



RESEARCH PAPER

A Critical Analysis of Pakistan's Relations With Iran In 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to critically analyze Pakistan's relations with Iran in the 21st century, focusing on political, economic, and security dimensions. The article explores the challenges and opportunities that define their bilateral ties in a rapidly evolving regional and global context. Pakistan and Iran share deep historical, cultural, and religious connections. Despite these ties, their relationship has been strained due to regional power dynamics, sectarian issues, and divergent foreign policy priorities. The 21st century has brought additional complexities, including the war on terror, economic sanctions on Iran, and evolving alliances in the Middle East and South Asia. The research employs a Qualitative approach, utilizing secondary sources, including research articles, official documents, policy analyses, and academic literature. It also examines geopolitical events influencing bilateral relations. The findings reveal fluctuating relations shaped by mutual interests in border security and trade, yet hindered by sectarian tensions and external pressures, particularly from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. To foster stronger ties, Pakistan and Iran should enhance economic cooperation, establish joint border management mechanisms, and prioritize dialogue to mitigate sectarian divides and external interference.

KEYWORDS Border Security, DPEC, Iran, Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline, Pakistan

Introduction

Socially, Pakistan and Iran share a lot of historical and cultural bond they have been together for decades if not centuries due to Islamic religion. The Islamic Republic of Iran established the diplomatic relations with Pakistan in years shortly after the latter had become an independent state in 1947. They are neighbouring countries with historical and cultural and religious ties; Pakistan's population comprises the majority of Sunni, whereas Iran's is Shiites and a significant minority of Sunni (Jahangir & Shabbir, 2022). These relations served to develop rapport between two countries which arguably had little known relationships with other but mostly based on religious differences at the least in the beginning. As Cold War unfolded, Pakistan and Iran were on United States side and were founder members of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO or the Baghdad Pact), Turkey being the other member. This was in view of their allied stand against the effect of the Soviet Union in the region as seen in Somalia. During the period beginning from 1960s and the 1970s, under the reign of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran was a close ally of Pakistan and Pakistan and Iran used to help each other during the wars with India in 1965 and 1971.

Economically both worked together in the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), an organization in which Turkey also participated to foster and encourage economic cooperation and development of the region. Commercial relations with Pakistan increased successfully in these years and Iran provided different kinds of help to the

Pakistani economy and defence system (Islam, 2022). This was however not the case until the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran when Ayatollah Khomeini came into power thus changing the dynamics of the two countries bilateral relations. New directions in Iran's foreign policy which have made it more revolutionary and anti-Western was likely to have caused some of the tension between Tehran and Washington. Pakistan on the other hand, continued to foster strong relations with Saudi Arabia and the United States whereby both these countries were very much against the new dispensation in Iran. Sectarian politics also entered as an important factor in that context where Iran has turned into the leader of Shia Muslims while the Pakistan staying a Sunni Islamic country with strong affiliation with Saudi Arabia – the leader of Sunni Muslims (Khan, et. al., 2019).

Still, both nations remained to forge diplomatic and economic ties during the development of these tensions. Both countries had similar concerns with regards to security especially along the Balochistan border in which issues such as insurgent activity and the drug trade were remarkably acute (Brattberg, 2024). Despite this, cooperation in security of borders emerged as one of the focal points in the relations even though the political animosity persisted. During the post-revolutionary era, Iran has supported Shia groups in Pakistan mainly during the 1980s and 1990s which led further intensity of tensions between the two nations. Another factor which affected the relationship between Pakistan and Iran was the Afghan Civil War in which Pakistan supported Sunni Mujahideen and then Taliban while Iran subsidized Shia factions in Afghanistan. Still, both countries remained conscious of the need to foster positively cooperative relations and did so into the main thematic pillars of states' interactions, namely trade, security of borders, and counterterrorism.

