



Social Sciences Spectrum

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-0427](#) P-ISSN: [3006-0419](#)

Volume 05, Issue 03, 2026

Web link: <https://sss.org.pk/index.php/sss>



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Pakistan–Iran Relations (2016–2020): Strategic Convergence, Structural Constraint and the Burden of External Geometry

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Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received	2026-05-19	Revised	2026-06-22	Accepted	2026-07-15
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Citation (APA):

Qamar, Z., Sohail, L & Anwar, T (2026). Pakistan–Iran relations (2016–2020): Strategic convergence, structural constraint and the burden of external geometry. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 5(3), 171-185.
<https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.05.03.575>

Abstract

Pakistan-Iran relations refer to the bilateral relations between two bordering Muslim majority nations having a 909-kilometer-long boundary between Baluchistan and Sistan-Baluchistan, a relationship which is defined by the overlapping ethnic geographies, sectarian sensitivities, energy interdependence and external alignments. Between January 2016 and December 2020, a concerted effort has been made to study this period because of the unusual nature of the events that occurred, including the arrest of Kulbhushan Jadhav, the Saudi execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, frequent border incidents by Jaish al-Adl, the United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the Taftan centered coronavirus crisis, all of which saw the institutionalization of competing regional architectures by the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and India financing the Chabahar port. It has also taken the qualitative content analysis of official statements, contemporary reporting in the Pakistani, Iranian and Western media, and scholarly literature into account to explore the strategic rationale. It uses a tri-theoretical approach of realism, constructivism and strategic culture for the interpretation of cooperation and friction. What makes this research important is that this is a very detailed, event verified map of a 5-year time period that is sum arise in traditional surveys. It offers a middle power view to policy makers and academics in South Asia a nuanced approach for assessing policy implications of the manner in which a middle power manages its close neighborhood rivalry while retaining strategic autonomy and avoiding sectarian spillover.

Keywords: Pakistan–Iran Relations, Saudi–Iran Rivalry, Baluchistan, IP Gas Pipeline, Chabahar, Gwadar, CPEC, Sectarianism, Strategic Culture, Imran Khan, Kulbhushan Jadhav, Border Security.

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Introduction

The boundary separating Pakistan and Iran is 909 km long, crisscrossing one of the world's least governments controlled ethno-tribal tracts of land the Baloch heartland of Baluchistan which stretches across the border into the province of Sistan-Baluchistan in Iran. Shah Alam (2004) in his research article about the relationship has pointed out that the relationship has been forged from political and strategic considerations which have overcome cyclical interests' conflicts. Iran was first to acknowledge Pakistan in 1947, helped it in 1965 and 1971 wars with India and helped it form CENTO and Regional Cooperation for Development. However, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the paths of the two states have taken a different course; Tehran has become a revisionist force in the Persian Gulf while Islamabad tightened its security straitjacket even as it became a part of the U.S.-led military alliance against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. With the Saudi led intervention in Yemen since March 2015, Islamabad found itself in an awkward situation as the Parliament resolution on Yemen neutrality, adopted in April 2015, was interpreted in Riyadh as a 'snub'. Meanwhile, the Saudi coup and the announcement of a 34 nation Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition that excluded Iran were read in Islamabad as a snub. Specialists in Rawalpindi already had doubts about the reliability of the Indians ever pressing on with the project, particularly because the Chinese port-run city along Gwadar, home to the deep-water port centerpiece of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, is only about 170 kilometers away from Chabahar. Reports according to the news on India's investment in the Iranian port of Chabahar, formalized by a trilateral agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016, came as a huge eye-opener for everyone in Rawalpindi, especially the Chinese port city of Chabahar is located close to Gwadar, the deep-water port show stopper for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Sunni Baloch insurgent group Jaish al-Adl ("Army of Justice") that was established in 2012 was making increasingly loud Iranian grievances against Pakistani passivity over the cross-border operations.

The year 2016 began with the Saudi murder of Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr on 2 January which led to the ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Iran and Riyadh's breaching of relations with Iran. The Saudi execution of Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr on 2 January was the beginning of both, with his murder leading to the ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran, and the severance of relations between the two capitals, Riyadh and Tehran. In the space of a couple of weeks, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chief of Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif (no relation) made consecutive visits to Riyadh and Tehran, where they co-branded the trips as a mediation initiative which was a noticeable presence throughout this period in Pakistani diplomacy: a dual role between a civilian head of government and a military leader (Dawn, 2016). The Pakistani security officials detained an alleged Indian intelligence operative, Kulbhushan Jadhav, in Mackel town in Baluchistan on 3 March 2016, alleging his entry from Iran (Dawn, 2019). The span of less than two months between these two events was the template as Pakistan would be a balanced a role in the region, a target for India to penetrate, and a country with its border with Iran as a security risk and a diplomatic opportunity for the next five years.

This study posits that Pakistan and Iran maintained the mere structure of friendly bilateral relations between 2016 and 2020 as the costs of confrontation were high, and that the conditions of external structural pressures, including the US sanctions, financial position of Saudi Arabia, strategic rationality of China and Indian counter-positioning between them, worked continuously on the relative cost of such deep cooperation, thus not allowing the potential for any substantive convergence to flourish.

