

IRAN'S AERIAL STRIKES: MOTIVATIONS AND PAKISTAN'S MEASURED RESPONSE

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Abstract

The January 16, 2024, missile and drone strike by Iran against alleged sanctuaries of Jaish al-Adl inside Pakistan's province of Baluchistan provoked a short crisis between Islamabad and Tehran, culminating in retaliation by Pakistan on January 18, 2024. The lack of close coordination on their shared frontier, amidst severe issues of drug trafficking from Afghanistan, terrorism in Baluchistan, and Iranian concerns about infiltration, undermined a mutual understanding between these two countries. Pakistan was entirely surprised, never having been attacked by Iran before. Despite the strike during the election campaign to determine Pakistan's next governing party and executive, Islamabad resisted retaliation until it failed to elicit a conciliatory explanation from Tehran. Iran's attack was most likely the result of a hardline foreign policy initiative decided and implemented by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as part of its escalating conflict with Israel and the defence of the Houthis in Yemen. Following Pakistan's measured and proportionate response, Tehran and Islamabad, encouraged by China, the US, Russia, and Türkiye, diplomatically defused the tension, and bilateral relations normalised.

Keywords: Pakistan, Iran, Aerial Strikes, Geopolitics, Transnational Militancy.

Introduction

While international community was focused and concerned with the Israel war on Gaza, Iran and Pakistan engaged in missile and drone strikes in their less-known remote border regions during the second half of January 2024. The initial strike, on January 16, 2024, was launched by Iran. Pakistan, compelled to demonstrate its commitment to defending its territorial integrity and political sovereignty, made a proportionate retaliation. Iran allegedly targeted two suspected bases of the Iranian-origin Sunni terrorist group Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice). At the same time, Pakistan carried out aerial operations against several Pakistani-origin terrorist hideouts in Iran. Owing to their proactive bilateral diplomacy, supported by key regional and international actors, the two sides were able to defuse the tensions and promptly restore normalcy in their political relations within a few days.¹

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Both Iran and Pakistan have typically pursued dialogue and sought collaboration in tackling complicated bilateral issues, including transborder terrorism. This raises the question of why Tehran felt the compulsion to launch a missile strike in the first place and why Pakistan's diplomacy failed to anticipate Iran's sensitivity to cross-border issues. An important conditioning factor was that these aerial strikes marked the culmination of years-long simmering tension between two neighbouring friendly countries over the problems of transnational terrorism and regional geopolitics, which were exacerbated by the Global War on Terrorism, the Arab Spring, and domestic developments facing both Tehran and Islamabad. Iran may have been influenced by the emerging practice of intermediate-range missile and drone strikes conducted by their Houthi allies in Yemen and its experience with its support to frontline states in Lebanon and Gaza. Pakistan, in contrast, has a long history of practising restraint and diplomacy in its relations with India, with exchanges restricted to occasional local artillery exchanges along the Line of Control in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K). Armed autonomist tendencies in both Iran's and Pakistan's Baloch provinces and issues of governance and underdevelopment are further aggravating factors that fuel the insecurity of both states. The sudden escalatory missile exchange underlined the lingering divergent perceptions about the opaque nature and approach of addressing the complicated issues of transnational terrorism and regional geopolitics between the two important countries of the Muslim world.

Pakistan and Iran have decades-long diplomatic, security, economic, religious and cultural relations. The two countries share a long, porous border of 909 km without any significant territorial dispute. They had no substantial political, ideological, or economic conflicts, and both countries cooperated in coordinating their assistance to Oman during the 1973-1976 Dhofar War. Iran was the first to recognise Pakistan as an independent state in 1947.² The Iranian leadership provided crucial military and diplomatic support to Pakistan during the latter's wars with India in 1965 and 1971. Similarly, Pakistan was the first country to recognise the Islamic regime following the Iranian revolution 1979. Not to mention, Islamabad played a constructive role during and in ending the decade-long Iran-Iraq war.

Nevertheless, relations between Iran and Pakistan have been ambivalent since the 1980s. The bilateral ties have demonstrated elements of both cooperation and competition. The two sides have developed greater understanding and respect for each other's regional power position and legitimate geopolitical interests. Pakistan views Iran as a good neighbour and an influential actor in the Middle East with the potential to support it in navigating the complicated power politics of South Asia and the Persian Gulf region. Similarly, Iran reckons Pakistan is an important neighbour, which separates its borders from South Asian giant India and shortens its border with unstable Afghanistan. Iran also recognises that Pakistan respects its legitimate security interests in the Middle East.