The nature of Pakistan–Iran relations has been discussed in academic literature, government documents and policy briefs with considerable emphasis placed on the historical, political and economic context. Academic locate them on shared cultural and religious affinity but explain that relations between them have been shaped by rivalry of regional polarity notably comprised of Iran and Saudi Arabia. In analysing the cooperative decisions, research articles focus on the dynamic and unstable nature of their cooperation especially on aspects such as trade, security boundaries and energy production and consumption (Muzaffar, 2017). There is information about contracts and partnerships in official papers and reports; thus, some of them, like the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, were scotched by international sanctions and internal problems. This paper also analyzes works on regional geopolitics that focus on the role of Great powers, especially the United States and China, in shaping relations between Pakistan and Iran. Altogether these sources make mosaic of respect of interests as well as divergence between two thus requiring strategic policies to cement their partnership.

Material and Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach in the critical analysis of the relationship between Pakistan and Iran in the twenty first century. The study is grounded in the Realist Theory of International Relations, which emphasizes power dynamics, national interests, and security concerns as key drivers of state behavior. Realism theory has been used as a theoretical framework to analyse the effects of the regional and international dynamics such as the US-Iran relations, Saudi Arabia-Iran estrangement and China on Pak-Iran relations. Data is collected through secondary sources which has been used to assess the geopolitical intentions, trade relations and cooperation on security matters. Analytical and comparative analysis of documents has been used to evaluate the dynamics of the bilateral relations and search for regularities of cooperation and confrontation.

Pak-Iran Relationship in 21st Century

The PAK-IRAN relations in the contemporary world of the 21st century may be described as precarious balancing (Hussain, Khan, & Hussain, 2021). In some ways, factors that determine the direction of Pakistan's foreign policy include the need to establish and sustain good relations with both the Shia-led Iran and the Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia that are bitter local rivals. Pakistan has tried to stay equidistant from the two powers while maintaining relations with both the countries on all the strategic interests including security, trade, and terror threats.

Security and Border Management

The border between the two countries which is around 900 kilometres long has been one of the main issues over which relations between both countries have been characterized by both cooperation, as well as conflict. Situated along the highly impassable and desolate region of Balochistan province, the border is a highly unpoliced area and well-known for being very porous and highly volatile mainly because of the infiltration by insurgent and militant groups from Afghanistan (Hajihoseini, Morid, Emamgholizadeh, & Amirahmadian, 2024). Both Pakistan and Iran have had to confront issues of cross border insurgencies, drug traffic, and terrorism during the years, which has posed a lot of challenges to their security management realities and at times; really put to test their diplomatic relations. Among the major security threats that both the countries confront in this region is insurgency which is known to be performed by groups such as BLA and Jaish al- Adl. These groups have adapted to the advantage of the huge, sparsely populated desert spaces to set up barracks and guerrilla activities. The BLA is mainly based in Pakistan and has been demanding freedom for Balochistan for several years now and its many activities include bombings, kidnapping and attacking Pakistani and Iranian security forces. Jaish al-Adl is an extremist Sunni group originated in the Iranian Balochistan which has attacked Iranian security forces several times, using territories of Pakistani Balochistan to escape the Iranian justice. These groups not only threaten the security forces of both the countries but also complicate the bilateral relations as, one or the other side has complained at times about the other side of providing sanctuaries to the insurgents or not doing enough to counter them.

For this reason, various cooperative measures by Pakistan and Iran intended at enhancing border security in the face of the adversities have been established. Among them, the practice of the joint patrolling of borders has been named as one of the effective measures to increase the level of security along the border zones, when representatives of security forces of both countries work together to patrol and ensure the security of the border. These joint patrols entail the restrictions of the freedom of movement of the insurgents and militants across borders as well as increase vigilance over areas that are easily accessed by the militants. This coordination is also meant to tackle drug trafficking which is another vice that rages along Pakistan-Iran border. It also is transit route of other drugs including opiates produced mainly in Afghanistan, trafficked through Pakistan into Iran and other parts of the world (Jahanbani, 2020). Both countries understand that only with the help of effective measures aimed at preventing the circulation of drugs, it is possible to ensure not only the stability in the region but also fight against the drug trafficking problem in the world. Thus, joint patrols have been accompanied by stepped up intelligence cooperation to strengthen efforts to counterinsurgent operations. Intelligence cooperation allows both countries to relay information concerning the movements and activities of the militant groups hence increased cooperation and arrests. Over the last few years some examples can be named, where the intelligence sharing between both countries helped in preventing the insurgents from crossing the border or attacking various targets.

