

THE IRANIAN-PAKISTANI FACTOR IN THE GEOPOLITICS OF CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

The author has chosen Iran and Pakistan, two giants of the Muslim world, as the subject of her analysis and identifies their place in the context of the geopolitical changes underway in Central and South Asia. She investigates in detail the degree to which their interests are inter-

twined, as well as the extent of their interaction with other actors (the U.S., Russia, China, India, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian republics).

She also points to the potentially useful factors that might eventually help to overcome all the challenges, risks, and threats that, so

far, remain prominent enough to slow down progress in the relations between Iran and Pakistan. The talks between the West and Iran, which have been going on far too long and complicated by the Ukrainian crisis and the rapidly approaching NATO drawdown

from Afghanistan, are further destabilizing the already destabilized situation in the AfPak zone. This negatively affects the relations between the two countries, their potential impact on the Central Asian region, and the prospects for the geoprojects related to them.

KEYWORDS: *Iran, Pakistan, Central Asia, South Asia, Afghanistan, geopolitics, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, India, interest, factor, strategy, security.*

Introduction

Today, the security of Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and the CIS largely depends on the level of relations between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as on the strategy the latter pursues in the so-called AfPak zone. It has become clear to one and all that the nuclear haggling between Tehran and the P5+1 (the U.S., Russia, China, the U.K., France, and Germany), which has been going on and on, and the upcoming drawdown of the coalition forces from Afghanistan are destabilizing the domestic situation in Pakistan.

This is affecting the relations between Iran and Pakistan and the intensity of their impact on Central Asian and global geopolitics.

Interests, Challenges and Threats

Pakistan, Washington's key ally in Central Asia, and Iran are stubbornly pursuing political and economic domination in the regional countries, with which they share common cultural and historical ties and geographical proximity. Islamabad is seeking regional domination by becoming a gate to the Indian Ocean and to the world markets for the Central Asian countries. In addition, Pakistan is securing its long-term geopolitical aims in Central Asia—integration with the region's countries and drawing them into its geopolitical orbit.

At all times, Afghanistan has always been regarded as the best geo-economic access to Central Asia. It comes as no surprise that Islamabad is building up its influence on Kabul. It is working hard to regain its lost position in Afghanistan by becoming actively involved in its economic and political rehabilitation; the pro-Pakistani forces may be represented in the new Afghan government.

It is expected that the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan gas pipeline and the related transportation projects designed to give the land-locked partners access to the Pakistani ports of Karachi and Gwadar will play a great role in the process.

So far, Pakistan's ambitious Central Asian strategy remains on paper because of nagging material and financial problems and the high level of internal instability, a product of the Afghan crisis. To be more exact, radical religious movements of the Taliban type that figure prominently in Pakistan can be described as a factor that provokes and maintains instability in the AfPak zone and complicates relations among Pakistan, the Central Asian countries, and Afghanistan. It should be said that in the not-so-distant past these movements were incorporated into the government and military structures,

while experts did not exclude their possible ties with the conservative elements in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries.¹ In any case, the religious and political fundamentalism of the Taliban, ill-fitted to the Central Asian secular lifestyle, widens the gap between the Central Asian republics and Pakistan and strongly affects their formal relations.

On the other hand, Iran, which relies, among other things, on the Shi'a communities in Pakistan (10 to 20% of the total population) and Afghanistan (10 to 19%)² is trying to outbalance Pakistan's presence in Central Asia. This means that Iran is a partner and also a potential rival of Pakistan in the Afghan issue.

On the other hand, both countries prefer a balance of power in Central Asia, which looks fragile amid the mounting instability and geopolitical struggle exacerbated by the upcoming NATO pullout. To ensure their security interests, Iran and Pakistan should try harder to settle the Afghan crisis, cut short drug trafficking and organized crime, address the refugee crisis, etc. Both are very interested in comprehensive regional partnership within the U.S.-inspired New Silk Road project³ or Heart of Asia project launched by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS).⁴

Their realization totally depends on whether the transit and transportation routes between Central Asia and South and Southeast Asia and Europe are implemented; they are of vital importance for the Iranian and Pakistani economies now in crisis.

