

Navigating Tensions and Opportunities: India-Iran Relations Amidst Pakistan-Iran Strains

Introduction

The article examines the complex and evolving dynamics between Pakistan and Iran with a focus on the impact of the Balochistan issue. Further it explores the opportunities for India to strengthen its economic and strategic ties with Iran.

An overview of historical relations between Pakistan and Iran

At the time of the partition Pakistan and Iran both Islamic countries, shared strong ties. Iran was the first country to recognise Pakistan and maintained robust diplomatic and economic relations with it. Iran supported Pakistan during the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971. However, the Iranian Revolution marked the beginning of deteriorating relations between the two nations. Despite both being Islamic states, they follow different sects of Islam: Pakistan is a Sunni-majority country, whereas Iran is a Shia-majority country.

After the Iranian Revolution, Shiism became the driving force for the Iranian government, while Pakistan increasingly identified with Sunni Islam. Both nations became deeply involved in promoting and protecting their respective Shia and Sunni identities. Other factors exacerbated the situation, such as Pakistan's close ties with Washington and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan began receiving financial aid and oil from Saudi Arabia, and its military was involved in the protection of religious sites in Saudi Arabia. Since the 1980s, Pakistan has suffered from proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with Saudi Arabia supporting Sunni extremist groups in Pakistan and Iran responding by backing Shia militants.

Throughout the 1980s, Saudi Arabia and the United States funnelled money through Pakistan to support Afghan Mujahedeen groups fighting the Soviet occupation. Eventually, the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda emerged from these factions. Concurrently, Iran recruited Shia Afghans to fight in the Iran-Iraq War, establishing connections with Afghan Shia Anti-Soviet forces, which later formed the Northern Alliance. This alliance gained support from the United States (US) led coalition following 9/11. Before 9/11, Pakistan's backing of the Afghan Taliban strained its relations with Iran, and Pakistan's subsequent cooperation with the US further worsened this relationship. Iran's strategic interests in Afghanistan often aligned with India's, intensifying Pakistan's distrust.^[1]

Balochistan Issue

The Baloch population resides at the intersection of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Baloch people living across these borders have been governed by Islamabad and Tehran. Despite the region's wealth in natural resources, the Baloch population remains among the poorest on both sides. Although the Baloch people and tribes in this region are separated by the border between the two countries, the daily exchange of goods and the deep-rooted historical, cultural, ethnic, and religious ties between them remain a concern for both Iran and Pakistan.

Socially, Pakistan's Balochistan province is the largest in area. Balochistan, despite its wealth of natural resources such as oil, coal, gold, copper, and gas reserves, remains the poorest province in Pakistan.^[2] Periodically, Baloch militants have expressed their desire for an independent country, emphasizing their Baloch identity since 1948. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) in Pakistan and the Balochistan Liberation Front have targeted Pakistani forces and

occasionally Chinese nationals to demonstrate their opposition to the construction of the Gwadar port in Pakistan. On Mar 24, the BLA took responsibility for an attack on the Gwadar Port Authority Complex. During the gunfire, security forces killed eight militants from the banned separatist group and two security personnel were injured.^[3] Armed Baloch insurgents attempted to penetrate a major naval air base in Pakistan's volatile Balochistan province, but security forces thwarted the assault, eliminating all four militants. The incident occurred during the night of Mar 25 in Turbat, a troubled district within the thinly populated province.^[4]

In Iran, Baloch minorities highlight their Sunni identity. Jaish ul-Adl (Army of Justice), established in 2012, is one of several separatist groups active in Iran. Originally, it was part of a larger Sunni militant organisation called Jundallah, which splintered after Iran executed its leader in 2010.^[5] The group has been actively involved in attacking government officials, security forces, and Shia mosques in Iran's Sistan and Balochistan province. In 2015, the group claimed responsibility for an assault that killed eight Iranian border guards, with militants reportedly infiltrating Iran from Pakistan. In 2019, it also took responsibility for a suicide bombing that struck a bus transporting Iranian military personnel, killing at least 23 individuals in Sistan-Baluchistan.^[6] Iran has accused Pakistan of permitting these militants to operate freely from Balochistan and launch attacks on Iranian authorities.

In Dec 2023, a Jaish ul-Adl militant attack on a police station in Iran's Sistan and Balochistan province resulted in the deaths of 11 Iranian officers and left several others injured.^[7] In 2023, a total of 10 Pakistani soldiers and security personnel were killed in three separate attacks in Balochistan, allegedly carried out by militants operating from the Iranian side.^[8] Both nations have blamed each other for sheltering separatist groups.

