

Iran-Pakistan relations after Ebrahim Raisi

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Former Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian's deaths in a helicopter crash are being mourned in Pakistan as well as Iran, two neighboring countries with close relations. This was shocking for many in Pakistan because of the close relations and also because this news came at a point where Raisi paid a visit to Islamabad last month in May to improve relations that were thought to be under strain after recent border skirmishes.

Raisi's recent visit to Pakistan came at a crucial point in the backdrop of regional dynamics. Iran is facing various political pressures domestically as well as internationally. The recent terror wave, missile strikes with Israel, domestic and international pressures, conflicts with the neighbors, and sanctioned economy have taken a toll on Iran's strategic outlook. Iran's neighbor, Pakistan, too faces multiple challenges; increasing terrorist attacks, strained relations with Afghanistan over terrorism, aggressive posturing from the Modi government in India, and a fragile economy with an aggravating inflation rate and energy crisis. These common issues have brought Iran and Pakistan closer to seeking avenues for cooperation that can potentially address mutual security, economic, and geopolitical concerns.

Raisi's visit was important and timely. Political observers saw it as an attempt to improve and mend ties with Pakistan after recent skirmishes that saw missile strikes from both sides citing terror outfits operating in respective countries. Another perspective behind Raisi's visit was the pressure that Iran is facing internationally, especially after its recent rift with

Israel.

Regionally, Iran is attempting to attract alliances and keep any political stalemates at bay. Its détente with Saudi Arabia is an example of how Iran is trying to avoid political deadlocks and continue with its strategic goals. It is important to observe that Iran's relations with China have strengthened over the years, with China's promising investment of \$400 billion over the span of 25 years, a cooperation agreement signed in 2021. This has given Iran a new strategic outlook. Raisi's visit to Pakistan came in this backdrop; to explore new avenues for cooperation and to address the irritants in the relationship. Pakistan, while observing the regional changes, believes that Iran is a neighbor that needs to be engaged positively.

Pakistan and Iran share approximately 562 miles of border which tends to provide trade potential but is also marred by security issues. The border tensions aren't new and have their roots in history as well as recent past. However, there is much in common that needs to be explored. Both sides have deep cultural roots, as Pakistan is believed to host the largest Shia population outside of Iran. This provides Iran with significant

cultural and religious affiliation and roots in Pakistani society and culture. This gives Pakistan an exceptional strategic space in larger Iranian, as well as regional, geopolitics.

Pakistan and Iran relations are generally peaceful with no major setbacks or fractures. However, terrorism is an irritant in the relationship that undermines the security of both states and regional security at large.

Iran continues to grapple with the Jaish-al-Adl terrorist outfit that it believes operates from Pakistan. Pakistan also believes that Baloch terrorist groups like Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and others are part of a terrorist network based in Iran. Nonetheless, the discourse of terror networks continues to be highlighted. A common threat for both Iran and Pakistan is the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISKAP); a terror group that operates in the region with scattered presence in Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Beyond security, there are several other issue areas between Pakistan and Iran. Economic integration remains at the top. Much has been speculated about the bilateral trade. However, there are multiple areas where Pakistan and Iran lack integration and need special

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