



The Iran–Pakistan Strategic Shift: Energy Alliance or Security Gamble?

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ABSTRACT

Iran Pakistan relationship has entered critical stage which is influenced by changing regional geopolitics, energy insecurity and multiple security interdependence. Bilateral engagement has traditionally been based on geographic proximity and low levels of strategic cooperation, but has lately been concentrated on energy collaboration, especially the proposed Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. This paper reviews whether the new partnership is a potential heinous energy alliance or a critical security issue. Through qualitative policy analysis and assessment of geopolitics, the study finds structural forces such as the acute energy shortage in Pakistan and the geopolitical necessity of Iran to diversify its export markets due to sanctions. Nevertheless, the deeper integration is held back by external sanctions regimes, financial constraints, infrastructural constraints, border insurgency, and competing regional alignments. The results indicate that, as much as energy diplomacy offers a sound economic platform on which collaboration can take place, security dilemmas, and geopolitical considerations that have not been resolved yet, could lead to the disintegration of long-term sustainability. During the sustainable bilateral engagement, a measured approach should be adopted by balancing between economic pragmatism and security risk control.



Introduction

The changing relationship between Iran and Pakistan is one of the geopolitical changes with the most significant consequences in South and West Asia over the recent years. Geographically located at the junction of the Middle East, the Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean, the two countries have to face structural challenges such as the economic fragility, chronic energy shortage, and transnational militancy. In this regard, a revival of bilateral relations has received a long-term interest, especially on the old Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline scheme. The project is

sometimes called the so-called Peace Pipeline, and in its version, the Iranian gas should be delivered to energy starved Pakistan. In Islamabad, the project presents a potential solution to a cyclic electricity crisis and stagnant industry; in Tehran, it promises a new line of export in the volatile world energy trading and global sanctions. The pipeline is still unfinished, though, because of its economic logic, this project is limited by geopolitical rivalry and foreign influences (Shamil, 2024).



Only one aspect of this strategic re-calibration is energy cooperation. The border between the two countries is more or less 900 km long, a large part of which passes through the unpredictable province of Balochistan, where the military activities and unlawful cross-border systems have historically lowered the level of trust. Regular security breaches have revealed the flaws in border control and cast doubt on the issue of sovereignty and internal balance. Tehran and Islamabad have responded through more coordination such as fencing of their borders, intelligence collaboration at senior levels and military-level exchange. These actions point to the fact that the partnership in question is not a pairing that is limited to transactional economic factors but a converging security demand that is formed by the realities of common threats and threat to the state (Chiusi & Panda, 2024).

This rapprochement is further complicated by the fact that it is in the wider regional setting. The growing strategic and economic association with China, especially the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has reformed the geopolitical association structure of Pakistan where infrastructure, power, and business web are included in the Belt and Road Initiative of Beijing. The emergence of Gwadar Port as a deep-sea maritime node serves as a representation of this change which may overlap with Iran schemes to establish connectivity and transregional trade corridors. To Tehran, interaction with Islamabad would provide access to growing Asian markets as well as cementing its eastern strategic flank (Thrassyvoulos, 2012).

However, this change of strategy occurs in the context of enduring structural barriers including, first of all, the sanctions of the United States against the energy sector of Iran. Historically, these sanctions have constrained the intentions of Pakistan to operationalize the pipeline in fear of financial fines as well as diplomatic impacts. At the same time, Islamabad has to walk the fine line between its relations with the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia whose competition with Tehran defines the regional NATO, and, at the same time, cope with the intricate balances with India, the interests of which intersect with those of both countries. The presence of the said external players brings up some important concerns about the sustainability of further cooperation between Iran and Pakistan without triggering any opposing geopolitical strains (Kuhn, 2014).

This paper thus questions Iran-Pakistan strategic shift by using a two-fold analysis platform. To begin with, it examines the future of an energy-based relationship based on economic interdependence, integrating infrastructure, and overlapping developmental goals. Second, it evaluates the possibility of a fatter alignment being a security gamble Pakistan would be left vulnerable to sanctions, regional tensions and internal frustrations, and Iran would understand its ability to use its partnerships under limited international circumstances. In placing bilateral engagement into the changing geopolitical structure of South and West Asia, the study aims to unmask how the present course is an element of pragmatic cooperation under structural necessity or a re-calibration of high risks under the influence of strategic uncertainty (Verma, 2007).