It should be said that Iran's interests are impaired by Pakistan's weakening and marginalization; it lost its former position in Afghanistan and is struggling with a political and economic crisis. To avoid instability in their territory, the people in power in Tehran are doing their best to maintain flexible economic and security cooperation with Pakistan. On the other hand, Iran boosted its diplomatic activities to extend Central Asian transit across its territory; the ten rounds of talks carried out with railway companies of the Central Asian countries are the best proof of Tehran's frantic efforts to preserve its domination in Central Asia.⁵

Islamabad figures prominently in Tehran's plans relating to the regional transportation routes and fuel pipelines from Central Asia to Europe and Asia, amply confirmed by the recently launched modernization of Pakistani railways in the areas bordering on Iran.

On the other hand, closer economic cooperation between Iran and Pakistan may decrease the conflicting potential in Central Asia and around it; to achieve this the Central Asian states should be actively involved in joint (and mutually advantageous) regional projects. This will accelerate the local countries' economic integration indispensable for sustainable economic growth.

So far, full-scale economic cooperation between Tehran and Islamabad cannot be realized due to the following factors:

- Iranian-American;
- American-Russian;
- Saudi;

¹ See, for example: J. Stern, "Pakistan's Jihad Culture," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 6, November/December 2000, pp. 119, 123.

² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shia_Islam], 9 March, 2014 (accessed 16 March, 2014).

³ For more details, see: *New Silk Road Strategy: Problems and Perspectives—Interview with Prof. S. Frederick Starr*, The Jamestown Foundation, 22 November, 2011, available at [<http://jamestownfoundation.blogspot.com/2011/11/newsilk-road-strategy-problems-and.html>].

⁴ [<http://aiss.af/index.php/flagship-initiatives/afg-pak-india-trilateral-meeting/article-categories/415-aiss-launched-heart-of-asia-research-project-1>].

⁵ See: "Spros na tranzitnye perevozki gruzov cherez territorii Irana prodolzhaet rasti," available at [http://www.iran.ru/news/economics/92881/Spros_na_tranzitnye_perevozki_gruzov_cherez_territoriyu_Irana_prodolzhaet_rasti], 14 March, 2014.

- Chinese;
- Afghan;
- Indo-Pakistani.

The Iranian-American and American-Russian Factors

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has been consistently opposing any foreign interference in the region. This explains its strong disagreement with the American military presence in Afghanistan after 2014. Pakistan, on the other hand, as a strategic partner of the United States, which has always depended on Washington for its security and economic status, is one of the main “foes” of the Iranian conservative establishment.

The United States spared no effort to keep Iran isolated and prevent its closer relations with Pakistan. In doing this, Washington relied on:

- *the Pakistan-Saudi tandem.* Immediately after September 2001 events, the U.S. decided that it would be more effective⁶ to combine its aid to Pakistan with contacts with other Muslim countries in the expectation that this combination would help to address and resolve a wide range of problems (primarily stabilization in Afghanistan). When applied, however, this aggravated the Shi‘a-Sunni disagreements and invigorated regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- *economic instruments used to force Islamabad to select business partners suggested by Washington.* Pakistan, as the main recipient of American financial aid, is living under constant pressure from Washington, which torpedoes all economic projects with Tehran. It does not like the plans to build an Iranian-Pakistani gas pipeline under the agreement signed in 2002: Washington suspects that Tehran will spend the money thus earned on international terrorists and proliferation of WMD. Recently, Pakistani oil minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi said that work on the pipeline was not possible because of the sanctions “imposed by the United States and the European Union on Tehran over its controversial nuclear drive.” It is expected that the pipeline, the cost of which is assessed at \$7.5 billion, will bring 21.1 million cu m of Iranian gas everyday to Pakistan, which is “struggling with a severe gas crisis.” Today Iran has already completed its 900 km of the pipeline, while 780 km on the Pakistani side is still under construction.⁷
- *possible interference of the special services of the United States and the Gulf countries in terrorist groups’ activities in the zones of the planned Iranian-Pakistani pipelines.* Some believe that these groups might have been involved in terrorist actions in the provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan.⁸
- *further exacerbation of Indian-Pakistani relations* (see below).