However, it has not been long that the tensions between the two countries rise resulting from cross border militant strikes or allegations of patronizing the rebels. Kashmir region, for example, Iran has often alleged that Pakistan was not taking adequate measures to prevent Jaish al-Adl which is using the Pakistani soil to carry out raids on Iranians. Of course, such allegations have at times resulted in spiriting tensions, with Iranian officials calling on Islamabad to exert greater efforts into dismantling these structures. On the other hand, Pakistan on its part has raised alarm over what it finds as Iranian support to some Shia militant groups in Pakistan (Ebiede, 2017). Religious extremism particularly conflict between Sunni and Shia in Pakistan has previously been influenced occasionally next to regional conflict of interest, notably the Saudi Arabia- Iran one. Pakistan's security establishment also does not want any impression of Iran meddling in its internal sectarian situation as it may aggravate tensions and fuel conflicts in certain highly charged areas of the country. Although Pakistan and Iran have realized these security concerns, their reaction to such cross-border incidents is characterized by a tactical appeasement between meeting the security needs and diplomatic relations. For instance, in situations where one party may launch an attack to another country, both the countries may at times, make provocative statements to express their displeasure of the acts but at the same time seek ways of cooling up the anger. Another factor has been diplomatic interaction that has involved the holding of meetings between the military and political authorities with regular sessions with a view of trying to bring down tensions between the two nations as well as endorse the relations between the two countries concerning the security of borders.

An added problem affecting border security in the Pakistan-Iran border region is in human and arms trafficking and smuggling. The area is also a channel for the immigrants who try to enter Iran and continue their way to Europe being illegal. Both countries are trying to reduce such occurrences through tightening up of the borders and crack down on human trafficking rings. However, the terrain of the border region and the borderline length remain formidable barriers to prevent the above problems from occurring all the time. In this paper, it is evident that the management of this Pak-Iran border is still one of the biggest challenges in the relations between the two countries (Tehsin, 2017). Although cooperation in border management and intelligence reformation has had some improvement in its outcome, cross-border militancy, accusations of sheltering rebels, and sectarian issues keep falling within the bracket of test and struggle for their cooperative paradigm. It is true that both the countries understand that they do not want a long India-Iran border which is volatile and insecure for both, but which could also pose a threat to regional stability of the South and Central Asian region if the borders of Pakistan and Iran became unstable. As such, maintaining and consolidating the relations between the two countries and continuation of positive measures of confidence building measures between China and India will be more required in the future to ensure that the border issues are resolved and both countries are not distracted in their goals and strategies for the rest of the region and world.

Economic Cooperation

Overall, there is fair amount of economic cooperation potential between the two nations but the most important sector which needs cooperation is the energy sector because Iran is well endowed with oil and natural gas reserves which can be very much helpful for the energy needy economy of Pakistan. Pakistan has long been suffering from consistent energy crises which have been a major setback to its industrial as well as the economic sector (Baloch, Chauhdary, & Ishak, 2019). On the other hand, Iran has the possession of some of the world's largest natural gas reserves especially in the South Pars gas field, which makes Iran the best suited partner for Pakistan for meeting its energy requirement. Another major plan for establishing bilateral economic relations for both countries is the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline or the "Peace Pipeline", which was planned in the early 1990s for importing Iran's natural gas from its South Pars field to Pakistan to

overcome its energy shortage. This project was also regarded as one of the signs of mutual investment the Pakistani requirement of energy and the Iranian interest to export gas other than their traditional destinations. The pipeline was to generate adequate electricity to cater for Pakistan's internal demand and at the same time serve as the connector of South Asia and Middle East markets.

