rapidly deteriorated following Iran’s shocking missile and drone strikes in Pakistan’s Panjgur region, allegedly targeting the Jaish al-Adl group. Pakistan condemned the attack as a violation of its sovereignty, warning Iran of consequences. In response,

³⁶ “Saudi Arabia (SAU) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners,” The Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed November 6, 2024, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/sau>.

³⁷ “The Impact of the Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement on Middle East Conflicts | Crisis Group,” April 19, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/impact-saudi-iranian>.

³⁸ Nils Adler, “Half a Million in Gaza Threatened by Sewage Flood amid Rainy Season: UNRWA,” Al Jazeera, accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/11/25/live-destruction-in-tel-aviv-beirut-amid-hezbollah-israel-missile-fire>.

³⁹ “Nearly 70% of Gaza War Dead Women and Children - UN,” accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn5wel11pgdo>.

Pakistan downgraded diplomatic ties⁴⁰ and launched precision military strikes in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province on January 18, under the operation "Marg Bar Sarmachar."⁴¹ The crisis de-escalated after the Foreign Ministers of both countries spoke on phone, restoring diplomatic relations. On January 29, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited Pakistan, formally defusing the tense situation.⁴²

Subsequently, the President of Iran, Late Dr Sayyid Ebrahim Raisi paid an important official visit to Pakistan from 22-23 April 2024. The Iranian President and his delegation were accorded a warm welcome in Pakistan. The two sides issued an extensive Joint Statement which among others, articulated an agreement to augment two-way trade to \$10 billion in the following five years; to expeditiously finalize a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and to expand linkages between the ports of Gwadar and Chahbahar.⁴³ The visit reflected the resolve of both sides to mend fences and strengthen bilateral ties.

5.4 Strikes by Iran and Israel

The war in the Middle East took a dangerous turn with tit-for-tat strikes by Israel and Iran. An Israeli missile strike targeting the Iranian Consulate in Damascus resulted in the deaths of seven individuals, including a high-ranking

⁴⁰ "Pakistan Recalls Envoy from Iran after 'unprovoked' Missile Strikes | Reuters," accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-recalls-ambassador-iran-after-air-space-violation-2024-01-17/>.

⁴¹ "Operation Marg Bar Sarmachar," accessed December 16, 2024, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/operation-marg-bar-sarmachar>.

⁴² "Foreign Minister of Iran Visits Pakistan (29 January 2024)," accessed December 16, 2024, <https://mofa.gov.pk/news/foreign-minister-of-iran-visits-pakistan-29-january-2024>.

⁴³ "Joint Statement between Islamic Republic of Pakistan and Islamic Republic of Iran at the Culmination of the Visit by the President of Iran," accessed December 16, 2024, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/joint-statement-between-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-and-islamic-republic-of-iran-at-the-culmination-of-the-visit-by-the-president-of-iran>.

commander of the Quds Force of Iran's IRGC, along with his deputy.⁴⁴ In response, on April 14th, Iran launched a large-scale direct attack on Israel, by launching more than 300 ballistic and cruise missiles, and UAVs.⁴⁵ According to Western reports most of the projectiles were intercepted and destroyed. On 17th April Israel responded in a limited and circumspect strike.

On 31st July, Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader was assassinated in Tehran. Only a few hours before Haniyeh's killing, Israel had bombed a Hezbollah stronghold in Beirut and killed a senior Hezbollah commander. The Supreme Leader of Iran called Israel a "criminal Zionist regime," and asserted that "severe punishment" was a "duty".⁴⁶

Israel continued with its vicious campaign. On 27th September, Hassan Nasrallah, the top leader of Hezbollah was assassinated in Israeli airstrikes in Beirut.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Deputy Commander of IRGC's Operations was also killed. Earlier, Israel and its intelligence agency reportedly carried out a series of pager explosions that targeted civilians and Hezbollah members in Lebanon.

On October 1, 2024, Iran launches about 180 ballistic missiles at Israel. Several missiles were intercepted with the assistance of the US,⁴⁸ while some penetrated the Israeli defences. On 25 October 2024, Israel launched three

⁴⁴ "Israel Strikes Iran Consulate in Syria's Capital Damascus: What We Know," Al Jazeera, accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/2/attack-on-iran-consulate-in-damascus-what-do-we-know>.

⁴⁵ Dana Polak, "Iran's First Direct Attack on Israel, April 14th, 2024," *Alma Research and Education Center* (blog), April 14, 2024, <https://israel-alma.org/2024/04/14/irans-first-direct-attack-on-israel-april-14th-2024/>.

⁴⁶ Waqar Rizvi, "What Ismail Haniyeh's Assassination Means for Gaza and the Larger Region," DAWN.COM, 12:00:31+05:00, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1849248>.

⁴⁷ "Hezbollah Leader Hassan Nasrallah Killed in Israeli Strike | AP News," accessed November 26, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-israel-hezbollah-airstrikes-28-september-2024-c4751957433ff944c4eb06027885a973>.

⁴⁸ Patrick Kingsley et al., "Iran Launches About 180 Ballistic Missiles at Israel," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2024, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/10/02/world/israel-iran-lebanon-hezbollah>.

waves of strikes against 20 locations in Iran and other sites in Iraq, and Syria. According to Western Media, Israel used precision air and drone strikes to target air defence systems to cover military sites and key oil and gas facilities.⁴⁹ This operation reportedly weakened Iran's capacity to launch attacks on Israel and leave it more vulnerable to potential future airstrikes.

The fall of Assad regime in Syria on December 8, 2024 came as a severe set-back to Iran. Israel used this opportunity to destroy a significant part of the Syrian defence infrastructure. In the post-Assad Middle East, in which Israel has considerably defanged Hamas and Hezbollah, a new balance of power is unfolding.

