

Iran – Saudi Rivalry: Options for Pakistan

Spearhead Special Report



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Contents

Introduction	2
Proxy Conflicts	4
India	5
Iran	6
US policies	6
Afghan instability	7
Conclusion	9

Introduction



Pakistan shares deep socio-religious linkages and has common security and economic interests with both, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Ideally, Pakistan aspires to remain neutral in the Iran-Saudi rivalry, while continuing to deepen ties with both nations. However, Pakistan's stance is prone to several vulnerabilities, thus to manage this balance Pakistan would have to work on certain internal policies and correctly respond to regional developments.

The aim of this paper is to explore the current developments in Pakistan's bilateral ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia, address the impacts of ideologically driven proxies and look at the current regional developments in order to assess Pakistan's options in dealing with Saudi-Arabia and Iran.

Recently, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Army Chief and Director General of Inter-Services Intelligence embarked on a trip to Saudi Arabia to attend the IMCTC meeting.

It has been stated that the purpose of the force is to defeat terrorism, integrate intelligence sharing mechanisms and help each state develop its own counter terrorism capabilities. The participation of the coalition states is to be defined in accordance with each country's capabilities and resources, as well as in accordance with each country's desire to participate in a given military operation.

Pakistan's degree of participation in the force is yet to be announced, but the fact that Pakistan's former Chief of Army commands the force has raised concerns over possible adverse impacts on Pak-Iran ties.

Earlier in November, Pakistan's Army Chief visited Iran to discuss security issues, the meeting concluded on a positive note with agreement on improved border management and enhancing bilateral ties.

Pakistan's consistent stance has been that it would not engage in any inter-state or sectarian conflict. The IMCTC's commander has also in the past stated his position of opting for negotiations over critical political differences and only directing force towards transnational terror elements. Despite, that it is believed that Iran has reservations about the actual purpose of the force and Pakistan's participation in the process. The Saudi-Iran animosity being fanned by the US and Israel influences the situation.

There is also a lack of clarity over the IMCTC's definition of the word 'terrorism'. According to some reports Saudi Arabia's recently revised Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism, maintains that "criticism of the crown prince is an act of terrorism". It also states "disturbing public order, shaking stability" and "exposing national unity to danger" as terrorism. Furthermore, the regional unfolding in the wake of the Syrian War clearly indicates that protecting respective - often divergent - national interests trumps the notion of a collective fight against transnational terror.

Currently, Saudi Arabia and Iran stand on opposite sides, to safeguard their interests in the landmasses between and around their territories. As part of its official policy on Iran, the Kingdom has mentioned the possibility of 'fighting the battle inside Iran'. Pakistan, which shares a direct border with Iran thus becomes an integral part of the Iran-Saudi equation. Pakistan cannot ever allow Baluchistan to be used as a launch pad against Saudi Arabia.

Proxy Conflicts

James Dorsey in his recent series of articles has indicated some developments. He states that a massive flow of Saudi and UAE funds has been allegedly funneled to certain ultra-conservative Sunni groups and madrassas operating in Baluchistan (Pakistan) in the recent past. Some of these funding channels are allegedly linked to banned groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Lashkar i-Islam, Ahle-Sunnat-wal-Jamaat. Earlier this year, Iran-Pak ties took a dip when Jaish al Adl militants claimed responsibility for killing Iranian border guards. Segments of these banned organizations are also believed to be linked to TTP and Al-Qaeda affiliates. Pakistan on its part continues to dismantle and eliminate threats---several successful operations have been conducted to thwart these terror networks.

The Iranians too, have been allegedly backing certain sectarian groups in Pakistan. It has been reported that the Iranian backed Zainebiyoun Brigade has been increasingly recruiting Pakistani Shia fighters to fight in Middle Eastern conflicts. It is reported that Pakistani law enforcement agencies are conducting large-scale crackdown on suspected members of the Zainebiyoun Brigade and their hideouts in the country.

Pakistan houses well-integrated diverse religious sects. There is a need to continue disrupting such sectarian terror groups and stringent internal policies need to be implemented to track and cut funding channels of such groups. Expedited measures to monitor and reform religious seminaries and madrassas are needed. Such externally sponsored factors pose a threat to national security and socio-economic development plans and paves way for creating crevices for the small segment of anti-state nationalist elements to exploit vulnerabilities. The idea of backing Arab nationalists in Khuzestan province and Baloch nationalists in Sistan - Baluchistan province of Iran is reportedly finding support from sections in Saudi Arabia and US. Pakistan needs to track trends and target the drivers behind those trends.