However, the IP pipeline project has since suffered many a setback and has experienced delays more so because of the sanctions placed on Iran in the international market. These sanctions particularly the ones headed by the US due to Iran's nuclear activity have made it very difficult for any country interested in engaging in serious business with Tehran. Given the tightrope situation Pakistan is in between its demand for energy and its obligations to its strategic partners, the country has been under immense pressure from the United States to stay away from Iran especially in projects such as the IP pipeline (Czulda, 2024). The political and economic consequences of breaching U. S sanctions have made Pakistan not to proceed with the project even though it is profitable. Besides the sanctions of the U. S, Pakistan has also received pressure from Saudi Arabia who is a close ally and source of financial assistance. As two regional foes Saudi Arabia has been averse to strengthening of Pakistan-Iran relationship especially in the areas of energy cooperation. Pakistani, who have been in a precarious position diplomatically trying to balance the two regional giants, has thus been challenged by these external dynamics. Although, successive governments of Pakistan have demonstrated their desire to proceed with the IP pipeline on the Letter of Interest (LoI) the actual progress has not been much evident and geopolitical concerns have continued to keep the project on hold.

However, it can be said that both Pakistan and Iran are not ready to give up on the idea of collaborating on other economic fronts. Iran has proposed to provide electricity to many of Pakistan's electricity scarce areas including Baluchistan province. The two nations have also been holding talks to improve the flow of goods between the two states especially via border markets. These are markets operating at the border of Pakistan and Iran and their general intended purpose is to help create legitimate markets and boost economic activity in these otherwise ignored areas. As the two countries promote border trade with a view to enhancing economic cooperation, it brings with it prospects of creating employment and development especially in the least developed provinces of Balochistan in both the countries (Nawaz, Arif, & Masood, 2019). However, the CPEC further enhances Pakistan-Iran economic relation into another level. CPEC is one of the most significant projects being undertaken under the BRI framework and has been hailed as the most life-changing project for Pakistan's economy signing deals of investments in infrastructure and connectivity with China and other regional markets. Iran has shown great interest towards CPEC as it seems to be a good platform for Iran to improve its connection with several regional markets including China. Since Iran is a geopolitically located country and it is rich in energy resources integration of Iran in CPEC could benefit not only Iran but also Pakistan and other regional countries by opening the trade and investment relations between two neighbouring countries.

Nonetheless, Iran's foreign involvement in the development of CPEC project has not come without some controversies. However, the Saudi Arabia's refusal to accept Iran's influence exerted in the initiative has made the situation even harder for Pakistan. Saudi is one of the main financial partners in CPEC and has made huge investment in CPEC particularly in Pakistan's development projects including \$20 billion in Gwadar Port which is an integral part of CPEC. This paper delves into the nature of Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran and how this has impacted on Pakistan's delicate strategic balance between the two nations (Rahim, Khan, & Muzaffar, 2018). Still, they must be careful not to offend their regional partners while keeping in mind the benefits of neighbouring countries as well as its own. Nevertheless, the possibility of Iran's integration with CPEC is still debated as mentioned above. The government of Pakistan has time and again shown its readiness to allow Iran to be part of the project with special focus on regional integration and trade.

Similarly, Iran has look at CPEC as an opportunity to break the sanctions imposed on it and increase its influence in the region. However, if Pakistan and Iran can face the external pressures and the geopolitical issues associated with CPEC this could greatly enhance the economic relations between the two countries.

There is possibility of huge economic partnership between Pakistan and Iran in the field of energy and connectivity. Although there are many issues with the IP pipeline including international sanctions and some external political pressures, both countries are interested in other ways of cooperation. The current dialogues on cross border relations on trade and electricity as well as Iran's possibility of joining CPEC are evidence of desire to bring relations to the next level (Shaikh, Ji, & Fan, 2016). However, the strategic context of this bilateral relation involving actors such as United States and Saudi Arabia would continue to define the future relations of Pakistan-Iran economic cooperation. Hence, while the two countries will continue to grapple with pressures in relation to Zim's political trajectory, the extent to which economic cooperation between the two nations will deepen shall continue to be imperative in determining their bilateral relations.

