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Pakistan, Iran become 'natural allies'

By M K Bhadrakumar
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The participation by Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari in the two-day conference on terrorism held at Tehran on June 25 was invested with political symbolism as a mark of displeasure towards the United States. But Zardari's return to Tehran within three weeks on a second visit on Saturday unmistakably carried the stamp of Pakistan's "strategic defiance" of the US.

Equally, for the second time in three weeks, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei received Zardari, signifying the high importance that Tehran attaches to the nascent signs of shift in Pakistan's regional policies.

Saudi Arabia made a diplomatic demarche with Pakistan to dissuade Zardari from attending the Tehran conference in June. For the second time, again, Riyadh made a bid on Friday to convey its apprehensions over the Pakistan-Iran intimacy.

Saudi ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Aziz Al-Ghadeer called on Zardari in Islamabad on the eve of his departure for Tehran.

Evidently, there is growing consternation in Riyadh that a tilt in the "balance of forces" in the Persian Gulf region may ensue if Tehran and Islamabad draw closer together. The Iran-Pakistan solidarity rubbishes the Saudi thesis that the Shi'ite-Sunni schism is the dominant theme of Middle Eastern politics.

The Pakistani Foreign Ministry underscored in a statement that Zardari's visit was taking place as part of Islamabad's "continuous consultations, coordination and cooperation" with regional states

on the issues of regional peace and stability, Afghanistan in particular. "Pakistan attaches special significance to joining efforts of immediate neighbors in an endeavor to bring peace to Afghanistan and to reversing the tide of terrorism afflicting the region."

The Iranian accounts, however, conveyed the impression that matters of economic cooperation dominated Zardari's talks with Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, whom he met twice during the day-long visit to Tehran. Curiously, Afghanistan was not mentioned as having figured at all in the talks in Tehran although senior officials in Islamabad were quoted by the Pakistani media that the main topic of Zardari's talks concerned Afghanistan - the US's drawdown of troops and the establishment of US military bases in Afghanistan, in particular.

Indeed, the Iranian accounts were uncharacteristically reticent, which would indicate that the talks touched on highly sensitive issues of cooperation that neither side wished to publicize. Security issues undoubtedly figured prominently in the discussions.

Pakistan's Interior Minister Rehman Malik accompanied Zardari for a second time on the visit to Tehran and Zardari and Ahmadinejad agreed on adopting a "regional approach" to meeting the challenge of militancy and terrorism. Zardari proposed the creation of an Integrated Border Management Regime and trilateral mechanism involving Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan to counter drug trafficking.

Significantly, within a day of Zardari's return from Tehran, Malik alleged that Israeli-made weapons had been recovered from Karachi, Pakistan's largest city that has been torn apart by violence in recent weeks. He said, "Weapons are being brought to Karachi from abroad," and cryptically added that even target killers were coming from outside. Iranian intelligence is very active in Karachi, which has been a scene of sectarian strife over the years.

Zardari told Ahmadinejad that Pakistan considered Iran as an "important friend and player in the region". A flavor of the growing intimacy between the two leaderships is available in the Iranian account of Zardari's call on Khamenei. The Supreme Leader was expansive in his praise of the "Pakistani nation" - "a great nation with long and deep background of struggle"; "a nation which believes in Islam" whose progress and success pleases Iran.

Khamenei advised Zardari that the "real enemy" of the Pakistani people and their national unity came from the West - "and the US on top of it". Interestingly, Zardari responded that Pakistan regarded Iran as a "model of resistance and path to progress".

Peace pipeline

The Pakistani briefing mentioned that Khamenei and Zardari discussed the "evolving situation in Afghanistan, with particular reference to the gradual withdrawal of US forces". The briefing cited Zardari as outlining to the Iranian leadership that:

- Pakistan supported Afghan President Hamid Karzai's efforts for reconciliation and peace.
- Pakistan favors an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" peace process.
- Pakistan is prepared to assist in the "capacity-building" of Afghan institutions.

- Afghanistan should not become a theater of proxy wars or civil war once Western troops depart.
- Both Pakistan and Iran have "vital interests" in stability and peace in Afghanistan.

On the economic side, Zardari proposed the conclusion of a free-trade agreement between the countries and a currency swap arrangement that would enable them to use the two national currencies for bilateral trade transactions. These are nascent ideas and the only tangible outcome seems to have been on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, which the two countries are keen to expedite.

Ahmadinejad assured Zardari that Iran would have completed by end-2012 the construction of the pipeline up to the Pakistani border. But the catch is that Pakistan is yet to commence construction work on its side of the border. The survey for the project began only in June and the earliest the construction work could begin would be by the beginning of next year.

In principle, the pipeline will do a world of good for Pakistan by meeting at least a quarter of its energy needs - some suggest it could be 50%. The project holds the potential to elevate the Iran-Pakistan relationship from the realm of rhetoric and hyperbole to a genuinely strategic plane.

The good part is that Pakistan has succeeded in conclusively brushing aside the US's objections to the pipeline project and is pressing ahead. By 2015 or so, Iranian gas can be expected to flow to Pakistan.

The pipeline project is symptomatic of Iran-Pakistan strategic ties as a whole. These are slowly but steadily gaining traction and they are in mutual interests. For Iran, Pakistan is a prize "catch" at the present juncture insofar as it is a major Sunni Muslim country, a traditional ally of Saudi Arabia and a neighboring country that finds itself in increasingly antagonistic terms vis-a-vis the US. Closer security cooperation with Pakistan would be highly useful to mop up the remnants of the anti-Iran Jundallah terrorist organization operating in the Sistan-Balochistan region.

For Pakistan, which is coming under increased pressure from the US, Iran becomes a "natural ally" at this point. In concrete terms, intelligence-sharing with Iran would be useful for Pakistan to monitor and crack down on US covert activities on Pakistani soil.

The fact remains that despite their divergent interests traditionally vis-a-vis the Afghan problem, Iran and Pakistan happen to share similar concerns. Iran no longer harbors the visceral hatred of the Taliban as a Wahhabi outfit as it used to be in the 1990s.

Indeed, the Taliban have transformed in the past decade and it has become possible for Tehran to view them as a movement of national resistance. It is in Iran's interest that the Taliban remain unwavering in their hostility to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and their uncompromising stance over the prospect of American military bases.

Also, resistance leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has become a common friend for both Iran and Pakistan. Most important, Iranian interests in Afghanistan have also undergone change. They have graduated from the historical concerns limited primarily to the plight of Hazara Shi'ites to

the larger geopolitical questions that the US invasion of Afghanistan opened up affecting Iran's national security interests, where Iran finds itself on the same side as Pakistan lately.

Both Iran and Pakistan prefer an Afghan peace process led by Karzai, which they are in a position to influence, rather than a settlement arrived at on American terms. Both countries also view with disquiet the prospect of American military bases in Afghanistan. Iran, nonetheless, will remain cautious until it is absolutely certain that the shift in Pakistani policies is not merely tactical with a view to creating negotiating leverage vis-a-vis the US.

Iran also cannot be under any illusion that given Pakistan's close political and economic ties with Saudi Arabia, Islamabad would ever openly take Tehran's side in its regional rivalry with Riyadh. Tehran would also appear not to unduly alarm the Saudis.

This probably goes to explain the unusual restraint in the Iranian reportage of Zardari's visit to Tehran - it was Pakistan's turn to introduce some hyperbole and to give media hype to the visit and make it look somewhat larger than life.