

Iran's Nuclear Agreement: Rethinking Pakistan's Middle East Policy

Iram Khalid

University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Aiysha Safdar

Pakistan Navy War College Lahore.

ABSTRACT

The recent P5+1 nuclear agreement with Iran has opened a new era of geo-politics in the region and beyond. It has concurrently thrown up new challenges and opportunities rejuvenating oil politics with Asia-Pacific as its locus. Mired in internal strife and tearing itself apart, the Middle East is witnessing emergence of a new political order. Saudi Arabia may no longer be the key regional arbiter in foreseeable future. Pakistan's enduring cold war relationship with Washington and revolution in Iran distanced the two countries. The unrelenting killing of Shias in Pakistan till recently further widened the chasm between Islamabad and Tehran. The nuclear agreement and ongoing strife and exceptionally muddled situation in the Middle East yearns for a new look foreign policy by Pakistan. With realignments underway, firm political resolve by Islamabad to accomplish the agreed points under NAP most expeditiously must be followed by imploring new avenues for a closer and warmer relationship with Tehran. Failure to do so is fraught with risk to Pakistan's internal and external security.

Key Words: P5+1, Nuclear Agreement, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Natanz Sectarian violence

Introduction

Middle East is today in a state of flux. Civil wars, insurgencies, range of extremist groups, poorly governed states and political instability afflict the region. Two dominant players Saudi Arabia and Iran are locked in fierce competition for regional dominance through proxy wars. Extra-regional powers, eager to promote their strategic interests are taking sides and their policies compound the regional tension and conflict (Kinzer, 2011)

The geopolitical frame work in the Middle East is collapsing. Russian's recent military involvement in the muddled situation in Syria is a manifestation of fracturing role of the US assembled arrangement that surfaced in the wake of Arab-Israeli war in 1973 (Kissinger, 2015). The rise of ISIS, war in Yemen, multi-layered conflict in Syria, unrest in Libya and political instability in Egypt have meanwhile created an environment of abject uncertainty.

South Asian Studies 31 (1)

Amidst these ominous developments, the P5+1 agreement with Iran on nuclear issue has thrown open new opportunities and challenges in the region and beyond. After prolong international isolation and acrimony, Iran and the US, along with latter's allies, reached what has been called a comprehensive, long-term verifiable agreement. The accord aims at putting a halt to Iran's nuclear weapon programme (Khattak, 2015.)Iran has agreed with six world powers to limit its sensitive nuclear activities for more than a decade in return for the lifting of sanctions(*Iran's key nuclear sites*, 2015). Diplomacy finally won.

Overview

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a 159 page document, authored by Obama administration on the nuclear programme of Iran was inked in Vienna on 14 July 2015. The agreement between five permanent members of Security Council (United States, Russia, France, China, United Kingdom) plus Germany and European Union is seen as a victory of diplomacy over confrontation(Qureshi, 2015).But until the end, both Israel and Saudi Arabia remained staunch opponents of the deal with Iran. Their entreaties and pleas were however set aside by the powerful countries involved in the negotiations. Their aim was to pull out an arrangement from Iran under rigorous stipulations that would prevent Tehran from furthering its nuclear pursuits with military objectives(Qureshi, 2015).

The agreement entails Iran to bring down its existing stockpile of low enriched uranium by 98percent,possibly by way of transferring excess to Russia. It also seeks to close down 2/3 of centrifuges at Iran's principal nuclear facility at Natanz. The accord further prohibits designing of warheads by Iran and conducting tests on detonators and triggers that could be weaponized. In return, Iran will be provided relief on the international sanctions against its economy as well as oil industry. The deal also allows release of an estimated US\$ 100-150 billion held in frozen Iranian assets around the world. It will now allow Iran to export its large reserves of oil and gas to regional and extra-regional countries; conduct trade with EU and engage in long overdue domestic development projects.

The U.S. Iran relations at a glance

Iran had been a strategic partner of U.S. prior to Islamic Revolution in 1979.Following the Islamic Revolution, fifty-two U.S. nationals were held hostage atthe U.S. Embassy in Tehran, for 444 days (November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981) by Iranian students supporting Islamic Revolution. Iranians demanded return of former Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who took refuge there. This was to prove a turning point in the U.S. –Iran bilateral relations(The new Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide, 2015).The protracted Iran Iraq war that began in 1980s triggered by latter and provoked by the United States ended up with clear divisions in the Middle East –

Sunni Muslim of Middle East led by Saudi Arabia and Shia Muslim of Middle East led by Iran (The new Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide, 2015).

The post revolution regime of Ayotullah Khomeini posed a direct threat to Israel, a key U.S. ally. To an extent it also challenged the Saudi supremacy in the region. This gave a direct blow to U.S. interests in the Middle East. Iran meanwhile established its nexus with Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and supported Hezbollah during war with Israel in 2006(The new Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide, 2015).

Pakistan-Iran Relations-The Rise And Fall

Pakistan and Iran continued to have warm relations during much of the cold war. Following independence, Iran became the first country to recognise Pakistan as a sovereign nation. Pakistan's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was the chief architect of close relations with Iran. Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan, a trusted aide of Jinnah was appointed Pakistan's first ambassador to Tehran. In May 1949, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan paid the first state visit to Iran. Later in March 1950, the Shah of Iran reciprocated and became the first foreign head of state to visit Pakistan(Hali, 2014).

Historically, Iran played a vital role in the security of Pakistan. This is particularly true for critical moments in Pakistan's history, including two major wars with India. Iran extended uninhibited support to Pakistan in these wars. The support from Tehran came in the form of military as well as logistic supplies. During 1965 war, Iran provided medical and oil supplies which were over and above the crucial purchase and provision of 90 F-86 Mk.6 Sabre jet fighters from West Germany. The military support of fighters counter-balanced the United States embargo on defence supplies to Islamabad(Hali, 2014).