Literature Review

The literature is developing on the complex Iran-Pakistan bilateral cooperation in the context of the energy interdependence, geopolitical restrictions, and security issues. The key in this literature comes with Iran-Pakistan gas line, often described as the quintessential expression of changing strategic participation. The project is commonly known as the Peace Pipeline, but it can easily be viewed as an energy diplomatic initiative, as well as a geopolitical mountain of a project. Preexisting sources emphasize that it can help alleviate chronic power lacks in Pakistan and diversify the energy mix but boost export incomes in Iran. Simultaneously, they also highlight significant obstacles, especially international sanctions against the energy industry and the whole geopolitical pressure towards Iran (Abbasi, 2023).

The study of the Bangladesh-Iran relations on the ground of the economic relations of the two countries also stresses on the economic rationality of the pipeline, which presents a win-win scheme of energy security and revenue generation. Nevertheless, researchers note that financial constraints, changing alliances in the region, and outside pressure, and in particular the pressure of the United States and regional rivals has been systematic in derailing implementation. These discussions place the halted pipeline in a broader geopolitical context in the region, where geopolitical factors like structural barriers are more important than economic impetuses (Youns & Muzaffar, 2025).

In addition to energy, researchers analyze the trade, border regulating, and informal economic networks as the essential aspects of bilateral interdependence. Research shows that informal cross border trade by far surpasses formal economic exchange pointing to latent economic connectedness which is under-institutionalized. This literature argues that long-term energy and infrastructure cooperation needs parallel changes in regulatory alignment and management of the borders. Iran-Pakistan simulation is therefore treated as a multidimensional rather than being limited to a single energy initiative because it incorporates economic connectivity alongside the mutual security requirements (Currier and Dorraj, 2010).

Security issues especially those to do with border control and insurgency have a leading role in the literature. The unstable Balochistan border has had its share of tensions including cross border militancy and separatist activities. Researchers asserts that the long-term strategic partnership is needed to resolve these deep set security weaknesses, which menace infrastructural developments and the overall stability. Despite relative paucity of systematic scholarly research on bilateral security co-operation, policy-focused literature points out to the recent senior-level discussions seeking to enhance the counterterrorist coordination and control of mutual challenges on boundaries (Betts, 1979).

A different body of work places the Iran-Pakistan relations within the context of regional and great-power politics. The problem of strategic alignment between Pakistan and China as part of the

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has large implications on its own policy calculus on Tehran, which puts bilateral engagement in more comprehensive structures of the connectivity across the region. At the same time, Iranian analyses view energy diplomacy as a strategic tool of overcoming international isolation and reducing the export market. Although it is not specifically related to Pakistan, this literature explains the reason Tehran has the motivation to maintain eastern alliances despite the constant external pressure (Janardhan, 2020).

Alongside these contributions, gaps did exist in the current scholarship. There is very little empirical and longitudinal research on the changing security cooperation mechanisms. Though there are studies that cite the extended involvement of military and intelligence, their permanency and institutionalization have not been systematically reviewed. This loophole underscores the importance of thorough qualitative and quantitative studies to identify whether the existing collaboration is transactional no matter the issue matter or a manifestation of the richer strategy re-balancing (Shafeeq, 2025).

Overall, the theoretical literature offers a subtle, but fractured conceptualization of Iran-Pakistan strategic change. It is common knowledge that energy cooperation is economically sensible and geopolitically limited. Security cooperation seems to be widening on the same basis of common threats, but is weak when it comes to insurgency, sanctions and regional conflicts. It is this that recent scholarship has been calling out to, and integrated analytical frameworks are what need to be able to evaluate how the energy and security aspects co-evolve and are also able to shape the direction of the Iran-Pakistan relations (Morady, 2011).

Research Methodology

The research design to be employed in the current study is a qualitative, descriptive-analytical one to take into consideration the question on whether the shifting Iran-Pakistan relationship is a long term energy relationship, or a strategic gambit. Two broad aspects will be applied to its analysis these aspects are: cooperation of energy particularly the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project and bilateral security coordination along the common front, including counterterrorism and border management units. It is informed by the secondary data, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy briefs, official government statements, and reports of renowned think tanks. The views of the documentary evidence of bilateral agreements and diplomatic messages discuss the strategic intent and policy direction. The article employs thematic content analysis in identifying the general patterns alongside the relationship to energy reliance, limitations of sanctions, regional balances of power and the evolving patterns of security collaboration. Realism and Neoliberal Institutionalism theories of International Relations contribute to the analytical understanding and it is possible to make a theoretically grounded conclusion about whether the contemporary situation is one of structural strategic alignment or conditional cooperation due to the greater geopolitical pressures.

