



Visit of President Rouhani

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About the Author

Ambassador Ashraf Jehangir Qazi has had a prominent diplomatic career. He was Pakistan Ambassador to USA, India, China, and the Soviet Union/Russian Federation. He was also UNSG Representative to Iraq and the Sudan. He is a known columnist and commentator on international affairs.

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The visit of President Rouhani of Iran to Pakistan should be an important development and opportunity for both countries, which have yet to realize and prioritize sufficiently, the potential of their bilateral relations. The “constraints” on Pakistan have ranged from its own sectarian tensions; the comprehensive influence of its Arab “benefactors” who view Pakistan’s relations with Iran with suspicion; and the sanctions of the US, EU and the UN on Iran on account of its alleged nuclear program.

These factors have raised the costs and risks for Pakistan to upgrade its economic and strategic relations with Iran. Moreover, the radical ideology and regional strategy of the Islamic Republic have not comported with the interests of Pakistan’s ruling classes. These sanctions on Iran are now being lifted as a result of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 countries.

In 1947, Iran under the Shah was the first country to recognize Pakistan. The two countries became fellow members of the strategic Baghdad Pact, later CENTO. Later, the two countries were founder members of the Region for Cooperation and Development (RCD), which was replaced by the larger Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO.)

During Pakistan’s conflict with India in 1965, Iran largely supported Pakistan and provided limited military assistance. In the run up to the Indian invasion of East Pakistan in 1971, the Shah of Iran sought to avert war between Pakistan and India through brokering a rapprochement between Pakistan and the Soviet Union. After the break-up of Pakistan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto assuming power, both Iran and Pakistan were concerned over developments in Balochistan. Iran extended Pakistan military assistance to quell the Baloch ‘insurgency’. However, its overbearing manner also alienated opinion in Pakistan.

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The Shah's Iran saw itself as heir to a great culture and civilization of which the areas now comprising Pakistan were an outpost. It saw Pakistan as a failed state without much cultural depth or coherent national identity. Pakistan was also poor compared to Iran. At no time was the Shah of Iran prepared to alienate India – which it saw as a comparable culture and civilization – on account of Pakistan.

The Iranian Islamic Revolution, the execution of Bhutto by a military usurper in Pakistan, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan made 1979 a watershed year. The international, regional, and domestic situation in Pakistan was transformed. Iran joined Pakistan in helping the Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation. But it remained deeply suspicious of Pakistan's new alignment with the US and Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran did not project itself in sectarian terms. It sought to be a rallying point for all Muslim peoples against the hegemony of the US and its domestic collaborators. This frightened status quo Sunni elites who in turn portrayed revolutionary Iran as a Shia insurgency against Sunni Muslims who constituted the vast majority of Muslims.

Similarly, the US did not take kindly to the new regime in Iran, which challenged its regional hegemony, besieged its embassy in Tehran for over a year, and humiliated President Carter in his attempt at a military assault to free American diplomats. Just as Kissinger earlier identified the “virus of independent nationalism” as a major threat to US interests in Southeast Asia, similarly US policy-makers accused revolutionary Iran of spreading an even more virulent religious version of the virus in the oil-rich Middle East.

Inevitably, Pakistan's dependent and nervous political elites submitted to the persuasions of its Saudi and American guarantors. As a result, Tehran and Islamabad supported different Mujahideen groups in Afghanistan against the Soviets. Saudi Arabia, which felt most threatened by the Iranian Revolution, poured billions into creating a Salafi-based Sunni political culture in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Pakistani establishment was actively drawn into this sectarian maelstrom. It foolishly ignored the inevitable blowback on its domestic politics and national security, which threatens Pakistan today.

Meanwhile, mutual understanding and trust between Iran and Pakistan significantly deteriorated. This situation was further exacerbated during the Pakistan-supported Taliban regime in Afghanistan. At one point,

Iran threatened war with Taliban after Iranian diplomats and intelligence personnel were slaughtered in Mazaar-e-Sharif.

After 9/11 and the dispersal of the Taliban, the US turned its attention away from Afghanistan towards invading Iraq. By removing Saddam Hussein and Mullah Omar, the US had unwittingly rendered Iran a major service. However, US plans for regime change in Tehran remained. But the historical ties between the ruling clergy of Iran and Iraq made it impossible for the US to transform the new Shia-led government of Iraq into a client regime. The American mission in Iraq was doomed to failure.

This failure led the US to shift its emphasis to Iran's alleged military nuclear programs. The Iran-backed proposal for a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East could have easily addressed the issue. But the US was only interested in regime change in Tehran and preserving Israel's nuclear arsenal. Iran was, accordingly, subjected to economically crushing sanctions. The JCPOA has somewhat eased the situation for Iran. Nevertheless, the regional civil war situation has if anything worsened with the rise of ISIS and Saudi attempts to raise a Sunni military coalition against Iran under the beguiling cover of a war against terror.

Pakistan has skillfully if not firmly resisted being drawn into such regional military entanglements, which would completely undermine its domestic stability and prospects for national development. President Rouhani's visit is taking place in this context with the region still hostage to the uncertain Syrian and Afghan situations. The leadership of Iran and Pakistan need to coordinate their respective navigation of the treacherous political landscape of their shared region. Accordingly, the more positive prospect of enhancing regional connectivity through initiatives such as the CPEC and other trans-regional energy projects should provide the geo-economic context for Pakistan's future relations with all its neighbours, including Iran.

It is much easier to shift to win-win and more inclusive strategies despite existing political differences within a geo-economic context than it is in an exclusively geo-political or geo-strategic context. This shift is an absolute imperative for strategic success in the far more complex and integrated world of the 21st Century. Moreover, strategically upgrading our relations with Iran does not imply any downgrading of our relations with our Arab brethren provided we credibly assert the independence of our national policies. We need to prioritize our own national interests above those of foreign patrons and benefactors.

There are plans for a five year road map to take bilateral trade with Iran from its current pathetic \$ 250 million to \$ 5 billion per annum. Banking channels and much more reliable data on border trade and smuggling will be required on which to base trade and investment strategies. Moreover, financing for the much-delayed Iran-Pakistan (IP) pipeline may be more feasible now that international sanctions against Iran have been lifted. Gwadar and Chabahar can become sister ports to handle anticipated rapid increases in regional trade and economic flows.

Instead of viewing the Iranian President's visit as a normal diplomatic occurrence, it should be seen as a harbinger of a sea change in our bilateral relations that could significantly contribute to peace, stability and prosperity in our region.