A high point in the bilateral relations was the 1969 celebration of Iranian Kingdom by Pakistan and Tehran's reciprocal gesture of commemorating Pakistan day the same year (Siddiqi, 2014). The two were members of the cold war defence pacts, SEATO and CENTO. Pakistani students were offered seats in Iranian universities and the Shah of Iran was deemed as the country's true great friend and patron (Hoodbhoy, 2012). Following dismemberment of erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971, Iran assisted Pakistan to repress the Baloch insurgency(Hali, 2014). Such brotherly relations continued up until the late 1970s. Pakistan was amongst the first few countries to endorse its recognition of the new regime in Tehran after the revolution in 1979. Regrettably, later events began to taint relations between the former allies.

The beginning of the End

Indubitably, the Revolution in Iran, Zia's Islamization drive in Pakistan and Afghan war played a central role in destroying the relations between Tehran and

Islamabad. General Zia's era was a major blow to the relations between the two countries. It created deep sectarian fissures in the society and raised the dreaded monster of religious extremism in Pakistan. Zia's policies fuelled anti-Shia hatred and fragmented the social fabric of the society (Ahmad, 2015). A crucial down turn in relations occurred when *Sipah-e-Sahaba* (SSP), a fundamentally anti Shia militant outfit was created in Pakistan. The organization was to later morph in a deadly killing machine and several of its splinter groups spread deep tentacles across the country. These groups targeted and resorted to wanton killing of *Shias*. The spike in the culture of jihad altered Pakistan's socio-political landscape and alongside destroyed the sectarian harmony that existed in Pakistan heretofore. With more and more locally and overseas funded private armies (*Lashkars*, *Sipahsetc*) rising, the state ceded its sovereignty to these groups. These armies eventually challenged the writ of the state and continue to do so to this day.

The now defunct and proscribed SSP has resurfaced time and again under different brand names (*Lashkar-i-Jhangwei*, *Ahl-e-Sunnat-WalJamaat*) and has splintered as well. Its focus has however remained purging society of *Shias* whom these groups consider 'infidels'. The outfit was initially encouraged to fight the Soviet Red army, the godless enemy in Afghanistan, but it later unleashed a sectarian battle in Pakistan. Zia was uncomfortable with those sects in Pakistan which were resisting his Islamic laws. The Iranian Revolution in January 1979 made *Shias* sect in [Pakistan confident](#) about pushing forward their ideology and challenging Zia's Islamization drive. The state resisted harshly (*The News*, 2015). By early 80s, fissures started to appear in the society. It then became a norm to punish people based on their sectarian identity (Siddiq, 2014).

As the Soviet Red army walked into Afghanistan, the focus of sectarian war shifted. With the financial support from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan started covert backing of the largely *Sunni Deobandi* Pashtun groups. Iran, on the other hand, fundamentally endorsed the *Shia* Tajik faction. In 1987 after an incident resulted in the massacre of scores of Shia pilgrims in Mecca, no official condemnation was heard from Islamabad (Hali, 2014). The gulf widened further following the murder of Iranian diplomat Sadiq Ganji in Lahore and the cold-blooded assassination of Iranian air force cadets visiting Pakistan in the early 1990s.

From 2001 onwards, Pak-Iran relations took a nose dive. The war on terror and the phenomenal rise in sectarian killings by militant groups like *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, which went on rampage deliberately targeting *Shias* and *Hazaras*, contributed to push the relations to the lowest ebb (Hali, 2014). The recent killing of Malik Ishaq, the notorious and most dreaded leader of *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* (LeJ) in a police shootout has come as a sigh of relief to the country and perhaps restored a semblance of relations with Iran on Plan (NAP), the police in Punjab (CIA, Pakistan) with the help of INTERPOL was also able to apprehend five high profile terrorists of *Lashkar-i-Jhangwei* from Dubai and bring them back to Pakistan. These terrorists were involved in the killing of at least 14 prominent

Shias. And while in Dubai, they were planning large scale attacks on *Ashura* processions in Pakistan.

Iran's Nuclear Programme-The Historical Perspective

Iran launched its nuclear programme under the Reza Shah Pahlavi. The Shah became an important ally of the United States following the successful overthrow of the government of Prime Minister Mossadeq through a US-UK sponsored coup in 1953. While it was Shah's personal interest to see Iran develop its nuclear potential, his cordial relationship with the US paved way for developing the programme. As appendage to the 'Atoms for Peace Programme', the U.S. offered nuclear research facilities and training to its cold war allies (Khan, 2010). Iran being one was asked to provide commitment not to develop nuclear weapons. In 1957, Shah accordingly sealed a nuclear agreement with the U.S. This led to the supply of a basic 5 MW light water research reactor and related laboratories commissioned at the Tehran Nuclear Research Centre (TNRC) in 1967. In 1968 Iran signed the NPT and later ratified the same in 1970(Khan, 2010, p. 47).

By 1974, after establishing Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), Iran contemplated to produce 23,000 MW of nuclear energy within next 20 years. It also contemplated to acquire full nuclear cycle. The plan included facilities to enrich uranium, fabricate fuel and reprocess spent fuel to obtain plutonium for civil fuel purposes. Iran accordingly made agreements with Germany, France and the US and acquired 22 breeder reactors for generating 23,000 MW of electrical power(Khan, 2010).

