



## ANALYSING PAKISTAN'S RECENT ENGAGEMENT WITH IRAN



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Iranian Foreign Minister Dr Javed Zarif, during his recent visit to Pakistan, discussed some vital issues between the two countries. The discussion during his visit included: bilateral trade cooperation between Iran-Pakistan, security issues in the region and, most importantly, Iran's offer to Pakistan to participate in Chabahar seaport project. Pakistan has been restless on India's engagement in Chabahar and the past few months have witnessed fervent efforts from Islamabad to enhance its engagement with Iran. Pakistan's Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa's visit to Iran in November (2017) was seen as an attempt by Pakistan to improve relations with Iran and cooperate in the areas of security and stability. In February this year, Pakistan National Security Advisor said, "Leadership and the people of Pakistan attach great importance to relations with Iran". In the last week of February, the Commander of Iran's Air Force met the Pakistani Army Chief. Even though Pakistan and Iran don't antagonize each other, they do not enjoy the great level of cooperation which was seen from 1947-1979. There has been a lot at stake for Pakistan and Iran since the shift in US posturing on the Iranian Nuclear deal and escalating Saudi-Iranian tensions. In the wake of Pakistan's energy crisis, its deteriorating relations with the US and India's growing engagement with Iran and Afghanistan, it would be in Pakistan's best interest to engage with Iran.

It would be useful to analyse critical factors leading to the shift in Islamabad's posture towards Iran:

- Pakistan is certainly concerned about its growing energy demand and sees Iran as a future partner in meeting its energy needs. The Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline is significant for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's (CPEC) energy requirements and success. Pakistan realises the potential of energy supplies it can receive from Iran but has restricted itself (in the past) owing to the pressures from the US and Saudi Arabia. Now with the change in

US behaviour, Pakistan feels more liberated to be able to move ahead with Iran. Pakistan's Minister for Petroleum and Natural Resources, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, said, "Pakistan has been trying to overcome its energy crisis by importing gas from Iran but sanctions on Iran had hampered the work on the project". (Radio Pakistan – *Deutsche Welle*). China has shown its willingness to fund Pakistan's part of the pipeline and Beijing will be eager to have gas from Iran. Tehran has also shown willingness to be part of CPEC and Pakistan is interested in engaging more actors in the corridor given the fact that India and US are opposing the legitimacy of CPEC. Although Pakistan is making efforts to engage Iran, it is a tricky situation given its relationship with the Sunni dominated Saudi Arabia.

- Shift in the US policy towards Pakistan can be seen as a major factor in Islamabad's approach towards Iran. US-Pakistan relationship has been strained over the last five years and took an unyielding shift with the announcement of President Trump's Afghan policy which talked about four pillars, including Washington's dealing with Pakistan. Trump's announcement carried a firm message for Pakistan. US squarely blamed Pakistan for sheltering militant organisations which are targeting US troops in Afghanistan. US administration has slashed military assistance to Pakistan. The American frustrations with Pakistan (once again!) surfaced harshly in President Trump's New Year's Day tweet. Although Pakistan has taken a bold stance and claimed that it does not require US assistance anymore, the fact remains that it would need US support on the international economic forums. Pakistan feels the need to manage the strategic vacuum created by the declining US support. It would not be totally incorrect to link Pakistan's renewed posturing with Tehran and downslide in US-Pak relations.
- On the other hand, the US relationship with Iran has been under stress with US taking a tough stance and rebuffing the nuclear deal. US positioning against Pakistan and Iran could potentially be a binding glue for both the countries. Pakistan wants to expand its regional influence and diversify its economic and diplomatic options.
- Iran has been concerned about the appointment of former Pakistan Army Chief as head of the Islamic Military Alliance created by Saudi Arabia. General Bajwa's visit was also to comfort Iran and address Tehran's concerns. Pakistan clearly does not want to be seen partnering with Saudi Arabia against Iran.
- Growth of India-Iran economic cooperation has added to Islamabad's discomfort. Operationalisation of the Chabahar port in Iran has significant strategic and economic repercussions for Pakistan. The port allows India to reach Afghanistan bypassing Pakistan and its efforts in Afghanistan are likely to get a significant boost with the operationalization of

the Chabahar port. Afghanistan is clearly rejoicing the operationalisation of Chabahar as Afghanistan will no longer be dependent on Pakistan as a transit route for its shipments. Afghanistan shifted 80 percent of its cargo traffic from Karachi port to Iran's Bandar Abbas and Chabahar ports. This would impact the business community in Balochistan and FATA. Pakistan is clearly worried. Chabahar port does challenge Islamabad's Afghan strategy where an important component is keeping New Delhi out of Kabul. This factor has contributed significantly in Pakistan's efforts towards Iran.

- Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, for the first time, mentioned Kashmir in his sermons in 2017 equating the situation in Kashmir to Yemen and Bahrain. One of his official websites (*Khamenei.ir*) contains a post (June 26, 2017) titled- "Everyone should openly support people of Yemen, Bahrain and Kashmir". Pakistan would like to draw extended support from Iran over Kashmir.
- Pakistan wants to expand its global reach and we can see aggressive efforts to expand cooperation with Russia, Central Asia and Saudi Arabia in recent times. Islamabad would like to reduce the number of its confrontational fronts and its efforts with Iran can also be seen in this context.

Pakistan's economic and strategic requirements have led to its renewed engagement with Iran. At present, it appears that Islamabad has managed to convince Iran to take a step forward in improving the relationship between the two. How far Iran can go in terms of offering participation to Islamabad in Chabahar seaport project remains to be seen, given the fact that the lease agreement signed between India and Iran (in February 2018) gives the operational control of the port (Shahid Beheshti port-Phase One of Chabahar port) to New Delhi. Iran also cannot afford to strain its ties with India at this point of time and Dr Zarif compared the Iran-India relationship to Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relationship during his visit. However, Islamabad will have to carefully deal with the challenge of balancing its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran at the same time. Also, New Delhi needs to watch these developments carefully to be able to protect its strategic and economic interests.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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