Similarly, they have forged closer security cooperation to address the issue of transnational militancy. To this end, the two sides signed a comprehensive security agreement to combat transnational organised crimes, especially terrorism, in 2013.³ They have also forged closer economic ties. Despite international financial sanctions on Iran, bilateral trade volume is over US\$ 2 billion. The two sides have recently re-engaged in the gigantic Iran-Pakistan pipeline project. Notably, the border regions of both sides are economically integrated, especially in electricity, agricultural products, and petrochemicals. In many ways, Pakistan and Iran reckon each other's value and position for national/regional peace, stability, and security.

On the other hand, there are irritants in their bilateral relations. To illustrate, Pakistan is uneasy about Iran's efforts to become the centre of gravity for the Pakistani Shia population, which constitutes 10 to 15 per cent of the total population.⁴ Islamabad also carefully observes Tehran's pragmatic policies towards India and Afghanistan, which share long borders and have a troubled history of political relations with Pakistan. Pakistan is sensitive to striking a balance in its relations with Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Iran also keenly monitors Pakistan's friendly relations with the Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia. The Iranian leadership also scrutinises Pakistan's relations with the US. Finally, Iran will closely assess the dynamics of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.

However, Iran and Pakistan face challenges in effectively policing their long and porous shared frontier. Consequently, neither is satisfied with the other's efforts to curb cross-border militancy. They fundamentally expect more effort from each other in this domain. Not surprisingly, these underlying tensions have, at times, yielded hostility. For instance, there have been incidents of mortar firings between the two countries, and Pakistan has previously shot down an Iranian surveillance drone inside its territory.⁵ This highlights that the two neighbouring countries have occasionally failed to anticipate the other's interests effectively.

The exchange of missile and drone strikes represents an unprecedented sudden escalation of hostility in bilateral relations, with the potential to undermine national/regional peace and stability. To unpack the dynamics of the crisis, the article is organised into four main sections addressing the following questions:

- What were Iran's motivations for launching missile and drone strikes inside Pakistan?
- How did Pakistan view the Iran attack?
- What was the salience of Pakistan's response strategy?
- What role did bilateral and multilateral diplomacy play in de-escalating the crisis?

Decoding Iran's Motivations

On the evening of January 16, the Islamic Republic of Iran targeted the "Green Mountains" area of Pakistan with missile and drone strikes. This attack, having been

carried out one day after Iran attacked Erbil in Iraq and Idlib in Syria, may have occurred under the pretext of destroying two suspected Jaish al-Adl bases in Pakistan.⁶ Iran's attack on Pakistan was an unprecedented aggressive act in the 77 years of Iran-Pakistan diplomatic relations and provoked a profound and reciprocal response from Islamabad. Iran considered the measure as a practical and deterrent response to terrorism⁷, to which Pakistan retaliated with an attack on the Baloch Liberation Front/Army. In either case, there is no evidence of either official or popular support for Jaish al-Adl in Pakistan or of the Baloch militants in Iran. The closure of insurgent sanctuaries serves the interests of both countries. However, the question arises: what possibly the real motive of the Islamic Republic of Iran would be to fire missiles at Pakistan, its friendly neighbour and Islamic country?

Pak-Iran relations were at their peak during the time of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi before the 1979 revolution. Iran was the first to recognise the Islamic Republic of Pakistan as an independent state in 1947. The Lahore Islamic Conference in 1959 and the presence of Iranian intellectuals in this meeting was another manifestation of the excellent relations between the two countries, especially at the cultural level. More precisely, Pakistan had a special place for Iranian intellectuals in the "turn to the east" policy, which they always promoted. During that time, the Shah of Iran also provided military aid to Pakistan in the form of aircraft basing and staging and spare parts. General Hasan Toufanian, who oversaw Iran's military purchases during the era of the Shah, said in his political diaries that the Shah of Iran had donated 99 fighter aircraft to Pakistan.⁸

In addition to supporting Pakistan in the wars with India, the Shah of Iran asserted diplomatic influence on India to desist from supporting militants within Pakistan, as both were united against providing aid to any militant group intent on spreading communist agitation or violence. During the rise of discontent in East Pakistan, the Shah of Iran consistently recommended compromise political solutions.⁹ After the 1979 revolution, the two countries called themselves friends and brothers, and Pakistan was the first country to recognise the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite challenges in their relationship driven by the rise of Shia political consciousness, the Iranian revolution, and disagreements over resisting Soviet regional encroachments, their stable relations diffused any confrontation.