Developing Suspicion

The U.S. suspicion on Iran started developing somewhere in 1975 while Shah was still in power. Iran developed problems with the U.S. over processing of plutonium. Iran insisted on having reprocessing facilities in Tehran, while the U.S. expressed apprehensions. Iran also became interested in seeking uranium enrichment technology. In 1976, Iran reached an understanding with South Africa for supply of US \$ 700 million worth of yellow cake in return for Tehran financing an enrichment plant in South Africa(Spector & Smith, 1990, p. 205). Tehran was furthermore becoming increasingly disinclined to accept any safeguards on its nuclear programme(Khan, 2010).

After Shah's rule, Iran's nuclear programme continued under the leadership of Khomeini, Ali Khamenia, Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatemi, and Ahmadinejad. The pace of the nuclear programme however slowed down considerably from 1979 until 1989. The prime reason was that the 'nuclear technology' was viewed with 'theological suspicion'(Khan, 2010) and considered against Islamic precepts.

A widening Chasm

The prolong and protracted war with Iraq, Washington's backing of Saddam Hussein and expanding presence of U.S. military in the Persian Gulf over and above Israel's hostile view however compelled Iran to renew its efforts towards nuclear programme. In April 2006, Iran's controversial President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that Iran joined "the club of nuclear countries" (*Iran's nuclear program*, 2006). According to reliable sources, by 2009 Iran had acquired enough enriched uranium to produce at least one bomb (*The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2009).

Covert facilities unveiled

International fears on Iran's suspect nuclear activities first surfaced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But it was not before 2002, when satellite photographs revealed undeclared nuclear facilities under construction. It was at this point that IAEA launched a demanding inquiry into the Iranian nuclear program. This led to some startling revelations. Amongst them was that Iran had enriched uranium and separated plutonium in undisclosed facilities taking advantage of the absence of IAEA safeguards. Later two events further intensified global concerns over Iranian nuclear program. One, when Iran breached the terms of a 2003 suspension by producing and assembling centrifuges and second, when in January 2006, Iran crossed international 'red lines' by resuming work on uranium enrichment at its Natanz plant (*The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research*, 2006).

Iran immediately asserted that it had an 'inalienable' right to pursue nuclear technology and that its program was for 'peaceful' civilian uses. However, after necessary inspection, IAEA inspectors found traces of weapons-grade uranium in the samples that had no function in purely civilian programs. Being in a tight spot, Iran admitted much of what it had already done in the nuclear field and granted the IAEA selected access to some Iranian facilities, while offering to negotiate with West over the future of its nuclear activities (Gold, 2009).

Iran Nuclear Programme and Pakistan

According to reliable sources, Pakistan and Iran had reached an understanding on nuclear cooperations somewhere in early 90s. The possibility of a shared defense treaty was too explored. Later, in 1991 during the stint of former COAS, Gen Mirza Aslam Beg, both sides, it is said, had reached an accord for nuclear cooperation. In return, Iran was to provide conventional weapons and oil since at the time Pakistan was under Pressler Amendment. Some quarters nonetheless maintain that the political authorities in Islamabad had refused any such move. It is claimed that President Ishaq sought PM Sharif's approval for the deal which was turned down by the latter. The deal was subsequently abandoned.

Regardless, in the nuclear realm, the known transfers of that period involved diagrams for P1 and P2 centrifuges, and 500 used P1 centrifuges in a disassembled

form. (Three actual P2 machines may also have been delivered)(Sokolski, 2008).Tehran was helped by Islamabad in missile and other technology transfers from China(Siddiqa, 2014).

The Stipulations

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and six major powers was inked in Vienna in July 2015. The conditions in the deal seek to significantly limit Iran's nuclear activities for several years. Under the terms of agreement, Iran has agreed:

- To convert plant Fordo into science research centre.
- Instead of shutting down, curtail uranium plant in Natanz.
- To limit enrichment to 3.7 percent (Bomb grade is above 90 percent and Iran had been processing ore to 20 percent enrichment).
- To cap stockpile of low-enriched uranium at 300 kilograms (660 pounds) for fifteen years.
- To rebuild and redesign the reactor to Arak so that it may not produce weapons grade plutonium.
- To ship out the reactor's spent fuel (which can also be used to produce bomb).
- Not to build any further heavy water reactors for fifteen years.
- To provide International Atomic Energy Agency greater access and information regarding nuclear program.
- To cut down existing stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98 percent(Board &Pecanha, 2015).

Once presented before the United Nations Security Council and adopted as a resolution,JCPOA will become an official international document. The Iranian President Hasan Rouhani tweeted now there can be "*a focus on shared challenges*". This was an oblique invitation to the West to join Iran in pursuing the fight against ISIS or Daesh, its fake caliphate and twisted ideological matrix in attacking *Shi'ites*, and the westerners(Escobar, 2015).

The Split- U.S. Congress

In the run upto July agreement, the United States Congress took a forceful partisan than a bipartisan view of the agreement. It was split along party lines in Washington over the [Iran](#) nuclear deal. While Democrats praised it as a landmark agreement Republicans called it irresponsible(*US Congress split over Iran nuclear deal*, 2015). President Obama threatened that as Commander-in-Chief he will overrule the decision in case Congress voted against his diplomatic move. In the end, the US President prevailed.

Israel

The Iran nuclear deal was welcomed by the world leaders. The US President Obama termed it a "new direction" while the Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed the deal to be "huge sigh of relief" for the world. Yet Israel was quick to criticize it as a "historic mistake" (*Cheers and Jeers greet Iran nuclear deal*, 2015). Israeli leadership on the whole is against the Iran-US deal and considers it against their interests. However there are some segments in the upper tier of security establishments who believe 'it is not the end of the world'. A closer examination of various opinion polls in Israel points to a broad public disapproval for the deal. Interestingly, such opinion transcended beyond the conventional political divisions in the country. A day after the agreement was signed, a poll conducted by Israel's Channel 10 found that an overwhelming 69 percent of Israelis opposed it, while only 10 percent were in favor, with 21 percent undecided (Maltz, 2015).

Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel said, 'Iran will get hundreds of billions of dollars with which it will be able to fuel its terror machine' (*Cheers and Jeers greet Iran nuclear deal*, 2015). Israelis fear that the deal will legitimize Iran as a nuclear threshold state, embolden its highly destabilizing role in a volatile Middle East, and trigger nuclear proliferation and a conventional arms race in the region (Herzog, 2015).

Saudi Arabia

From Riyadh's viewpoint the nuclear deal with Iran will first, allow the latter to bolster its economy and second, still permit it to retain the capability for manufacturing nuclear weapons. The time period of the deal to remain effective, 15 years is considered too short to demolish Iran's technical potential in preserving a nuclear programme. Both results, maintains Saudi Arabia, would reinforce Iran and its allies in the region (*Why Saudi Arabia and Israel oppose Iran nuclear deal*, 2015).

Although the government of Saudi Arabia fell short of publicly condemning the agreement, lest a diplomatic crisis with Washington ensued, it nonetheless remains wary of the developing U.S. policy and its direction (Black, 2013). For the Saudis, the deal ignores the regional security concerns. The new alliance between the US and Iran is deemed a direct insult to Saudi's sensibilities and disappointment for the long held bilateral relations between the two countries (Elass, 2015).

Overview- Iran's Nuclear Structure

The strategic priorities of the United States saw a wholesale makeover following 9/11. During the last decade of previous century, the catchphrase "rogue states" was often invoked to label countries identified or deemed to be linked to nuclear

non-proliferation. Terrorism was identified as the principal threat after September 2001 attacks on the U.S soil. The possibility of what has since been called “nuclear terrorism” uses WMD to cause large-scale death and destruction. It was accordingly found elevated in national security priorities by the United States consistent with the risks the threat posed. Iran's indistinct quest for military nuclear technology meanwhile continued to advance at a time when international sensitivities on the issue were gaining great momentum (Chubin, 2006). Tehran was public about its desire to acquire peaceful nuclear energy. But the revelations by other governments and Iranian exile groups that Iran is building nuclear facilities that can be used for the weapons program increased international suspicion.

The country had several nuclear sites. These were under observation by the global watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The more significant sites included the heavy water reactor and production plant, *Arak*, the nuclear power station, *Bushehr*, - *Gachin* - uranium mine site, *Esfahan* - uranium conversion plant, and the uranium enrichment plants at *Natanz* and *Qom*. Short details of some of these are given hereunder:

Arak

The Arak nuclear complex is composed of a 40MW heavy water experimental reactor and an adjacent heavy water plant (*Building a safer world*, 2015). Under the JCPOA, Iran is required to reconfigure the reactor so that it is unable to produce any weapons-grade plutonium. The reactor will thereby become less of a proliferation threat. Also, Iran will be disallowed to build any more heavy-water reactors or accumulate heavy water for 15 years.

Bushehr

Planned with German assistance as commercial venture and before the revolution in 1974, the facility at Bushehr has two pressurized water reactors. After the revolution, the plan for reactors at Bushehr was rescinded. In 1990s however, the project was revitalized, this time with Russian assistance. Work resumed and Moscow started necessary construction at the site. Canisters of enriched uranium were transported from Moscow to the plant site in 2007. In 2011, the plant was formally linked up adding about 700 MW of electricity to the national power grid (Feiveson, Glaser & Mina, 2014). The reactor was functioning at 100 percent of its nominal power when it was examined by IAEA inspectors in August 2013.

Esfahan

Esfahan is Iran's uranium conversion facility (UCF). In order to convert yellowcake for enrichment of uranium, Iran commenced work at this facility in 2006. The conversion took following forms:

- *Hexafluoride gas* - used for enrichment processes

South Asian Studies 31 (1)

- *Uranium oxide* - used to fuel reactors
- *Metal* - used in some types of fuel elements, as well as the cores of nuclear bombs

Natanz

As a fuel enrichment plant (FEP), the facility at Natanz is Iran's largest gas centrifuge enrichment facility. Fearing aerial strike by Israel or any other country, bulk of the facility is structured deep underground in three large buildings. The complex has enough potential to hold up to 50,000 centrifuges. The hexafluoride gas is pumped into centrifuges which segregates uranium isotopes U-235. In April 2008, Iran made public a collection of photos showing the then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad touring the Natanz enrichment plant. These also showed details of a plant sized to enrich enough uranium to make fuel for a one gigawatt-scale power reactor giving a country an effective breakout capability which could be reconfigured to make highly enriched uranium for twenty to thirty nuclear weapons per year (Feiveson, Glaser & Mina, 2014, p. 101). Under the stipulations of JCPOA, for the next ten years Iran will not be allowed to install more than 5,060 of its run-down and least efficient centrifuges at Natanz. Furthermore, the research related to uranium enrichment will only be undertaken at Natanz but not beyond years.

Qom

As a condition accepted by Tehran under JCPOA, the country is barred from any kind of enrichment at Qom for the next 15 years. The facility will be therefore redeveloped as a centre for studies in nuclear, physics and technology. The centre will produce radio isotopes for use in agriculture, medicine in other industry as well as science from the permissible 1,044 centrifuges allowed for installation.

Middle East Geopolitical Order and Pakistan

For long in history, the region called Middle East has remained divided, mostly on sectarian lines and mired in internal strife. During the cold war, the legitimacy of the long established monarchical power in many of its states was challenged by revisionist Arab regimes. Beginning with 1970s, Muslim hard-liners rejected the secular order in the Middle East and initiated a drive to impose Islamic political system. The first turbulent change came with a revolution in Iran. This revolution altered the course of U.S. foreign policy not only towards Iran but the region at large (Nasr & Takeyh, 2008). In the aftermath of Arab Israel war of 1967, Iran took a strong stand and maintained that Israeli occupation of Arab lands was a direct contravention of the United Nations charter and therefore illegal and unacceptable. But while urging speedy withdrawal of Israeli forces from occupied territories, the Shah of Iran publicly affirmed Israel's right to nationhood (Chubin & Zabih, 1974).

