

Pakistan - Iran Relations: Strategic Challenges and Regional Security Implications

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Abstract: This article examines the historical evolution of Pakistan - Iran relations, the main dimensions of their strategic cooperation, and the geopolitical, religious, ethnic, and security factors influencing bilateral ties. Particular attention is paid to the transformation of relations following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the proliferation of nuclear technologies associated with the A. Q. Khan network, the situation in Afghanistan, and the impact of the Balochistan issue on regional security. The article also analyzes Pakistan's efforts to maintain a strategic balance in its relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Furthermore, it explores the potential implications of the military and political tensions surrounding Iran in 2026 for Pakistan's economy, domestic security, and foreign policy options. The study highlights the key challenges facing Pakistan's foreign policy and examines its diplomatic opportunities for promoting regional stability. Artificial intelligence tools were used to assist with the translation of the manuscript into English.

Keywords: Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, regional security, nuclear proliferation, A. Q. Khan network, Balochistan, geopolitical balance, strategic cooperation, foreign policy.

Introduction: Pakistan - Iran relations represent an important case for understanding the complexity of regional diplomacy in South Asia and the Middle East. Despite their geographical proximity and shared regional interests, the two countries face the challenge of reconciling bilateral cooperation with competing strategic priorities and external political pressures. Their relationship therefore provides valuable insights into how states pursue national interests while responding to an increasingly uncertain regional environment.

The relevance of this study lies in the need to understand the factors shaping Pakistan's policy toward Iran and the implications of bilateral relations for regional stability. The article aims to examine the principal determinants of Pakistan - Iran relations, assess the challenges affecting their development, and explore the opportunities for diplomatic engagement. It argues that maintaining constructive relations with Iran remains an important element of Pakistan's broader foreign policy, requiring a careful balance between security considerations, economic interests,

and regional partnerships.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design based on document analysis and a historical-analytical approach. It examines Pakistan - Iran relations through the analysis of academic publications, official government documents, policy reports, and relevant materials from international research institutions. These sources provide a basis for identifying the major factors influencing bilateral relations and assessing their implications for regional security and foreign policy. The study also applies comparative analysis to examine how Pakistan's relations with Iran interact with its broader regional partnerships and strategic priorities. Particular attention is given to the relationship between security considerations, economic interests, and diplomatic objectives. By combining historical analysis with an assessment of contemporary developments, the research seeks to identify patterns of continuity and change in Pakistan's policy toward Iran.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature on Pakistan - Iran relations can be examined through several interconnected perspectives: regional security, foreign policy decision-making, nuclear non-proliferation, and geopolitical competition. These approaches provide a broader framework for understanding bilateral relations beyond their immediate diplomatic and political context. Research on Pakistan's foreign policy highlights the importance of strategic security considerations, regional rivalries, and relations with major international actors. Works such as Hassan Abbas's *Pakistan's Nuclear Bomb: A Story of Defiance, Deterrence and Deviance* (2018) provide useful context for understanding Pakistan's security environment and the international implications of its nuclear programme. Although nuclear policy is not the sole determinant of Pakistan - Iran relations, it forms part of the wider strategic context in which bilateral ties have developed.

Official publications, including materials issued by Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, offer insight into the stated objectives of bilateral cooperation and the governments' diplomatic positions. Policy reports and regional security studies further help explain how developments in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and the Gulf influence Pakistan's foreign policy calculations. Despite the contributions of existing research, Pakistan - Iran relations require continued analysis as regional security conditions and geopolitical alignments evolve. This article addresses this issue by considering bilateral relations within the broader interaction of national interests, regional partnerships, and security challenges. It seeks to connect historical developments with contemporary foreign policy considerations and to assess their significance for regional stability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Iran occupies a special place in Pakistan's complex relations with its regional neighbors. The two countries share a 909 kilometer border and have historical, cultural, and religious ties. In addition, Iran was the first country to officially recognize Pakistan, and diplomatic relations were established in May 1948 (Abbas, 2018, p. 176). This period marked the initial stage of relations between the two countries, during which they had similar foreign policy orientations and, under the bipolar world order, turned toward the West as partners of the United States. At the same time, they joined the regional security bloc CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) together with the United States.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Iran continued to support Pakistan. A notable aspect of this period was that, despite their different policies toward Arab states, the two countries continued their strategic

partnership. The situation changed after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Iran, under the leadership of Shia clerics, severed its relations with the West, and relations with Pakistan also became more complicated. Although Pakistan was among the first countries to recognize the Islamic Republic of Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, n.d.), as a state whose population consisted predominantly of Sunni Muslims, Pakistan began to move closer to Saudi Arabia. However, relations between the two countries were maintained due to the presence of Shiite Muslims living in Pakistan and their cultural similarities.