A Saudi think tank, the Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies published a report titled: [Chabahar and Gwadar Agreements and Rivalry among Competitors in Baluchistan Region](#) ,which explores various options for countering Iran's alleged hegemonic designs. The author discusses the Baluchistan factor in depth, stating:

“Iran’s strategy of using Chabahar as its main strategic base for projecting power in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean poses a direct threat to the Arab Gulf States making them conduct immediate counter-measures to protect their interests. Iran-Pakistan cooperation has been shaken by major tensions in their relations emanating from their competing interests in Chabahar and Gwadar

and their alliances with opposing powers, namely India and China as mentioned before. Saudis could benefit from this friction. These developments could pave the way for an opening toward Arab support for the Baluch struggle against Iran. Saudis could persuade Pakistan to soften its opposition to any potential Saudi support for the Iranian Baluch. The major hurdle in developing Chabahar is fierce opposition by the Baluch nationalists fighting for independence.”

Pakistan has stated that it sees no threat from Chabahar and Iran has said that it sees Gwadar and Iran as sister ports. It is unlikely that Iran would be influenced by Indian stakes in Chabahar to encourage any anti-Pakistan venture. Pakistan participated in the recent inauguration of Chabahar port. The possibility of external forces exploiting the situation does exist. There is a need for Pakistan and Iran to revive economic ties as well as the Iran-Pakistan Pipeline Project that both Russia and China also favor. Keeping in mind the ethnic and geographical linkages, and mutually adverse implications of unrest in Balochistan regions; a coordinated Pak-Iranian approach in securing borders and development of respective provinces is needed.

The military has recently announced the ‘Khushal Balochistan project’ aimed at enhancing the Baluchistan’s socio-economic development and security. These are positive trends that require vigilant implementation. Recently, a surge in providing international platforms to anti-state terror forces has been noted. The Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, Gen Zubair Mahmood Hayat has also recently disclosed Indian role in fomenting unrest in attempts to sabotage Pakistan’s economic development plans, stating that “India’s indirect interference in Pakistan is manifested in sponsoring Tehreek-i-Taliban-Pakistan, Baloch and other sub-nationalist outfits and many other terrorist groups”. The aspect of regional rivalries is a crucial aspect of Pakistan’s position on the Iran-Saudi equation.

India

With access to Chabahar, India envisions to counter Chinese regional influence and also bypass Pakistan in trade routes. This will allow it to open up an alternative land-sea route for trade with Afghanistan, Central Asian States, Russia and Europe.

However, Iran has also granted land and facilities to China for investments in the Chabahar Free Trade Zone.

India and China continue to maintain strong economic ties but at times, strategically confront one another over critical security interests. For that,

Pakistan needs to remain watchful of Indian activities in Pakistani and Iranian territory to pressure China. In the Gwader- Chahbahar equation--- Pakistani reservations are less likely to be against regional economic growth but more centric towards Indian activities in the Iranian Baluchistan region. There have been reports of India using its access in Chahbahar to carry out covert activities in Pakistan just as it is using Afghan territory. The Jhadav episode is an example. Pakistan would have to watch this situation carefully.

Iran

It is reported that Iran sees Chabahar as an important alternative to its ports located towards the inner sections of the Strait of Hormuz. Chahbar supposedly provides Iran with a better chance of sustenance in case of any blockade of the Strait of Hormuz.

Many also view the Chabahar development as part of Iranian efforts to further expand its position economic and political position in Afghanistan, Central Asia, South Asia and also projecting power in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

Iran has also built a highway linking Chabahar to Zahedan (capital of Iranian Baluchistan). Work is underway to connect Zahedan to Malik (on the Iran-Afghanistan border) and integrating this network with Zaranj-Delaram highway completed by India in Nimroz province in Afghanistan.

However, Afghan instability cannot be discounted in the success of these projects, it is likely that this is 'the best case scenario option'. Thus it is noteworthy that real utility of the ongoing projects currently stems from the routes that pass through Iran in connection with the Russian-Indian supported NSTC—work has also begun on integrating Iranian rail network with Central Asia. These are areas where Indian-Iranian and Russian interests align to enhance regional connectivity through Iran and develop stronger maritime cooperation in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

US policies

The US appears to address its concerns through its own prism of reality while seemingly ignoring the fast changing regional dynamics. It seems to be placing its eggs in many baskets - hoping something works - more often producing counterproductive and contentious outcomes; to a point of self-isolation.

On one hand, it supports Saudi-Israeli stances against Iranian threats, hoping to counter Iranian, Russian and Chinese clout. For that, the new administration

has shown its disdain for bringing Iran out of the cold by decertifying the nuclear deal. There are possibilities of a more stringent future Iranian policy, coupled with broader sanctions.

On the other hand, the US supports Indian initiatives through Iran, also as a means to counter China, Russia and check Pakistan. It is believed that the sanctions pose challenges to international businesses in Iran - creating a convergence between Russia, China and even India to work around all this and move fast to preserve their security and economic interests in Iran. For this to happen the US wants to fast track Afghan stability through a cooperative policy with India and a coercive one against Pakistan while ensuring its indefinite stay in Afghanistan as a guarantor of Afghan security.

The US continues to view its security and economic interests as linear progression in the region and remains tied up in the Afghan conflict. Its focus remains on creating a favorable security situation in Afghanistan to advance its further interests. While on parallel the regional players, despite being embroiled in the Afghan conflict are also regrouping to bypass contentions and working on regional economic development.