Following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Egypt dispensed with the long held relationship with Soviet Union. Cairo moved towards closer to Washington. The result was the peace pacts between the erstwhile foes Israel and Egypt and Jordan. In September 1980, Iraq under Saddam Hussein overturning a previous treaty with Iran, claimed sovereignty over Shatt al Arab, a 120 mile long river expanse formed at the convergence of Euphrates and Tigris rivers that ultimately drops in the Persian Gulf. The war that ensued turned into a sectarian conflict. Most Sunni states and the U.S. backed Iraq. The war which lasted eight long years, wrought destruction and deepened the fissures in the region.

In 1990, encouraged by the West and the U.S., Iraq's Saddam Hussein once again went to war. This time it was the neighbouring Kuwait. An international coalition led by the U.S. however quickly decimated Iraq's revolutionary guards and overwhelmed Saddam's military power. The events of 9/11 gave a new twist to American policy. After its initial onslaught on Afghanistan, through what was called operation "Enduring Freedom", the United States under Bush turned towards Iraq in 2003. The invasion on a false premise of WMDs was apparently ongoing effort in the war on terror. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States became U.S. allies. The Russian political and military influence virtually disappeared from the region (Kissinger, 2015).

During the Arab spring that swept much of the Middle East in 2011, Bahrain almost saw a revolution. The Bahrainis and Saudi ruling families played on strengthening sectarian divisions between Sunni-Shia to prevent cross-sectarian opposition front, which appeared possible during the initial days of uprising in Bahrain. But it was Bahrain where Saudi Arabia pursued military intervention rather than negotiation, primarily for its own internal reasons. The February 2011 swift military response against protestors in Bahrain confirmed Saudi Arabia as counter-revolutionary force. In its wake, the ruler of Bahrain Hamad Al Khalifa claimed that the revolt was driven by Iranian conspiracy to undermine *Sunni* rule despite a Bahraini report having found no evidence of any direct involvement of Iran in the Bahraini uprising (Gerges, 2014).

The sectarian divisions in the Middle East are becoming deeper by the day. The Sunni Middle East led by Saudi Arabia is now pitted against a Shiite Iran in a battle for regional ascendancy as never before. In 1979, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan joined the U.S.-UAE-Saudi bloc. This move further alienated Pakistan from Iran. In the wake of the Iran-Iraq war and the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia intensified. Both countries remained in the United States bloc as India moved closer to Iran (Rafiq, 2015).

Time and again, under the pretext of sustaining balance of power, the partisan U.S. policy in regional conflicts and otherwise has only exacerbated tension and widened the chasm in the Middle East. Up until the recent nuclear agreement and particularly through the entire decade of 80s, Washington sided with the conservative monarchies and Israel to drive into corner the hard-line regime in Tehran (Nasr & Takeyh, 2008). The U.S. also made sure that Pakistan become part

of the vicious setup. Later again after 9/11 attacks, Pakistan was given no chance but to join US in its war against terrorism as a non-NATO ally, again agitating Iran.

The sectarian violence and terrorism in Pakistan spiked between 2007 to 2013. But since last year (2014), as a result of military operations (Zarb-e-Azb) in North Waziristan and nationwide counterterrorism operations, both terror related attacks and sectarian violence, has dropped significantly as the table below indicates:

Table: Sectarian Incidents in Pakistan

Year	Incidents	Killed	Injured
2001	154	261	495
2002	63	121	257
2003	22	102	103
2004	19	187	619
2005	62	160	354
2006	38	201	349
2007	341	441	630
2008	97	306	505
2009	106	190	398
2010	57	509	1170
2011	30	203	297
2012	173	507	577
2013	131	558	987
2014	91	208	312
2015	46	212	200

Source: South Asia terrorism portal. Sectarian violence in Pakistan 1989-2015. Retrieved from <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/Pakistan/database/sect-killing.htm>

With the reduction in deaths of *Shia* civilians at the hands of *Sunni* Deobandi (closer to Saudi Wahabbi strand of Islam) extremist outfits and Pakistan's belated but firm action against sectarian groups, the prospects for Pakistan-Iran cooperation have brightened. Pakistan's decision not to play an active combat role in the Saudi-led Yemen war has, and will continue to have, the same mitigating effect on Iran (Rafiq, 2015). In this backdrop, the recent conclusion of India-UAE deal worth US \$75 billion has prompted Pakistan to add more allies in its wish list.

Iran Saudi Arabia and Pakistan

It is a no secret that as a *Sunni* majority state, Pakistan has traditionally nurtured warm and close relationship with Riyadh. This relation became particularly strong in the wake of the U.S. led war in Afghanistan in the 80s and the earlier revolution in Iran. Saudi Arabia persistently provided economic assistance and oil shipments both, free as well as on deferred payments to Pakistan. Riyadh also bailed out Islamabad in some critical periods of economic sanctions and default. In addition, a large Pakistani diaspora working as skilled and unskilled jobs in Saudi Arabia is a source of substantial foreign remittances. In return, Pakistan has served the key destination for Saudi

military training of all three services, including army, navy and airforce.(Ali, 2015).

