In a highly surprising move, Iran’s foreign minister, on an unscheduled and unannounced visit to Pakistan on Thursday (May the 23rd), announced the proposal to link Pakistan’s port of Gwadar with Iran’s Chabahar port. This announcement signals tectonic geo-political shift taking place in the region in the wake of increasing tensions between the US and Iran. The US has already successfully forced India, its chief South Asian ally, to scrap its purchase of oil from Iran, a country India was not long ago claimed to have entered into a strategic alliance with. Although the US has somehow left Chabahar out of its net of sanction, India’s decision to follow the US in its footsteps does signal its participation in the US policy of crippling Iranian economy and take Iran to the verge of massive political disruption and eventual regime change. Iran, obviously, is not unmindful of the implications of this particular decision of India.

Iran’s proposal to link Chabahar with Gawadar, despite the fact that the US sanctions don’t apply on the post, shows the deep sense of Indian betrayal prevailing in Tehran and a counter-manoeuvre to avoid isolation. Iran, obviously, does not expect India to be as robust and committed to building the rest of the port as it would have in a peaceful and sanction-less scenario. Iran, logically enough, is boosting its ties with its immediate neighbour, a country that already is deeply allied with China and aims to expand CPEC to Iran to increase regional connectivity. With Chabahar and Gwadar being linked, Iran will thus have two major regional states on its side i.e., Pakistan and China and will be far better placed in China’s extended regional connectivity programme than it is now. Zarif’s connectivity
proposal itself tells everything. To quote him:

“We believe that Chabahar and Gwadar can complement each other. We can connect Chabahar and Gwadar, and then through that, connect Gwadar to our entire railroad system, from Iran to the North Corridor, through Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, and also through Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey.”

As far as the US—Iran tension is concerned, unlike India, Pakistan has already said that it will not take sides in the conflict. Pakistan’s neutrality in the on-going scenario suits Tehran far more than it does for the US, that is if it does at all.

There is also no gainsaying that Tehran’s proposal to connect the two ports couldn’t have come with prior consultation with the Chinese, who are practically running the port in Pakistan. Accordingly, before coming to Pakistan, Zarif was in China where he met his Chinese counterpart and certainly discussed this proposal, leading Chinese foreign minister to “Welcome Iran” to actively take part in the joint building of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through Chabahar.

China also re-affirmed its support for Iran. “China firmly opposes unilateral sanctions and the so-called 'long-arm jurisdiction' imposed by the United States on Iran,” Wang said, pledging to maintain the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and safeguard the authority of the United Nations and basic norms governing international relations.

Chinese support’s major manifestation came a few days ago when Chinese oil tanker Pacific Bravo left the Persian Gulf with 2 million barrels of Iranian light crude, ignoring the US sanctions and practically challenging the US unilateralism.

Pacific Bravo is owned by Bank of Kunlun, a financial institution that is owned by the Chinese state oil company CNPC. Bank of Kunlun has long been the financial institution at heart of China-Iran bilateral trade—a role for which the company was sanctioned during the Obama administration. Despite already being designated, Bank of Kunlun ceased its Iran-related activities in early May when the oil waivers were revoked. But Bravo’s current moves point to a change in Chinese policy. Importantly enough, Bravo sailed from the Persian Gulf on the same day as Zarif arrived in Beijing and met Chinese foreign minister to discuss Iranian participation in BRI (through linking Gwadar and Chabahar).

With Iran now taking this fundamental shift, what is apparent is that a major foreign policy shift in Iran has taken places whereby its leadership has come to an understanding that their relations with the US are unlikely to take a positive turn for a long time and that a necessary adjustment in the foreign policy is absolutely needed. As a matter of fact, it was only a few days ago when Iran’s supreme leader criticised Iran’s foreign policy and dropped a major hint about why changing the course of foreign policy was an utmost necessity.

Of course, its major manifestation is reorienting Iran’s relations with Pakistan via participation in BRI. Pakistan will be least concerned about any US reaction over linking Gwadar with Chabahar, for the US sanctions do not apply to the Iranian port. But the fact that geo-political significance of the port will undergo a significant change after a successful linkage between the two ports and that China will become a major player, the US might feel ‘compelled’ to direct its sanctions toward the port eventually.

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