

Pak-Iran Collaborative Strategies for Enhancing Regional Cooperation in Eurasia*

*Irfan Shahzad**

Abstract

[Pakistan and Iran – located at the juncture of South, West and Central Asia – assume pivotal position and undeniable role for any move, aimed at enhancing regional cooperation in Eurasia. The two countries must make joint efforts for long-term sustained peace in neighboring Afghanistan, which is a prerequisite of any enduring cooperation between the nations of the region. Regional energy politics is another important area where the two can join hands for collective benefit of the region. An indigenously designed and backed Silk Road can be revived as well with their mutual efforts, while reinvigorating the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) can do wonders. Several emerging and non-traditional challenges also provide vast scope for regional and sub-regional collaboration. – *Author.*]

1. Introduction

In today's world, regional cooperation is a prevailing and strengthening norm in international relations. At the outset, however, regional cooperation in Eurasia – as much as the 'region' itself – sounds too broad and vast to be covered in any single academic discussion. Eurasia – spanning the land mass of two large continents – is simply too big a 'region' to be taken as single unit. Moreover, while discussing regional cooperation in Eurasia, it will always be a question demanding a clear answer, whether one is talking about intra-regional cooperation, inter-regional cooperation, or the inter-continental one.

The scope of this paper is, nonetheless, confined to Pakistan, Iran and their immediate shared neighborhood – i.e. South-West and Central Asia – though it has implications for and linkages with the whole of Eurasia. In fact in any discourse on cooperation in this loosely-defined region, Pakistan and Iran assume the central position in all respects. For any broad-based regional cooperation in Eurasia, the respective roles of Pakistan and Iran as well as the mutual collaboration between these two brotherly nations assume utmost significance.

*Revised version of the paper presented in international conference titled "Islamic Republic of Iran and Regional Cooperation in Eurasia" organized by Institute of Iran and Eurasian Studies and Institute of Political and International Studies, in Tehran, Iran on February 18-19, 2013.

*Irfan Shahzad is Lead Coordinator at the Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad-Pakistan. The author thankfully acknowledges the assistance of Ms. Waqar-un-Nisa, an IPS team member.

This brief paper attempts to draw an outline of the prospects that exist for cooperation between the two, not only for the mutual

For any broad-based regional cooperation in Eurasia, the respective roles of Pakistan and Iran as well as collaboration between these two brotherly nations assume utmost significance.

benefit but for the benefit of the region; the two continents in question; and perhaps even beyond. Besides, considering the regional and global geo-political realities, the paper also touches upon the challenges that are faced in this connection. It discusses, precisely, the subjects including Security and Stability in Afghanistan; Energy Politics in the heart of Eurasia; Revival of the Silk Road; Rejuvenation of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and Cooperation in

Emerging/Non-traditional Challenges.

2. A look at the Emerging Regional Scenario

Before discussing the role of Pakistan and Iran for fostering regional cooperation, it is pertinent to have a cursory look at the emerging regional scenario. The region is currently going through a major transition. After a decade long, apparently failed adventure, the US-led NATO forces have announced a drawdown from Afghanistan and an end to combat operation, by the end of 2014. At the same time however, the US is busy finalizing the arrangements for its permanent stay in the country beyond 2014 – albeit at a limited scale but keeping a sizeable presence at the designated bases all across the country. The *Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement* between the US and Afghanistan has been signed on May 01, 2012¹, while the talks are underway since November 2012 to authorize the long-term presence of American/NATO forces in Afghanistan – probably a new *Status of Forces Agreement* – beyond 2014². It needs little stress that while the so-called 'War on Terror' had fallouts of its own, the long-term post 2014 presence of US/NATO forces in Afghanistan may also have multidimensional implications for regional peace and stability in general, and for Pakistan and Iran, in particular. Martin Jacques' words below sound pertinent:

"The United States is entering a protracted period of economic, political and military trauma. Its medium-term reaction may not be pretty: the world must hope it is not too ugly."³

¹The White House Press Release, "Fact Sheet: The U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement," The White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/fact-sheet-us-afghanistan-strategic-partnership-agreement> (accessed April 15, 2013).

