

At the heart of the Pakistan-Iran-India tango lies Chabahar

A new churning is taking place in the region, with India announcing its first shipment to Afghanistan, via the Chabahar port in Iran, and Pakistan's army chief taking a delegation to Iran earlier this week for a series of meetings.

Has India's Chabahar initiative caused Pakistan to re-engage with Iran? Or, is this a parallel development, addressing bilateral issues and the repercussions of Pakistan's involvement in the Middle East?

Pakistan's Iran Predicament

Since Zia ul-Haq's time, Pakistan's relationship with Iran has been tense, indifferent and sometimes, even hostile. Zia's Islamisation strategies were perceived by Shia Tehran as the deepening of Sunnization, creating new stress in the bilateral relationship and emphasising sectarian faultlines inside Pakistan.

High-level visits between Iran and Pakistan became the exception. Afghanistan soon became a much more important neighbour, with the US using Pakistan as a cat's paw in its own war against the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Meanwhile, Iran-US relations went through the wringer, even as Teheran was bogged down with other issues in the Middle East.

Despite the continuing political tension between Iran and Pakistan, both countries drew closely together on two other matters. First, Pakistani nuclear scientist A Q Khan drew a willing Iran into his own underground network of nuclear linkages that served both sides well. Second, smuggling between the Pakistan-Iran border, especially along the Makran coast, began to take place.

Enter the Middle East Cold War and the Islamic Military Alliance

But the political divide was exacerbated by Saudi Arabia's expanding influence on Pakistan. Riyadh's Islamic Military Alliance is now headed by Pakistan's former army chief, Gen. Raheel Sharif. Clearly, the Pakistani government isn't terribly attracted to the idea, especially because its own Shias, between 30-40 million, are said to comprise about 10 per cent of the total 200 million population. Pakistan's National Assembly has even discussed Raheel Sharif's new job and pointed out that there is a need to go slow.

Was Raheel Sharif given the job because he was once the most powerful man in Pakistan and Pakistan is the only country in the Islamic world with a proven nuclear weapon capability ?.

Meanwhile, Teheran's relations with Saudi Arabia began to deteriorate over the ongoing conflict in Yemen. Riyadh also seemed determined to isolate Qatar, in an attempt to consolidate its leadership in the Muslim Ummah. Its efforts to get the US on board this regional great game were enormously boosted with Donald Trump identifying Iran as the cause of instability in the Arab Islamic American summit in Riyadh in May 2017, even as King Salman looked on.

Certainly, Pakistan being a part of this Summit would not have gone down lightly in Tehran.

Chabahar: Trigger, not the Cause

The operationalization of Chabahar port by India has triggered the panic button within Pakistan. As Delhi faltered in its execution of Chabahar in recent years, Pakistan was cynical and even sarcastic; meanwhile there was the China-supported Gwadar port as well as the Beijing-funded

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, both projects being described as a “regional game changer”.

With Chabahar now in the mix, the regional great game has taken a new turn. Chabahar is not far from Gwadar. As the crow flies, the straight distance is only 171 km, while the road route doubles it to 356 km. Second, Chabahar is more than a port, it is the starting point of a trade and transit corridor that could become parallel to the CPEC as it cuts across Iran and into Afghanistan. Third and most importantly, New Delhi has big plans for Chabahar, to connect it to the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and opening it up to the passage of goods into Russia and onwards.

Gen Bajwa’s Visit: Should India be worried?

India’s political will to walk the talk with Chabahar has exaggerated the bilateral and regional predicament in Pakistan’s west. Islamabad would certainly like to repair its relations with Teheran. Gen. Bajwa’s visit to Iran must be seen in this context, when he met the Iranian president, its defence minister as well as the commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards.

The army in Pakistan has always been all-powerful, but a trend towards greater consolidation of power can now be clearly seen. Gen. Bajwa’s visit to Iran was preceded by a trip to Kabul, where he also met President Ashraf Ghani as well as the top Afghan leadership. Both New Delhi and Teheran, now connected through the Chabahar thread, must be closely watching.

But despite the fanfare of the visit, Gen. Bajwa did not succeed in getting a succulent joint statement with the Iranians. Whatever was made public is mediocre and focussed on border security between the two countries relating hotline communication, border fencing and patrolling, intelligence sharing etc. The fact that Pakistan has to talk about establishing hotlines in 2017 shows the level of communication so far!

The powerful director-general of the media wing of Pakistan’s armed forces, ISPR, Maj-Gen Asif Ghafoor, effusively thanked the Iranian Supreme Leader for a “supportive statement” on Kashmir and said, “It is a long pending dispute between India and Pakistan. Regional peace and security remains at stake unless it’s resolved to the aspiration of Kashmiris in line with UN Resolution.”

Predictably, the Pakistan media sought to project this as Iran’s Supreme leader throwing its “weight behind Pakistan on Kashmir”.

That’s why the operationalization of the Chabahar port in Iran is so significant. India has demonstrated its intention to play on the regional chessboard, even while it balances its own relations with the US and Iran. The old great game just got a new veneer.

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