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Title: India as a Factor in Pakistan-Iran Relations in the 21st Century

Abstract

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Keywords: Pakistan-Iran Relations, India-Iran Strategic Partnership, Chabahar Port, Regional Connectivity, Geopolitical Competition, Energy Security, South Asian Politics

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India as a Factor in Pakistan-Iran Relations in the 21st Century



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Abstract

In a 21st-century scenario, the Pakistan-Iran equation is becoming more and more influenced by the regional and global dynamics, and India is an important strategic partner. The study discusses the evolving Indian relations with Iran with a particular emphasis on geopolitical competition, energy security, economic cooperation, and regional integration. The Indian involvement in the Chabahar Port project and its broader geopolitical drive in Afghanistan and Central Asia is covered in detail. It examines Pakistan's perception of India's rising influence in Iran and its impact on the bilateral relations and regional security between Iran and Pakistan. It also underscores Iran's policy of balancing the defence of national interests with maintaining good relations with two South Asian competitors.

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Keywords: *Pakistan-Iran Relations, India-Iran Strategic Partnership, Chabahar Port, Regional Connectivity, Geopolitical Competition, Energy Security, South Asian Politics*

Introduction

In this regard, the rise of India as a 21st-century regional and global power has had a direct effect on Pakistan-Iran relations. India's growing economic power, military strength, and strategic push into the Middle East and Central Asia have reshaped the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. India's increasing interaction with Iran is attributed primarily to the issues of energy security, regional connectivity, and the desire to counter Pakistan in the region. India's investments in the Iranian port of Chabahar and its participation in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) are indicative of New Delhi's interest in accessing Afghanistan and Central Asian countries without having to travel through Pakistan (Pethiyagoda, 2018).

Pakistan has also vocally voiced strategic worries regarding India's growing ties with Iran. Once, Pakistan and Iran had friendly relations due to their shared culture and religion, but later came into conflict over developments in Afghanistan and the shifting dynamics of regional alliances. Analysts point out that India limited Pakistan's regional clout by using its strengthening ties with Iran to increase its political and economic clout in Afghanistan. The Chabahar port project attracted a lot of attention as a strategic alternative to the Chinese-built Gwadar Port, part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This, in turn, introduced an element of competition in the Pak-Iran relations and increased regional influence and connectivity mistrust between the two (Bhatnagar, 2018).

At the same time, Iran's larger strategic considerations were impacted by India's ascent to prominence in the area. India's energy sector was large, and it was a key trading partner of Iran, as the country had a significant worldwide influence. In spite of the tough sanctions imposed by the UN on Tehran, India had maintained diplomatic relations with Iran and was looking to develop joint projects in the fields of economy, energy, and infrastructure. Iran was able to diversify its international alliances and lessen its dependence



on any one regional player due to this practical relationship. Iran also tried to maintain a balance in its relationship with Pakistan as a result of their geographical closeness, common interests, and concerns of border security in Afghanistan. Thus, Iran's twenty-first-century policy towards South Asia has often involved a balancing act between Pakistan and India without being “pro-Pakistani” or “pro-Indian.” (Sohail & Iqbal, [2017](#)).

In short, the twenty-first-century relations between Pakistan and Iran are greatly influenced by the increasing regional weight of India. The economic growth, the development of strategic connectivity plans, and the enhancement of diplomatic efforts have made India more important in Iranian foreign policy. Meanwhile, Pakistan became concerned about the 'enclosure' by its neighbours and competition. The triangle of Pakistan, Iran, and India is a representation of the region's emerging geopolitical interdependency in the Middle East and South Asian context. While Pakistan and Iran remain actively engaged in various areas of cooperation, such as border control and regional security, India's rise in importance still plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of Pak-Iran relations in contemporary geopolitics (Hashmi, [2021](#)).

In the broader context, India-Iran strategic cooperation for the 21st century is a pragmatic collaboration driven by regional geopolitics and common strategic interests. Both countries emphasised the importance of cooperation in trade, connectivity, counterterrorism, and stability in the region of Afghanistan and Central Asia. Occasionally, however, the relationship was hindered by difficulties, including US sanctions, India's ties with Israel and the United States, and instability in the region. Still, it remained strategically relevant for both countries. The changing dynamics of the partnership illustrate how India and Iran have been trying to adjust to the 21st century's multipolar world by building strategic autonomy and working towards mutually beneficial regional cooperation (Jagtiani, [2024](#)).

Research Questions

Q:1 How does the rising engagement of India with Iran affect bilateral relations between Pakistan and Iran in the 21st century?