Occasional incidents between Iran and Pakistan have occurred since the Iran Revolution. Most recently, there was an attack by the Jaish al-Adl group on Rask and Chah Bahar police stations on the night of April 3, 2024. 10 Iranian military forces personnel were killed, and another 12 were injured while fighting continued until the evening of April 4.¹⁰ Based on public statements from the Islamic Regime of Iran, Tehran conducted a retaliatory attack on the border area of Pakistan on December 15, 2023.¹¹ Pakistan has also been the victim of terrorism, primarily by Baloch militants supported by India, and often infiltrating from Afghanistan through Iran.

While the two countries have consistently been eager to solve the security issues along their shared border, its remoteness and most of the militancy on the

Iranian side are associated with the endemic drug trafficking emerging from Helmand province in Afghanistan, leaving Tehran prone to unilateral solutions. Iran may not have struck Afghanistan because of the state of infrastructure on their shared border. Striking Israel, given the extent of Israel's US-funded and Western-backed air defence systems, may be prohibitively expensive, as compared with Iran's practice of striking targets that are believed to support Israel.

Iran's missile attack on Pakistan may be the consequence of habit, in which Tehran's foreign policy decision-makers prefer bombardment, as they have historically done in other crises, such as against Iraq. This policy-decision-making group has not prioritised the relatively less volatile relations with Pakistan, given its priority focus on Israel, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the US, and Turkey. It might have viewed Islamabad's alleged disinterest in addressing the issue of drug trafficking as an invitation for independent action. Iran relies on sympathetic non-state actors to assert its influence in the Middle East region (the four Hs: Hezbollah, Hashd al-Shaabi, the Houthis and Hamas) and aggressively defends its territorial waters. Tehran is unlikely to change the delineation of its long-standing sphere of influence with Pakistan. Iran's assertiveness in the Caucasus relates to the loss of those territories to Russia in the early nineteenth century, and its defensiveness in the Persian Gulf has to do with five centuries of European maritime encroachment. Tehran's interest in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea to Bab al-Mandeb, and from the Gulf of Aden to the Sea of Oman is primarily influenced by Iran's determination to secure its trade routes, occasionally denied and not exclusively related to the security of its oil exports.

However, the timing of Iran's missile and drone attack on Pakistan might have also been influenced by the political importance to the Tehran government of the fourth anniversary of the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, which has led to a renewed emphasis on counterterrorism in Iran. In that terrorist attack, 103 people were killed, and 211 people were injured.¹² While the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shaam (ISIS) claimed responsibility for this attack,¹³ Tehran attributed this attack to Israel. Tehran may be signalling more assertiveness against all threats of terror and militancy. The IRGC attacks on the evening of January 16 were to counter the believed presence of Israeli-backed groups in Iraq and Takfiri terrorists in Idlib, Syria, which itself took place a few days after the US and UK attacked Yemen's Houthis.¹⁴ Therefore, it is probable that Tehran's foreign policy authorities, in their desire to demonstrate and signal resolve against US and Western attacks on Yemen, struck at Jaish al-Adl in Pakistan with the erroneous calculus that these were not of critical Pakistani interest.

The IRGC intends to show itself as an uncompromising force, sidelining moderates within Iran in the process and willing to leverage the "mad man theory". After the IRGC attack on Pakistan, a member of the National Security Commission of the Iranian Parliament said: "This action shows that we are serious and there is no complacency with any group or country regarding the security and interests of our country, not even the Europeans".¹⁵ Although Pakistan possesses nuclear arsenals and a better-equipped army and air force, Tehran's attack was facilitated by the belief that

they share a common dilemma in governing the two halves of the unstable province of Baluchistan and therefore, no immediate Pakistani interest would be compromised by this isolated and remote attack.

However, Tehran did not appreciate the severe security challenges posed by India's substantial existential threat to Pakistan and the imperative that Islamabad would retaliate against even minor incursions and attacks because of its multilingual and multiethnic population. It is also likely that the US and the UK do not see the Iranian attack on Pakistan as asserting a principle of inevitable retaliation as much as symptomatic of an insensitive foreign policy formulation process in Tehran.