⁶ See: *Razmyshleniia o terrorizme: vlianie na Iuzhnuu Aziu i Blizhnyi Vostok: Materialy mezhd. seminara 3 apreliia 2002 goda*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, 2002.

⁷ See: “Iran Says Pakistan Obligated to Finish Pipeline,” RFE/RL, 27 February, 2014, available at [<http://www.payvand.com/news/14/feb/1185.html>], 17 March, 2014.

⁸ See: A. Evstratov, “Glavny istochnik irano-pakistanskoy napriazhennosti,” 25 February, 2014, available at [http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/92691/Glavnyy_istochnik_irano_pakistanskoy_napryazhennosti], 27 February, 2014.

The American-Russian factor. Geopolitics of Central and South Asia and the Middle East is rooted in the contradictions between the United States and Russia. The rivalry of these superpowers for domination in this vast zone predetermines, to different extents, the pace and specifics of what is going on there: the balance of power in the area depends on the orientation of the states aligned along the America-Russia axis. This makes Iran an important factor in building a world order advantageous to the U.S. or the RF. Confrontation between the United States and Iran forces both Washington and Moscow to seek support for their policies in the AfPak zone in Islamabad, which inevitably affects relations between Iran and Pakistan.

In particular, the agreement between Delhi and Washington on strategic partnership and the newly recognized role and importance of the Pakistani Taliban in stabilizing Afghanistan have forced Russia to shift its political preferences from India to Pakistan.⁹ At the same time, relations between the United States and Pakistan are rapidly cooling because of drones, transportation of coalition troops, etc. The Iranian-Pakistani tension subsided and the number of more or less considerable conflicts decreased.

On the eve of the pullout, the United States is becoming more and more aware of Pakistan's key role (both positive and negative) in the Afghan settlement. India, in turn, which expected to establish much closer relations with the United States after 2014, is very concerned about what it sees as Washington's efforts to establish constructive contacts with Islamabad.

The Ukrainian developments shifted the accents in regional geopolitics once more. After the Crimean referendum held on 16 March, 2014 with Moscow's support, the U.S.-led Western community promised harsh anti-Russian sanctions. The situation is very dynamic, the variables are too numerous to allow for more or less reliable forecasts. One thing is clear: the American-Russian partnership on Afghanistan is threatened; this might affect, at least partially, the implementation of joint Iranian-Pakistani projects and continued functioning of the Russian-Pakistani workgroup set up to fight terrorism. Today, the position of Iran, which officially sides with Moscow, contradicts Pakistan's latent neutrality as an American ally. In any case, Tehran will have to adjust its regional conduct to Moscow's economic interests. It cannot be excluded that Delhi and Moscow will move closer because of the present disagreements between India and the United States,¹⁰ which will keep the disagreements between India and Pakistan very much alive.

Other Factors

Saudi Arabia. The U.S. efforts to establish more or less stable relations with Iran have stirred up political aggressiveness in Saudi Arabia, Tehran's regional rival. If the talks between the P5+1 and Iran prove successful, Saudi Arabia will lose some of its present geopolitical and economic clout in the Middle East and Central Asia. Riyadh has already identified Islamabad as one of the allies in the struggle against Tehran's higher regional status; it "will use its channels to negotiate a deal with Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP)."¹¹

⁹ See, for example: A. Davydenko, "V.I. Matvienko: Otnosheniia Rossii i Pakistana—na pod'eme," *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn*, available at [<http://interaffairs.ru/read.php?item=9205>], 28 February 2013; "Otnosheniia Rossii i Pakistana nachalo 2013," *Svargaman*, 31 May, 2013, available at [<http://voprosik.net/otnosheniya-rossii-i-pakistana-nachalo-2013>], 19 March, 2014.

