On the Run-up to Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's Visit to Iran

Many firsts, much tradition and a great deal left out on the official agenda for the Iran-Pakistan talks. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, who took office in August 2018, paid his first visit to Tehran on April 21-22, 2019 after receiving an invitation from Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

For the first time in history, the head of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan:

- voiced support for the ideals of Iran’s Islamic Revolution as the country marked its 40th anniversary, who assured Iran’s spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that Islamabad has set out on a path to revolution;

- publicly admitted that terrorists had used Pakistani soil in the past to carry out attacks against Iran, which has been met with sharp criticism from the Prime Minister’s opposition in Islamabad;

- avoided bringing up the failed negotiations on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline.

There were three challenges that the Prime Minister dealt with in a terrific manner, which took place in the background during his visit to Tehran:

- Washington’s steep step-up in anti-Iranian sanctions (Iran-US relations deteriorated in May 2018 following President Donald Trump’s announcement that the US was going to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal, JCPOA; in April 2019, the US declared the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps a terrorist organization; Washington will start imposing
economic sanctions against countries importing Iranian crude oil since May 2, 2019; the US has been putting pressure on the EU to politically isolate Iran. Despite threats of economic sanctions, in April 2019, both Islamabad and Tehran called on Washington to fully implement the Iran nuclear deal as soon as possible;

- Saudi hostility towards Iran;
- a brutal terrorist attack in the Pakistan-Iran border area which took place in April 2019.

PM Imran Khan’s visit to Iran can be described as a breakthrough in bilateral relations. The historical, cultural, religious and civilizational ties between the two neighboring Muslim countries are now being recognized with respect for the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Imran Khan had shown how he is putting Pakistan’s new approach of strengthening relations with all neighboring states into action, which was put forward by the government of the Pakistan Justice Party (PSP/PTI) headed by Khan. Iran and Pakistan have stressed that “no third country” will be able to prevent Iran-Pakistan relations from developing (an obvious reference to the United States and its policy which aims to isolate the Islamic Republic). And given the current situation, countries in this region need to cooperate independently and directly promote their own interests. For Pakistan's former government, friendship with Iran did not go beyond the diplomatic level.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who came to power in June 2013 with the victory of his party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), caved to pressure from the US and Saudi influence and tried to forget about the agreements signed in spring 2013 by Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Iranian President Ahmadinejad for the construction of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. Iran-Pakistan relations were frozen while Sharif was in power. Only in November 2017, with the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa’s visit to Iran, their original defense partnership began to be restored to earlier levels, and bilateral relations intensified on a diplomatic and economic level at a later stage.

In July 2018, immediately after the results of the parliamentary elections were announced, Iran expressed a willingness to promote and expand its cooperation with Pakistan's new government across all areas. Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs was one of the first high-ranking foreign diplomats to pay an official visit to Islamabad in autumn 2018, when he met with Imran Khan. It was during this visit, in response to the Naya Pakistan (New Pakistan) program of reforms announced by the Pakistan’s new government, when Iran's Foreign Minister told Khan what had been achieved thanks to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, particularly in terms of health, with the greatest improvements seen in primary health care provision. The Iranian experience appealed to Pakistan, and the two states signed the Declaration for Cooperation in Healthcare Sector in 2019.

The current composition of bilateral relations is far more diverse and complicated, and involves security, trade, religious pilgrims, the status of Pakistani prisoners in Iran, the ports of Gwadar and Chabahar, cultural ties, humanitarian cooperation and joint participation in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

Time and time again, terrorist attacks have challenged bilateral relations between these countries. In recent years, terrorist groups have intensified their activities on both Iranian and Pakistani soil. Therefore, Islamabad and Tehran have re-acknowledged the importance of regular cooperation between politicians, the military and security personnel to combat threats such as drug trafficking, kidnapping and human trafficking, hostage-taking, money laundering, bombings and arson. Following the talks, the countries signed a deal to cooperate in the fight against terrorism for the first time; agreed to form a Joint Rapid Reaction Force; and agreed to open new border crossings (in Gabd-ReemandMand-Pishin), as well as border markets. The countries plan to continue to build a fence along the border and synchronize the work of border patrol services.

The leaders of both countries expressed regret that Iran, with a population of 80 million people, and Pakistan, with a population of 210 million people, have not taken advantage of their trade potential for various different reasons, and the range of goods has remained limited over the past years. Nawaz Sharif's government took up Washington’s anti-Iranian sanctions policy, and the volume of trade declined as a result. Since 2017 however, the countries have been gradually expanding the range of goods they produce and the volume of exports and imports using the means they have available. For example, they agreed to establish a barter committee for the exchange of goods with the aim of stepping up monetary, financial and commercial activities. Iran, for its part, is prepared to deliver a tenfold increase in the volume of electricity it exports to Pakistan.

Long-term plans include the construction of a railway line connecting the ports of Pakistani Gwadar and Iranian Chabahar, as well as completing the construction of the gas pipeline to Pakistan.
The process of brokering an internal Afghan political settlement remains a matter of concern for other countries in the region. Iran and Pakistan believe that the formula which would give this solution is in intra-Afghan and Afghan-led dialog.

Peace and harmony in the region remain a priority and provide the foundation for developing transport transit corridors, which are the engine for accelerating bilateral and regional partnerships and trade. Iran and Pakistan support the implementation of bilateral and multilateral agreements, including the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative - BRI; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor - CPEC; and agreements on establishing the North-South and East-West corridors in Iran.

During the visit, Iran acknowledged that a solution may only be found to the conflict in the Jammu region and Kashmir through dialog, which should take the will of the regional population into account and should adhere to the UN Security Council resolutions. The Pakistani Leader, in turn, spoke of injustice against the Palestinians. Both Iran and Pakistan view Israel's illegal occupation of Golan Heights and the transfer of the Israeli capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem as a violation of international law, which will only lead to greater instability in the Middle East.

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