In 1969, pilots from Pakistan airforce conducted strikes to subdue and repel an incursion into the Saudi border with South Yemen. From early 70s till late 80s, nearly 15,000 Pakistan army troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia guarding the Kingdom's border. The Saudi funding of Mujahideen during the Afghan war and political support to the military regime of Zia-ul-Haq is also a well-established fact(Ali, 2015). Unfortunately, the *Sunni*, Deobandi-Wahabi nexus between Riyadh and Islamabad, financing of Madrassahs, right wing political parties as well as sectarian groups coupled with regional developments over the past 35 years have caused an irreversible damage to Pak-Iran relations.

On the flip side and among recent developments, Saudi Arabia's demand of Pakistan to fight in Yemen and latter's refusal suddenly estranged the relations between the Riyadh and Islamabad. In December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced to forge a 34 nation alliance. The union apparently meant to fight terrorism, includes *Sunni* majority Muslim countries at the cost of excluding *Shiite* dominated Iran, Syria and Iraq. Interestingly, while the objectives of remain 'unclear', Pakistan and Turkey are the only two countries in the alliance with potent armies both, in quantity as well as quality (Aftab,2015). Independent observers view the alliance as a move against Iran and to expand Saudi sphere of influence. Pakistan's decision to join the grouping is fraught with risk.

Re-Evaluation Underway

Regardless, since strategic interests of countries are dynamic and are constantly reviewed to provide for geo-political changes, recent developments indicate that a thaw and recalibration in the bilateral relations is perhaps underway. Both, Pakistan and Iran seem keen to revisit their estranged relations. An illustration of the change has been the [decision by the Pakistan parliament not to join](#) a Saudi-led nine Arab nation effort to quell a Houthi rebellion in Yemen. Pakistan's judicious decision seemed motivated by the reluctance to commit its already burdened armed forces to a conflict outside its own area of influence as well as hesitation to antagonize Iran.

The relationship with Tehran could become increasingly important now that international sanctions against Iran have been lifted. The *Shia* constitute around 20 percent of population in Pakistan, the second largest in the world and the government can ill-afford to further irk an already sidelined minority. Pakistan's foreign secretary also dismissed speculation that Islamabad would [provide Riyadh with nuclear weapons](#) or know-how in response to what the Saudis might view as a weak deal on Iran's nuclear programme(Ali, 2015). The prospects of Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline and Tehran's possible participation in CPEC also seems to be gaining momentum. Unfortunately, Pakistan's dithering and lack of clarity on joining the Saudi led 34 nation alliance has the potential to once again reverse the relations with Iran.

Rethinking Foreign Policy

The region and surroundings of Middle East and South Asia are experiencing major shift in geo-politics. Russia's unilateral military intervention in Syria and America's fading influence is indicative of the changing dynamics. For over three decades Pakistan remain locked in a close partnership with Washington and Riyadh. This relation resulted in economic bail out of Islamabad at some critical junctures in its history, including post nuclearization in 1998. The American supplies of military hardware also largely came during same period. But this relationship distanced Pakistan from Iran in the post revolution period. The unabated killing of *Shias* and mass murder of *Hazaras* in Quetta, Gilgit Baltistan and elsewhere in Pakistan with little or no action on part of the State against the perpetrators further compounded a problematic relationship. Developments in Afghanistan meanwhile played their own due share.

China's advance in economic and military spheres; its ever enlarging strategic interests in Africa, Middle East and the Indian Ocean, Russia and Pakistan's renewed efforts to warm up their relation in the backdrop of India's aggressive foreign policy are emerging developments. All this necessitates Islamabad to take fresh stock of situation with respect to its internal policies as well as external affairs. In this regard some of the issues that merit relook are listed hereunder:

Internal Policies

●Readjusting Ideological Moorings

The trend of naming and calling other sects or individuals as 'infidels' only gained momentum as a result of state policy during and following Zia's era. It also saw a mushroom and unchecked growth of Madressahs, rise in religiosity and religious extremism with an ever-expanding frontier of intolerance in the society. Pakistan's proxy wars in Indian Kashmir, Afghanistan coupled with a right leaning media did the rest. A firm resolve at State level is needed to change the mindset and make Pakistan a progressive and tolerant state where life of citizens is secure. This is a tall order since the malaise runs deep and reversing it will be difficult. However, globalisation and trends of 21st century require Pakistan to connect with the rest of the world; the country cannot live in isolation. This will require political resolve first and foremost and a wholesome review of internal policies.

●Furthering NAP

A 20 point National Action Plan (NAP) on counter terrorism was announced in December 2014. It followed the cold blooded massacre of school children at Peshawar by TTP. The NAP points were detailed by the Prime Minister. Although, headway has been achieved in some areas, there remain issues that require

increasing efforts. Despite killing or apprehending some important terrorists, a firm action to block the financing of terror and sectarian groups is still awaited.

●Media coverage to Iran

As a first step to improve the relations, appropriate media coverage to Iran must be accorded on television networks in Pakistan. Talk shows must highlight the significance in historical and contemporary perspective without injuring the interests of any other Muslim country.

●Balochistan

Iran has been persistent in its complaint that Pakistan's side of Balochistanis being used by militant groups like *Jundullah* for attacks on Iran. Steps to arrest the problem in earnest is in order.

●Identifying hate Spreading Seminaries and Mosques

The seminaries that have been spewing extremism especially sectarianism have continued to increase over the past three decades. There has been a widespread indoctrination by groups as well as local clerics. The Mosque pulpit and sound system has been used indiscriminately to motivate and mobilise support from ignorant masses. The sadistic killing of Punjab Governor SalamanTaseer and lynching of a couple by a mob at Qasur allegedly on flimsy pretext of blasphemy represent just the tip of the iceberg. Lately, under NAP government has issued instructions against any misuse of loudspeaker to spread hate, banned wall chalking etc. This policy must be pursued in earnest with all Seminaries and Mosques closely watched and kept on tight leash by the state. The long overdue Madressahcurriculum, dissemination of hate literature and other reading material also needs to be guarded against.