Research Methodology

The research design used in this study is a qualitative design of the interpretive type that is appropriate for a topic that has a dense causal mechanism, contextual and multi-actor. The author did not have access to closed primary documents, like the cable files of the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the deliberations of the Iran Supreme National Security Council, and the design is built on the systematic triangulation of secondary documents, which include peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs from reputable academic presses, policy reports from research institutes, and contemporary reporting from major newspapers. This is because it enables the cross-checking of the verified facts of an event where there are competing information sources, for instance, in casualty counts and dates, and it helps the researcher to reconstruct the discursive context in which decisions were rationalised by the Pakistani, Iranian and West interlocutors. The time frame covered from 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2020 looked at the time period that marked the beginning of the Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr's execution, which immediately tested Pakistan's neutrality, and the end of the period when the Taftan COVID-19 controversy, the Soleimani aftermath, and the institutionalisation of the Pakistan-Iran border fence had changed the operational matrix of the relationship. The dyadic relationship of the Pakistani state (civilian government and the military establishment as two semi-independent institutions that coordinate their actions at the operational level) and the Iranian state (elected presidency, Foreign Ministry, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Office of the Supreme Leader) serves as the unit of analysis. Bilateral meetings on the documented record are highlighted, such as visits by the minister, military-to-military exchanges and border mechanisms. Three criteria were used in selecting sources. First, credibility: preference was given to peer-reviewed journals like Strategic Analysis (IDSA), Strategic Studies (ISSI Islamabad), Pakistan Horizon, to specialised monographs like *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy, and American Influence* (2015), by Vatanka, and to established policy institutes like the United States Institute of Peace, the Atlantic Council, the Middle East Institute and the International Crisis Group. Second, recency: sources published after 2015 were prioritized, but fundamental sources like Alam (2004) were retained as they continue to be cited in the field. Third, balance: An effort was made to include Pakistani (Dawn, The Express Tribune, ISSI, IPRI), Iranian (Tehran Times, IRNA, Press TV), Western (Reuters, AFP, BBC, Al Jazeera English) and multilateral angles to remove the bias from the reportage. A theoretical framework is a synthesis of three traditions. Structural realism suggests that external pressures for balancing remain, the salience of the China factor and that the impact of the US sanctions is inhibitory. Constructivism reflects the notion that identities: Sunni–Shia, Persian–Sub-continental, revolutionary Islamic versus civilian-military hybrid, create enduring intersubjective tensions which are not merely decodable by material factors. Strategic culture, influenced particularly by Fair's (2014) analytical framework for the Pakistan Army, helps to shed light on how the Pakistan Army has incorporated and reproduced a specific security worldview within itself, which permeates its Iran policy. The three drawbacks are that there are no Persian language primary sources beyond English translations, that it's hard to check sources of a confidential intelligence claim relating to the Jadhav case, and of course a patriotic press's lack of objectivity on matters of state on either side. These are reduced by 'cross-source' triangulation and by explicit recognition of 'contested facts'.

Literature Review

Shah Alam at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) provides a political and strategic overview of the relationship between Iran and Pakistan from the early days of the Cold War through to the early 2000s in his article on "Iran–Pakistan Relations." The rhetoric of the

people reflects these differences: Although both worldviews and differences of interests have existed since the beginning of the relationship, the combined impact of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the concurrent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has seen the region reorient and the legacy of each revolution has been felt both by India and Pakistan (Alam, 2004, p. 526–533). In spite of the differences, Alim towers finds the current state of Iran-Pakistani relations was close but fails to see socio-economic, sectarian, and ethnic fault lines in their societies as short-term vulnerabilities for the long run. The article is still taken as the pre-2010 norm for the political-strategic axis of the relationship. Alex Vatanka of the Middle East Institute is the author of the most sustained recent study of the bilateral file in Iran and Pakistan: *Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (I.B. Tauris, 2015). Vatanka presents a relationship where both cultural and religious similarities lie in the deepest substrate and are constantly undermined by structural pressures pushing from the United States, and where differences in Islam create forms of intra-sectarian tension, while rhetorical folklore of Islam's unity and cohesion is combined with a lack of operational fulfillment in practice. That scriptures and shared institutional membership, such as with the Economic Cooperation Organization, still have very little to show for them," says Raza (2020) quoting him. "But depth in the friendship is still lagging." Vatanka's analysis is particularly important because it identifies the stalemate of co-operation as the persistent backdrop of U.S. policy toward Iran that has punctured the Pakistani opportunities for engagement with Tehran on a regular basis. Hilali will advocate that the most feasible confidence building measure between the two neighbours is an effective border management cooperation of which he further says it can bring "strategic convergence from tactical cooperation" between the two nations by harnessing the potential for cultural and commercial integration. Despite its current defects, the JCPOA presented a temporary opportunity to reimagine a path toward cooperation, and Afghan security and economic ties are the two most tangible benefits that such engagement with Iran can bring, Hilali suggests. The post-JCPOA collapse has brought the US out of the role of arbitrator in Pakistan-Iran relations, rendering Pakistan uncertain about its energy and connectivity projects with Iran and worse than ever for lack of mutual trust and depth of the relationship, as formerly found in the context of such as the JCPOA (Raza, 2020). "Islamabad and Tehran have got to take the first step in regaining lost trust by adjusting to the new regional and international dynamics," says Raza. In the open-source tradition of analysis that has evolved around Sino-Iranian and Sino-Pakistani triangular dynamics, John Calabrese posits that Pakistan's structural positioning along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and between an Iran increasingly geared toward Beijing makes bilateral relations open to triangular dynamics between Sino- Irano- Pakistan. Calabrese (2018) has explained how Beijing is now taking an increasingly active interest in Iran and Pakistan, presenting both enabling and constraining factors: The inherent need for other signatories to trilateral connectivity means that China's sanctions exemption presents its own cost-benefit calculations for providing a lifeline even for Tehran, while it also requires Pakistan to wait for opportunistic moves to Tehran until Beijing has made its own posture more clear. In this regard, it may be repeated that Pakistan's Iran strategy is a secondary option given its dependency on CPEC as highlighted by the China–Pakistan literature, notably Andrew Small's *The China–Pakistan Axis* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