However, as far as Pak-Iran relations are concerned, the two have many areas of cooperation in cultural, political and economic domains; the most important of all these is the fight against social movements that use terrorism. Their disagreements over policy towards terrorism are a common enemy and a severe threat to the political and economic development of the two countries, which is also rooted in ethnicism and religious extremism.¹⁶ Since Pakistan has always been a victim of terrorism on its western and northern borders, Islamabad would be easily approached to coordinate a solution to border issues along its Western frontier.

Afghanistan could intensify the perceived rivalry between Tehran and Islamabad, although this most often affects sub-nationalist groups interested in Afghanistan, specifically the Persians of Herat and the Pakistani Pashtun. Mutual historical suspicion, which does not affect Iran's central Persian-speaking or Pakistan's primarily Punjabi and Sindhi, often drives uncooperative foreign policy over Afghanistan. While both Iran and Pakistan are fundamentally hostile to separatist Baloch groups (Islamist within Iran but secular within Pakistan), their lack of fine-grained mutual understanding has interfered with what would be an easy coordination effort at border policing and coordinated exchange of intelligence against sanctuaries and drug smuggling routes. The Pakistani concern that Iran could be incentivised to harbour Indian-funded Baloch separatist base camps is not supported by the prevailing evidence. The Iranian belief that Israel would find little difficulty establishing covert supply bases in Pakistan is equally without any precedence. While Pakistan has legitimate concerns about Indian use of Iran's harbour at Chahbahar, it is outside of Pakistan's power to insist that Iran finds a new oil export customer, given the international pressure against Tehran.

The value of economic cooperation between Iran and Pakistan far outweighs the inflicted cost of fighting along their Baloch frontier. Although Iran's gas pipeline to Pakistan is facing the challenge of US sanctions, it is one of the most critical issues worth cooperation and anticipated benefits to both countries. This project, when completed, could increase trade between the two countries, which is currently about US\$2.3 bn to as high as US\$5 bn. This was the principal issue of discussion during the September 2023 visit by the Iranian Foreign Ministers to Pakistan.¹⁷ There are more fundamental issues of underdevelopment in Baluchistan, the coordinated solution of which would dramatically reduce separatist violence and drug transshipments.

Pakistan's Assessment and Incremental Response Strategy

The general reaction of the Pakistani government and society to the highly provocative Iranian missile and drone strike on its soil was one of general shock and surprise, a breach of trust, and a violation of the country's sovereignty. The Pakistani leadership assessed that Iran's public justification for the attack neglected Pakistani interests and jeopardised the credibility and responsiveness of Pakistan's policy of local deterrence to safeguard its territorial integrity and reputation. Islamabad also saw Tehran's unilateral action as dismissive of the interest of friendly neighbouring states and, more broadly, of undermining regional peace and stability. Pakistan's foreign policy interest in Southwest Asia is to secure strategic depth to manage India's threat. It seeks to normalise relations with neighbouring Iran and Afghanistan.

Iran's aerial strike came as a surprise to Pakistan for several reasons. First, Pakistan and Iran have maintained cordial relations throughout their diplomatic history. Pakistan has never been the target of an aerial or missile strike from Iran in its history. Secondly, Pakistan was preparing for general elections in early February 2024, and a caretaker government was in place to oversee the country's affairs.¹⁸ During such a sensitive period of power transition, Pakistan, like any other country, was expecting political courtesy from its friendly neighbour rather than a missile strike inside its territory. Thirdly, there were no immediate prior political tensions or indications of hostility between Pakistan and Iran. Just a few hours before Iran's aerial strike, there was a cordial diplomatic meeting between Pakistan's acting prime minister, Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, and the Iranian foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, during the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. During this high-level political meeting, the Iranian foreign minister did not raise any concerns or reservations (if there were any) with the Pakistani prime minister.¹⁹ Earlier in the day, Iranian and Pakistani navies participated in a day-long joint maritime exercise in the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.²⁰ A day before the attack, Iran's Special Representative for Afghanistan visited Islamabad and met with the Pakistani foreign minister. Both diplomats decided to enhance cooperation and coordination for regional stability during the meeting.²¹ The locus for security-related decisions in Iran may be dominated by the IRGC (rather than the Iranian armed forces), which may have a super-ordinal authority to manage national security.