Q:2 What is the strategic concern involved in India's involvement with Iran, the Chabahar Port project being one of them?

Research Methodology

The researcher adopts a qualitative method in order to study the role of India in the 21st century in Pakistan-Iran relations. The bulk of the research is secondary sources (books, scholarly journal articles, policy papers, official reports, and reliable news assessments). The interpretation of geopolitical changes in the region is done descriptively and analytically, and the topics discussed include diplomacy, cooperation in the economy, energy politics, and competition in strategic sectors. To find trends in how India's interactions with Iran affect Pakistan-Iran ties, content analysis is used. The study also uses a comparative method to consider the policies and goals of Pakistan, Iran, and India in the greater context of the region of South Asia and the Middle East.

Literature Review

“*India and Asian Geopolitics*” ([2021](#)) by Shivshankar Menon will explore the evolving geopolitical role of India in Asia. He traces Indian foreign policy from Independence to the Indo-Pacific, drawing on his diplomatic experience. Asia's rise to prominence as the world's geopolitical power centre is highlighted in the book. It links to broader developments in the region and the changing dynamics of power in India. A prominent issue of concern is the changing dynamics of India-China relations that are both cooperative and competitive in nature. Among other topics, Menon examines major world events such as the Cold War, globalisation, and the rise of China. He believes that India's foreign policy has a strategic autonomy as they adjust to change. The book also includes Indian relations with the USA, Russia, Japan, and others. Menon sees India as a country on the rise, capable of establishing a pluralistic, stable Asian order. He comes to the

conclusion that controlling geopolitical issues and actively participating in the area are critical to India's future (Menon, [2021](#)).

Raza Ali Khan's book "*Living on the Edge: Pakistan-Iran Relations, Challenges & Prospects*" provides a comprehensive analysis of the Pakistan-Iran bilateral relations. From 1947 to the present, the book charts the historical development of connections. It highlights the impact of the Iranian Revolution on the region in 1979 and the early support of Pakistan by Iran. Despite the close cultural and religious ties, the author argues that competitive and geopolitical dynamics remain relevant in relation to relationships. Important areas of collaboration are trade, energy security, border management, and diplomatic engagement. Sectarian disputes, Afghanistan's instability, and outside influences from regional and international forces are the main causes of tensions. The security concerns are related to the common border and the strategic importance of Balochistan. The book also explores prospects for economic integration via such commitments as the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. Khan reiterates mutual interests in economic development, counterterrorism, and stability in the region. He concludes that maintaining communication and collaboration is crucial to improving ties between Pakistan and Iran (Khan, [2020](#)).

Pakistan's long-lasting impact on Indian foreign policy is examined in Raja Qaiser Ahmed's "*Pakistan Factor and the Competing Perspectives in India: Party Centric View*". The book argues that Pakistan remains a key player in the regional dynamics and security of India, even in the face of political changes in Pakistan. It traces the growth and implications of Hindu and Indian nationalism and its impact on the policy of Pakistan. His research interests include the impact of nationalist myths, elections, and domestic politics on foreign policy decisions. The book demonstrates that Pakistan continues to be a key concern for India's policy community. Ahmed concludes that although strategies could alter, India's foreign policy stance is always influenced by the "Pakistan factor" (Ahmed, [2022](#)).

The book "*India's Foreign Policy*" by J.N. Dixit describes how India's external relations are made, drawing on his experience as a senior diplomat. It covers Foreign policy from Independence onwards, with special focus on Nehruvian ideals of strategic autonomy and non-alignment. Dixit explores and examines India's relationship with its powerful neighbours, China, Russia, and the United States. The study covers the impact of regional wars and the shift in global power on India's goals. The author contends that a combination of idealism and practical security considerations may be seen in India's policies. Dixit also examines the processes of making decisions in the formulation of foreign policy and constraints in policy-making institutions. Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to the study of India's strategic practice and relations with the outside world (Dixit, [2001](#)).

"*India's Near East: A New History*" by Avinash Paliwal is a comprehensive study of India's relations with Afghanistan and West Asia. The book poses challenges to the conventional wisdom about India's long-standing regional interests. It charts India's engagement in Afghanistan, ranging from the Cold War to post-9/11. Paliwal says diplomatic, development, and intelligence cooperation are among the instruments. One of the main points of contention is that India's strategy is influenced by both regional influence aspirations and security requirements. It also examines India's strategy to keep the balance between the US, the Gulf, and Iran. The author shows the importance of intelligence services and unofficial networks in the implementation of policies. Geography and historical memory are said to be key determinants of India's strategic outlook. The research concludes that India will become more influential in the Near East in the face of growing competition and connectivity aspirations in the region (Paliwal, [2020](#)).

