

## **Indo-Iran Relations in the Changing Regional Environment Implications for South Asia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

International relations are determined by systemic and structural factors at the global, regional and state/domestic levels. Inter-state relations require common interests, shared goals, inter-related threat perception and eminent security challenges. Indo-Iranian relations have been on a progressive trajectory since the beginning of current century; their relations are focussed on political, economic, security and strategic spheres. As an emerging major power, India intends to enhance its influence across regions. This paper attempts to examine how Indo-Iranian relations have shaped up over the years. How convergence of interests by these two far-off neighbors have developed to join and cooperate in economic, political and social domains. For Pakistan, any development on its eastern and western borders holds important bearing on its national security; therefore, what new challenges are posed by Indo-Iranian relations in the changing regional environment of South Asia.

**Key Words:**        **National Interests, Regional Environment, Security Concerns, India & Iran**

### **Introduction**

In a regional security complex, convergence and divergence of interests among interstate relations carry significant importance. The convergence of interests makes bilateral relations more exigent while divergence on interests leads towards frictions. Out of the dynamic sub-regional systems of South Asia, Iran, India and Pakistan are three important states. The internal politics and interstate relations among these three countries deeply impact the security of respective states and regional system. Indo-Iranian relations have been on the progressive trajectory since the beginning of the current century and three factors determine India's relations with Iran, political-economic, security and strategic. Pakistan holds a significant place in the geopolitics of the region; there is an on-going regional competition between Pakistan and India; while Pakistan and Iran share fluctuating relations, which is marred by political perversion due to many reasons. Therefore, this paper endeavors to highlight the existing relations between Iran and India and

its political, security and economic implications for South Asian Security in general and Pakistan in particular.

### **Theoretical context**

Chanakya's Raja Mandala is a theory which views states in relation with each other in circles. (Ghutam, 2013) This circle analogy is not limited to the territorial boundaries when it comes to a state being a member of the international organization. In the contemporary world, international organizations could serve as another tier of diplomacy, which is not bound of territorial limitations but simultaneously, diplomacy would categorize and focus on those states, who are immediate neighbours. Kautilya or Vishnugupta, Chanakya (350–275 BCE), wrote *Arthashastra*, which provides guidance to the king for a better rule in the world system. (Boesche, 2002) The most interesting narration of his work is thought of as an important precursor to war, foreign policy and classical economics; Kautilya's desire was for his king to conquer the world. Thus, India projects the ancient idea of *Maha-Bharat* or global hegemony of the king based on Chanakya's ideals. The theory of Mandala called whole international system as circles of state. States those borders immediately with ruler's states are hostile states. Similarly, those states outside their border with hostile states are neutral state or friendly states against the central lying state. (Pillalamarri, 2015) The relations of India and Pakistan have always been bitter which further acknowledges the Kautilian school of thought as immediate friends being enemies, and enemies' neighbours as friends. Foreign policy of India relies heavily on the Mandala logic as it seeks Iran, Afghanistan and Japan as natural allies against Pakistan and China. During the Cold War, bilateral relations between India and Iran have mostly been influenced by international system more than the domestic compulsions and desires, which have witness definite highs and lows.

### **India-Iran relations**

India and Iran are two major states of South-West Asia, which share common understanding of political, economic, military and cultural relations since the Neolithic age. (Sharam & Sajjad, 2015) In the old great game, Iran played the sideline role whereas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's New Great Game, many players are trying to side with major powers. In its quest to reach Afghanistan and Central Asian, India has revitalized its relations with Iran over the years. Leaving historic relations aside, both countries have now come up to close diplomatic and economic ties.