² Micheal R. Gordon, "U.S. in Talks with Afghans on Presence after 2014," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2012.

³Jacques, *When China Rules the World*, 559.

Considering the nature of US' involvement, particularly in the last decade, in the region that Pakistan and Iran are part of, it would not be too much to say that the region may witness many of the desperate acts by a declining superpower in the years ahead, as this is the region where the US is facing a humiliating failure after almost 12 years of a misadventure, using all its might.

This, however, is not all about the emerging scenario in the region. Developments of all sorts have been witnessed in the recent past, which continue to unfold in the strategic, political, economic and social arenas, in and between the countries of the region which will indeed be shaping the future of

the region and determining its course in the years ahead. The never-ending 'great game' in Central Asia – next door for both Pakistan and Iran – is all too visible. On the economic front, the unprecedented development of China, and Beijing's focus on developing its western region – particularly with the designation of Kashgar (which connects China with the region that Pakistan and Iran are part of) as Special Economic Zone in May 2010 – is

presenting new prospects for the extended regional cooperation. The new ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Cha Bahar in Iran also open up new avenues for cooperation between the countries of the region.

Developments of all sorts have been witnessed in the recent past, which continue to unfold in the strategic, political, economic and social arenas, in and between the countries of the region which will indeed be shaping the future.

Apart from plans for long-term stay in Afghanistan, the US has entered into the process of negotiating deals with some countries of the region that do not bode well for the peace and stability of the region as a whole.⁴

3. Security and Stability – Afghanistan

Peace and stability are prerequisites for any form of cooperation – bilateral, regional or global. It goes without saying that Afghanistan holds key to the security and stability of Asia, as in the words of Allama Mohammad Iqbal:

⁴These include controversial nuclear deal with India, because of which India is now seeking a permanent waiver from and a membership of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG); and recent arms sales deals with some of the Gulf countries, which will certainly add to tensions and have destabilizing effects on the broader region around Pakistan and Iran.

Policy Perspectives

آسیا یک پیکر آب و گل است
ملت افغان در آن پیکر دل است
از فساد اوفسار آسیا
از کُشاد او کُشاد آسیا

Any durable and sustainable cooperation in the Eurasian region – or in a major part of it, at least – is un-thinkable without stability in Afghanistan. The US-led invasion and occupation of the country is well into its 12th year, with visible fallouts for the whole region. Particularly, the plethora of internal and external security challenges that Pakistan is confronted with, are primarily a consequence of this ISAF/NATO campaign, next door. Now, the announced drawdown of the NATO forces from the country, which has practically begun with the outbound transit of military equipment (first consignment sent through Pakistan on February 10, 2013), presents both an opportunity and a challenge, at the same time.

Questions that loom large include, but are not limited to: Will the US/NATO forces withdraw, at all? What will be the actual nature and extent of the outside forces' engagement with Afghanistan and their involvement therein, with a 'Status of Forces Agreement' between the US and Afghanistan pending finalization? Will the country see stability or will it fall back into the civil war, as was experienced in early 1990s after the withdrawal of Soviet forces? A report of UK's select defence committee fears that civil war is likely, once the foreign forces leave Afghanistan⁵. A lot depends on the outcome of the process of reconciliation, started inside the country, as it is the key process to determine what sort of political dispensation the country will witness in the post-2014 period. Pakistan and Iran, with their deep-rooted linkages with and influence over the war-torn unfortunate country, have an undeniable role to play – individually as well as collectively.

While Pakistan and Iran have had differences over Afghanistan, particularly in the period of Taliban regime, the points of convergence are, however, much more than the points of divergence in their respective interests, viz a viz Afghanistan and regional stability. The two countries, therefore, must put their heads together and join hands for ensuring a sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan, and facilitating a political dispensation in which the rightful share of

⁵Lucy Morgan Edwards, "Civil War is the Price Afghan's will Pay for the Criminals the West Installed," *The Guardian*, April 12, 2013.

representation is guaranteed to all the stakeholders. Pakistan-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral mechanism needs to be strengthened, and made meaningful.