In his 2020 book "*The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*," Jaishankar advocates for a practitioner-centric approach to India's foreign policy. The author argues that the world system is marked by increasing geopolitical competition, power dispersion, and uncertainty. He points to the need for India to pursue a pragmatic pathway, instead of idealism. Inevitably, strategic autonomy, meaning India's ability to engage with other power centres without tying up into tighter alliances, is a recurring theme in the book. Jaishankar examines India's engagements with the geopolitically important nations such as China, Russia, and the United States. Moreover, he notes the importance of regional security and neighbourhood policy in India's foreign policy objectives. Some of the key issues discussed in the book are the rise of China, Pakistan's animosity, and the changing global alignments. It highlights the growing importance of connecting, technology, and economic power in foreign policy. The writer calls for India to be active and

proactive in international affairs. All things considered, the book provides a strategic guide for India's behaviour in a world system that is becoming more complicated (Jaishankar, [2020](#)).

Historical Background

At the time of the establishment of Pakistan, Iran was the first country to recognise Pakistan and build good relations with it. Due in great part to common strategic goals during the Cold War, relations remained cordial and constructive during the early decades (1947–1979). Both countries signed security pacts, such as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), and took positions in the Western bloc. During Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime, Iran extended military and economic assistance to Pakistan, even during the Indo-Pak war in 1965. But following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and other regional events, especially the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the relationship started to change. There was a lack of trust and competition due to conflicting ideological positions, e.g., Pakistan's support of Sunni state governments in the Gulf and revolutionary Shi'a Iran. The issue of bilateral relations was further complicated by Afghanistan becoming an important battleground state in which both countries had conflicting geopolitical interests (Tariq, et al., [2018](#)).

But India-Iran relations gradually turned positive post-1979, partly due to common concerns over Afghanistan and connectivity in the region. India sought to strategically and geographically isolate Pakistan by leveraging the backdoor of Iran for Afghanistan and Central Asia. With Tehran continuing to maintain its link with Islamabad, it also enhanced its relationship with New Delhi, thus introducing competition in Pakistan-Iran relations. This created a balancing element, which often restricted the scope of Pakistan-Iran collaboration in India (Sohail & Iqbal, [2017](#)). The overall picture of the history of Pakistan-Iran relations before the dawn of the twenty-first century reveals a dynamic shift from a strategic partnership to a more complex, sometimes competitive relationship. Their shared geography, history, and culture helped promote cooperation, but shifting geopolitical circumstances, most notably the influence of India and the developments in Afghanistan, played a key role in the transformation of these bilateral relationships.

Early Diplomatic ties of Pak-Iran

Iran had cultural and religious kinship, cooperation, and goodwill. Politically, Iran demonstrated strong support for Pakistan's sovereignty and international legitimacy by being one of the first countries to recognise the fledgling Muslim state in August 1947. The Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, viewed Pakistan as one of the important Muslim neighbours, whose stability was essential for cooperation and security in the region. This early recognition also helped to establish good relations between the two countries, to the extent of expressing their common ideals of strengthening unity among Muslim countries in the post-colonial world (Raza, [2018](#)).

Before the formation of Pakistan, there were historical and cultural linkages between the two states that greatly affected their relationship. The Persian language, literature, and customs had an impact on the intellectual and cultural life of the Indian subcontinent for centuries, especially during the Mughal Empire. In addition to being a neighbour, Pakistani officials saw Iran as a civilizational ally with whom they shared cultural and religious ties. The two countries opened diplomatic missions, expanded trade and cultural relations, and soon after independence, both countries shared the same common historical experiences. In 1949, Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, visited Iran and significantly strengthened the relations between the two countries, paving the way for political and commercial cooperation (Qadir et al., [2022](#)).

The Cold War was an important factor in Pakistan-Iran relations from 1947 to 1958. Both countries supported the Western bloc, led by the USA, as they perceived the threat of the USSR's increasing power to be a serious threat to regional security. Their strategic partnership was expanded when both countries became members of the Baghdad Pact in 1955, sponsored by the United States. As a keystone of Pakistan-Iran defence cooperation, the partnership aimed at curbing the Soviets' Middle East and South Asian development. The United States gave both countries economic and military assistance in signing security pacts backed by the West, cementing their diplomatic ties. Pakistan and Iran maintained their close strategic

cooperation within the Baghdad Pact, which later changed into the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) following the 1958 Iraqi revolution (Marwat, [2023](#)).