¹⁰ See: "Pakistan-Rossia: novy format otnosheniy s islamskim mirom," *Pakistan Today*, 12 September, 2013 [<http://www.islamnews.ru/news-141723.html>], 19 March, 2014.

¹¹ "Saudi-Pak Deal: Pakistan Promises to Keep Its Borders Open for Afghans," 7 January, 2014, available at [<http://www.dispatchnewsdesk.com/saudi-pak-deal-pakistan-promises-keep-borders-open-afghans>], 17 March, 2014.

It is equally important that “Saudi Arabia was seeking Pakistani assistance to train rebels in Jordan and Turkey with the goal of creating a regular military force” in Syria. “It is reasonable to assume that Pakistan will assist the kingdom in providing small arms and training for the Syrian rebels, at least to the extent that this does not upset Islamabad’s relations with Washington,”¹² and Tehran. It is unwise to entrust the balance of interstate forces to radically-minded and heavily-armed people; their haphazard and uncontrolled moves might lead to far-reaching repercussions in the Middle East and in Central and South Asia. Ukraine is the best example.

On the other hand, experts do not exclude that Riyadh might try to upturn the joint Iranian-Pakistani energy projects. Under pressure from the Saudi opposition and the Western sanctions, “Iran says it has canceled a planned \$500 million loan to Pakistan to build part of a pipeline to bring natural gas from Iran.”¹³

This means that Riyadh and Islamabad are pursuing a two-faced policy: on the one hand, both capitals are talking to the Taliban, which is aimed at adjusting the Afghan political field to their own interests. On the other, they support the riots in Syria and are fanning the Sunni-Shi’a strife and religious extremism in Central Asia probably guided and funded by unofficial radical groups in both countries.

China. Despite China’s current friendly relations with both countries, in the future (when the sanctions are completely removed), it might concentrate on more predictable and sustainable Iran. This is illustrated by the current plans to raise the volume of bilateral Iranian-Chinese trade to \$38 billion¹⁴; Beijing and Islamabad are only cooperating in the military-political sphere.

It is absolutely clear that this partnership—arms deliveries, assistance in modernization of armed forces and a Chinese naval base in Gwadar—is a strong irritant for Iran, which is claiming regional leadership. We should also bear in mind that the use of military force against the Shi’a community of Pakistan cannot be excluded.

Tehran is obviously concerned about China’s involvement in transportation projects that will connect it with Central Asia because they compete with similar Iranian projects.

Afghanistan. This country is still a target of rivalry between Pakistan and Iran. The following figures of Afghan refugees illustrate the scope of the Afghan problem up to and including extremism, drug trafficking, etc., which affect both countries: 2.4 million, of whom 1 million are registered and 1.4 million are unregistered refugees, remain in Iranian territory,¹⁵ while 2.6 million (1.6 and 1 million, respectively) camp in Pakistan.¹⁶

The U.S. State Department set up an Afghanistan and Pakistan Strategic Partnership Office.

The sides, however, have very different ideas about their future development and the role it will play in the future of Afghanistan. Tehran would particularly like to see the Shi’a community of Afghanistan being afforded wider rights. Islamabad, in turn, with its own political ambitions, believes that the interests of the Taliban should be taken into account to stabilize relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The very different ideological approaches and preferences of Iran and Pakistan explain their very different approaches to what the Taliban is doing. Iran cannot accept the philosophy of the

¹² “Saudi Arabia Overhauls Its Strategy for Syria,” 26 February, 2014 [<http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/saudi-arabia-overhauls-its-strategy-syria>], 5 March, 2014.