The Historical and Strategic Background of Pak-Iran Relations

One of strategic intimacy followed by managed cordiality is the historical baseline that needs to be used to measure the events of 2016-2020. It was following the recognition of Pakistan by Iran in 1947 that substantial material assistance was provided as was done between the two in 1965 war such as supply of Jet planes, fuel and nurses along with medical materials and provision of diplomatic and military aid in 1971 (S., 2004). Here it is assumed that recognition was only a token

to Pakistan, and had nothing to do with the understanding and cordiality that is evident in the war of 1965, or in the war of 1971. Both states are members of CENTO (which was dissolved by Iran in 1979) and in 1985 both were among the founding members of the precursor of the Economic Cooperation Organization, the Regional Cooperation for Development. However, as Vatanka (2015) noted, there was little economic interdependence: bilateral trade has never been as large as it could be in such an institutional environment.

Post 1979 reordered incentives which continues binding 2016-2020. With the Iranian Revolution, Tehran became a revolutionary anti-American player aiming to influence within the Islamic community of the Persian Gulf region while the aligned Pakistan (backed by the USA and Saudi Arabia) tried to stabilize its position in the presence of the Islamist armed insurgents from Afghanistan. During the 1980s and 1990s, the two countries have supported the opposing factions of Afghan Pushtun people, Iran the Northern Alliance and Pakistan the Taliban, Fordham said. In the early 2000's, shifts in strategic relationships, brought about since 9/11, have slightly narrowed the gap and the lack of trust has remained. Importantly, Alam (2004) calls out clandestine Pakistani transfer of nuclear-related materials to Iran as a fiber that stewed Western perceptions of the relations.

The analytical implication of a structural realist analysis is: If there is no overwhelming hegemony, then any two Muslim countries whose ethnic geography intersects should move towards cooperative equilibria. The constructivism, however, suggests the relative strength of the revolutionary Shia versus Sunni-establishment discourses that are reinforced in different ways by the presence of clerical institutions in both states and that infuse a perceptual tension into all kinds of transactional interactions. The dynamics for each segment of the subsequent analysis is created by the interaction of these two logics: material incentive to cooperate, ideational incentive to mistrust (Fair, 2014; Vatanka, 2015).

The Saudi–Iranian Rivalry and Pakistan's Balancing Act

The Saudi–Iran Rivalry was the most pertinent exogenous factor impacting Pakistan's Iran policy for 2016-2020 period. Islamabad's neutrality as ensured as soon as the Saudi case of Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr was executed in Saudi Arabia on 2 January 2016 and Saudi Arabia broke ties with Iran. Islamabad's neutrality was put to the test when the Saudi embassy in Tehran was stormed and Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic relations over the execution of the Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. The test of Islamabad's neutrality was the storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and breaking of diplomatic ties due to the execution of Saudi Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. (Panda, 2016) Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chieftain of the Pakistan Armed Forces (PAF) Gen. Raheel Sharif talked to the king and Saudi Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman in Riyadh before moving to Tehran on 19 January where they met President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei completely in the company of one another (The Express Tribune, 2016). The mission was initially said to be 'mediation' but Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubair later clarified that there was no mediation required only communication. It thus provided a glimpse of the disparity in Pakistan's diplomacy.

Structural exposure of Pakistan to Saudi Arabia amounted to a material fact. The Saudi capital is also prepared to provide a non-conditional grant of \$1.5 billion and hosted some 2.5 million Pakistani workers and made a commitment of \$20 billion for new investment in Islamabad in February 2019 during Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit there (Iran Primer, 2019). The country has territorial issues of its own though, as it shares a border with Iran, has the second largest population of Shi'a Muslims of any Muslim state and depends on the peace of its frontier

province Baluchistan to have any hope of success for the project they are hoping for CPEC. These "revealing" visits carried with them a new message: COAS Raheel Sharif, who was appointed as the new president of the Islamic Military Alliance in 2017, is not fit for the job, due to his lack of credibility in the eyes of the coalition and its members, further adding to doubts about the neutrality the visits were meant to assure. Mediation was revived in October 2019, following the Aramco strikes of September 14, which saw Prime Minister Imran Khan travel to Tehran, on 13 October, and Riyadh, on 15 October, to what the Iran Primer characterized as one of "facilitating" talks (Iran Primer, 2019; Al Jazeera, 2019b). The assessments thereafter by Iranians about this round were that it was serious, but that Saudi hesitation to allow any Saudi change in the form and design of this round made it impossible to "shut down" (Tehran Times, 2020).