After carefully assessing the incident, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphatically condemned the "unprovoked" strike by Iran. It expressed concerns that Iran resorted to an "illegal act" despite having several avenues for communication and cooperation. It further declared that violation of Pakistan's sovereignty was "completely unacceptable" and warned of "serious consequences".²² Subsequently, Pakistan's foreign minister addressed his Iranian counterpart and described Iran's attack not only as a "serious breach of Pakistan's sovereignty" but also one counter to the "spirit of bilateral relations". He further underlined that Pakistan had the right to respond and Iran's unilateral action could "seriously undermine regional peace and stability".²³ Parallel to this, the Pakistani military command held extensive day-long

discussions on the military situation following the Iran strike. It evaluated the implications for local conventional deterrence in the border region and its impact on Pakistan's regional geostrategy. It also assessed various military response options for the country's executive.

At the same time, Pakistan's national political parties, who were busy running their election campaigns, also expressed similar dismay at Iran's unilateral strike. Shahbaz Sharif, president of Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), who became prime minister of Pakistan following the general elections, stated: "I am shocked at the Iranian breach of Pakistani sovereignty. This missile attack is against the spirit of our friendship and principles of good neighbourhood".²⁴ Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader, told the BBC he was "surprised" by Iran's aerial strike. He also emphasised that if any country thinks Pakistan cannot respond to such violations, it would be mistaken.²⁵

It is pertinent to mention that Pakistan's political and military leadership avoided an abrupt and impulsive response. Instead, they took time to assess the incident, and their statements reflected strategic reasoning and evaluation of the long-term effects of a response. Their statements were measured and without sensationally aggressive rhetoric. Not surprisingly, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued its first short press release several hours after the incident. The Pakistani government even decided not to convene the National Security Committee (NSC) meeting following the Iran attack. Similarly, in their incident coverage, the national media acted responsibly without seeking to arouse unnecessary public commotion. The Pakistani decision-making process reinforced the culture of strategic restraint and responsibility during the crisis.

Responding prudently and promptly to an unexpected provocation from a friendly neighbour was challenging for the Pakistani leadership. The higher policy direction was to develop incrementally measured responses. The calibration of such a response had warranted a great deal of understanding about Iran's motivation behind the attack, the nature of the attack, and its implications for local deterrence and Pakistan's broader geopolitical strategy. To this effect, critical questions were carefully addressed to evolve the optimal response strategy. Was it an accidental/inadvertent strike? Was it a hot pursuit/preemptive strike against terrorists of Jaish-al-Adl? What weapon systems were employed in the aerial attack, and what damage did they cause on the ground? Did the IRGC conduct the attack with the approval of the Iranian political leadership? Was it to strengthen Iran's power position in the bilateral relationship with Pakistan, which was subject to internal political, economic, and social challenges? Was it to undermine Pakistan's role as a sophisticated power balancer in the Middle East? Was it to send signals to the US, UK, Arab states, and Israel?

While assessing the situation, Pakistan took some immediate incremental steps. First, the Pakistani armed forces were instructed to take minimum safeguards to prevent further aerial strikes from Iran. In parallel, Pakistan recorded a robust

diplomatic protest against Iran. Islamabad then patiently awaited Tehran's response, hoping for a plausible explanation or apology. However, to its disappointment, Pakistan received no response from Iran, even after several hours. Faced with this, it decided to downgrade its diplomatic relations with Iran. It recalled its ambassador from Iran and asked the Iranian ambassador, coincidentally in Tehran, not to return to Islamabad. Additionally, it decided to suspend all ongoing or scheduled high-level visits between the two nations.²⁶

On January 17, 2024, the Iranian defence minister, followed by the foreign minister, delivered Tehran's official statements. While commenting on IRGC's anti-terrorist aerial strikes in Syria and Iraq, the Iranian defence minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani told the media on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting that Iran had no limitation in defending its national interests and people. He went on to say that Iran is "a missile power in the world" and it would employ its missiles whenever it felt necessary.²⁷ Admittedly, he did not mention the aerial strike against Pakistan, but the context and timing of his comments were crucial. A few hours later, Iran's foreign minister avowed that Iran had conducted cross-border air strikes against "Iranian terrorists present on Pakistani soil". He added, "We would not allow Iran's security to be compromised".²⁸