¹³ “Iran: Loan for Pakistani Pipeline Canceled, Minister Says,” 14 December, 2013, available at [<http://www.stratfor.com/situation-report/iran-loan-pakistani-pipeline-canceled-minister-says>], 5 March, 2014.

¹⁴ See: “Do kotsa goda ob’em tovaroorota mezhdur Iranom i Kitaem dostignet 38 mld doll.,” 11 December, 2013, available at [http://www.iran.ru/news/economics/91734/Do_konca_goda_obem_tovarooborota_mezhdur_Iranom_i_Kitaem_dostignet_38_mld_dollarov], 5 March, 2014.

¹⁵ [<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>], March 2014 (accessed 18 March, 2014).

¹⁶ Ibidem.

Taliban, which dominates in Pakistan and partly in Afghanistan. The situation in Pakistan is complicated by the rivalry of two parties—the Pakistan Muslim League (PML Nawaz Group) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party founded by Imran Khan—which might strengthen the Taliban on the lookout for an opportunity to seize power.

“Pakistan has been pushing for a balance of power between the Taliban and anti-Taliban forces,” while the expert community is convinced that “the Pakistani Taliban wish to see Pakistan serve as a launchpad for the creation of an international caliphate” and that “a politically dominant Taliban in post-NATO Afghanistan would also embolden the Pakistani Taliban to act against Islamabad.”¹⁷

On the other hand, successful talks with Iran, the drawdown of American troops, and a strategic agreement with Iran will open new vistas for Washington, namely, practical cooperation with Iran, which the United States sees as a potential strategic partner in peaceful transformation of Afghanistan, something which Islamabad is not interested in.

Likewise, Pakistan does not need partnership between India and Iran, on the one side, and Afghanistan, on the other; Afghanistan does not want to see the Taliban or any other extremist group at the helm; it is seeking closer relations with the Central Asian countries within the Heart of Asia project, which will trim the role Pakistan is playing in the region.

The disagreements and conflicts preserve the continued threats presented by all sorts of terrorist groups (al-Qa‘eda, Jundallah, and others) operating in close proximity to Iran and in Pakistan. This is confirmed by the recent blast at the Iranian consulate in Peshawar, abductions of Iranian border guards by terrorists who came from Pakistan, and a terrorist attack in Quetta on a bus carrying Shi‘a pilgrims.¹⁸

India. The relations between India and Pakistan should be analyzed within the Washington’s turn toward the APR. “South Asia ... represents a key axis with India as the linchpin in the Asia-Pacific strategy of U.S. vis-à-vis China.”¹⁹ According to this strategy, “India is a crucial and key player in the future security and development of Afghanistan ... and a leader in the new silk road, in the heart of Asia process.”²⁰

Some believe that if developed, these processes will create “an arc of containment” of which India will be the center; in the future, it will stretch from the southeast to Central Asia.²¹

If realized, this strategy might ensure India’s regional domination and infringe on Pakistan’s interests. The rising regional rivalry between India and China keeps the tension between Islamabad and Delhi at a high level; their bilateral relations are developing according to the well-known formula “one step forward, two steps back.”

When the country was celebrating the 65th anniversary of the Republic of India, Pakistani troops opened fire in Kashmir²² to demonstrate that Islamabad was extremely vexed with the Delhi-Tehran partnership.

The two capitals, meanwhile, promote the idea of a north-south transportation route that will bring together Russia and Central and South Asia. None of the sides wants a stronger “Sunni bloc

¹⁷ “Afghanistan and Pakistan after the 2014 NATO Drawdown,” available at [<http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/afghanistan-and-pakistan-after-2014-nato-drawdown>], 15 April, 2013.