Realistically, Pakistan's efforts to appease its relations with both Riyadh and Tehran may be viewed as an example of a "Structuralized Omni Alliance". Or, that is, Pakistan, a relatively weaker power, aims for expanding the number of major and middle powers to which it has ties to maximize its diplomatic leverage against the negatives linked with taking a definite side. Another aspect of strategic-cultural analysis is the involvement of the Pakistan military in foreign policy decision making process which has continued to remain at its core. Over time, the military has accrued a "path-dependency" mental effect, particularly when it gained proficiency from Saudi backing in the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, financial backing in the various phases of budget support after the 1999 coup and Iran's generosity in the face of "difficult days". However, while Pakistan made significant efforts at mediation in 2016 and 2019, its positive mediation results did not result in any significant shift of policy. This reinforces what is asserted in this paper, namely that if external constraints are high, there is little opportunity for meaningful bilateral cooperation.

A Critical Examination of the Threats to Border Security, Threats in Baluchistan and Threats from the Cross-Border Militancy in the Area.

So, the Pakistan-Iran relationship was in 2016-2020, at the same time, a vestigial form of connection, but the major point of friction between the two rivals. Crossing the 909-kilometre border, which passes through uncharted and poorly patrolled desert, is a favored route for smugglers, drug traffickers and insurgent groups, both from Iran and Pakistan (Arab News, 2020). From a series of sanctuaries, the Iranian side claims to be on the Pakistani side, the Jaish al-Adl militant group which emerged from former members of Jundullah have struck Iranian security forces on a number of occasions since its inception in 2012. A Chabahar suicide bombing and a Mirjaveh kidnapping, in October 2018 and December 2018, respectively, of twelve Iranian border guards were attributed to Jaish al-Adl in 2018 (Israel Defense, 2019). Actually, senior Iranian military commanders had already threatened 'cross-border retaliatory action' against Jaish al-Adl sanctuaries in Pakistan if Islamabad failed to take 'action' in a way that helped 'urgency' of General Bajwa's visit to Pakistan in November 2017.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) soldiers were trapped in a bus hit by an IPC on 13th February 2019 in Sistan-Baluchistan on the Khash-Zahedan Road. Thirteen of them were wounded and at least 27 IRGC members were killed, Iranian authorities later confirmed, and Jaish al-Adl took the blame for the deaths (Times of Israel, 2019). The attack came close to Yater Pulwama Indian Caps unit of Indian Armed force, where on 14th February 2019 40 members of the Indian CRPF were killed in a Jebel Pulwama suicide attack in IAJK by the Jeooshi organization. For the Pakistani-Iranian relations, however, the more immediate effect was an impromptu Pakistani foreign ministry statement that "President Rouhani called upon Pakistan to

take decisive action against anti-Iranian terrorists” and a public discussion by IRGC commanders on “cross-border retaliation” against these terrorists (Al Jazeera, 2019a).

But Prime Minister Imran Khan when he visited Tehran in April for talks with President Rouhani on 21–22 April agreed to create a joint rapid reaction force between the two sides on the border (Al Jazeera, 2019a). The initial phase of Rs 3 billion (about \$18.6 million) for fencing was approved by the Economic Coordination Committee in May 2019, which, according to Pakistan's Interior Ministry's societal assessment report in 2021, would fence about 46 per cent of the border (Arab News, 2020a; Arab News, 2021). The fence design, a three-foot deep and ten-foot-high concrete wall with border forts on it and surveillance at every point around it, was thought up by the Pakistan's General Headquarters as an "important military project," just like the Pakistan – Afghanistan fence (Business Recorder, 2020). Iran on its side has had been building its own physical barriers since 2011 (The Express Tribune, 2011). The border narrative provides a fascinating vantage point on the two states' process of coalescing around how to get rid of the contested events and instead fold a thick-walled concrete wall of the border, with defensive investments interpreted by the other side as potential signs of offensive investments, a textbook scenario that is part of the security-dilemma dynamic.

Economic and Energy Relations: The IP Gas Pipeline and Trade

Iran planned to supply up to 750m of natural gas a day through the gas pipeline irrigated by Iran Pakistan to Pakistan, through the South Pars gas field, but the line will eventually be extended to India. By 2016 at the latest, Iran had advanced about 900 kilometers on its own, with Pakistan making almost no progress, owing to the “chilling effect” of US secondary sanctions on firms, banks and insurers that would participate in energy-related projects in Pakistan, and which would thus be a conduit for Iran to advance its own development (Vatanka, 2015; Raza, 2020). Different numbers had briefly opened up a window in 2016 for Pakistani officials to discuss in the open the options to resume construction under the JCPOA, while Chinese involvement was tossed as a potential solution. In May 2018, however, the US pulled out of the JCPOA, extinguishing that window nearly completely and in November 2018 re-imposing secondary sanctions.

At least publicly, Iranian authorities followed this trend and, as before in 2014, signaled that they could seek to undergo international arbitration to demand compensation for breach of contract should Pakistan prove unwilling to apply its construction promises. The risk entailed the possibility of billions of dollars in fines, but Iran did not ask for formal arbitration in 2016-2020. In Pakistan's view, the pipeline moves could not be hastened, because of the number of problems it would cause for the country, such as it being impossible to move the project forward due to sanctions imposed by the USA or due to mounting pressure from FATF, which could come from Pakistan especially from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, who are the main financial backer of the Pakistan Afghanistan gas pipeline. The IP file thus became a paradigm of the external constraints that diminish bilateral cooperation; consequently, this hypothesis is validated by this study (Raza, 2020).