●Clamping down Sectarian Outfits

Under the much touted NAP, the government has taken action against violent sectarian outfits involved in anti-*Shia* campaigns; some prominent and dreaded leaders like *Malik Ishaq* who on numerous occasions were set free by the judicial courts for lack of prosecution or evidence have too been mercifully eliminated. However, the external and internal sources of funding of these groups also need to be plugged permanently. Many Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia are involved in financing these groups through private and official channels as part of agenda on their proxy war. This is no secret. The proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran fought since 80s with Pakistan as its locus has now shifted to Syria, Iraq and Libya. Pakistan still remains important as a large *Sunni* majority nuclear state with a formidable military and therefore all efforts are needed to clamp down on

South Asian Studies 31 (1)

sources of funding. Remaining embroiled in internal security will atrophy power potential of Pakistan.

Political Patronage

It is no secret that many mainstream political parties in the country have provided open patronage to sectarian and extremist outfits seeking favours in local or general elections. This largely holds true for Punjab where Malik Ishaq of *LeJ* was presumed had reached a tacit understanding not to target *Shias* in return for a safe haven in the province. The state must identify, single out and take all possible measures against such parties colluding with the enemy. In the same context, student unions in several public sector Universities have now become a virtual extension of militant and sectarian wings of country's political parties. The Universities must be purged of all such groups along with a country wide campaign undertaken to de-weaponise academic institutes.

●Muharram

Apart from routine security measures which have continued to increase over the years amidst equally sophisticated attacks on *Ashura* processions, some strong punitive message and wide publicity both, against enflaming sentiments and sanctity of Muharram must go out at national level side by side. In this regard, key political leadership of the country besides religious scholars must appear on media and underscore significance of Muharram. Shutting down mobile phone services in parts or across Pakistan shows just how weak and fragile our internal security apparatus has become. Despite the presence of over 2 million pilgrims in Saudi Arabia each year, the services are never shut down.

●More seat allocation for Iranian personnel in Armed forces institutes of learning

All military academic institutes must increase seats for Iranian military. This should be backed by bilateral exchange programmes and joint seminars.

Revamping External Policies

●Overall review of policy on Iran

This must include balancing diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions of relations *viz-a-viz* Iran and Saudi Arabia. The oil prices in international market have now dropped to a record low in recent history. Saudi Arabia has been the principal oil supplier to Pakistan. The oil imports from Saudi Arabia must now be complemented with oil shipments from Iran. This diversity will ensure energy security for the foreseeable future and restore balance in relations. It needs no

reminding that in line with its national interest; UAE recently reached a multibillion dollar trade agreement and also signed a defence partnership pact with India. This came through during PM Modi's recent visit to UAE, the first by any Indian PM in several decades. Both India and UAE have rarely spoken in international forums about Kashmir issue to favour Pakistan. Why then should Pakistan continue with a policy which undermines its internal security and creates gulf with other countries in the region?

● **The Saudi Alliance**

No matter what, Pakistan must not repeat the *faux pas* of joining the recently announced Saudi alliance. It clearly strikes at the roots of Muslim world. The grouping will widen the gulf between Muslims and deepen sectarian fissures. For Pakistan, the cost of previous US and Saudi Arabia backed alliance to raise Mujahideen against Russia in the 80s and subsequent support to regressive Wahabi Taliban regime in Kabul through the 90s has been too monumental. History must not be allowed to repeat for consequence could be devastating for Pakistan already reeling from countless internal and external problems.

● **Pursuing IP gas pipeline with greater vigour**

The hitherto lukewarm drive to complete Iran Pakistan gas pipeline must be rejuvenated. Reportedly while Iran has already laid its portion of the pipeline, Pakistan side has been wanting. The project must be expedited.

● **Expanding Collaboration between think tanks**

Key think tanks and research institutes in Pakistan including IPRI, SASSI, ISSet could sign MoUs with Iranian think tanks for research in areas of common interest.

● **Bilateral /trilateral naval manoeuvres with Iranian Navy (and if possible Saudi Navy)**

Pakistan navy currently conducts a joint exercise with Royal Saudi Arabian navy on regular basis. Possibility of increasing military to military contacts and conduct of naval exercises with Iran could be explored.

● **Exploring avenues for increased bilateral trade**

The bilateral trade between Iran and Pakistan is insignificant. All possible avenues must be examined to increase the current levels of trade.

●Cooperation and not contest- Gwadar and Chabahar

A sense of competition between Gwadar and Chabahar must not be allowed to surface. Iran must be made part of CPEC. Both China and Iran are willing. The decision now rests with Islamabad. In case Pakistan fails to take Iran onboard, the real beneficiary will be India.

Conclusion

The nuclear deal Iran signed with six world powers in July has now been approved by the country's ultimate constitutional authority, the *Guardian's Council*. It sets the stage for lifting of all nuclear-related economic sanctions imposed on Iran. The journey to the deal was never easy or trouble free and in the *Guardians Council* it was a hard-won victory for President Rouhani government (*Business Recorder*, 2015). But in the final analysis the accord is likely to change the regional balance of power in the Middle East. It will bring about a major shift in Middle East and South Asian geopolitics.