Indian Factor in Early Pak-Iran Relations

Pakistan's 1947 independence had a significant impact on the early relations between Iran and Pakistan. Although the two Muslim nations were originally friendly to each other in religious, cultural, and strategic terms during the Cold War, India constantly influenced the very nature and trajectory of their interaction. Pakistan-Iran relations were among the most important relations in the early years of Pakistan's existence, not only because of their proximity in the region, but also because of Pakistan's role as an important ally in combating Soviet expansionism and regional turmoil. But, because of its civilizational history, economic needs, and geopolitical concerns, Iran also tried to maintain a balance in its relations with India. The triangular relationship between Pakistan, Iran, and India came into existence and started influencing the affairs of the region of the Middle East and South Asia (Sohail & Iqbal, [2017](#)).

The Kashmir issue was one of the first cases where the Indian influence was seen in Iran-Pakistan relations. Iran, in contrast, responded very mildly to the Kashmir issue and did not bring up any expectations of Pakistan for Islamic sympathy. Iran generally remained neutral in the direct conflict over Kashmir, but it did support Pakistan's side on the issue from time to time. The surprise Pakistani leaders felt from Iran's circumspect diplomacy was that they expected a clear stance from another Muslim country. Iran was reluctant because it wanted to keep diplomatic and economic ties with India, which it considered to be a significant Asian nation. So ultimately, Pakistan realised that the foreign policy of Iran wasn't going to be defined only by religion. Instead, Iran pursued an altruistic policy, weighing regional power balances and national interests. This early split was a reflection of India's blocking of the development of a fully coordinated Iran-Pakistan cooperation (Bilgrami, [2018](#)).

Strategic and economic considerations also played a part in Iran's balancing acts between India and Pakistan. Iran's trade and diplomacy were attracted towards India due to its large market, strategic location, and regional importance. Iran recognised India as a key regional power that could be helpful in politics and economics. This led to Tehran having close ties with Islamabad and cultivating good relations with New Delhi. But Pakistan didn't want to be cut off from the rest of the region diplomatically and was often suspicious of growing Indo-Iranian ties. Every time Iran seemed impartial amid Indo-Pakistani hostilities, these worries grew. The result was a pattern that gave Iran more strategic flexibility and regional balance, while Pakistan felt it would get more support from Iran, due to a common religion and alliance (Dawar, [2025](#)).

Another of the Indian factors was the geopolitical position of Afghanistan. While their interests were sometimes at odds with those of Pakistan, Iran, and India were also involved in the political changes in Afghanistan. During the early decades post-Independence, Pakistan had a partial vision of Afghanistan through the lens of India's influence, due to its fear of the hostile neighbours. Iran, on the other hand, followed an autonomous Afghan strategy and occasionally came to an agreement with India over regional stability. This further fueled Pakistan's suspicion that India might be seeking to reduce the strategic depth of Pakistan in the region by exploiting Pakistan's neighbours, Afghanistan and Iran. Although the roots of these dynamics can be dated back to the early years of Iran-Pakistan relations, when regional rivalries and alignments began to take shape, it became more prominent in later decades (Imran & Bhatti, [2020](#)).

Pak-Iran Relations in the 21st Century

With the arrival of the twenty-first century, the relationship between Pakistan and Iran has remained intricate with the presence of collaboration and competition, triggered by external factors, security threats, and regional geopolitics. Although both countries have a long border and a long history of goodwill and religious connections, bilateral relations have often been up and down. The early 2000s saw cooperation largely driven by mutual priorities of economic growth in trade, security of the borders, and cooperation in energy, particularly in relation to the proposed Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. However, there were also growing disparities during this period due to the imposition of international sanctions on Iran, Pakistan's

backing of the Western counterterrorism policies after 9/11, and the shifting of the regional alliances. This led to relatively consistent diplomatic ties, albeit on various occasions where cooperation was hindered and delayed (Anwar, Taimoor & Mustafa [2025](#)).

Energy and economic cooperation became important but severely limited aspects of the partnership in the 2010s and beyond. The Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, also known as the “Peace Pipeline,” was a major economic opportunity for both nations, but has been stalled due to financing difficulties and pressure from the United States on Iran for sanctions. The other problems that affected the relationship were security concerns on the border, particularly in Balochistan and Sistan-Balochistan, where the two governments blamed each other for not being able to control the movements of insurgents. Both sides continued to try to expand border markets and electricity exchange; however, trade was limited when compared to potential. These dynamics reveal a pattern of “managed mistrust,” in which collaboration is there but is constantly influenced by outside factors and geopolitical limitations (Ebrahim, [2024](#)).