Diplomatic Relations and Regional Dynamics

Basically, several factors define the main features of Pakistan's diplomacy in relation to Iran in the 21st century: regional conflict and interdependence in the Middle East and South Asia, the ongoing confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This enmity which stems from ideological, political and sectarian differences has seen both nations backing different sides in different conflicts in the region particularly in Syria, Yemen and to some level in Afghanistan. The question of the loyalty of the Pakistan to Saudis or the cultural and border proximity of Iran has repeatedly placed the nation in a dilemma to balance the Saudis and Iran. Thus, the foreign policy of the country has been mainly dictated by the lack of desire to immediately plunge into the confrontation between the two regional leaders, as well as the willingness to preserve the friendly relations with both actors (Mansoor & Khalid, 2024). The two weakness that showed Pakistan's neutrality was in the Syrian Civil War and Yemen civil war. In Syria Iran supports Assad's government while Saudi Arabia supports the opposition, Pakistan has remained neutral in this conflict. Likewise, in Yemen, where they support the coalition fighting the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, Pakistani government has declined pressure from Riyadh to join the overthrow. This was most observable in 2015, when Saudi Arabia called upon Pakistan to join its coalition against the Houthis. However, one would expect compliance given the strong bond between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in terms of economic aid and military cooperation but the Pakistani government under the premier Nawaz sharif opted for a soft line. In March 2015, the parliament of Pakistan did not approve military deployment to Yemen to serve in Saudi Arabia's coalition; the action was perceived as an attempt to avoid the aggravation of relations with Iran, the country that did not support the intervention of Saudi Arabia in Yemen.

While other players in this conflict taking a side, Pakistan played the role of a mediator expressing the wish to solve the conflict through peaceful means. Such a strategy helped Pakistan to keep its strategic partnership with both Iran and Saudi Arabia at the same time without offending one or another party. To mediate thus assume the middle ground, Pakistan has over the years been urging both regional powers to talk and find a diplomatic solution. This policy of mediation is consistent with the larger goals of Pakistan's foreign policy that includes ensuring stability of the region and especially its neighbourhood and protecting its economic and security interests (Hirono, 2019). Indeed, Pakistan's diplomacy has not been restricted to this conflict alone, the country has been used as a mediator in many other crises. The country has made similar attempt to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia during other times of crisis. For instance, in December 2015 when the Kingdom executed Shia cleric Nimr al Nimr and the Iranian attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran, Pakistan urged the two kingdoms to remain calm and invited

them to have dialogue. This episode has also pointed out that sectarian conflict in Iraq could affect Pakistan and hence it is imperative for Islamabad to remain a neutral player.

Afghanistan, which the two countries trace their historical ties hence qualifies as another important diplomacy ground between Pakistan and Iran. From each country's standpoint, Afghanistan is securely in their neighbourhood and unpredictability threatens to extend the instability to their own soils. Their interests in Afghanistan differ at times; Pakistan has been closer to the Afghan Taliban while Iran has backed Shia factions and ethnic minorities throughout the years, however, both have realized the necessity of collaboration in the post-9/11 world especially in the context of the U. S exit from Afghanistan (Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2020). In the last few years, Pakistan and Iran have been part of many regional and multilateral meetings for the support of peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan. These endeavours had comprised of joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and other regional organisation related to security an economic integration in the Central and South Asia. Some issues of concern that exist between the two countries include presence of ISIS and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and likelihood of these groups to use Afghan soil to launch an attack on other countries in the region. Furthermore, common issues of concern of both Pakistan and Iran include the issue of refugees from Afghanistan and the effects of the instabilities that Afghanistan poses on Business and Trade.