However, apart from the pipeline, bilateral trade is consistently lower than potential – typically under \$400 million a year, formal cross-border trade, with several times the figure in unofficial channels of cross-border smuggling of fuel, foodstuffs and consumer goods. Both governments from time to time agreed on increased possibilities to use barter systems, jointly establish border markets and preferential trade deals. In 2018, the talks held on barter trade made an aspirational but structurally limited statement as it raised both the risk to sanctions and limited infrastructure development on the border; similarly, the planned joint markets on the border at Gabd – Rimdan

and Mand – Pishin marked an aspirational step in 2019, yet with a similar limitation in relation to infrastructure and risk to sanctions. Any assessment from a realist-institutionalist perspective should take this persistent absence of formal trade seriously, since it represents an economy of short-term gains that prevails in the presence of sanctions; when discussing the matter from a constructivist point of view, it should, however, also be noted that neither group of entrepreneurs is willing to invest in a known area that a sudden political event might ruin all their expectations (Raza, 2020; Hilali, n.d.).

Gwadar Vs Chabahar: A Geostrategic Port Competition

During 2016 to 2020, much of the dialogue in the region surrounding connectivity focused on the concept of a Gwadar Chabahar Myanmar-Pakistan connection. Situated on the Makran coast of Pakistan and operating since 2013 under Chinese control, Gwadar was touted as the crown jewel of the deep-water port segment of the \$62 billion CPEC corridor, the most significant of the bilateral aspects of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Small, 2015). About 170 kilometers west of Gwadar in Sistan-Baluchistan, Iran, Chabahar is the focus of a trilateral agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan, which was signed during Indian PM Narendra Modi's visit to Tehran in May of last year, where India pledged investment in the port and the connected rail corridor between Chabahar and Zahedan, to access Afghanistan and Central Asia without having to deal with Pakistan (Raza, 2020).

The symbolism was heightened in Pakistan. On March 3, 2016 Pakistani authorities allegedly uncovered proof that a Pakistani intelligence operative was operating out of Chabahar, and using it as a base to infiltrate Baluchistan, serving as “ostensible security proof, for Islamabad that the Indian investment in Chabahar carried covert security implications,” as the Dawn reports (2019b). The diplomat had run a legitimate business in Chabahar and had been abducted from Iranian territory, India told the International Court of Justice in its judgment of 17 July 2019 which went on the consular-access dimension, and held that the conviction should be reviewed by Pakistan, albeit without examining the espionage allegation itself (Dawn, 2019b). For Tehran, Chabahar was a diversifying foreign policy arm in the direction it always aimed in its next-to-sleeve strategic policy.

The 'competition' at the Port in 2016–2020 was found to be more down-to-earth than it seemed in the rhetoric. Throughput of Gwadar trade ports continued to be moderate while political tensions and security vulcanite's in Baluchistan contributed to the amount of hesitation for investments. US sanctions exposed Chabahar and it had to face the issue stemming from catastrophic delays in infrastructure projects, especially the Chabahar-Zahedan railway. However, the October 2017 Indian supply of wheat to Afghanistan through Chabahar was well reported but not the sign of a steady shipment. Theoretically, the port competition can best be understood through a realist analysis as a classic example of competitive infrastructure diplomacy, where symbolic encirclement effects play as much a role as the cargo manifests; and through a strategic-culture analysis as a veritable example of the propagative zero sum game in which both establishments viewed the other's connectivity moves as zero-sum signals (Fair, 2014; Small, 2015) (Small, 2015; Raza, 2020).

The Constraining Elements of Sectarian Dimensions and Domestic Political Constraints Are Out of the Question.

The sectarian aspect of Pakistan-Iran relation isn't the necessary binary of Sunni-Shia and a necessary instrumentalist narrative of proxy; both elements are in play. It is estimated that 15-20%

of Pakistan's population is Shia, a large number in comparison to the Muslim world, noting that historically Iran has been a guideline for Pakistani Shia institutional life, theologically and clerical aspects (Vatanka, 2015). Since 1990s, anti-Shia sectarian violence has been a recurring pattern within Pakistan, with Hazara Shia communities in Quetta being targeted for high-casualty attacks periodically during 2013-2015 by groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the individuals belonging to the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan tradition. On the other hand, Tehran's ties with Shia clerical groups in Pakistan have been seen by Pakistani security analysts as one of the avenues of influence.

The presence of the Pakistanis as a visible public response is nothing more than sectarian-emotional but what the killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani on January 2020 brought, was the most visible sectarian-emotional Pakistani public response of the entire 2016 to 2020 period. On 5 January 2020, thousands of supporters of Majlis-e-Wahdat-e-Muslimeen continued to march on the road to the American consulate building and violently pitched it against police vehicles in the city of Karachi, while other Shia organizations held mourning and protest gathering in various parts of the country (Voice of America, 2020; Dawn, 2020a). The state's reaction was well on the guidelines, giving a message of neutrality by Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, while reminding the world of the historical Pakistani solidarity with Iran in the same enduring sentence in his 7th January 2020 speech before the Senate (Dawn, 2020b). The episode made it clear that sub-national mobilization based on a sectarian/emotional approach is a kind of constraint that exists within Pakistan's Law Street and Iranian streets do not have anything similar, that can respond to the Pakistani emergency emotionally.