Discussion

The changing strategic relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan and especially the sections on energy cooperation and security coordination have yielded mixed reactions by global and regional over-actors. These responses introduce divergent interpretations of the Iran-Pakistan pivot, as an instrument of practical economic partnership or a strategic-level casino game that fits into the larger framework of geopolitical conflicts. The course of this alliance is not dictated by the bilateral priorities only but also by the regime of sanctions, bilateral security issues, and strategic decisions of great forces. To the Iranians, a closer relationship with Pakistan is an economic necessity. Such an endeavor as the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, often termed as the

heart of bilateral collaboration, is regarded in Tehran as an independent and mutually advantageous plan aimed at ensuring the long-term export markets and counteract the impact of international sanctions. Policymakers of Iran have always managed to position the project as a business deal to help Pakistan solve its energy crises and Iran gets much closer to the global market. This is the same view and a larger strategy of Tehran to diversify partnerships and lessen its exposure to being marginalized by the West (Alam, 2004).

Iran also points to the economic payoffs of institutionalized cooperation in the long term. Outside the pipeline, Tehran has facilitated collaborative mechanisms, institutionalised diplomatic interaction, and trading and security coordinating platforms to extend the trade and security cooperation. Such moves indicate that Iran takes the relationship as a recalibration in a larger eastern strategy, and no individual energy deal (Marketos, 2009).

The strategic hedging is manifested in the position of Pakistan. Imminent structural energy deficiencies in Islamabad have limited industrial output and economic security. Iranian gas is a nearby and price effective choice that will diversify the energy portfolio of Pakistan. Policymakers have recognized the economic advantages that the pipeline could have in terms of eliminating persistent problems of shortages in supplies and dependency on expensive imported fuels. Yet, Islamabad has at the same time emphasized that development should be consistent with the national interest and the larger diplomatic picture (Hassan, 2022).

This risk aversion is indicative of the fact Pakistan has to and must be aware of the practicality of energy matters coupled with addressing geo-political risks. The interaction with Iran takes place in the setting of the Pakistan relations with United States, the Gulf States and multilateral financial bodies. The attempts to find diplomatic guarantees or exemptions highlight the way in which the issues of sanctions still define the calculus of decisions in Pakistan (Kazmi and Rasool, 2024).

Simultaneously, there is an escalation of security collaboration between Tehran and Islamabad and this includes the control of borders and coordination of combating terrorism. Its almost 900 kilometer borderline, which mostly lies through Balochistan, has been the scene of militancy and instability in the past. The dialogue on high levels and collaborative mechanisms are signs of awareness of common vulnerability and the necessity to develop security responses by consulting each other. These changes prove that bilateral engagement has been embracing both energy-related and security-related factors (Ahsan, 2021).

Strategic containment is the approach taken by the United States as far as Iran Pakistan cooperation is concerned. Washington has effectively warned against the pipeline implementation, and threat of sanctions to entities that have significant economic cooperation with Iran. This stance corresponds to the more general U.S. attempts to keep the economy on a leash with Tehran and avoid any form of regional normalization that may water down sanctions impact (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2025). To the American view, a closer relationship between Tehran and Islamabad might result in an increase in the influence of Iran in the region, making it difficult to achieve U.S. strategic interests in South and West Asia (Klasra, 2024).

The strategic environment is also further influenced by the regional actors. The long-term partner of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, looks at the rapprochement between Iran and Pakistan in terms of its competition with Tehran. Riyadh has close economic and military relations with Islamabad, and even though it does not advertise its opposition to bilateral energy collaboration, Tehran orientation is assessed in the context of regional power games and x-rays of influence in the Muslim world (Gul et al., 2021). Larger Gulf strategic considerations play into Saudi suspicion about alterations in the regional alignments of Pakistan (Pagliarulo, 2016).

The strategic stance of India brings in a new dimension. Even though, New Delhi had initially been a part of previous pipeline talks, the country later withdrew and instead increased collaborations with Iran via establishment of Chabahar port. This project overlays with region-wide competition, especially in pertinence to the Gwadar port organized by China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). These intersecting infrastructural initiatives are indicative of the geopolitical, economic integration and connectivity nexus (Jain, 2019).

The role of China forms a significant structural point of attraction. Beijing has established Pakistan as part of a larger infrastructural and energy system with the help of CPEC and Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese investments diversify the strategic choices of Islamabad, which can counterbalance the possibility of entirely depending on one partner. Although China is not the main centre of the Iran-Pakistan pipeline, its wider presence affects the balancing behaviour and the regional calculus of Pakistan (Hamblin, 2021).