Cleaning the mess of what would be a 13-year long war by the end of 2014 – the longest one fought by the US – would not be an easy task in any way. Thus, the job is not limited to Pakistan and Iran alone, and thus, the two – as the ones with the most stakes in the country – should pave the way for the positive involvement of other regional players, notably China and Russia.

While Pakistan and Iran have had differences over Afghanistan, particularly in Taliban period, the points of convergence are, however, much more than the points of divergence.

4. Energy Politics in the Region

While global energy politics is complex and multidimensional, having a closer look at the energy politics being played in the Eurasian region, one finds that it revolves around the following dimensions:

Firstly, there are very visible efforts to stop Iran from developing and marketing its immense energy resources, in one garb or the other, with Iran's nuclear program being used as the major excuse. A series of sanctions have been put on the country on the pretext of its alleged nuclear weapon program; the reasons are clearly aimed at stopping Iran from becoming a major energy player in the region.

Secondly, moves aimed at creating roadblocks for China's unhindered access to energy supplies and putting obstacles in the way of China's diversification of its energy supplies are, indeed, no secret. Mark Jones, pointing to America's interference – rather its naked aggression – in this energy-rich region in the name of pre-emption, says:

"... the Americans have only a very small window of opportunity (like Hitler enjoyed in 1939) before their military advantage evaporates. This is perhaps the real cause of Bush's headlong rush to war. It is China they must pre-empt. The Islamic world, broken-backed as it was and remains, is not the problem. This will be war for the survival not only of the American Century but of the cultural zone where people actually live – the "burbs" with an SUV in every drive – the pinnacle of ostentatious consumption, born and raised on cheap oil."⁶

⁶Jones, "Battle of the Titans," 113.

Thirdly, designs aimed at providing India a greater access to Central Asia's energy resources and facilitating its competition with China are also clearly noticeable. For the purpose, not only the routes *bypassing* Pakistan are being explored, but some projects *involving* Pakistan are also in line.

Fourthly, efforts vis-à-vis encouraging and facilitating Central Asian Republics (CARs) finding new markets as well as routes of transportation for their energy resources – particularly the hydrocarbon – are also there. It also involves decreasing CARs' dependence on Russia for export of energy, with an aim to 'limit' Russian influence in the region; however CARs themselves seem quite desirous of this, to an extent at least.

Every country has a right to make efforts for its long-term energy security; to develop all energy resources available at its disposal; to market its exportable surpluses; and to diversify the sources of its energy supplies and imports. Yet, all of this has to be done on a level playing field, with fair mutual gains. The above-

Iran-Pakistan pipeline is the most feasible and potentially the most advantageous project for the region.

mentioned four points, around which the regional energy politics is revolving, unfortunately, cannot ensure a "win-win" situation, and may result in the disparities of opportunities as

well as the needless investments into some of the projects that are considered non-starters, resultantly creating crisis for the countries involved.

Pakistan and Iran, quite visibly, have a major role in this backdrop. Iran-Pakistan pipeline is, perhaps, the most feasible and potentially the most advantageous project for the region. It was encouraging to note that Pakistan and Iran, despite immense international pressures, moved ahead for practical realization of this project; however, it is equally worrisome that some confusing signals are also emerging after the new government has taken power after May 11 elections in Pakistan. The sooner, the better! Not only Pakistan and Iran should expedite the efforts further for an early completion of the project, but India should also reconsider its decision not to join the project⁷. In case India withdraws completely, the prospects for the inclusion of China in the project needs to be explored on fast track basis. The much talked about Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India

⁷While India says that its decision to stay out of the project, even for the time being, has nothing to do with American pressures, the question that arises is that why, then, India is joining Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran (TAPI) which will also be passing through Pakistan? This is a clear example of pushes for certain projects, while undermining certain others.

(TAPI) pipeline project, remains a non-starter. Its fate will continue to depend on the security and stability in Afghanistan and it will, in fact, be a question mark even years after Afghanistan becomes relatively stable.