The sectarian element is an occurrence of low frequencies and high amplitude from a constructivist perspective. It does not often come into play when negotiating foreign policy day-to-day, but when there's a regional shock, it comes out, and with a disruptive force. For instance, during moments like that, when in 2018, an approximate number of 1,800 religious scholars issued a multisectoral fatwa that declared suicide attacks incompatible with Islam, the Pakistani institutions performed a special act to manage that sectarian variable, allowing the country to avoid losing foreign policy autonomy (South Asian Voices, 2020). The strategic-cultural aspect of the Pakistan Army's refusal to employ a pro-Iranian or pro-Saudi-lineup in the 2016-'20 window suggests institutional-learning is underway about the fact that 'all-out takaro pro-Iranian' or 'all-out takaro pro-Saudi' posture will lead to intolerable internal blowback (Fair, 2014).

The Influence of External Actors.

This is the time when external actors infiltrated in all consequential decisions taken in Pakistan–Iran relations and the bilateral context turned out to be part of a broader framework of the systemic dynamics. The most important exogenous constraint was the United States. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the renewed secondary sanctions in May, 2018 rendered the Pakistani IP gas pipeline and increased banking connections, large-scale energy investments suddenly quite difficult, to the point of invoking punitive measures from the United States (Raza, 2020). The assassination of Soleimani in Baghdad on 3 January, 2020 and the subsequent request from Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, to General Bajwa, instead of the Pakistani civilian leadership, on Iran issues clarified how Washington interacted with Islamabad on Iran issues (Dawn, 2020a) (Raza, 2020; Calabrese, 2018).

China was the major provider of the enabling pole. This was a period when Beijing started to consider and work out the concept of a 'Sino-Iran-Pakistan connectivity corridor' (SIPCC), an idea formally inked into in March 2021. According to Calabrese (2018) and others who have analyzed Sino Iranian relations, China's policy in the Middle East is multi vector and is not designed to go

head-to-head with the USA to displace them, but it does allow Iran the choice of a fallback relationship, thereby changing the Pakistani calculation. In a previous article, Andrew Small (2015) had earlier demonstrated how CPEC had created an unprecedented degree of strategic intimacy between Beijing and Islamabad which has pervaded all Pakistan's foreign policy stances.

The biggest counter-pressure axis was India and Saudi Arabia. Within the above context, Pakistan's perception to being surrounded by strategic enemies was heightened when India reported increasing investments in Chabahar, and in its West Asia diplomacy in general. In this background, Pakistan perceived itself as being surrounded by enemies giving rise to strategic encirclement. (Raza, 2020). The December 2018 \$6 billion balance-of-payments support facility (2019) and the recurrent financial-dependency structure of Saudi Arabia with Pakistani labor and the Saudi Arabia's \$20 billion investment pledge in Islamabad during the Crown Prince's visit to Pakistan in February 2019 had limited Pakistani room for manoeuvre against Tehran (2019, Iran Primer/2020, Keynoush). A neorealist framing makes this arrangement look like a classical penetrated regional sub-system with an American balancer representing the hegemonic power – offshore, a Chinese strategic patron – emerging power – in the region, a Saudi financial creditor and an Indian regional opponent – the potential source of the oldest of all game theory stakes. In this context, the latitude for an autonomous Iran policy is rather restrictive.

The Diplomatic Relation Programmed 2016 – 2020 Provided an Overview of Diplomatic Visits and Turning Points.

In 2016–2020, the bilateral diplomacy calendar was very full. The Sharif–Sharif joint visit of 18–19 January 2016, as a Saudi–Iran mediation, kicked off the period and indicated the joint ownership of the file by the civil–military duumvirate in the case of Afghanistan (Panda, 2016). In March 2016, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani came to Pakistan to participate in a high-level visit which culminated in the signing of several memoranda for trade and energy cooperation and engagement in counter-terrorism. The Pakistani foreign ministry made several visits to Tehran during the same time, across which Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif repeatedly held on to Islamabad to press Tehran regarding Pakistan's response to the Khash–Zahedan attack, famously in early 2019 in the aftermath of the attack (Al Jazeera, 2019a).

General Qamar Javed Bajwa's visit to Tehran in November 2017 is seen as the most impactful military visit during this time and a turning point forward in military affairs. Bajwa made his three-day visit to Tehran during the middle of November 2017 and met the Iranian President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Zarif, Commander of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei (Dawn, 2017; Al-Monitor, 2017). Both Iranian and Pakistani media reported this to be the first "substantive visit" by a Pakistani army chief in nearly 30 years. Bajwa expressed its desire to learn from the organizational model of Basij in Iran, and it was agreed to strengthen border patrolling, Intelligence exchange, and the upcoming fencing infrastructure in the border with Iran. (AL-Monitor, 2017)

Mrs. and Mr. Bilquis 'saviors' of Pakistan, which Imran Khan was the first in line, saw the highest engagement with the civilian leadership in the history of Pakistan. His first-ever trip to Iran on 21–22 April 2019 came just weeks after the border town of Khash was attacked in the district of Zahedan, and was specifically aimed at border security, resulting in the announcement of a joint, rapid reaction force (Al Jazeera, 2019a; The Nation, 2019). Mediation efforts showcased Pakistan's aspirational policies, which were led by mediation efforts conducted in October 2019 involving both Tehran and Riyadh, following the Aramco strikes (Iran Primer, 2019; Tehran Times, 2020), against which both parties nominally responded. After the killing of Soleimani on 3 January 2020,

FM Mr. Qureshi visited Tehran in mid-January 2020 to deliver Islamabad's message for de-escalation, which he then took to Riyadh and Washington (keynoush., 2020)

The relationship has never been under stress from February-March of 2020 until the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the Taftan controversy of about 6080 pilgrims coming back from Pakistan through the Taftan quarantine in inadequate conditions which created a humongous humanitarian-administrative crisis (Badshah, Ullah, Badshah and Ahmad, 2020; Arab News, 2020a). This diplomatic sequence illustrates not only a high frequency of engagement but also relatively low content depth with a generally sub-agenda-setting, reactive type quality.

