

Pak-Iran Relations amid Recent Developments: Implications and Way Forward

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Abstract

The relationship between Pakistan and Iran has undergone significant shifts amidst recent geopolitical developments, including changes in regional dynamics and global power struggles. This abstract explores the implications of these developments on Pak-Iran relations and outlines potential pathways forward. Despite historical ties and shared cultural, economic, and strategic interests, the relationship between Pakistan and Iran has faced challenges, including divergent regional alignments and security concerns. Recent developments, such as the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and tensions in the Persian Gulf, have further complicated bilateral relations. Key issues include energy cooperation, border security, and regional stability, with implications for broader regional dynamics in South Asia and the Middle East. This abstract highlights the importance of dialogue, diplomacy, and mutual cooperation in addressing shared challenges and promoting stability in the region. The way forward involves enhancing bilateral engagement, fostering economic ties, and strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms to address common security threats and capitalize on shared opportunities.

Keywords: Bilateral Relations, Recent Developments, Geopolitical Dynamics, Regional Stability

Introduction

On January 16, 2024, Iran and Pakistan entered a phase of heightened military conflict, beginning with Iran's missile attacks on Pakistan's Baluchistan province. These strikes aimed at Jaish al-Adl bases, a group opposed to Iran, coincided with similar Iranian military actions in Iraq and Syria. Pakistan retaliated swiftly, deploying missiles and fighter jets to target insurgent groups in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, which were accused of launching attacks against Pakistan from Iranian territory (Mir, 2004). This sudden military engagement between Iran and Pakistan is particularly striking against the backdrop of increasing regional tensions, including ongoing attacks by Iranian-supported militias on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, and threats to international shipping in the Red Sea by the Houthis, another group with ties to Iran (Childs, 2003). The direct conflict between Iran and Pakistan marks a notable shift from their typically subdued and localized border frictions, highlighting a significant deterioration in their relations.

The escalation can be traced back to deep-rooted issues, including accusations from Iran against Jaish al-Adl, which Tehran labels a terrorist organization with external links, including to Israel. This group has been a thorn in Iran's side, conducting attacks such as the one in December 2023 in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan

province. On the flip side, Pakistan's decision to strike back was driven by the need to assert its sovereignty, deter further aggression, and navigate the intricate dynamics of regional politics, especially considering the potential for escalation with other neighboring countries (Karim, 2004). The unfolding situation carries the risk of further escalation, potentially drawing the region into wider conflict. However, various factors, including Pakistan's military strength, diplomatic efforts (notably by China), and the strategic disadvantages for Iran in persisting with hostilities, helped in de-escalating tensions. This recent conflict underscores the longstanding frictions between Iran and Pakistan, rooted in ideological differences, geopolitical alliances, and mutual suspicions, all set against the broader canvas of regional security challenges in the Middle East and South Asia (Ali, 2024).

The year 2024 has ushered in a pivotal moment for Pakistan-Iran relations, set against a backdrop of historical complexities and recent escalations that spotlight the perennial Realist themes of power, security, and state sovereignty within the anarchic international system. Realism, with its emphasis on the centrality of states, their security interests, and the inexorable quest for power as a means of survival, provides a compelling lens through which to examine the unfolding events between these two nations. The recent exchanges between Pakistan and Iran, a stark manifestation of Realist principles, underscore the gravity of national security concerns and the extents to which states will go to defend their territorial integrity and sovereign interests (Raza, 2020). This episode began with Iran's air raids against the Jaish al-Adl group in Pakistan's Balochistan province, a response framed by Tehran as a defensive measure against cross-border insurgencies—a classic Realist portrayal of state behavior driven by security imperatives. Pakistan's retaliatory missile strikes and air raid into Iranian territory further illustrate the Realist assertion that states, when confronted with threats to their security, will assert their power to safeguard national interests (Schuett, & Hollingworth, 2018). The Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs articulated this retaliation as a clear expression of its "unflinching resolve to protect and defend its national security against all threats," echoing the Realist discourse on the primacy of state survival in a competitive international arena.