¹⁸ See: *Dawn*, 23 January, 2014; “Pakistanskiy deputat osudil vzryv okolo iranskogo konsulstva,” available at [http://www.iran.ru/news/politics/92745/Pakistanskiy_deputat_osudil_vzryv_okolo_iranskogo_konsulstva], 18 February, 2014.

¹⁹ [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/SOU-01-150114.html].

²⁰ “Comments on India’s Relations with Iran, Afghanistan, and the U.S. Remarks Wendy Sherman Under Secretary for Political Affairs — New Delhi, India,” available at [<http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2013/202682.htm>], 24 May, 2013.

²¹ See: “SSHА derzhat indo-pakistanskіe otnosheniya pod kontrolem,” *Asia Times Online*, 18 January, 2014, available at [<http://www.warandpeace.ru/ru/exclusive/view/87011/>], 19 March, 2014.

²² See: “A Special Project with the New America Foundation and Johns Hopkins SAIS,” *Times of India; The Hindu*, 30 January, 2014.

comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia,” which “poses an ideological as well as security challenge.”²³

Under the pressure of geopolitical reality, which interferes with its Afghan initiatives, the rapidly approaching pullout and much more active contacts between Pakistan and the United States, Delhi is rearranging its regional priorities; it wants a treaty with Saudi Arabia and has already signed several treaties in the economic and security spheres with Japan to protect itself against the impacts of Pakistan and China.

The Cornerstones of Mutually Advantageous Partnership

Mutually advantageous partnership between Iran and Pakistan in Central Asia is possible despite the contradictions and barriers I have written about above; today, the following can be described as positive trends in this respect.

- (1) Since 2001, when the Taliban regime was overthrown in Afghanistan, both countries have done a lot to defrost bilateral relations. On 14-16 December, 2005, the then Foreign Minister of Iran Manouchehr Mottaki visited Islamabad,²⁴ a sure sign that it might become Tehran’s key ally in South Asia in the future. Iran expects that Pakistan (an Islamic nuclear state) might help it in many respects, up to and including its dealings with the IAEA. On the other hand, “commentators in Pakistan, Iran’s Muslim neighbor and a strong U.S. ally, call on Washington to eschew violence and seek a diplomatic solution.”²⁵ Islamabad expects that Tehran will broker a settlement of the Kashmir issue.²⁶
- (2) The predominant (89% according to the Pew Research Center) anti-American sentiments in Pakistan²⁷ and a certain share of Islamic solidarity might make it easier for Islamabad to start talking to Tehran.
- (3) Expecting that the sanctions will be lifted ultimately and completely, Iran will hardly risk marring its international image or aggravate the smoldering Sunni-Shi’a strife; its very restrained response to the challenges coming from Pakistani territory is the best proof of this.
- (4) The New Silk Road strategy consistently promoted by the United States favors reintegration of South and Central Asia as the best scenario in which all the regional players will be able to realize their interests. “A U.S. strategy for Asia that does not contemplate Pakistan’s role is incomplete, and a U.S. strategy for Pakistan that primarily considers its role in the context of Afghanistan is shortsighted,” says American expert Daniel Markey.²⁸ He has outlined “a

²³ A. Bhatnagar, “Indo-Iranian Cooperation in Afghanistan Faces Challenges,” *The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 22 August, 2012, available at [<http://atlanticsentinel.com/2013/05/indo-iranian-cooperation-in-afghanistan-faces-challenges/>], 7 May, 2013.

²⁴ See: A.M. Vartanian, “Iran i Pakistan: novoe navedenie mostov?” *Institut Blizhnego Vostoka*, 21 December, 2005, available at [<http://www.iran.ru/>], 5 March, 2014.

²⁵ “Regional Press Split over U.S. Iran Threat,” *BBC news*, 25 January, 2005.

²⁶ See: Z. Farzinnia, “Iran and Pakistan: Continuity and Change,” *Iranian Journal of International Relations*, Tehran, Vol. XVII, No. 2-3, Summer-Fall 2004, pp. 324-325.