The situation in neighboring Afghanistan also had an impact on relations between the two countries. The outbreak of war in Afghanistan led to the beginning of competition between Pakistan and Iran for spheres of influence. While Iran supported Afghan Shiites, Pakistan supported the Taliban.

At the same time, relations between Pakistan and Iran involved nuclear cooperation, which raised serious concerns about nuclear proliferation. Analysts point out that the initial stage of these relations dates back to around 1987. In particular, H. Abbas (2018, p. 245), an American scholar of Pakistani origin, notes that Pakistan's nuclear ties with Iran consisted of a complex series of episodes spanning 20 years and could be divided into four distinct phases. According to him, these ties began with the 1987 agreement, which gave Iran the opportunity to benefit from A. Q. Khan's expertise. During the subsequent period from 1988 to 1992, Iran worked to implement and expand the 1987 agreement. Between 1993 and 1995, centrifuges were supplied, and contacts between A. Q. Khan and Iran continued into the 2000s. The period after 2004 was marked by a deterioration in Pakistan - Iran relations following the international exposure of nuclear technology proliferation and illicit transfers. The two sides began accusing each other of disclosing crucial information about secret agreements to the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency).

In addition to material interests, the international situation also played a role in Pakistan's transfer of nuclear technologies to Iran. During this period, regional instability strengthened the strategic ties between Pakistan and Iran. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent US-led military operations, as well as the US sanctions imposed on Pakistan under the Pressler Amendment, further convinced the Pakistani military of the need to move closer to Iran. However, to achieve this, they also needed to secure the support of the political leadership. The Pressler Amendment was introduced in 1985 as Section 620E(e) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. It required the US president to

certify annually that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device as a condition for receiving US assistance. In October 1990, President George H. W. Bush declined to provide the required certification, resulting in the suspension of US military assistance to Pakistan and the non-delivery of 28 F-16 fighter aircraft purchased by Pakistan in 1989 (Kraft, 2009, p. 4). Thus, Prime Minister N. Sharif visited Tehran three times within three years (1991–1993), President Ishaq Khan made a visit in 1991, and in 1992, Iranian President Rafsanjani was received in Islamabad on an official visit.

These nuclear cooperation ties also raised concerns within Saudi Arabia's intelligence services, as Saudi Arabia had been closely monitoring Iran due to their rivalry. The credibility of this information is supported by the visit of Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal to Pakistan in early March 1995, when he attempted to persuade Prime Minister Bhutto to put an end to such cooperation. Thus, the issue of nuclear technology proliferation hindered plans for a strategic partnership between Pakistan and Iran. Furthermore, according to H. Abbas, A. Q. Khan's network played a decisive role in Iran's nuclear program, and following its exposure, the two countries would no longer be able to cooperate in the nuclear field in the future (Abbas, 2018, pp. 253-254).

Since the 2000s, the two countries have strengthened their cooperation in trade and economic affairs and have also begun working together to combat terrorism. However, one persistent issue continues to affect their relations: the conflicts in Pakistan's Balochistan province. The Baloch ethnic group lives on both sides of the Pakistani - Irani border. Family and cultural ties among the Baloch population have created an interconnected social environment across the border. While the Baloch constitute a Sunni minority in Iran, the Baloch population in Pakistan considers itself an ethnically discriminated group, and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has been conducting an insurgency. The BLA has been designated as a terrorist organization by Pakistan and the United States (Rubio, 2025). Furthermore, Balochistan's heavy dependence on Iran for energy supplies and support for its local economy is a factor affecting Pakistan's national security. The annual volume of cross-border trade amounts to approximately USD 3 billion. According to Pakistan's Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (OGRA), as of 2023, approximately 4,000 tonnes of fuel were smuggled into Pakistan daily. In addition, Iran supplies more than 70% of the 142.5 MW of electricity consumed in the Makran region of southwestern Balochistan. The Iran-Israel war in June 2025 not only raised concerns about the security of the Baloch population living along the border but also affected the

local economy. This is because a significant part of the regional economy depends directly or indirectly on the cross-border supply of fuel (including oil, diesel, and liquefied natural gas) and food (Anees, 2025). Based on these factors, it can be concluded that Pakistan faces vulnerabilities in regional security due to its geopolitical position, ethnic and sectarian factors, and Balochistan's dependence on Iranian resources.