The Pakistani strategic analysts, who objectively assessed the nature of the incident, Iran's immediate posturing, and consequential security implications, noted the comments of Iran's defence and foreign ministers. They subsequently reached some basic conclusions that Iran had launched a well-planned missile and drone strike inside the Pakistani territory. Although the apparent targets were unconfirmed Iranian terrorists, there was no impending terrorism threat from the Pakistani territory to Iran. Iran's aerial strike, in the presence of well-established communication and cooperation mechanisms, was a clear violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and entirely unjustified. When Pakistan was preparing for general elections, the timing of Iran's strike was seen as a further aggravating matter that had implications for Pakistan's local military deterrence in the border region. It was also noted that its timing during elections may have been an effort to influence Pakistan's elections and consequently enhance Iran's relative influence. Moreover, the categorisation by some Iranian officials of Pakistan as being within Iran's sphere of influence along the lines of Syria and Iraq was viewed, quite aside from it being an entirely nonsensical assessment, as a threat to Pakistan's geostrategic status and posture across the regions of South Asia and the Middle East.

To demonstrate its resolve to protect its territorial integrity and border sovereignty and reinforce its geostrategic position across South Asia and the Middle East, the Pakistani government directed its armed forces to conduct highly proportionate and targeted precision military strikes against the hideouts of the Pakistani-origin terrorists in Sistan-o-Baluchistan province of Iran. Following these higher policy directions, the military commanders planned and conducted intelligence-guided high-precision aerial strikes in the early morning of January 18,

2024, and claimed the deaths of several wanted terrorists. For these aerial strikes, Pakistani military planners employed a combination of stand-off weapons, killer drones, and loitering munitions.²⁹ These capabilities were prioritised due to their greater precision than ground-based weapons such as artillery. Moreover, it was aligned with the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) doctrine of deterrence through effective retaliation. As a standard practice, the Pakistani military command also approved and implemented a few contingency plans to meet the immediate challenge of further escalation following the tit-for-tat aerial strikes.

While briefing media on retaliatory strikes in the border region of Iran, Mumtaz Zahra Baluch, spokesperson for Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, underlined that the precision military strikes were conducted with the "sole objective... of Pakistan's security and national interests". The spokesperson emphasised that Pakistan's action manifested its "unflinching resolve to protect and defend its national security against all threats. Pakistan would not allow any country to challenge its territorial integrity and political sovereignty under any pretext or circumstances. At the same time, the spokesperson maintained that Pakistan had invariably considered Iran as a "brotherly" country. She further emphasised: "Pakistan fully respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic of Iran."³⁰

Diplomacy and De-escalation

The measured military response, followed by the conciliatory attitude of Pakistan, set the stage for subsequent diplomatic efforts to defuse the fast-escalating military situation between two friendly neighbours. In this context, the Pakistani foreign minister spoke with his Iranian counterpart on January 19, 2024, highlighting "close brotherly relations" between the two countries. He expressed Pakistan's desire to normalise the bilateral relations with Iran "based on the spirit of mutual trust and cooperation". He further emphasised that bilateral cooperation must be predicated on "respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty". Finally, the two foreign ministers agreed that "working level cooperation and closer coordination on counterterrorism and other aspects of mutual concern should be strengthened."³¹ They also discussed the possibility of ambassadors returning to their respective capitals. By January 22, 2024, Pakistan and Iran's foreign ministers finally agreed to restore diplomatic relations. They mutually decided that ambassadors of both countries "can return to their respective posts by January 26, 2024."³² Furthermore, the foreign minister of Iran accepted the invitation of the foreign minister of Pakistan to undertake an official visit to Islamabad on January 29, 2024.

Accordingly, the Iranian Foreign Minister visited Islamabad and held detailed meetings with the Pakistani civil and military leadership. Both sides developed an understanding during these interactions to intensify cooperation to combat terrorism. To this effect, the two foreign ministers agreed to immediately deploy "liaison officers" in their border towns to "further strengthen ongoing security and intelligence cooperation."³³ They also decided to hold regular ministerial and military-level

meetings to prevent misunderstandings in future. Recognising the intrinsic linkage between security and development, the two chief diplomats agreed to operationalise the joint border markets to uplift the socio-economic status of those residing in the border regions.³⁴ Notably, Pakistan renewed the invitation to the President of Iran to undertake a visit to Pakistan. On this invitation, Iran's President, Ebrahim Raisi, paid a three-day visit to Pakistan. During the visit, the Iranian and Pakistani leadership held detailed discussions and took decisions to boost security and economic cooperation.³⁵ These significant developments signalled the return of normalcy in the political relations between the two friendly neighbour countries.

