

Book Review
By
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Alex Vatank, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (New York: I.B Tauris, 2015), 304.

Iran and Pakistan relations have had some distinct characteristics over the last six decades. Unlike India and Afghanistan, Iran does not have contested borders with Pakistan, but their bilateral relationship is marred by geopolitical rivalry, economic disconnect and deep distrust of each other. Their rhetoric of shared cultural history going centuries back is contrasted to the diametrically opposed political outlooks on contemporary security and regional issues. The era of cooperation during the Shah's era when Iran and Pakistan were both part of Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and their shared strategic interests of containing 'communist expansion' after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, was followed by a zero-sum game in Afghanistan, which still, in a more moderate form, continues. The most concrete manifestations of these features of their bilateral relationship are the partially successful visit of President Rouhani to Pakistan, tripartite trade agreement between Iran, India and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan and more importantly the failure of both states to open a new page after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPA) commonly known as Iran nuclear deal and the subsequent lifting of sanctions on Iran.

Alex Vatanka, a Senior fellow at the the Middle East Institute and Jamestown Foundation in Washington, in his book *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence*, captures all these aspects of Pakistan-Iran relations. But more importantly Vatanka discusses these issues in the larger geopolitical context, regional situation and the role of outside powers generally and American influence particularly. Expanded over ten chapters, the book covers the history of Pak-Iran bilateral relations from 1959 when Pakistan and Iran signed the 'Friendship Treaty' to the contemporary period. Written in crisp prose, the chronological order of events is interspersed with insightful analyses that take into account not only the overlapping of security challenges, threat perceptions of both the states and the geopolitics of that era but also factors in the role of leadership at the helm of affairs that shaped the policies of the respective states.

Vatanka considers the period from 1949 till the Iranian revolution in 1979 as one of cooperation. The regional turbulence and 'communist threat' and their tilt towards America combined to make both Iran and Pakistan become part of Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). Iran stood by Pakistan during the wars of 1965 and 1971. Moreover after the imposition of arms embargo by America, Pakistan looked towards Iran as a conduit for arms to meet its security challenges. Shah also rejected Sardar Daoud's claims of greater Pushtunistan and raised the issue of western Afghanistan, which had once been part of Persian empire to neutralize Afghan premier's irredentist claims on some Pakistani territory. In order to promote regional connectivity and boost trade, Pakistan, Iran along with Turkey launched Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) in 1964. It failed to achieve its desired outcomes but in subsequent years it would become the hippy trail.

The watershed event, according to the author, in the bilateral relationship came in the form of Iranian revolution under, the religious leader, Imam Khomeini as he is referred to in Iran. Khomeini withdrew Iran from CENTO and his notion of exporting the revolution ruffled many a feather in its neighbouring countries. Gen. Zia ul Haq, who had deposed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, supported sectarian groups to counter what he considered Iran's attempt to export its revolution in Pakistan. He instituted policies like making zakat compulsory on all citizens, that further vitiated the social stability and exacerbated sectarianism in Pakistan. Though all was not honky-dory between Iran and Pakistan, but the regional turbulence and geopolitics provided them enough opportunities to work together. Both Iran and Pakistan opposed Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and supported the resistance forces against the Soviet forces. Moreover, the revolution in Iran and the subsequent hostage crisis led to severing of Iran's diplomatic relations with America and then imposition of arms embargo and sanctions on Iran. During the Iraq-Iran war, a significant part of Iranian arms imports from China and North Korea came through Pakistani ports.

This convergence on Afghanistan was followed by a zero-sum game after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Iran and Pakistan put their weight behind different factions, jockeying for power involved in an internecine war after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. Iran and Pakistan have for quite some time traded accusations, blaming each other of supporting

militant groups and providing them sanctuaries. Iran has accused that the Sunni sectarian groups fighting against Iranian government are based in Pakistani Balochistan and take refuge there after launching attacks on Iranian security guards. Pakistan counters these accusations and says since it faces a greater security threat from its eastern border and its forces are deployed in tribal areas of Pakistan, it can not commit sufficient number of troop to monitor the long border with Iran.

Vatanka's book is a fine contribution to the discourse on bilateral relations between Iran and Pakistan. His meticulous research, his access to some of the official documents and government memos and his analytical prowess add to the value of the book. His objective analysis of the issues that mar bilateral relationship between Iran and Pakistan, and their impact on economic disconnect and distrust of each other, make gripping reading. Though the time period it covers extends to over six decades, the author tries to cover all the significant political developments between the two countries. But at times it seems the fast-paced narrative to cover all issues undermines a deeper analysis of certain significant developments.

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