In June 2025, Pakistan condemned Israel's strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. Furthermore, since the possibility of attacks on Iran's nuclear program had long been a concern for Pakistan as well, Pakistan has sought to support Iran in this regard. At the same time, given its traditionally close relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Pakistan seeks to maintain a balance in its relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In 2026, the US and Israel's attack on Iran, justified by the need to halt its nuclear program, had economic consequences for Pakistan. At the same time, it provided the Pakistani government and Field Marshal A. Munir with an opportunity to mediate, bringing Pakistan into the international spotlight. On the other hand, Pakistan found itself facing a difficult choice amid the conflict: the defence pact signed with Saudi Arabia imposes certain obligations on Pakistan in this regard. Supporting these arguments, the attacks on Iran and the death of the country's Shiite religious leader intensified anti-American sentiment among the population in Pakistan's border regions. Mass unrest observed outside the US Consulate in Karachi was also witnessed in other cities. Pakistan was also among the first countries to feel the economic impact of the war in the Gulf, prompting the introduction of austerity measures nationwide. If events continue to develop in a negative direction and Saudi Arabia decides to become involved in the conflict, Pakistan may also be compelled to deploy its troops in accordance with its treaty obligations.

When analyzing Pakistan's relations with Iran and its defense commitments to Saudi Arabia, the core issue is not simply a matter of choosing which state to support. Islamabad strives to maintain three objectives simultaneously: ensuring Saudi Arabia's security, avoiding direct entanglement in a war with Iran, and preserving its role as a mediator in US-Iran negotiations. As of October 9, 2026, this issue has already taken on a practical dimension. The defense agreement signed in Mecca between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey was practically activated on October 5, triggered by Houthi attacks from Yemen on Saudi Arabia. The three nations approved measures to jointly deploy their defense capabilities. At the same time, Pakistan's military leadership states that it will continue

mediation to achieve peace through negotiations between the US and Iran.

Thus, Pakistan faces three strategic contradictions: The first contradiction is defense commitments to Saudi Arabia. Pakistan may participate in protecting the territorial integrity and security of Saudi Arabia. However, the exact manner in which the defense agreement will be operationalized—specifically regarding which forces, in which regions, and under what conditions—remains a crucial issue. On October 9, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan announced that the scope and timeline of force deployment would be determined by the alliance's relevant mechanisms.

Secondly, maintaining relations with Iran is of direct importance to Pakistan due to their shared border, the Balochistan security issue, cross-border trade, and mutual security concerns. If Pakistan participates in anti-Iran military operations within the framework of its cooperation with Saudi Arabia, tensions along the Pakistan-Iran border could escalate significantly.

Third, Pakistan's role as a channel of communication between Washington and Tehran provides it with valuable diplomatic leverage. However, maintaining Iran's trust while simultaneously providing military assistance to Saudi Arabia could prove increasingly complex. On October 9, the Pakistani military's press wing reiterated that the country remains committed to achieving peace through dialogue.

CONCLUSION

One of the most complex challenges for Pakistan is the impact of foreign policy decisions on its internal social and political situation. A direct confrontation with Iran could increase security pressure in Pakistan's Balochistan region, harm the border economy, and fuel unrest among certain communities. However, such consequences are not inevitable: they depend on the scale of military operations, Iran's response, and the Pakistani government's internal policy management. Furthermore, it is crucial for Pakistan not to frame its alliance with Saudi Arabia as a religious or sectarian confrontation with Iran. Otherwise, an external geopolitical conflict risks intertwining with internal sectarian tensions.

This situation can be explained through the concept of the limits of strategic balancing. Pakistan must simultaneously protect three key interests: maintaining its defense alliance with Saudi Arabia, avoiding the deterioration of neighborly relations with Iran, and enhancing its international diplomatic influence. The activation of the Mecca defense agreement in October 2026 has made the tension between these competing interests even more apparent. The main question is: Can Pakistan fulfill its defense commitments to Saudi

Arabia without being drawn into a war with Iran? The answer primarily depends on the alliance's practical military mechanisms, the subsequent scale of attacks against Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan's ability to preserve its diplomatic channels of communication. Therefore, it is more accurate to view the current situation not as Pakistan making a final choice in favor of one side, but rather as a critical test determining how much foreign policy room for maneuver it can maintain.

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