It is essential to mention that critical regional and international actors supported and facilitated bilateral diplomacy between Iran and Pakistan. The external players conducted public and quiet diplomacy in quickly defusing the crisis by engaging both or one of the contenders. Given the absence of formal diplomatic relations between the US and Iran, Washington could not mediate between Iran and Pakistan. Nevertheless, it urged both parties to demonstrate restraint and address their emerging issues peacefully. It is worth noting that since October 7, 2023, the US has been engaged in hectic diplomatic efforts to prevent the whole region from falling into a full-blown war. The US expressed concern about the unilateral airstrikes of Iran against Pakistan. At the same time, it explicitly emphasised the peaceful de-escalation of the crisis. John Kirby, the White House National Security Spokesperson, briefed the reporters that Washington is closely observing the developments between Iran and Pakistan. He maintained that the US did not want further regional escalation. "We are in touch with our Pakistani counterparts," Kirby added.³⁶

Russia was also alarmed by the escalating situation in the Pak-Iran border regions. It advised both countries to demonstrate "maximum restraint" and solve their problems "exclusively by political and diplomatic means". Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova underscored that counter-terrorism operations outside a country's sovereign territory should be adequately "coordinated and negotiated" between the countries involved.³⁷ Furthermore, Russia expressed its willingness to join efforts against the menace of international terrorism.

Similarly, having friendly relations with Iran and Pakistan, China called on the two sides to remain calm and exercise restraint. It insisted that the two influential countries of the Muslim world should avoid further escalation of tension. Notably, it expressed its readiness to play a "constructive role" in defusing the situation between Iran and Pakistan.³⁸ The meetings between China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sun Weidong, with the Pakistani leadership from January 20 to 22, along with phone calls between the Chinese Executive Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ma Zhaoxu, and his Iranian counterpart, were instrumental in repairing Pak-Iran ties.

Türkiye, another mutual friend of Iran and Pakistan, also played a significant role in bridging the differences between the two sides. In this regard, the Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, maintained close contact with the foreign ministers of both Iran and Pakistan. He regularly advised the foreign ministers of two friendly

countries that “the issue should not escalate further and urged the restoration of calm.”³⁹ He avowed that Türkiye would continue to do whatever was necessary to reduce the tensions between Iran and Pakistan.

The bilateral diplomacy, supported by regional and international players, defused Pak-Iran tensions. On the one hand, these coordinated diplomatic efforts thwarted any further military escalation between the two friendly neighbouring countries. On the other hand, these diplomatic endeavours quickly restored normalcy in the Pak-Iran political relationship.

Conclusion

The Iranian aerial strike with chest-thumping, followed by Pakistan’s retaliation, has broken down the widely held expectation that the two countries had successfully managed the issues of transnational terrorism and competitive geopolitics. The two neighbours did not allow these issues to escalate into a severe crisis for long. Both countries have intensified cooperation and built mechanisms at different levels, including political, diplomatic, military, and intelligence, in response to this crisis.

Luckily, the reciprocal missile/drone strikes did not cause damage to each other’s armed forces, economic centres, or urban complexes. They attacked what they considered to be terrorists inside the other’s territory, which the other also regarded as problematic. Pakistan has been fighting against transnational terrorism since 9/11 despite severe odds and heavy losses. Iran also sees transnational terrorism as a serious problem for its security. It is worth recalling that both sides have never accused each other of sponsoring terrorism against each other.

The unilateral aerial strike by Iran did not achieve any significant military and political goals for Pakistan and was widely viewed as reckless. Instead, it risked militarising the issues of transnational terrorism and geopolitics with Pakistan. Another round of such strikes could have caused a permanent strain on the diplomatic relations between two friendly neighbours. To undo the effect of the airstrikes, the two sides need to be proactive and strengthen existing bilateral/multilateral mechanisms of consultations and cooperation. As part of the strategy, the two countries can continue their tradition of having a relatively demilitarised border and maintain the status quo of the military forces before the crisis. Transnational terrorism and geopolitics require continuous, sincere dialogue and meaningful cooperation mechanisms.

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