²⁷ See: F. Kapralov, “Pakistan: ot takticheskikh otnosheniy s Zapadom—k strategicheskim s Vostokom,” *peacekeeper.ru* [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1391633220>], 5 February, 2014.

²⁸ D.S. Markey, “Reorienting U.S. Pakistan Strategy: From Af-Pak to Asia,” *Council on Foreign Relations Press*, January, 2014, available at [<http://www.cfr.org/pakistan/reorienting-us-pakistan-strategy/p32198>], 10 March, 2014.

two-pronged approach to future U.S. policy for Pakistan: defend against security threats, and support Pakistan's economic growth and normalized relations with its neighbors." America means business; this is confirmed by the talks on regional security and bilateral relations between Sartaj Aziz, National Security Advisor and key advisor on foreign policy to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, which took place in Washington on 27 January, 2014.

- (5) Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan interested in beneficial economic reintegration with Central and South Asia and the Persian Gulf support "expanding transit trade and encouraging private sector investment, as well as promoting cooperation in projects related to infrastructure, transport and communications."²⁹ Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari said that "Pakistan was committed to timely completion of the IP gas pipeline. He said a number of other economic projects were in the pipeline between Iran and Pakistan, including electricity import and wheat export, rail and road connectivity,"³⁰ and also the TAPI project. The Pakistani leaders in general confirm that they will live up to their obligations under the gas pipeline agreement; comprehensive bilateral talks on construction and various alternatives are going on.³¹
- (6) The Central Asian countries are actively involved in projects of a vitally important regional transportation and transit network of cargo hauling and pipelines, including the trans-Afghan and Pakistan routes. They are especially interested in the Termez-Mazar-i Sharif-Herat-Bandar Abbas and Chabahar corridors and a no less important transport corridor between China and the Gulf created by a railway that will reach the port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea.

Conclusion

The region of Central and South Asia dotted by seats of instability offers very good conditions for gradual and sustainable development and wider economic cooperation. Religious and political confrontation, ethnic and tribal disagreements, and the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan are sending waves of instability across Central Asia, which might provoke local armed clashes. Instability is further exacerbated by Islamabad's pro-American policy pursued against the background of the continued confrontation between Iran and the United States and by solidarity demonstrated by the radical Islamic organizations in both countries. This process is deepened by the tactics designed to squeeze Russia out of geopolitical projects associated with Central Asia, which contradicts their logic of regionalism. This is fraught with new threats and challenges in Central and South Asia.

It should be said that the worsened relations between Russia and the West because of what is going on in Ukraine echoes in the region: the explosive situation might provoke unpredictable developments. It is hoped that the economic and political interests shared by the Euro-Atlantic community

²⁹ Tahir Khan, "Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan to Step Up Business Ties," *The Express Tribune*, 10 January, 2013, available at [<http://tribune.com.pk/story/491834/pakistan-iran-afghanistan-to-step-up-business-ties/>], 10 January, 2013.

³⁰ "Zardari for Early Convening of Pak-Iran-Afghanistan Summit," available at [<http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/national/22-Mar-2013/zardari-for-early-convening-of-pak-iran-afghanistan-summit>], 22 March, 2013.

³¹ See: "Pakistan reshitelno nastroen na realizatsiiu proekta po importu iranskogo gaza," available at [http://www.iran.ru/news/economics/92894/Pakistan_reshitelno_nastroen_na_realizaciyu_proekta_po_importu_iranskogo_gaza], 14 March, 2014.

and Russia will push them to hold talks and engage in a gradual settlement of the current crisis. It seems, however, that Moscow will play a more limited role in the region in the near future.

Much depends on how the Iranian nuclear problem will be settled and who will be elected as the next president of Afghanistan, as well as on the political will of the actors with outstanding interests in Central and South Asia and their readiness to reach a consensus for the sake of national and regional security. Taken together, this will decide the nature of relations between Iran and Pakistan.