India and Iran are two ancient civilizations and carry the legacy of ancient Silk Route, which connected the two states before the partition of subcontinent in 1947. Before the partition, the post-World War-II security environment had different complex consequences for India and Iran and later both countries got involved in the conspiracy of Cold War. The Iranians at large assumed

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communism as a threat to Iran (Abidi, 2000) and India adopted the policy of non-alignment. Iranian revolution in 1979 did not bring any betterment in communication between India and Iran. During 1980s, both states experienced decline in bilateral relations because Iran was preoccupied with Iraq war and the attachment of Islamic regime made it to take up the Islamic causes such as the Kashmir issue and plight of Muslims of India that led to stressed Indo-Iranian relations. Indian response to Iranian non-cooperation was muted due to number of reasons such as the acknowledgement of Iran's role in the Gulf, Central Asia and Afghanistan. Indian importance to economic ties was based on the conviction that pragmatists ruling elite of Iran wants to ensure business and maintain good interstate ties with New Delhi. (MEA Report, 1980)

Iran remained primarily defensive state predominantly concerned with its own internal stability, survival and protection of revolution inspired institutions, increase of its economic resources and territorial integrity. (Tahir-Kheli, 1983) Revolution in 1979 resulted in the emergence of Islamic Republic and subsequently ouster of Shah was regarded as positive changes by India. It viewed the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and Revolution as Iranian desire and quest for self-assertion and identity without any big power influence (Tahir-Kheli, 1983). Disintegration of the USSR in 1990-91 and leaving Afghanistan in chaos had eminent impacts on Iran as northern provinces were at odds with their neighbors being administratively unstable. Besides, the chance of riots and clashes, chance of eruption of ethnic conflicts in border areas and spilling into Iranian territory was major concern; stabilized Central Asia was in the interest of Iran. (Chubin, 1994) However, Iran remained at odds with major powers and regional actors in the Middle East and South and Central Asia. Subsequently, since 2002, the major contentious issue became the Iranian nuclear program, which was seen as regional security threat to Israel and KSA, and the US regional dominance. However, India and Iran significantly boosted their relations by signing a defence agreement in 2003 but the Indo-US Strategic Partnership in 2004 put severe strains on these relations.

### **Convergence of Indo-Iranian relations**

In the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, India's projection of pursuing an independent foreign policy without any overarching influence had greatly helped it in shaping an approachable relationship with Iran. This affiliation with the Middle East and particularly with Iran is dramatically diverse than some decades ago. Indo-Iranian relations can be divided into pre and post-Cold War era. Iran's rapprochement towards India started to increase after the end of Cold War and further strengthened due to Iran's 'Look East Policy' reinforced by a mutual desire to initiate a strong connection within the Central Asian and Caspian regions. The disintegration of the Soviet Union offered both Iran and India the opportunity to cooperate for enhancing trade with Central Asian Republics (CAR).

India's main security dilemma arises from its quest for collaboration with world hegemony to become a regional power and manage regional affairs. (Dutt, 1999) Iran's dilemma arises from its exposure to challenge regional players in the Middle East, rivalry with the US and search of markets to sell its oil, and quest for military prowess including nuclear power. During the post-Cold War era, there were common security and political concerns of both countries. Iran's necessity to find more export markets due to its deteriorating relations with the US; India, which has now emerged as one of the world's biggest importers of petroleum products, was in a preeminent position to receive this natural assistance. Though connected by sea-route, India desires to bypass Pakistan to reach Afghanistan through Iran via Chahbahar port to fulfill its expansionist designs to reach CARs and expand influence in Afghanistan. India has a tough call at its hand to counter two arch nuclear rivals, China and Pakistan, in its neighborhood. India not only wants to overcome Pakistan militarily but also through soft maneuver to discredit Pakistan and keep it engaged in domestic issues.

Improving bilateral ties between India and Iran has given momentum to military-to-military contacts. India wants to sell its conventional military hardware to Iran, as modernization in military was desperately needed for Iran in prevailing regional scenario and India could provide spare parts and modern arms. India could likewise provide essential technical assistance and training opportunities to the Iranian armed forces. India was planning to sell Iran the Konkurs anti-tank missile and assist in the upgrading of Iran's T-72 tanks and other armored vehicles. (Pant 2004) In 2003, both countries signed a defence agreement to enhance bilateral defence cooperation and strategic partnership, and military-to-military relations. (Chansoria, 2010) In March 2003, India and Iran held joint naval exercise in Arabian Sea. In early 1990s Iranian navy was helped by Indian navy in adapting Russian Submarines to warm waters of Persian Gulf. (Why This Iran Port is Important, 2014) Navies of both countries were part of "open" display of military cooperation. Their joint naval exercise during March 2003 in Arabian Sea reflected their concern over increasing US military presence in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf. Its significance was high as the military exercises involved all forces of India and the US had been expanding since 1995. (Fair, 2004) The second naval exercise of India and Iran took place on in March 2006 concurring few weeks before historical Indo-US Nuclear Deal and a weeklong visit of President George Bush to India.