The ensuing diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions, while reflective of a mutual desire to avoid further conflict, also embody the Realist understanding of diplomacy as an extension of state power and interests. The decision by both countries to engage in dialogue, the return of ambassadors, and the international community's calls for restraint signal a recognition of the potential for unchecked escalation to undermine not just bilateral relations but regional stability as well—a scenario all caution against (Yousuf, 2024). The involvement of global powers and supranational entities, urging a peaceful resolution, highlights the interconnectedness of state actions within the global system, underscoring the Realist perspective on the balance of power and the role of third parties in mitigating conflicts. This complex interplay of power dynamics, national security, and diplomatic overtures amid the recent Pakistan-Iran developments offers a vivid illustration of Realism in practice (Childs, 2003). As this article delves into the nuanced fabric of Pak-Iran relations through the Realist lens, it seeks to unravel the implications of these recent events for regional security, the bilateral ties that bind these two nations, and the broader international order. The path forward, informed by Realist principles, calls for a strategic recalibration of diplomatic and security postures, with an eye towards preserving state sovereignty, achieving a balance of power, and fostering a stable regional environment conducive to mutual interests and peaceful coexistence (Yousuf, 2024).

Contextualizing Recent Developments

The recent attacks between Iran and Pakistan can be traced back to a complex interplay of factors involving security concerns, allegations of harboring militants, and broader geopolitical dynamics.

Cross-border insurgencies and militant sanctuaries are considered as major factors behind recent strikes. Both countries have accused each other of allowing their territories to be used as safe havens by militant groups that launch attacks across the border. Iran has been vocal about its concerns regarding the presence of groups such as Jaish al-Adl, which has been responsible for multiple attacks in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province. Pakistan, on the other hand, has pointed to the activities of Pakistani origin terrorists, notably the so-called 'Sarmachars', operating from within Iranian territory. Despite sharing multiple dossiers and engaging in dialogues over the years, the perceived lack of action on these concerns has fueled tensions (Haqqani, 2024). The situation escalated when Iran launched air raids using drones and missiles against Jaish al-Adl in the Panjgur area of Balochistan, which resulted in civilian casualties, including children. Pakistan condemned this act as an unacceptable violation of its sovereignty and retaliated by striking targets inside Iran, aiming at militant hideouts associated with different separatist groups (Baloch Liberation Army, Baloch Liberation Front and other militant groups). These retaliatory strikes were a direct manifestation of the frustration felt by Pakistan over what it saw as Iran's inaction against militants who pose a security threat to Pakistan (Nabeel, 2018).

The exchanges of military strikes were accompanied by diplomatic actions, such as the recall of ambassadors and public condemnations, which added to the strains between the two countries. However, both nations expressed a desire not to escalate tensions further. High-level diplomatic engagements, including discussions between their foreign ministers and the involvement of international actors like China, the United States, and the United Nations, reflect efforts to de-escalate the situation and address the underlying issues through dialogue and cooperation (Schuett, & Hollingworth, 2018).

The attacks occur against a backdrop of regional geopolitical shifts and rivalries, with both Iran and Pakistan navigating their relationships with major powers like the United States, China, and Saudi Arabia, as well as dealing with their respective internal security challenges and economic pressures. The involvement of international actors in calling for restraint and offering to mediate underscores the potential impact of these tensions on regional stability and security (Al-Jazeera, 2024).

Furthermore, domestic political considerations and public sentiment towards each other's country also play a role in shaping the responses of Iran and Pakistan to these incidents. Both governments face pressure to act decisively against perceived threats and to defend national sovereignty, while also managing the delicate balance of showing strength without escalating into a broader conflict. Scholars have repeatedly highlighted it in the recent past (Bibi et al., 2024).

Immediate Responses of the Experts

The international community faces significant challenges in attempting to mitigate the tensions between Iran and Pakistan, largely due to the complexity and obscurity surrounding the involved parties and the geopolitical intricacies of the region (Widakuswara, 2024). The recent exchange of strikes between the two countries represents a notable escalation in a historically volatile but manageable relationship. Historically, both nations have managed to maintain a functional

relationship despite ongoing border skirmishes and mutual accusations of harboring militants. The situation's complexity is compounded by the opaqueness of the Baloch separatists and groups like Jundullah and Jaish al-Adl, alongside the internal decision-making processes within Iran and Pakistan, which remain largely enigmatic to external observers. This escalation has put the practicality of the Pakistani military and the unpredictability of Iranian reactions under a microscope, amidst other regional pressures and the potential for minor groups to instigate further conflicts.

