

Iran and Pakistan Can Be Friends

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With the looming fear of a US attack on Iran it is pertinent to reanalyse the US-Iran conflict beyond conventional wisdom. Instead of defusing the crisis by labelling it as a US-Iran affair or specific to the Middle East more emphasis should be placed on international, and more importantly, regional cooperation.

Sharing a 564-mile long border Iran and Pakistan could provide that regional cooperation.

Before the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan-Soviet War in 1980 both Iran and Pakistan enjoyed strong strategic and economic ties. They were also close to the United States.

The major tipping points of the 1979 revolution and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 negatively effected geopolitics of the region. If Iran and Pakistan could bury the hatchet and strengthen diplomatic and economic ties they could play key roles as peace brokers between India and Pakistan; and between Iran and the United States.

In addition, both countries can find political solutions to local problems such as the Baloch insurgency and boost energy trade.

Soon after the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussain, attacked Iran and the Soviets began bombing Kabul. The power calculus changed dramatically for Pakistan, Iran and the United States and hard choices had to be made.

Pakistan initially supported the Iranians against the Iraqis but later, under Saudi and American pressure, withdrew support and began supporting the Iraqis.

The Iranians retaliated and strengthened their ties with Pakistan's arch rival India and began supporting the Northern Alliance of Afghanistan against the US-Pakistan backed Taliban. Thus began a tit-for-tat proxy war till September 11, 2001.

Soon after the Americans destroyed the Saddam and Taliban regimes, the Iranians were cautiously pleased. Once again the power calculus changed.

Pakistan's relationship with India began to improve after 2003 and it withdrew support for the Taliban (at least temporarily). Saddam was gone and the Americans, partly because of Iran's support for Iraqi Shiite militias, could not completely control Iraq.

But now the United States seems to be running out of patience, and Pakistanis and Iranians will have to cooperate to avert a possible US attack.

While it would be naïve to expect Pakistan, a non-signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and home to A. Q. Khan's nuclear technology network, Pakistan can still play an effective role.

Why? Because Pakistanis are not Arabs - Iran's traditional competitors - and Pakistan has a relatively low incidence of sectarian violence. In addition, past precedent of facilitating the opening of China to the United States gives credence to Pakistan's middleman status.

Furthermore, four things unite the Iranians and Pakistanis more than common cultural, linguistic and historical links: the hanging sword of a potential US attack on Iran's nuclear facilities and the role of Pakistan to avert such an attack; Iran's leverage with India vis-à-vis Kashmir; the Baloch insurgency; and bilateral energy trade.

To begin the process of US-Iran detente, the authors recommend a US-EU-Iran summit hosted by Pakistan to reevaluate the current proposals to deter Iran from acquiring military nuclear technology.

The summit may end up being more symbolic than productive, but the power of symbols cannot be underestimated. Pakistan's status as the only Muslim nuclear power, and America's chief ally in the war on terror, could give credence to the perception of a more balanced and inclusive negotiation process.

If Pakistan participates, Iranians would have a hard time selling the idea that all efforts against their nuclear programme are a part of a grand Western conspiracy against Iran's sovereignty.

Consensus

So far the international consensus seems to be that Iran's membership in the NPT grants it an exclusive right to indigenous and foreign nuclear technology, but prior NPT violations, and political posturing against the United States and Israel make the international community sceptical about Iran's true motives.

The latest European and Russian proposals provide Iran enough incentives to withdraw from its current ambitions but they also propose strict oversight - Iran likes the incentives but not the oversight. This is where Pakistan could persuade Iran to budge from its position.

In addition to Pakistan's role in defusing tensions between Iran and the US, Iran could reciprocate by pushing for peace between India and Pakistan.

Iran and India share strong political, economic and cultural links providing Iran leverage to push for permanent settlement of the disputed region of Kashmir.

Again, Iran's push could be more symbolic than productive but Iran's willingness to play the role of a mediator as a strong and stable neighbouring country will not be taken lightly by Pakistan or India.

Besides regional and international crisis Iran and Pakistan also share a common domestic problem - the Baloch insurgency. While the Balochs in Iran are mostly under the writ of the state they constantly defy the state in the Balochistan province of Pakistan.

Both countries could benefit from intelligence exchange and joint military operations with the ultimate goal of finding a political solution.

Energy trade provides another reason for strong bilateral cooperation. The recent stalemate on the Iran-India-Pakistan gas pipeline must be resolved by emphasising on mutual economic gain and long-term political alliance between the two countries.

Iran and Pakistan are natural partners. Shirin Thir-Khel, senior adviser to US Secretary of State, said that cooperation between both countries is a "logical extension of their common heritage".

So can Iranians and Pakistanis knock on the neighbour's door and expect some realpolitik hospitality? Yes, they could. Regional and international conflicts, such as the Iran-US and Pakistan-India crises; and national issues, such as the Baloch insurgency; and bilateral trade, must be solved by active political engagement and economic cooperation, and not by reactive short-sighted military solutions.

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