The regional dynamics are somewhat complex and despite the kindred policies with regards to Afghanistan both Pakistan and Iran continue to share paradoxical interests. For instance, Pakistan's major focus has been the establishment of control over the Taliban, but Iran has traditionally had hostile relations with the Taliban because of their brutality against Afghanistan's Shia population. However, both the countries remained diplomatic with each other on Afghan issues understanding that stability of this region benefitted both countries. The bilateral diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Iran remain influenced by regional Bern considering the Iran Saudi conflict and more the situation of Afghanistan (Coen, 2024). Pakistan's foreign policy may be described as equidistant, Pakistan has been doing its best in overtly supporting no side while encouraging Iran and Saudi Arabia for negotiations. This approach has helped Pakistan in providing protection to its strategic interests, preserving its loyalties and making a positive contribution to stability of the region. In the future, the future will, therefore, crucially depend on Pakistan's capacity to anticipate and manage these regional dynamics especially as more emergent shifts such as the current volatile status in Afghanistan alongside the ongoing conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia persist.

Sectarian Dynamics and Religious Diplomacy

The sectarian issue remains one of the most challenging and long-term factors in the Pakistani Iranian relations as in the whole of Middle East, especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan has strong ties with Saudi Arabia being a Sunni dominated country while Iran is the first Shia country of the world hence the rivalry (Haider, Ahmad, & Khurshid, 2021). This split is not just in religion, but geographic and political as well that affects all areas of relations in the Arab and Middle Eastern region. The sectarian division has to a larger extent been fuelled by outside players as well as regional animosities. For instance, as the overseer of the Sunni Muslim world, Saudi Arabia has sought to place fellow Sunni Muslims in power in different parts of the Muslim world a situation Iran has sought to counter by presenting itself as a champion of Shia Muslims. This regional rivalry has also made it hard for countries such as Pakistan to manage their policy especially when they want to maintain equal relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. The (Shia-Sunni) sectarian divide within Pakistan where the Shia forms one part of the population have further produced strains in Islamabad's diplomacy.

Sectarian conflict in Pakistan, though has risen and fall at certain moments in time, it has been escalated by external factors in a way the religious groups funded by Saudi Arabia and Iran are supporting sectarian tendencies. Shias in Pakistan is believed to be 10-20% and this group has been in one way or the other falling into the hands of Sunni extremists, thus experiencing violences and political exclusion (Akhter & Kaplan, 2023). Iran has also often been worried about the situation of Shia Muslims in Pakistan especially when it comes to sectarian violence including killings and bombings of the Shia camps. The Iranian authorities have occasionally verbally attacked Pakistan for not going out of its way to protect the Shia in that country and this has put some strain on the relations between the two. Nevertheless, sectarian tensions have remained a significant factor in Pakistan's relations with Iran; Pakistan, for the most part, has not highlighted the sectarian tensions in its official diplomatic relation with Iran and both countries are Muslim countries with a similar interest in regional security. Islamabad has time and again reaffirmed its respect for religious harmony and has been keen to convey the same message to Tehran that it has no tolerance for sectarianism. This has been a part of a Pakistan's political approach towards avoiding that sectarian differences could be used to thwart the bilateral relations. In the hope of counterbalancing the sectarian issues which were poisoning bilateral relations between the two countries, Pakistan has tried to emphasize on mutual interests including cooperation on regional security and trade.

Religious diplomacy has come out as a key factor in managing crisis in the relationship between Pakistan and Iran. Both the leaderships of the two countries have been in dialogue in ensuring a form of unity of the Muslims as well as to reduce the tension that exists between the Sunnis and Shia. This has been achieved through what has sometimes included a diplomatic action where leaders from both countries have held meetings involving dialogue with religious leaders where issues of interfaith dialogue particularly, the theme of Islamic unity and the need for cooperation among Islamic states without any form of compromise or dilution of principles have been highlighted. Similarly, Iran has also tried to maintain a moderate stance in its relations with Pakistan, disregarding issues of sectarian conflict that exist in Pakistan and trying to cooperate more on the issues that are favourable to both the countries (Raza & Noreen, 2024). Pakistan's religious diplomacy should not be seen just on the relationship with Iran; it has been an important factor in its overall regional policy. Being one of the biggest Muslim countries with both Shiite and Sunni populations, the Pakistan has tried to be an intermediary between Iran and Saudi Arabia especially in times of increased sectarian strife in the Middle East. For instance, during the Syrian Civil War and Yemen conflict where Iran and Saudi Arabia backing local players through sectarian divide, Pakistan avoided choosing sides while instead attempting to play the role of a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two major themes of Pakistan's religious diplomacy have been Muslim unity and advocacy for disturbances' peaceful settlement.