The United States, amidst this tension, appears to be in a diminished position to influence Islamabad, partly due to a perceived distancing from Pakistan, especially its military leadership. This distancing has been interpreted clearly by Pakistan's army leadership, diminishing the potential for leveraging this incident to rebuild trust between the United States and Pakistan. Alternative mediators, such as Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, might play a role in de-escalating tensions, offering a counterbalance to China's growing influence in the region (Bibi et al., 2020).

On another note, the strikes between Iran and Pakistan are not seen as precursors to a larger conflict between the two nations. Both countries targeted groups within each other's territories that they mutually consider problematic, suggesting an indirect form of mutual assistance rather than an escalation to direct military conflict. This perspective posits that, despite the apparent aggression, there is no inherent interest on either side to engage in a broader military confrontation, with external powers like China, Russia, and the European Union potentially playing more effective mediatory roles due to their relationships with both countries.

Moreover, the strikes have rekindled historical grievances between Iran and Pakistan, raising questions about decision-making processes, the influence of external powers, and the future of trade relations between the two nations. The role of the United States in the region, particularly its past interactions with groups like Jundullah, adds another layer of complexity to the bilateral tensions. The situation is further complicated by the weak interim government in Pakistan, which may lack the capacity to effectively address these multifaceted issues, potentially leaving the military to assume a more prominent role in the crisis.

Iran's aggressive posture, demonstrated through the recent spate of missile strikes, aims to communicate its military capabilities and assert its strength both regionally and domestically. This show of force is seen as a response to various pressures, including those from jihadist groups, and serves as a message to external adversaries. However, the effectiveness of these missile strikes in addressing Iran's security dilemmas remains questionable, with the potential for further political tensions and implications for regional stability.

Each of these perspectives offers a unique insight into the recent Iran-Pakistan tensions, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the issue, the limited influence of the international community, and the delicate balance required to navigate the path towards de-escalation and stability in the region.

Implications

The recent military exchanges between Iran and Pakistan over insurgent activities on their respective soils mark a significant escalation in their bilateral relationship, which has historically been characterized by cautious engagement overshadowed by mutual suspicion and regional geopolitical complexities. This section will explore the implications of these attacks on the relationship between the two countries, underpinned by relevant facts and examples.

The direct military confrontation, initiated by Iran's missile strikes in Pakistan's Baluchistan province and followed by Pakistan's retaliatory actions in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, represents a notable departure from the generally restrained and low-profile military engagements between the two nations. Historically, Iran and Pakistan have managed their disputes quietly, without resorting to such overt military actions. This shift suggests a significant erosion of trust and could herald a period of increased diplomatic strain. For instance, the decision by Iran to publicly announce its strikes in Pakistan could be seen as an attempt to signal its resolve against perceived insurgent sanctuaries. This public declaration, coupled with Pakistan's forceful response, risks embedding a narrative of confrontation in their diplomatic exchanges, potentially sidelining avenues for peaceful dialogue (Shakil, 2023).

The military engagement between Iran and Pakistan occurs within a context of complex regional security dynamics, where both countries find themselves aligned with opposing geopolitical blocs. Iran's perceived closeness with India, particularly in the development of the Chabahar Port as a counter to Pakistan's Gwadar Port (developed with China), has been a point of contention. The recent escalation could further push Iran and Pakistan into seeking deeper alliances with their respective partners, thus exacerbating regional polarization. Moreover, the conflict highlights the role of external actors in the Iran-Pakistan equation. For example, the involvement of Jaish al-Adl, a group with alleged links to external entities, including possibly Israel, underscores the extent to which external influences can exacerbate internal and bilateral tensions, thereby complicating the regional security landscape (Islam, 2024).

The conflict also brings to the fore the sectarian and ethnic dimensions that underpin Iran-Pakistan relations. Jaish al-Adl's insurgency is rooted in the grievances of the Baloch and Sunni minority in Iran, mirroring the broader sectarian and ethnic cleavages in the region. The escalation of military actions against such a backdrop risks inflaming sectarian tensions, not just within Iran and Pakistan, but potentially across the broader Middle East and South Asia regions, where Sunni-Shia divisions are pronounced.