Findings and Analysis

The results lead to conclude that Iran-Pakistan collaboration is a manifestation of strategic ambiguity, not unambiguous alignment. The government of both nations still goes through the rhetoric of developing the pipeline and fostering the trade. The importance of the project symbolically remains given as a signifier of a possible economic interdependence. To Pakistan, a successful implementation would ease the energy shortages and decrease dependency on imports. To Iran, it provides a way to diversify exports when global markets are limited. Nevertheless, structural constraints are the dominant ones. The artificial hindrance of the sanctions is the core act of uncertainty which determines the feasibility of financing and assessing the risk of diplomacy. An example of such exposure to external pressures is the involvement of Pakistan in clarifying with Washington to clarify the consequences of sanctions, which was a direct impact that pressure has on bilateral results (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2025).

Security cooperation, in its turn, has gone step by step. Formalized communication, intelligence sharing and coordination in the border indicate increasing awareness that economic ventures need concomitant security stabilization. Mutual dangers in the border have encouraged practical cooperation that can persist in spite of the ups and downs in energy policy (Ahsan, 2021). The wider foreign policy patterns of Pakistan accentuate diversification instead of strategic realignment. Intensified ties with China, increased energy co-operation with Russia and constant defense relations with Saudi Arabia demonstrate a multidirectional diplomatic stance. These partnerships demonstrate the geopolitical risk mitigation effort by Islamabad but preserves a flexible policy (Hamblin, 2021; Gul et al., 2021).

Progress is further complicated by operational issues, such as problems with financing, bureaucracy, and legal complications. The topic of Pakistani domestic discussion of sanctions exposure and economic viability highlights the controversial aspect of the pipeline project. The susceptibility of infrastructure projects to instability is strengthened by security incidents in the border regions. Together, the results indicate that, though economic rationality favors cooperation, geopolitical and institutional impediments are significant in restraining the achievement thereof. The Iran-Pakistan strategic change is thus conditional engagement in line with structural pressures but not irreparable strategic course revision.

Conclusion

The Iran-Pakistan preferences have followed a strategic path that reflects a balanced approach of coexistence and being cautious. Energy cooperation - especially gas pipeline- means a reasonable

ground with an economic necessity basis. Simultaneously, there is an augmented security discourse which is an indication of mutual awareness of trans-border threats and the need to stabilize frontiers. However, the relationship is not a consolidated alliance. Rather, it is an adaptive strategic hedging that is influenced by the regimes of sanctions, alliance matters, as well as regional rivalries. The instrumental character of the interaction between Pakistan and Iran is reinforced by its diversified partnerships and Iranian comprehensive attempt to counter economic isolation. Therefore, the Iran-Pakistan shift could be deemed as a hybrid strategic structure - both opportunity and risk. It shows possible improvements in connectivity and cooperative security, but is limited by geopolitical facts stipulated in the modern order in the region. The continuity of transition of this partnership as long-term strategic alignments or continual conditional and episodic development will lie in the changes in the policy of sanctions, stability in the region, and the systematization of bilateral mechanisms to shield the course of cooperation against the impact of external factors.

Recommendations

In order to create a stable and win-win relationship among Iran and Pakistan in place of a strategic risk, a number of policy steps are suggested.

- To resolve the restrictions imposed by sanctions on energy cooperation, first, both the countries need to enhance the use of diplomatic representation in the form of multilaterality. The effective proactive dialogue at an international and regional level can be used to find legal frameworks or negotiated arrangements that minimize the potential risk of punitive action without jeopardizing national interest.
- Second, expansion of institutionalized border security cooperation must be done. Intelligence bureaucracy, synchronized patrols, and combined threat evaluations can strengthen border security and reduce the possibility of an escalation of threats across borders. Organized security partnership will assist in the change of reactive measures to preventive coordination.
- Third, economic participation ought not to be limited to the pipeline project. The bilateral interdependence can be enhanced by opening formal trade channels, easing the customs process, and enhancing transport links. Miscellany of energy partnerships i.e. renewables and alternative gasses will also decrease susceptibility vulnerability to geopolitical interference whilst sustaining energy security.
- Fourth, to develop the trust and minimize the misperceptions confidence-building actions including frequent dialogs on defense, cultural interactions, and joint humanitarian or disaster-response measures should be institutionalized.
- Fifth, in situations where there is a strategic stalemate, especially in financing or compliance issues, neutral third-party facilitation can help to resolve technical issues without creating political tensions.
- Lastly, the two governments would have to ensure a consistent evaluation of the regional security trends. Adaptive policy coordination will make them able to react to changing alliances and external pressures effectively and still protect long term strategic autonomy.

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