It is in recent times that the competition to gain regional access for Afghanistan, China, and India has had more impact on Iran-Pakistan relations. India's involvement with Iran's Chabahar Port has added a new strategic dimension to India's policy on Iran, giving an alternative trade path to New Delhi, which bypasses Pakistan and has an indirect impact on the economic geography between Iran and Pakistan. The aspirations of Pakistan for connectivity have been strengthened by the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), both of which have resulted in the overlapping regional corridors. Iran has tried its best to diversify its economy and strike a balance with Pakistan and India. Overall, the relationship in the twenty-first century remains viable but cautious, and bilateral relations are continually influenced by regional rivalries, energy and economic interests, and opportunities (Jamal, [2024](#)).

India-Iran Strategic Convergence in the 21st Century

India and Iran had a great strategic convergence in the twenty-first century, related to common geopolitical, economic, and security goals. Both countries have a historical and cultural link, but after the Cold War, the changing dynamics of the region compelled both countries to cooperate more closely. India viewed Iran as an important economic partner and an emerging power, and Iran viewed India as a gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the rest of the Middle East. The convergence was largely driven by the interest of the two sides in regional connectivity, energy security, and balancing competing regional powers, analysts said. Deeper economic and diplomatic integration was facilitated in the new century due to Iran's “Look East” policy and India's “Look West” policy (Bishoni & Sakshi, [2022](#)).

One of the most notable aspects of Iran's strategic rapprochement with India has been cooperation in trade and connectivity. India heavily invested in building the Chabahar port in southeast Iran, bypassing Pakistan, to provide direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. This project further strengthens the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), designed to facilitate the flow of trade between India, Iran, Russia, and the countries of Eurasia. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the growing presence of Chinese in Pakistan's Gwadar Port, scholars noted, made the Chabahar initiative significant for India strategically. During times of international sanctions, Iran's partnership with India enhanced its regional economic role and decreased its reliance on a small number of commercial partners (Singh, [2019](#)).

The India-Iran strategic relationship has continued to be interlinked with energy cooperation in the twenty-first century. India is one of the world's fastest-growing energy consumers, and Iran has some of the largest natural gas and oil reserves. In order to guarantee a steady energy supply for its growing economy, India looked for long-term energy cooperation with Tehran. Despite the pressure from the US and UN sanctions on Iran, India tried to maintain a balanced relationship with Tehran, while safeguarding its larger strategic interests. But at times, the scope of India's cooperation with Iran was hindered by the U.S. sanctions and the strengthening of strategic ties between the U.S. and India, particularly in the financial and energy sectors. Though under pressure, diplomatic relations between the two countries continued, and they explored the possibility of continuing economic cooperation (Pethiyagoda, [2018](#)).

In the broader context, India-Iran strategic cooperation for the 21st century is a pragmatic collaboration driven by regional geopolitics and common strategic interests. Both countries emphasised the importance of cooperation in trade, connectivity, counterterrorism, and stability in the region of Afghanistan and Central Asia. Occasionally, however, the relationship was hindered by difficulties, including US sanctions, India's ties with Israel and the United States, and instability in the region. Still, it remained strategically relevant for both countries. The changing dynamics of the partnership illustrate how India and Iran have been trying to adjust to the 21st century's multipolar world by building strategic autonomy and working towards mutually beneficial regional cooperation (Jagtiani, [2024](#)).

Chabahar Port vs Gwadar Port, Geo-economic Rivalry

The geoeconomic competition between the port of Gwadar (in Pakistan) and the port of Chabahar (in Iran) is one of the greatest in the South Asian and Indian Ocean region. The two ports are separated by only 170 kilometres from the Arabian Sea, but they are backed by two rival regional powers with competing geopolitical interests. China is investing heavily in a project dubbed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in Gwadar Port. Chabahar Port is being developed by Iran with strong Indian support, as part of India's overall connectivity policy towards Afghanistan and Central Asia. Both ports aspire to become key trading and transit ports between Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and other regions. The ports are, in fact, an expression of the growing strategic competition between China and India over dominance in terms of connectivity and economic power in the region (Khetran, [2019](#)).