The escalation could have far-reaching implications for future diplomatic and economic engagements between Iran and Pakistan. The two countries have shared interests in several areas, including energy cooperation and counter-terrorism. The Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, for instance, has been a symbol of potential economic collaboration. However, the recent military strikes and the escalation of tensions could stall such initiatives, as mutual trust diminishes and security concerns take precedence (Cafiero, 2024).

One of the most ambitious projects between Iran and Pakistan is the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline, also known as the Peace Pipeline. The project aims to transport natural gas from Iran to Pakistan, with Iran having completed its section of the pipeline. However, the project has faced numerous delays on the Pakistani side, largely due to concerns over potential sanctions from the United States, as well as funding and security issues. The recent military conflict could exacerbate these challenges, as heightened tensions might deter investment and further complicate negotiations over sanctions relief. The escalation also risks undermining the political will necessary to push the project to completion, potentially leading to increased energy insecurity in Pakistan and lost revenue for Iran (Jamal, 2024).

Iran and Pakistan have been working to enhance trade relations, including the establishment of border markets to facilitate local commerce and improve the

livelihoods of people living in border areas. In 2023, it was reported that both countries agreed to establish more markets along their common border as a means to strengthen economic ties and reduce smuggling (Shahid, 2023). The military escalations could threaten the progress on these initiatives. Heightened security concerns and strained diplomatic relations may lead to increased border restrictions and reduced cross-border movement, directly impacting trade flows and the development of these markets. This, in turn, could affect the local economies in the border regions, which are already marginalized.

Iran and Pakistan have a shared interest in combating terrorism and securing their common border, where various armed groups operate. Both countries have previously pledged cooperation in dealing with these security challenges, recognizing that collaboration is essential to regional stability. The recent military actions, however, could compromise this collaborative stance. Trust, a critical component of security partnerships, has likely been eroded. This breakdown in trust might lead to reduced intelligence sharing and cooperation in border management, potentially offering militant and insurgent groups greater leeway to operate across the border.

Way Forward

The challenges ahead are significant, requiring both Iran and Pakistan to reassess and potentially recalibrate their approach to bilateral relations and regional engagement. The path forward should ideally be marked by efforts to rebuild trust, resume dialogue, and reaffirm commitments to cooperation on shared challenges and opportunities. Doing so is not only in the interest of Iran and Pakistan but also critical for the stability and prosperity of the broader region.

In a notable dialogue with the Tehran Times, Pakistan's Ambassador in Iran Muhammad Mudassir Tipu delineated the pathways and critical moments leading towards a fortified relationship between Iran and Pakistan, emphasizing their deep historical, cultural, and geographical bonds. Despite the tensions marked by military confrontations in January 2024, both nations have demonstrated a commitment to mend and enhance their bilateral relations, as evidenced by mutual congratulatory messages post-electoral victories, showcasing a desire to deepen political and diplomatic ties (Shah, 2024). With ambitions to escalate trade volumes to \$5 billion in the coming years and discussions on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, economic cooperation stands as a cornerstone of their partnership. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at boosting tourism and cultural exchanges, alongside plans for academic collaborations, underscore a broad-based strategy to address security concerns and explore the full potential of their relationship. His insights underscore a comprehensive framework for advancing Iran-Pakistan relations across various domains, marking a hopeful trajectory toward a mutually beneficial and deeply interconnected partnership.

In summary, avoiding strategic errors and refraining from aggressive policies are critical to prevent detrimental outcomes for both nations by keeping in view the following steps (Khan, 2024);

- Both nations should reassess their foreign policies in light of evolving global and regional strategic landscapes.
- Understanding the security concerns of each country is crucial for mutual respect and cooperation.
- An intelligence-based framework is essential for addressing the challenge of militants, insurgents, and other destabilizing entities.

- Strengthening the Joint Border Security Force and Surveillance is vital for enhancing security along the border.
- The leadership in both countries needs to overcome misunderstandings and rebuild trust.
- Diplomatic efforts should be prioritized to facilitate peaceful and constructive dialogue.
- Regular meetings between political and military leaders are necessary to review security policies and develop practical solutions for combating terrorism, militancy, and insurgency.

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