The trajectory of relations between the two nations has been volatile since 1979. The situation in Balochistan remains a persistent concern, periodically troubling both countries. On 16 Jan 2024, Iran launched a series of drone and missile strikes in Pakistan's Balochistan Province, asserting that the target was the Jaish-ul-Adl terrorist group operating from Iranian Balochistan. Pakistan condemned the strikes as a flagrant breach of international law and the essence of bilateral relations between Pakistan and Iran. Within 48 hours, Pakistan retaliated with a series of highly coordinated and precisely targeted military strikes on the hideouts of separatist groups in Iran's Sistan and Balochistan region.^[9] Months after the two neighbours conducted reciprocal airstrikes on alleged terrorist hideouts within each other's territories. In Apr 2024, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi was on a three-day official visit to Pakistan, aimed at enhancing cooperation. During their discussions, they agreed to collaborate on eliminating terrorism and explored ways to strengthen bilateral relations across political, economic, trade, and cultural spheres.^[10]

India-Iran Relations

Since gaining independence, India has faced challenges in maintaining stable relations with Iran, navigating a delicate balance between Iran and the US. India's close ties with other West Asian nations such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have further complicated this relationship. In recent years, India-Iran relations have been characterised by a degree of caution and distance. Iran has expressed disappointment with India's reluctance to jeopardize its strategic and economic interests with the US and the broader Western world while seeking to strengthen ties with Iran. The strains in Iran-Pakistan relations due to the events in Balochistan could create an opportunity for India and Iran to strengthen their ties.

Opportunities for India

Economic Engagement with Iran. The strained relationship between Iran and Pakistan over Balochistan presents an opportunity for India to enhance its economic ties with Iran. A prime example of this potential is the development of the Chabahar Port in South-Eastern Iran, which has seen significant investment from India. This Port is crucial as it improves India's connectivity with the broader region, thereby strengthening its economic and strategic position.

On 13 May 2024, India and Iran signed a significant agreement regarding the Chabahar Port. This contract, between Iran's Port and Maritime Organisation and India Ports Global Ltd, grants India operational control of the port's terminal for ten years, with an option for automatic renewal.^[11] This agreement is a critical step toward realizing the strategic value of Chabahar, aligning with India's interests in the Arabian Sea, Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The contract could serve as a foundation to further enhance Indo-Iranian relations.

The revitalisation of Chabahar, along with two key corridors, enables India to circumvent the geographic barrier posed by Pakistan, providing improved access to Central Asia and Eurasia. Furthermore, Chabahar has become a focal point of Sino-Indian rivalry due to China's interest in the port and its expanding strategic partnership with Tehran. This makes it increasingly critical for India to enhance its presence in Chabahar to prevent it from falling under Chinese influence.

By strengthening relations with Iran, India secures a reliable ally in a volatile region. Enhanced India-Iran ties can counter China's growing influence through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor or China-Pakistan Occupied Kashmir Economic Corridor and other regional projects. A robust partnership with Iran also supports India's energy security, given Iran's substantial oil and gas reserves. Additionally, it reinforces India's strategic interests in Afghanistan, where both nations have invested in development initiatives.

Until 2018, Iran was one of India's top crude oil exporters. By the 2018-19 period, it ranked as the third-largest supplier to India, with imports peaking at USD12.1 bn. However, after US sanctions were imposed, India ceased all Iranian oil imports. Consequently, Iran's position as a crude oil exporter dropped from ninth in 2018 to 71st in 2021, according to Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries data.^[12] Iran offers a direct maritime route for importing energy supplies, which reduces transport costs compared to routes from Russia.

Strategic and Security Cooperation. Iran, grappling with insurgency issues in its Sistan and Balochistan province, might seek to enhance its security and strategic ties with India. By cooperating in intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism efforts, both nations can build trust and deepen their bilateral relationship. Additionally, India can provide technological and logistical support to Iran for managing its border security, further solidifying their partnership.

In this context, India and Iran can revisit the New Delhi Declaration of 2003, which outlines areas of cooperation including defence. This includes joint naval exercises and sea-lane control and security. New Delhi should actively pursue strengthening naval cooperation with Tehran to ensure stability in the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz. Measures such as joint naval exercises between the Indian Navy and the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy and increasing port calls by both navies can be crucial. Moreover, India could participate in the Iran-Oman naval rescue and relief drills, thereby bolstering New Delhi's strategic presence in the critical chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz.

Conclusion

Since independence, the India-Iran relationship has been like a roller coaster ride. Despite challenges such as India's neutral stance and its emphasis on peaceful resolution, which allowed it to maintain relations with both Iran and Iraq, as well as India's votes against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency and the India-US Nuclear Deal (2005-2008), the two countries have managed to navigate their complex bilateral relationship. The strained relationship between Iran and Pakistan, particularly over the Balochistan issue, opens significant opportunities for India. By deepening economic and strategic ties with Iran, India can enhance its regional influence, improve energy security, and counterbalance China's growing presence in the region. Strengthening Indo-Iranian relations through projects like the Chabahar Port and enhanced security cooperation can provide a stable and reliable partnership in an otherwise volatile region.

End Notes

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