Gwadar and Chabahar are geoeconomically competing for supremacy in the region, trade routes, and energy corridors. Gwadar reduces China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca for energy transportation and provides direct access to the Arabian Sea. Moreover, it enhances the strategic importance of Pakistan in the regional trade. However, Chabahar provides India with a different path to Afghanistan and Central Asia that doesn't go via Pakistani territory. India is hoping to boost its economic and political influence in Eurasia without going through Pakistan via Chabahar (Bibi & Muzaffar, 2025). The port has the potential to make Iran a transit hub between other regions, which is beneficial for Iran. This competition is not only economic, but also closely connected with other larger geopolitical competitions like China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and even the competition with the United States. Analysts often describe the two ports as "sister ports," but due to geopolitical tensions, they have entered the strategic competition mode instead of the collaboration mode (Omidi, 2023).

Chabahar is considered India's strategic check to China in Gwadar. Investment in Chabahar enables India to reduce the influence of Islamabad over the South Asian trade routes by providing an alternative route without passing through Pakistani territory. Meanwhile, Gwadar is enhancing China's geopolitical position near strategic sea choke points and is boosting its presence in the Indian Ocean region. This has led to the two ports being described by experts as part of a greater Indo-Pacific geopolitical rivalry in which infrastructure is being used to exert influence. Other countries, such as the USA, whose attitude towards Chabahar has shifted with sanctions on Iran, also influence the competition and indirectly influence India's ability to massively increase the project (Gul & Asgher, 2020).

But as competition with Gwadar grows, some experts believe that Chabahar could operate as a complementary port in a more cooperative regional arrangement. In principle, both can work together on enhancing connectivity in the Arabian Sea and the Central Asia region by dividing the trade routes and lowering transport costs. But in reality, these ports have become an icon of strategic rivalry between India, China, Pakistan, and Iran. Today, Gwadar and Chabahar are not only economic infrastructure but instruments of regional power projection as well, thus reflecting the growing influence of geoeconomics in the regional political and strategic landscape (Sarwary, [2025](#)).

Afghanistan as a Geopolitical Linkage

Because of its very important position as a connection between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Afghanistan is an important point of intersection of Pakistan, Iran, and India. It has considerable

geopolitical importance in the power play of the region because of its location and the country's historical ties with all three countries. Iran is proud of its cultural and economic ties with western Afghanistan. India considers Afghanistan to be a gateway to Central Asia and a way of extending its influence in the region, and Pakistan considers Afghanistan to be a vital part of its border security and strategic depth. This makes Afghanistan of great importance to the competing geopolitical interests of each of the three states (Imran & Bhatti, [2020](#)).

Economically, Afghanistan is an important transit centre to connect infrastructural facilities and regional trade corridors. Historically, Pakistan has been Afghanistan's main trade route and land route, but the tensions have compelled Afghanistan and India to utilise the Chabahar Port in Iran as a trade route. This shift will be a plus to Iran's trade links in the region and a minus to Pakistan's transit advantage. The rivalry between Chabahar and Gwadar ports is very significant in the context of Afghanistan's role in a bigger geoeconomic competition with Pakistan, India, and Iran (Khan & Jabeen, [2025](#)).

Security and strategic factors add to the importance of Afghanistan. India is investing in infrastructure and economic projects to expand its footprint and promote stability in the region, while Pakistan is looking for influence in Afghanistan to prevent it from falling under India's hostile influence. Iran maintains political, economic, and cultural ties with Afghan groups. Since the Taliban's return in 2021, these dynamics have become more complex, with all three countries adapting their policies to protect their interests in an evolving regional geopolitical environment (Raipeha, [2013](#)).

Overall, Afghanistan is a strategic crossroads between India and Pakistan and between India and Iran, both in terms of trade and geography and of security concerns. Its strategic position makes it a competitive area for its surrounding countries, as well as being vital for regional trade and links to the markets of the Central Asian countries. India is seeking linkage and balance against other competing powers, Pakistan is looking for strategic influence, and Iran is looking for regional integration. This has meant that Afghanistan remains a factor in South and Central Asia's broader geopolitics (Rahmani, [2024](#)).

Energy Politics and Economic Interdependence

In terms of Iran's energy politics with Pakistan and India, Iran's huge natural gas reserves, regional energy insecurity, and constraints of international sanctions all have a significant role to play. Iran has some of the world's biggest confirmed natural gas reserves, particularly in South Pars. It has long tried to take advantage of this energy advantage by exporting pipelines to its neighbours who don't have it. Due to the constant shortage of gas supplies, expansion of industries, and fast-rising energy demands, Iranian gas has emerged as an attractive option for India and Pakistan. However, energy politics here are never purely economic, but part of an array of geopolitical dynamics, including the power of the United States, shifting sanctions against Iran, and more general Middle East and South Asian relations (Bukhari & Khan, [2026](#)).

The Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline project, which has been blocked for a long time, is the most notable example of Iran-Pakistan energy relations. The scheme aimed to supply natural gas from Iran to Pakistan to ease the current fuel and electricity supply woes in the country. The project provided industrial stability, reduced dependence on expensive imports of LNG, and energy security for the country of Pakistan. In the face of sanctions, it was an important export market for Iran. But, despite the many agreements, the project has always been stalled due to funding problems, technical challenges, and, crucially, the risk of U.S. sanctions against Iran that prevent foreign investment and infrastructure development. This is why energy interdependence remains potential and not real, due to which Iran's export potential is yet to be realised, and Pakistan is still suffering from an energy crisis (Ali, [2022](#)).

Initially focused on the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline, energy politics between Iran and India have taken a more complicated turn. India desired to diversify its sources of energy, and its rising energy requirement propelled its participation. But New Delhi has backed out of the pipeline project due to strategic considerations, such as sanctions against Iran, concerns about the pipeline running through Pakistan, and India's growing relations with the United States. Rather, India has looked for other ways to interact with Iran, most notably by investing in the Chabahar Port, which gives India access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without going through Pakistan. This is a shift from a direct to a more holistic geopolitical-

economic linkage, with trade facilitation and strategic connectedness taking the place of energy cooperation (Sultan, [2024](#)).

Despite the hurdles in the pipeline diplomacy, Iran-Pakistan-India energy politics have demonstrated the role of geopolitics that constricts natural interdependence and that of geography and economics that propels it. In all three cases, Iran satisfies the needs of South Asia, which is a significant provider of energy to the region, but the interdependence hasn't fully been realised because of political mistrust, sanctions policies, and conflicting alliances. This has led to a fractured energy infrastructure in the region, with Iran increasingly looking to Asian markets such as China and India, which are growing more dependent on a variety of global supplies, including LNG markets, and Pakistan remaining an energy-insecure country. This is indicative of the fact that energy politics is not only about resources but is also the product of international power structures (Naazer, [2022](#)).

Pak-Iran Border Dynamics

The Iran-Pakistan border, affected by topography, nationality, security issues, and regional geopolitics, is one of the most complex borders in South Asia and the Middle East. This border extends across an area that is largely underdeveloped and arid and inhabited by the ethnic Baloch, who have pre-national relationships with their ethnic counterparts in Iran's Sistan-Balochistan province. The border is not just a geographical border but a socio-cultural space with an economy that is interdependent, families across the border, and unregulated transborder movements. Traditionally, these have led to a less effective role of the state in its governance and to a greater degree of autonomy for tribal organisations and non-governmental networks in relation to local activities (Mehmood, [2023](#)). The border's significance from a geopolitical perspective is highlighted by its role as a key link between South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Central Asia, serving as a vital transportation and energy corridor and as a hub for regional connectivity efforts. But the same demographic and geographic elements that promote communication have also created ongoing security and governance issues for both Tehran and Islamabad (Karim, [2022](#)).

Cross-border militancy and insurgency are one of the unique challenges faced by the Iran-Pakistan border. Separatist violence in these two states is the result of the activities of the Baloch nationalist and militant groups spread across the porous frontier. Pakistan's non-compliance to stop militant groups like Jaish al-Adl from attacking Iranian security has been accused of on multiple occasions by Iran. However, the Iranian land is reportedly serving as a haven to carry out cross-border activities by anti-Pakistan rebel groups like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) (Ali, [2022](#)).

Simmering militancy, smuggling, and regional instability surrounding Afghanistan have placed border control and securitisation at the focus of the Iran-Pakistan relations in recent years. Both governments have begun the process of fencing and bartering in an attempt to gain better territorial control and to stop illegal crossings. Problems with terrorist and drug trafficking and rebel mobility are evident in the Iran-Pakistan border barrier and indicate a broader trend towards 'securitised border government'. But, the social and economic impacts of the militarisation of the border have also been felt by local Baloch communities whose traditional way of life relied on the mobility and trade across the border (Sahito, [2025](#)).

Moreover, regional geopolitical conflict has further complicated the border dynamics with the inclusion of local security issues in larger international conflicts such as China, India, and the United States, as well as the strategic significance of Gwadar Port in Pakistan and Chabahar Port in Iran. Although tensions have persisted along the border, Iran and Pakistan still do not seem to want to go to war with each other because of the economic interests they both share, the fear of regional instability, and because they know that a prolonged border war would not achieve them any significant strategic objectives. As a result, the Iran-Pakistan border is a place of negotiation, economic interdependence, and developing regional diplomacy in addition to being a site of violence and instability (Shah, [2023](#)).