5. Reviving the 'indigenous' Silk Road

As the US plans to withdraw from Afghanistan, it is working upon a strategy to revise the ancient Silk Road in a way that best suits its interests in the region. While apparently there is no harm in pursuing the idea and supporting it – and Pakistan also supports it officially – a deeper analysis becomes quite pertinent. As Khalid Rahman states:

“Seen from purely an economic and commercial point of view, NSRI seems to be an excellent initiative that can usher the region into a new era of unprecedented economic, trade and energy cooperation. But peculiar geo-political, geo-economic and geo – strategic significance of the regions of South and Central Asia, and overall objectives of extra regional players and their regional allies, cannot be ignored. The need is to study NSRI in the context of broader US and western strategy for the region”⁸.

An important point in this regard is that the projects being conceived and promoted under NSRI – by and large – exclude Iran, which seems and sounds unnatural. That is why Iranian officials have found the idea as “unjustifiable and suspicious.”⁹

It needs no mention that Pakistan connects Iran with South Asia, and beyond. Iran connects Pakistan with Turkey, South Caucasus and parts of Caspian region. This overland connectivity presents immense prospects for enhancing the existing trade and commerce activity between the East and the West, particularly the region stretching from China to Eastern Europe. While regional initiatives should be strengthened, Pakistan and Iran also need to fortify and enhance their bilateral linkages that connect the two countries – and resultantly this region – more strongly, reviving a

Pakistan and Iran need to fortify and enhance bilateral linkages that connect the two countries – and resultantly this region – more strongly, reviving a purely 'regionally-devised' and 'regionally-backed' version of the New Silk Road.

⁸Rahman, “New Silk Road Initiative and Pakistan China Relations.”

⁹Joshua Kocera, “Central Asia: Iran Left out of New Silk Road Plans,” *EurasiaNet*, November 22, 2011 available on <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64567> (accessed on May 25, 2013.)

purely 'regionally-devised' and 'regionally-backed' version of the New Silk Road.

6. Rejuvenation of the Economic Cooperation Organization

Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is one of the premier organizations, aimed at fostering regional cooperation. It would not be wrong to say that despite the unmatched potential and opportunities for regional cooperation, ECO – formerly RCD – has so far failed, disappointingly, to deliver in this connection. There may be many reasons behind it; but coherent and strong initiatives on part of Pakistan and Iran can give this practically dormant organization, a new life. The challenges indeed are there, but not insurmountable. Particularly for the purpose of trade and commercial cooperation in the region, the Quetta

The Quetta Plan of Action – adopted by the ECO in early 1990s – needs to be implemented in letter and spirit.

Plan of Action – adopted by the ECO in early 1990s – needs to be implemented in letter and spirit. ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), signed in 2003, is yet to see proper implementation though it has the potential to put the region on the course of enhanced commercial activity and higher levels of investment. In the words of a Pakistani scholar:

“Unfortunately, regional cooperation within the framework of ECO has suffered so far due to sheer ignorance or lack of comprehension of its vast potential on the part of senior officials and lack of vision of leaders of the member states.¹⁰”

Things have to move forward, without any further delay, for the mutual benefit of ECO member countries and the region as a whole.

7. Tackling Emerging/Non-Traditional Challenges

We are living in the times when new challenges are emerging on the security horizon of all the nations, while some new dimensions are being assumed by the traditional ones. These, by and large, are shared interests. Energy Security has been discussed above. Issues such as Water Security, Food Security, Climate Change, and Environmental Degradation have become the issues to tackle on urgent, long-term and sustainable basis.

These issues not only call for the individual efforts but provide a whole new world for bilateral cooperation between the countries of this region, since this region – which Pakistan and Iran are part of – finds

¹⁰ Husain, “Pakistan’s Option: SAARC or ECO.”

itself among those parts of the world that are most vulnerable to the threats, emanating from these emerging challenges. Pakistan and Iran, having many mechanisms and forums of interactions at higher state levels, should incorporate discussions on these challenges, thereby paving the way for closer cooperation in this connection.