Findings

During 2016-2020, the visit frequency of the leaders increased while the level of potential results from operational cooperation civil sector declined, specifically in the energy, banking and trade sectors.

Pakistan's efforts towards mediation in January 2016 between Riyadh and Tehran, and again in October 2019, also had symbolism attached for Islamabad but failed to resolve fundamental Saudi–Iranian differences with the latter being clear that Pakistan was not a de facto or formal mediator.

The threat from cross-border militants, especially those from Jaish al-Adl Iran and some of the Baloch militant groups operating from Iranian territory, created a constant terrorism cycle, with the attack on Khash in Zahedan in February 2019 killing at least 27 members of the IRGC being the most significant event so far.

In the past, Pakistan opted for hardening up the border with India, in exchange for diplomacy, with a corpus of Rs. 3 billion allocated in 2019 to initiate the process of physical fencing of the 909km-long border.

Iran finished its section of the pipeline in 2016, but the US secondary sanctions compelled its halt, unlike the INSTC, which went ahead in spite of them.

The port competition between Gwadar and Chabahar was fundamentally symbolic at the top; it was a competition that suffered from low performance by both ports and had security and political risks for both.

All the consequential Pakistani decision-making concerning Iran was influenced by outside actors like the United States (with sanctions), China (with CPEC and Iran outreach), Saudi Arabia (with financial assistance) and India (with Chabahar).

Sectarian-emotional domestic dynamics in Pakistan, as demonstrated by the public mobilization by Pakistani Shia organizations during January 2020, represents an asymmetric constraint on Islamabad's Iran policy which does not exist with the Iranians.

Discussion

The central argument of this study, that-depth of substantive Pakistan-Iran cooperation has been negatively related to the intensity of external structural pressures, has been supported by empirical evidence examined in this study. Realist theory predicts exactly this solution in a penetrated regional sub-system—a middle power that is dependent on a sanctioning hegemon (the United States), a strategic patron (China), a financial creditor (Saudi Arabia) and faces a regional adversary (India) will systematically opt for hedging and symbolic engagement rather than for

deep convergence. The progress of Iran's segment, coupled with the near lack of progress by Pakistan despite often repeated formal commitments, can only be explained with reference to the sanction's regime, not with bilateral political will. The 2018 US withdrawal from the JCPOA made this limitation increasingly rigid, even to the extent of making many banking-channel "workarounds" which had been considered in the implementation phase in 2016 impossible.

This description can incorporate the residual perceptual friction left by material variables by adopting a description of constructivism. The Sharif-Sharif mediation that took place in January, 2016, took place amidst the contentious declaration of state sectarianism by the two powers and Pakistani military and political establishment readily endorsing Saudi narratives over Iranian ones in the Riyadh-mediated assumption that it would be welcomed in Riyadh was a testament to the unspoken Sunni establishment identification which follows the realist calculus. Likewise, Tehran's ongoing irritation about allowing Jaish al-Adl activities in Pakistan and Pakistan's ongoing irritation at the tolerance of activities by Baloch separatist groups in Tehran illustrate a low-trust intersubjective frame that can't be broken by material CBMs.

A third layer of explanation is provided by strategic culture as it has been developed by Fair (2014) in her analysis of Pakistan Army's institutions worldview. For the Pakistan military, their ranking priority list is India as the existential threat, China as the indispensable patron, USA as a transactional dependency and Iran as the secondary option which can be cajoled, not altered. In this order of priorities, the expense of just "upgrading" the Iran relationship in terms of Saudi displeasure, American vulnerabilities under sanctions, and the price in Chinese strategic patience - appears high, while the incremental security or economic good that the relationship can deliver is relatively small. That is way even the most operationally substantive military-to-military meeting of November 2017, followed by a series of military manoeuvres involving 5,000 troops, did not yield any transformational changes but incremental improvement of an agreement on "joint" border mechanism and eventual fence construction.

The issue of Soleimani in January 2020 could be just the most severe event subjected to this triple lens. Realist analysis was that Pakistan will declare neutrality and will propose to mediate and that is what Foreign Minister Qureshi's foreign tour managed to achieve given that Pakistan exposed to both the power of America and prospect of Iranian retaliation will declare neutrality and offer mediation. The tremendous domestic mobilization by the Pakistani Shia groups and measured official responses which highlighted the fight against Daesh and the protection of national sovereignty, could be understood in terms of constructivism. On issues of regional war, the U.S. like Pakistan knows that the Pakistani GHQ is the alpha generator channel not the Pompeo-Bajwa or the Pompeo-Khan channel is the alpha generator, but the Pakistani GHQ channel.