These developments have triggered ever-increasing US pressure on Iran, creating more difficulties in strengthening "Pakistan-Iran relations".

5.5 Iran's latent nuclear weapons ambitions

Given a menacingly hostile environment created by an ever-belligerent and all-out aggression by Israel, fully backed by the US, Iran's leaning to pursue a covert nuclear weapons capacity seems more justified than ever.⁵⁰ So far, at all levels, Iran has expressed its unwavering commitment to NPT. As a signatory to the NPT, Iran is legally bound to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons while it is permitted to develop nuclear technology for energy and other civilian uses under IAEA safeguards.

⁴⁹ Bethan McKernan, "Israel's Strikes on Iran Reportedly Hit Air Defence Systems Protecting Energy Sites," *The Guardian*, October 27, 2024, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/27/israel-strikes-iran-air-defence-systems-energy-sites>.

⁵⁰ Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "Iran's Nuclear Program:," *CISS Insight Journal* 12, no. 2 (December 31, 2024): P09-32.

According to an IAEA report, its combined stockpile of 60 and 20 percent enriched uranium in gas form is close to 900 kilograms. Additionally, Iran has installed approximately 118 centrifuges, including 76 more advanced. (Such centrifuges were previously prohibited under the JCPOA).⁵¹

Despite facing US hostility, Iran is not entirely isolated diplomatically; it enjoys close strategic ties with Russia and maintains good relations with China. While remaining within NPT, Iran may already have achieved the potential of nuclear weapons.⁵²

6. COMPLEXITY OF PAKISTAN-IRAN RELATIONS

There is an intricate interplay of regional and international factors, coupled with the sectarian divide and national ambitions that impose limits on cooperation between the two countries.

Despite the election of a relatively moderate President, Mr. Masoud Pezishkian in Iran, the ideological dynamics have not fundamentally changed. Though greatly weakened by its involvement in the Middle East conflict, Iran continues to wield influence in the region. Despite the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement engineered by China, the deep-seated misgivings and mistrust about Iran in the Gulf Arab states persist. The conflict in the Middle East and direct tit-for-tat strikes between Iran and Israel are contributing factors to Iran's low image in the West.

⁵¹ "The Art of a New Iranian Nuclear Deal in 2025 | Arms Control Association," accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2025-03/art-new-iranian-nuclear-deal-2025>.

⁵² Jaspal, "Iran's Nuclear Program."

As regards Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran are not on the same page. Iran considers Afghanistan's West as its "area of influence" with which Iran shares linguistic, sectarian, and ethnic links. Persian-speaking or Shia groups, mainly among the Hazara, have traditionally enjoyed strong support of Iran.⁵³ Although Pakistan and Iran still have competing interests in Afghanistan, at present there is no situation of an active proxy war in Afghanistan.

The tensions in the border regions between Pakistan and Iran persist. However, the sectarian tensions between the two countries have subsided.

The implementation of the IP gas pipeline agreement in the near future remains in doubt because of stringent US sanctions. For the same reasons, bilateral trade and economic cooperation between the two countries remain limited. Lessons must be learned from countries having substantial trade relations with Iran, e.g. India, Turkey, and China.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Despite Iran's growing difficulties with the US-led West, strengthening bilateral relations with Iran should be a priority for Pakistan.
2. While political relations are cordial, high priority may be accorded to expanding economic and commercial bonds with Iran. In this context:
 - a. Iran should be among the preferred choices for sourcing Pakistan's energy needs. Ways and means should be explored to find a way to legally circumvent sanctions and concretise the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline Agreement (IP).

⁵³ "Iran's Continuing Interests in Afghanistan," accessed December 19, 2024, <https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/twq/v37i2/05.html>.

- b. The target of 10 billion dollars of bilateral trade, over the next five years, agreed during the visit of late President Ebrahim Raisi to Pakistan (April 2024), may be pursued in earnestness.
 - c. Border markets and barter trade should be encouraged to sidestep economic sanctions on Iran.
- 3. The Pakistan-Iran border, often a source of tension and irritation, must be better managed. Strict measures may be taken to prevent cross-border terrorism by militant groups operating from both sides.
- 4. Pakistan and Iran may join hands to promote lasting peace and development in Afghanistan. This is also central to regional connectivity and development.
- 5. The expanding relations between China and Iran, present an opportunity for Pakistan to strengthen economic and commercial ties with Iran.
- 6. International and Regional mechanisms such as ECO, OIC, SCO and other bodies representing the Global South may be utilised for closer bilateral and regional cooperation.
- 7. A new approach and an open mind-set are required to create a win-win situation in relations with Iran.

8. CONCLUSION

Pakistan's foreign policy requires recalibration to put a higher priority on peaceful and mutually beneficial neighbourhood diplomacy. Iran has to be a priority. Pakistan and Iran have enjoyed cordial relations but have failed to harness the full potential of their mutual ties. The external and internal factors that place limits on two-way cooperation continue to exist in varying degrees.

However, a fresh outlook and win-win mind set is needed in dealing with Iran. Iran's significant trade relations with India, China, and Turkey indicate that possibilities exist to bypass sanctions on Iran. Iran's growing ties with China and its rapprochement with Saudi Arabia could be facilitating factors for a positive upturn in Pakistan's trade and economic relations with Iran. Pakistan should enhance its oil and gas procurements from Iran. In this context, a solution to the IP project may be found expeditiously. The two countries need to work and cooperate closely to eliminate the threat of cross-border terrorism from non-state actors on both sides. Furthermore, Pakistan and Iran need to cooperate closely to usher in a period of peace and development in the war-torn Afghanistan. The two countries also need to utilise international and regional platforms and mechanisms to maximise bilateral and regional cooperation.

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