Sistan-Balochistan and Balochistan Region Linkage with Iran

The Goldsmith Line, 590 miles (909 km) long, is the border between Pakistan and Iran. The Baloch people are found in border areas, and their common language, ethnicity, culture, and traditions promote social and cultural interaction and cooperation between the two countries. Strategically important and close to the border with Iran, the population of Balochistan and the population of Sistan-Balochistan in Iran have frequent contact, with the same being true of Hazara in Pakistan and Hazara in Iranian cities such as Qum. The region's importance as an energy and transportation corridor has been accentuated by common customs, projects such as gas pipelines, Gwadar Port, and oil infrastructure in Balochistan (Khan Z. A., [2012](#)).

Balochistan is the only province of Pakistan having a direct land frontier with Iran, which has a great influence on the sociocultural and socioeconomic relationship between the two countries. While there have been some problems that have resulted in tensions, miscommunication, and instability in the region, it can also have a positive impact on Pakistan-Iran relations. Despite such challenges, Balochistan is still crucial to Pakistan and Iran's efforts to integrate in the social and economic spheres. Shared religion and culture, and physical developments such as roads and railways, can enhance cross-border relations. Also, it is hoped that the planned project, such as the Hub oil refinery, will increase economic cooperation, which has recently been hampered by political differences, including the Afghanistan issue (Javaid & Jahangir, [2015](#)).

In the context of the rise of militant and insurgent groups that operate on both sides of the porous frontier of Balochistan. Iran and Pakistan blame each other for not being able to curb cross-border militancy and countering groups such as Jaish al-Adl and various Baloch separatist groups. Insurgency and foreign intervention are typically synonymous with sectarian extremism in Iran, and the terrorist attacks in Sistan-Balochistan are considered to pose a threat to the country's sovereignty. In the interim, Pakistan has complained of the presence of anti-state militants allegedly from across the border in Iranian territory. Periodically, these claims have led to military conflicts, involving cross-border strikes and security operations, as well as diplomatic issues (Mehmood, [2023](#)).

The region's current insurgency is closely tied to its grievances over economic deprivation, political marginalisation, and over-militarisation by the state. Both countries have expanded border wall-building projects, surveillance of movement, and the deployment of troops to ensure security and to contain militancy that increasingly securitises the border. These security measures have further added to tensions between the border communities and the state over the disruption of customary trade and movements (Basit, [2018](#)).

The connection between Sistan-Balochistan has become more strategic due to regional connection projects and greater geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean region. The Gwadar Port in Pakistan (Balochistan) and Chabahar Port in Iran (Sistan-Balochistan) are sometimes viewed as a sort of competitive but connected port on the sea with geopolitical implications. Gwadar is an important link of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under China's Belt and Road (BRI) initiative, and Chabahar is partially funded by India, which is a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia without involving Pakistan (Shahraki & Mirlotfi, [2024](#)). Because of these efforts, the border region is now an important area of meeting between the local ethnic and sectional dynamics and international security and economic issues, such as the West, the People's Republic of China, India, and the Gulf states.

Conclusion

To wrap it up, a common interest and a continued geopolitical context have characterised Pakistan-Iran relations in the 21st century, and they indicate a limited but practical cooperation. Although the two countries share a long border, they need cooperation and have historical, cultural, and religious ties. External factors, such as the international sanctions against Iran, changing regional alliances, and security concerns in border areas, have often restricted their bilateral relationship. Signs of deeper integration include the ongoing efforts to expand economic integration, particularly the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, though it has been delayed.

Further, with the evolving regional environment, Pakistan-Iran relations are increasingly becoming complex. External factors such as Iran's strategic cooperation with India under the auspices of the Chabahar Port project have increased, which in turn has resulted in competition and strategic reorientation. The Iran-

Pakistan relationship is now a part of a larger competition for connectivity and influence in South and West Asia as a result of Iran's balancing role between Pakistan and India and China's growing regional influence. These are just examples of how bilateral dynamics are no longer just bilateral; they're part of wider regional rivalry and alignments.

Whether the two countries can deal with external threats and a region of mutual gains and losses or not will decide the future of Pakistan-Iran relations. Some areas, such as border security management, energy linkage, and economic cooperation, still have a huge potential that is not being realised. But the partnership is likely to remain steady, albeit limited more of a cautious engagement than a transformative partnership in the foreseeable future, unless the regional rivalries are managed well and political will is sustained.

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