Last but not least, there is the poignant epilogue to the Taftan COVID-19 controversy, February-March 2020. Integrated response between the two counties on the other hand was still weak at mid-March since the disease outbreak in Pakistani provinces due to poor quarantine was reported when 6,080 pilgrims landed in Pakistan from the UK (Arab News, 2020). There have been later admissions by Health Minister Zafar Mirza, which proved that there was disconnect between rhetoric and reality in Taftan and that there was no alternative for the vaccine program in 2016-2020 except Taftan, which resulted in such rhetoric-reality gaps.

Recommendations

For the Pakistani state: establishment of Iran Desk of the state at the institutional level with single mandate that has representatives from the Foreign Office, GHQ and concerned economic

ministries; and eliminate the recurring problem of divergent signals during the mediation meeting (Jan 2016), as well as when Soleimani departed from Pakistan post, and pre-Iran declaration of Neutrality.

On the Pakistani side, finalize the co-operative rapid reaction force agreed upon in the Khan-Rouhani meeting in April 2019 by just outlining the standard operating procedures, communication lines and hot pursuit understanding that goes from announcement to realization.

Share mutual intelligence by breaking the game of 'chicken', between rival firms, who can only operate on the basis of suspicion – between Islamabad and Tehran on the case of Jaish al-Adl, for example; for the JIo: Engage in more transparent and accountable intelligence sharing with Tehran on the cross-border movement of Baloch insurgents over into Iran; Tehran in turn should do so with Islamabad for Jaish al-Adl.

On Iranian state's side: discuss with Pakistan options regarding renminbi currency and in barter terms which will yield immediate results along lines of cost-effective trade growth, without exposing Pakistani entities to secondary sanctions etc. particularly in energy supplies etc. with Iranian border regions.

It is not possible to forget another player that is equally responsible, the Economic Cooperation Organization, and introducing tangible and timely indicators for the revival of ECO as the primary 'trilateral' forum for connectivity of Iran – Pakistan – Turkey, to compensate for the gap of chronic implementation.

In regards to multilateral institutions, UNOCD (UN Office on Drugs and Crime) should be engaged to promote capacity building for the bilateral Iran-Pakistan counternarcotics operations along the border, as they are already well up-to-date with the bilateral operations.

For academic and policy community: Pakistani universities need to develop an exclusive Iran studies programmed and Iranian universities the Pakistan studies programmed, and vice versa to cure the de-structuralist of the discourse about Pakistan from the western/Indian context and the case of Iran in the Pakistani context.

For the academic and policy community: It is vital that the Saudi-Iran rivalry, along with the sectarian governance and connectivity contest, is dealt with and discussed in the track 2 processes at various levels and that the discussions are made public, which would chill the public debates.

Conclusion

The period between January 2016 and December 2020 is one of the dynamic and opportunistic five years in the modern history of Pakistan – Iran relations. It kicked off with the Sharif–Sharif mediation visits after the Saudi execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, involved the Kulbhushan Jadhav case, the attack on Kulbhushan Jadhav and beating of his wife, the visit of Imran Khan to Tehran and 'Bajwa' operations against that mob, the launch of the bilateral fence and 'joint rapid reaction force' concept, and ended with a Taftan bi-controversy about the COVID-19 and a crisis about Soleimani. Before all else, the two countries maintained their diplomatic traditions of good will, but without committing them to any specific and measurable steps toward the pipeline, the banking, the trade or cooperation in action against terrorism.

The main outcome of this analysis is that this distance between architecture and substance is independent and not an effect of particular individuals and/or governmental organizations: It is structurally created by the limiting force of actors outside the inside. By sanctioning and targeting Soleimani, the US set the outer limit for Pakistan's targeting Iran. Saudi Arabia imposed limitation

in the southern flanks by the provision of financial aid and the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC). Meanwhile China has helped and hindered Pakistan's initiatives, including CPEC, and savvy diplomacy in the Middle East. India established its own counter positioning incentive through Chabahar and in general its policies towards West Asia that influenced every single Pakistani decision. But in this matrix, there was not much scope for Pakistan and Iran to move towards convergence outside the establishment; the calendar was filled at the top level by the meeting was helpful as a crisis management tool but not much as a transformational one.

Clearly this 'presently' is significant. However, the nexus will stay somewhat different from one another as long as Pakistani exports continue to rely on a Saudi BOV support despite clearly exhibiting some fiscal rigor and the lack of a re-connection on the Pakistani side to the Iranian track towards global financial connectivity to lessen the secondary sanctions liability of Pakistani entities. Hardened borders fence, the symbolic Gwadar–Chabahar skirmish, Saudi–Iranian balancing and jewel of the sea drama will continue to dominate the operational picture. However, the cultural, religious and ethnic connections that link the two nations, as well as their shared concerns regarding peace in Afghanistan, anti-narcotics efforts, Baloch peace and stability, and economic development of the trade corridors represent a foundation that can yet grow into a solid relationship.

For policy makers and scholars in Islamabad and Tehran, what is most important is taking the record of 2016-2020 for a diagnosis. This is not a failing number grade assessment. It's more a question of designing institutions that will "take the bullet" without losing the “bilateral” substance that has always been, and conveniently will continue to be, intrinsic to civilized nation-state dialogue, of financial workarounds, of educational investments that, over the years, will allow this proposal to converge, more than geography, history and demography will, towards a kind of cordiality more comparable to the “convergence” of bullets thrown at the walls.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

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