Drug production and trafficking is another important area that demands bilateral (Pak-Iran) as well as sub-regional (Pak-Iran-Afghan) cooperation. However, any meaningful cooperation in this regard will require going beyond the traditional debate on supply side, with more focus on the demand side of this issue. It is not to defend the nations producing drugs, but as a matter of fact, the drug-production and trafficking cannot be eliminated by focusing solely on the eradication of poppy cultivation in parts of Afghanistan, and its trafficking through Pakistan and Iran. It will require a wholesome approach, with equal focus on curbing the drug use in countries which are major destinations for drugs.

Indeed, a well-thought-out closer collaboration – at conceptual as well as at operational levels – between Pakistan and Iran on these new and emerging threats to the national and regional security, will not only be bilaterally beneficial, but will have a long-term positive impact on the enhanced regional cooperation as well. It will also broaden the agendas of interaction between Pakistan and Iran, and among the countries of the region.

8. The Final Words

No doubt, there appear many pushes and pulls when talking about regional cooperation in the South-West Asia specifically, and Eurasia at large. Yet, the potential for cooperation is immense, the opportunities abound, and the need cannot be overemphasized. Pakistan and Iran are the two countries that can help kick-start the regional cooperation with their joint efforts in the areas mentioned above in this paper.

Indeed, there is also a competition between the two countries in a number of fields. Yet, a healthy competition could, in no way, be a hurdle in the way of board-based cooperation. While Gwadar and Cha Bahar are seen, by and large, as competing projects, it is up to the policy-makers of Pakistan and Iran to present and position the two ports as complementing each other. This writer goes one step ahead, proposing a designated "Gwadar-Cha Bahar Free Ports Area."

There have been, and remain, difference between the two, as well. Nonetheless, what binds Pakistan and Iran together is much stronger than what, at times, has been a point of difference of opinion among the two. While fostering any kind of cooperation, it becomes equally important for the two counties to identify their common enemies and threats, and the forces that have been busy creating differences between them, by means of exploiting the ethnic and

sectarian divide among the *Ummah* in this part of the world¹¹. Cooperation – bilateral or regional – is unthinkable without coming up with a clear joint strategy in this regard.

Enhanced regional cooperation does not only provide opportunities for gaining from each other's successes and finding help in case of challenges – bilateral as well as regional – but it also provides a safeguard, at least to an extent, against the continued interference of extra-regional forces and their designs, which may easily be witnessed at play in this part of the world. Bilateral, sub-regional, and regional cooperation, therefore, will have to find a place among the top priority agenda items of the policy makers, in both the countries.

While fostering any kind of cooperation, it becomes equally important for the two countries to identify their common enemies and threats, and the forces that have been busy creating differences between them.

¹¹For a detailed discussion on the subject please see Jafar, "Pakistan-Iran Relations: The Security Scenario."

References

- Edwards, Lucy Morgan. "Civil War is the Price Afghan's will Pay for the Criminals the West Installed," *The Guardian*, April 12, 2013.
- Gordon, Micheal R. Gordon. "U.S. in Talks with Afghans on Presence after 2014," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2012.
- Husain, Javid. "Pakistan's Option: SAARC or ECO." *Criterion Quarterly* (October-December 2012).
- Jacques, Martin. *When China Rules the World*. London: Penguin Books, 2012.
- Jafar, Ghani. "Pakistan-Iran Relations: The Security Scenario." *Strategic Studies XXVIII & XXIX*, no. 1 & 4 (Winter 2008-Spring 2009).
- Jones, Mark. "Battle of the Titans" in *The Final Energy Crisis* edited by Andrew McKillop and Sheila Newman. London: Pluto Press, 2005.
- Kocera, Joshua. "Central Asia: Iran Left out of New Silk Road Plans," *EurasiaNet*, November 22, 2011 available on <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64567> (accessed on May 25, 2013.)
- Rahman, Khalid. "New Silk Road Initiative and Pakistan China Relations." *Policy Perspectives* 10, No. 1 (2013).
- The White House. "Fact Sheet: The U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/fact-sheet-us-afghanistan-strategic-partnership-agreement> (accessed April 15, 2013).