Iran is more tempting for big international oil firms. As studies indicate the cost of developing a field in Canada or the U.S. can range from \$59 to \$114 a barrel, the expense in Iran does not exceed \$31. (*Iran is more tempting for big oil firms*, 2015). Major readjustments and realignments in national policies are underway in the region reckoning ongoing geo-political developments. The Iran nuclear agreement will have far reaching consequences for Pakistan. It brings in its wake a host of challenges and opportunities. Much however depends on how Iran manages its policy in Middle East and South Asia. A balancing non-partisan diplomatic act by Islamabad to redefine relations with Riyadh and Tehran is need of the hour. Pakistan needs urgent and utmost stability to surmount plethora of challenges, some existential. The diplomatic course Pakistan takes now will define if Pakistan stands to profit or lose as a consequence of the nuclear agreement (Basit, 2015). The long drawn externally sponsored sectarian war fought on Pakistan soil must now end in earnest. The regional developments require Pakistan to come up with an adept foreign policy. Such a policy must be based on consensual approach between the political and military establishments. A failure will only be at Pakistan's peril and a distinct advantage for India.

References

- Aftab, Y. (December 22, 2015). Saudi Arabia's alliance of 34. *Pakistan Today*.
Ahmad, M. (September 7, 2015). The day Pakistan changed. *Daily Times*.
Ali, S. M. (August 7, 2015). Rethinking Pak Saudi relations. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://tribune.com.pk/story/933526/rethinking-pak-saudi-relations/>
Basit, A. (July 25, 2015). Implications of the deal. *The News*. Retrieved from <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-9-330549-Implications-of-the-deal>

- Black, I. (November 24, 2013). Iran nuclear deal: Saudi Arabia and Gulf react with caution. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/24/iran-nuclear-deal-middle-east-reaction-saudi-arabia>
- Board, W. J. & Pecanha, S. (July 14, 2015). The Iran nuclear deal- A simple guide. *The Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/the-iran-deal/the-iran-agreement-fe48e81e5ffe>
- Cheers and Jeers greet Iran nuclear deal. (July 15, 2015). *Al-Jazeera News*. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/mixed-reactions-historic-iran-nuclear-deal-150714162542420.html>
- Chubin, S. & Zabih, S. (1974). Foreign relations of Iran. *University of California*, Berkeley.
- Chubin, S. (2006). Iran's nuclear ambitions. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Washington D.C.
- Editorial. (July 29, 2015). *The News*.
- Editorial. (October 18, 2015). *Business Recorder*.
- Elass, R. (July 14, 2015). A road map for Middle East after Iran nuclear deal. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/jul/14/arab-states-react-iran-nuclear-deal>
- Escobar, P. (July 16, 2015). Historic Iran nuke deal resets Eurasia's Great Game. *Daily Times*
- Feiveson, H. A., Glaser, A. & Mina, Z. (2014). *Unmaking the bomb*. London: The MIT Press.
- Gerges, F. A. (2014). *The new Middle East, protest and revolution in the Arab World*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Gold, D. (2009). *The Rise of Nuclear Iran: How Tehran defies the West*. Washington D.C: Regnery Publishing Inc.
- Hali, S. M. (October 21, 2014). Strains in Pak-Iran relations. *Daily Times*.
- Herzog, Michael. (July 24, 2015). Israel confronts the Iran nuclear deal. *Policy Analysis: The Washington Institute*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israel-confronts-the-iran-nuclear-deal>
- Hoodbhoy, P. (January 23, 2012). The bomb: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran. *The Express Tribune*.
- Iran is more tempting for big oil firms. (October 18, 2015). *Dawn*.
- Iran's key nuclear sites. (July 14, 2015). *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11927720>
- Iran's Nuclear Program. (2006, April 28). *The Guardian*.
- Khan, S. (2010). *Iran and nuclear weapons, protracted conflict and proliferation*. New York, NY: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Khattak, T. M. (July 22, 2015). After the Iran nuclear deal. *The News*.
- Kinzer, S. (2011). *Reset Middle East: Old friends and new alliances*. London: I.B Tauris.
- Kissinger, H. (October 18, 2015). A path out of the Middle East collapse. *Daily Times*.
- Maltz, J. (August 12, 2015). Polls show Israelis strongly oppose Iran nuclear deal. *Haaretz*. Retrieved from <http://www.haaretz.com/news/israel/premium-1.670835>
- Nasr, V. & Takeyh, R. (January/February 2008). The cost of containing Iran: Washington's misguided new Middle East policy. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2008-01-01/costs-containing-iran>
- NTI: Building a safer world. Retrieved from <http://www.nti.org/facilities/177/>
- Qureshi, S. (September 19, 2015). Iran can be an asset for the United States. *Pakistan Today*.
- Rafiq, A. (August 19, 2015). Iran and Pakistan: Back to Business. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/iran-and-pakistan-back-to-business/>
- Siddiq, A. (November 26, 2014). Pakistan-Iran relations. *The Express Tribune*.
- Sokolowski, H. D. (Ed.). (2008). Pakistan's nuclear future: Worries beyond war. *Strategic Studies Institute*. Retrieved from http://npolicy.org/books/Pakistans_Nuclear_Worries/Full_Book.pdf

South Asian Studies 31 (1)

- Spector, L. S. & Smith, J. R. (1990). *Nuclear ambitions: The spread of nuclear weapons, 1989–1990*. Oxford: Westview Press.
- The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research. (2006).
- The International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2009). *The military balance*. Oxon: Taylor and Francis Group.
- The new sectarianism: The Arab uprisings and the rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni divide. (2013). Analysis paper. *The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*.
- US Congress split over Iran nuclear deal. (July 15, 2015). *Euro News*. Retrieved from <http://www.euronews.com/2015/07/15/us-congress-split-over-iran-nuclear-deal/>
- Why Saudi Arabia and Israel oppose Iran nuclear deal. (2015, April 14). *Al Jazeera News*. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/saudi-arabia-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal-150401061906177.html>

Biographical Note

Prof. Dr. Iram Khalid Department of Political Science University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Aiysha Safdar is a doctoral student at University of the Punjab Lahore. She is currently working as Research Fellow at Pakistan Navy War College Lahore, Pakistan.