Afghan instability

Afghanistan remains divided on its relation with Pakistan, it places the conditionality of Indian trade through Pakistani territory, at the same time it has reservations over Pakistan's sporadic border shutting due to security crisis stemming from Afghan territory. The Indian's aspire to deepen their role in Afghanistan, it is yet uncertain what shape this role would take. The likelihood of India continuing its socio-economic development initiatives and assisting the Afghan forces in training is emerging.

At the same India is likely to safeguard its security interests through covert means. Russia and Iran, despite maintaining ties with the Afghan Government are allegedly also supporting Taliban and other anti-US factions. The Saudi's continue to lend support to US initiatives and Afghan government while allegedly also trying to enhance their ideological clout in the country.

China continues to deepen its own socio-economic development of the country. In Afghanistan, there are various economic development efforts working in parallel to divergent, often clashing, security interests. Amidst this, the Afghan internal crisis is only exacerbated at the same time placing restraints on the Afghan leadership to carry out a more wholesome broad based regional approach.

Prevailing assessments claim that the clearing of IS from Middle East has dispersed several of its members. The possibility of IS finding space and support in Afghanistan appears to be on the rise. Several regional terror groups have been noted stated their allegiance to ISIS. There have been reports of IS trying to recruit members of nationalist groups as well.

The Middle Eastern situation demonstrated the gruesome reality of what happens when state rivalries, separatist movements and terror groups all come to play together. One of the biggest paradoxes of the Syrian war was perhaps the support to 'moderate rebels and al-Qaeda affiliates to defend broader national interest'.

It is unlikely that the Afghan situation would stabilize in the foreseeable future, Pakistan needs to insulate itself from the hotchpotch of multiple rivalries operating and brewing in the Afghan arena and broadening relations with various segments in Afghanistan could help.

Conclusion

For Pakistan, siding with any one contender in the Saudi-Iran rivalry creates a set of adverse implications. At the same time, choosing to remain neutral may be a desired luxury, because Pakistan would be compelled to defend itself from Iranian or Saudi regional strategies that may adversely - even inadvertently - impact Pakistan's national interests.

From what has emerged on the objectives of the IMCTC - the aspect of integrated intelligence sharing is crucial; keeping in view the seemingly enduring instability next door coupled with the disturbing news on emergence of IS-K. Such intelligence would be of considerable importance to Pakistan in its CT efforts. Selecting a Pakistani soldier to command the IMCTC and/or urging Pakistan to further advance its security commitments speaks volumes about Pakistani capabilities. Pakistan maintains credible security ties with Saudi Arabia - this is an important relationship. Given the Kingdom's current challenges and visions, a space exists to correctly negotiate and expand Pak-Saudi ties not only in security but also economic and technology domains.

However, Pakistan needs to clear the pitfalls, such as the 'definition of terrorism' used by the IMCTC. At the same time, Pakistan needs to clearly define its own level of participation and objectives as part of IMCTC - it needs to continue with its current position of not engaging against any particular state.

In the case of Iran, it is believed that the bare minimum of a 'more vigilant border management on respective sides' has been set. Just as Pakistan ensures its territory would not be used by any anti-Iranian elements. Iran too, needs to look at the mutual adversities that stem from providing space to miscreants. Pakistan needs to address the role of India on Iranian territory, and Iran needs to take responsibility of ensuring that its territory is not used against Pakistan.

The mere existence of Gwadar or Chabahar ports is not the issue at play, nor is it correct to view this as Iran-Pak economic rivalry, because the economic utility of the ports could only be truly harnessed if the region enhances its overall economic potential and improves collective security.

Furthermore, Iran's sanction laden economy is looking for some relief from various avenues. An important space exists for Pakistan to converge with Iran on trade and economic development. China is increasing its stakes in the Iranian economy including the energy sector, Pakistan needs to take advantage of these developments for its own energy woes and may not find itself in a better position to go through with its pipeline projects with Iran. The

Iranians on their end also need to stop viewing Pakistan solely through its ties with Saudi Arabia and seriously work towards broadening economic ties.

The Afghan situation continues to remain unstable, one cannot say with certainty when or in what shape the decisive outcome would be. Therefore, Pakistan could also serve as an important bridge between Iran and China and it needs to look at regional connectivity developments by Russia, Iran, Turkey, India, Qatar - and focus on integrating CPEC further into these initiatives.

There is a need to enhance security and economic ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia, as both also have much to gain by maintaining good ties with Pakistan.

Pakistan could also try to help resolve some Iranian and Saudi differences and at the same time take stringent measures to ensure its own territory is protected from Iranian and Saudi proxies and their ideological and political propaganda.

Pakistan needs to resort to a more assertive and proactive approach in dealing with both Iran and Saudi Arabia - in the light of broader regional developments. Pakistan needs to develop inner strength to counter the emerging negative trends and exploit opportunities.