

CONFLICT

Pakistan must not allow extremists to act as a 'Sunni Wall' against Iran

Pakistani-Iranian ties are gradually turning into a hostile affair as the two neighbors continue to engage in border clashes. Analyst Siegfried O. Wolf tells DW why Islamabad needs to re-evaluate its regional policies.



Border tensions between Pakistan and Iran have flared over the past few months, with Teheran accusing Islamabad of allowing Sunni militant groups to infiltrate its eastern border. Pakistan denies backing the armed outfits.

Last month, the Iranian security forces entered Pakistan to engage in a battle with these militants, resulting in a skirmish with the Pakistani border guards. This comes at a time when Pakistan is also engaged in a gun battle on its eastern border with India, and its relations with Afghanistan are also not very cordial.

Siegfried O. Wolf, a senior research fellow and lecturer in International and Comparative Politics at the University of Heidelberg's South Asia Institute, says in a DW interview that it is likely that the Pakistani extremist groups are operating without the support of the South Asian country's government and the military. But he adds that Islamabad must go after Islamists wholeheartedly if it seeks to improve ties with its neighbors.



DW: The border clashes between Iran and Pakistan have increased, with Teheran accusing Islamabad of allowing Sunni militants to enter its Sistan and Baluchistan provinces. How credible are Iran's claims?

Siegfried O. Wolf: Looking at the history of Iranian-Pakistani border tensions, Teheran's claims could well be true. However, the only force in Pakistan that can allow such border conflict to occur, is the country's powerful military. But it is unlikely that the Pakistani army or its intelligence organization, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), would be interested in confrontation with Iran.

Pakistan is tied up fighting militant groups as well as keeping

Siegfried O. Wolf: 'Pakistan's regional position is getting more complicated by the day'

major urban areas and the country's troubled northwestern border with Afghanistan under control. In addition, the army is also trading fire with India at the Kashmir border. Therefore,

opening a third front in the southwest would not be wise.

In my opinion, Iran's claims are credible, but it seems that these groups are not working on Islamabad's directives.

Is it possible that these armed groups can infiltrate Iran unilaterally without Islamabad's support?

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There is no doubt that Pakistan in the past didn't do much to stop international terrorist groups from using its territory. There have been accusations that Pakistan was getting financial and logistical support from Saudi Arabia to nurture anti-Iranian organizations. But I doubt Pakistan's security forces are still able to control terrorist groups like the radical Jaish al-Adl outfit, which carried out the recent attacks against Iranian border guards.

Is Pakistan being used as a proxy in the ongoing Saudi Arabia-Iran regional rivalry?

It will be hard to prove that Pakistan functions as Saudi Arabia's proxy. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif spent many years in Saudi Arabia during his exile period, and subsequently developed close links to the Saudi monarchs. Pakistani officials will avoid upsetting Riyadh as the country's energy security is one of Sharif's major concerns. Therefore, I don't think that his government will be interested in provoking Tehran too much and, hence, putting bilateral gas pipeline projects at risk.

Having said that, I think that Pakistan's international relations and its regional position are getting more complicated by the day. The likelihood of a US-Iranian convergence, the ongoing China-Russia rapprochement, an increased cooperation between Teheran and New Delhi, and the situation in Afghanistan are signs of changing regional dynamics. The Pakistani establishment

is unhappy with these developments. These new security paradigms might force Islamabad to forge even closer ties with Saudi Arabia.

With reports coming in about an increased cooperation between the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban and the Middle Eastern Sunni jihadist group "Islamic State" (IS), do you see these groups causing trouble for Iran in the coming months or years?

For Pakistan's Islamic fundamentalists, the country is already a "Sunni Wall" against Shiite Iran. The policy of containing the Shiite influence in the region was seriously affected after the collapse of the Sunni-Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq. These events created a power vacuum which is now being increasingly filled by Tehran. Saudi Arabia does not want to see the rise of Iran and will continue to do anything to ensure Sunni dominance.

In this context, one has to emphasize that most of the Sunni militant groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region believe in the Saudi Arabian ultraconservative and puritanical Wahhabism and the Takfiri ideology, which commits its followers to fight the enemy from within – for instance, the Shiite people.

Here we find a common ideological bond between IS and the Taliban. But it seems that neither the civilian government nor the military is willing to identify IS as a threat. This will have serious implications not only for religious minorities in Pakistan but also for the country's ties with Iran.



'I don't think that PM Sharif's government would be interested in provoking Tehran and risking bilateral gas pipeline projects,' says Wolf

What should Pakistan do to stay out of the Shi'ite-Sunni war in the Middle East which is apparently spilling over into its borders?

Pakistan should stop differentiating between the "good" and "bad" Taliban. In other words, the country should give up the notion that one can negotiate and cooperate with Islamic extremists. Also, Pakistan should finally launch a comprehensive military campaign against the whole Taliban movement and other affiliated militant organizations.

This must include ending financial and logistical support for militant groups which are perceived by Pakistan's neighbors as a security threat. It should also include a serious re-assessment of Islamabad's relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf is a senior research fellow and lecturer in International and Comparative Politics at the University of Heidelberg's South Asia Institute.

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