This diplomatic balancing act has been very important for Pakistan especially in managing the relations of its two powerful neighbours and is an essential role in containing the sectarian conflict within the Pakistan border. As a third party, Pakistan has tried to avoid further escalation of sectarian conflict within its borders by stressing more on dialogue by siding with the regional Sunni-Shia conflict (Karim, 2022). This approach has enabled Pakistan to protect its political objectives in the region as well as endeavour to protect internal stability. On the other hand, Pakistan has been very much conscious of the strategic implications of sectarianism. The Pakistan's military and political establishment understand that the sectarian conflict and segregation constitute a potential threat for the radical groups from within and outside the country. As such, religious diplomacy is about the functioning relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as about avoiding aggravation of sectarian tensions which may have negative impact on the security and position of Pakistan in the region.

The sectarian relations between Pakistan which is Sunni-dominated country and Iran, which is Shia-dominated have been a source of concern in their diplomatic relations (Kumar, 2016). Nonetheless, Pakistan has been able to reduce the effects of sectarianism on its relations with Iran due to good diplomacy and highlighting the commonalities between the two countries. Muslim unity as an element of religious diplomacy and the approach to the resolution of religious conflicts have been critical in sustaining stability in the relations between Pakistan and Iran that enables the former to strategically position itself in the sectarian Middle Eastern region. In future, Pakistan's capacity to maintain balancing in both Iran and Saudi Arabia will prove to be significant for the Pakistan's overall regional policy as well as internal stability.

The interconnection of Pakistan and Iran in the overall circumstance of the 21st century is based on historical bonds and a convergence of security interests along with geopolitical factors. However, sectarian differences as well as the conflicting relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are some of the issues that affect the cooperation between the two countries; nevertheless, Pakistan has managed to have good relations with the Iran (Mahmood, Begum, & Khan, 2023). Economic cooperation, especially in the gas line field is the most explored domain of cooperation though external pressures have influenced the execution of certain projects such as the Iran Pakistan gas pipeline. The political and economic relations between Pakistan and Iran especially considering the strategic partnership of Pakistan with Saudi Arabia shows the strategic foreign policy of Pakistan on balance of power. This paper concludes that as power shifts occur throughout the world, Pakistan's diplomacy with Iran will keep being vital in their mutual efforts of fighting security threats and ensuring regional development.

Conclusion

Pakistan's relationship with Iran in the 21st century reflects a blend of historical affinity and contemporary challenges. While shared concerns over border security, counterterrorism, and economic development provide a foundation for cooperation, sectarian dynamics and geopolitical rivalries pose significant obstacles. Pakistan's strategy of maintaining equidistance between Iran and Saudi Arabia has enabled it to navigate complex regional politics, underscoring its role as a mediator in conflicts like the Yemen and Syrian civil wars. Economic initiatives, such as the stalled IP gas pipeline and potential collaborations within the CPEC framework, highlight untapped opportunities, though external pressures and sanctions have hindered progress. Religious diplomacy has been instrumental in mitigating sectarian tensions, promoting Muslim unity, and preserving bilateral ties. Ultimately, the future of Pakistan-Iran relations will hinge on their ability to manage mutual interests amidst shifting regional and global power dynamics, ensuring stability and fostering development in South Asia and the Middle East.

Recommendations

- Boost trade ties by addressing barriers and enhancing border infrastructure.
- Strengthen border security through joint management and counterterrorism efforts.
- Encourage diplomatic dialogue to build trust and resolve misunderstandings.
- Reduce sectarian tensions via interfaith initiatives and cultural exchanges.
- Collaborate on regional projects like CPEC and Chabahar Port.
- Engage in multilateral forums to align on common regional and global goals.

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