India is making shift in its Middle Eastern policy in pursuit of substantial regional interests. Iran and India are largest regional entities in terms of their geopolitical and geo-economic outreach. India's diplomatic presence in Iran is reflective of the diplomatic and intelligence sharing between both countries. In 2002, India established consulate in Bandar Abbas, Iranian port city, allowing it to monitor ships movement in Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf (Berlin, 2004). India's plan of extended neighborhood, where it aims to be perceived as a supra-regional power in the area from the Strait of Hormuz to Central Asia. (Fair, 2004:44-45) Iran and India both have concerns about unipolarity and India wants

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its desired role in the emerging multipolarity. So, India's quest towards Central Asian States and Afghanistan is stressing it hard to have good relations with Iran beyond economic ties. (Fair, 2004:266) The development of Iran's Chabahar port by India is a cornerstone of this multi-layered strategy, by bypassing Pakistan and to get access not only to Iran but Central Asia and Afghanistan as well. Iran's importance for India lies in its geographical location as it borders with five crucial regions namely Afghanistan, Eurasia, Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia and two strategically vital energy hubs i.e. Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea.

#### **Divergence in India-Iran relations India-US relations**

The relations between India and US have strong impact on Iran-India relations. The US look towards India as a balancing force against China and Pakistan in South Asia. India is also second largest buyer of arms from the US and have strategic defence and trade ties, which puts pressure on Iran to remain away from India. The US geopolitical interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia confluence well with India to serve the broader US policy objectives in the region. The US has been uttering anxieties around improved Indian cooperation with Iran in the fields of energy and defense. The US has put substantial pressure to stop India from enhancing cooperation with Iran and Indian abandoning of Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline project is a case in point. Middle East has also a very complex situation; interstate relations have a diverse pattern. Saudi Arabia has recently established open ties with Israel and in the same breadth it does not enjoy good terms with Iran. On the other hand, Iran is supporting Hamas, has conflictual relations with others Gulf States. It has openly challenged the US sanction on development of its nuclear capability. (Davenport, 2020)

#### **India and KSA/Israel**

However, biggest issue with India is to maintain balanced relations with KSA/Israel and Iran. Iran and Saudi Arabia are central actors of security situation in the Middle East. Both draw their legitimacy from religion and have ambitious designs which are difficult to achieve because 'values' and 'interests' are the major battling ground. Aspiration for the Muslim World leadership, religious differences and proxy wars in the region revolve around the "values" whereas "interests include regional security issues, balance of power, and presence of US in the peninsula and determination of oil price." They use ideology as cover to achieve other political motives. Obedience at home and rebellion abroad is one of the basic elements of foreign policies of Riyadh and Tehran, which has aggressively awakened a sleeping Sunni-Shiite discord. (Freedman & Karsh, 1993) Saudi Arabia is strategic partner with the US and also cares for its relations with Israel. (Marcus, 2019)

## **Iran-China accord**

Iran and China have signed a deal worth \$400 billion aims on energy and infrastructure projects, defense cooperation, intelligence sharing and sale of discounted oil from Iran to China. Iran-China collaboration will have a major impact on the geopolitics and economics of this critically vital region (Raza, 2020). An 18 pages report leaked by the *New York Times* reveals that collaboration of Chinese presence in Iran's telecommunication, ports, counter terrorism and efforts to mutually block human trafficking and railway and other areas and Iran in return will look after energy needs of China through oil export. The deal will be cut for 25 years. Major Share of the deal is likely to be spent on energy, which is estimated \$280 billion and \$120 on other sectors. This deal is going to upset the US as China has already built many ports along the Indian ocean from South China Sea to Suez Canal. India has been upset too over this arrangement. Sino-Iran deal has cut the Indian wings to expand in the region and across Iran to Afghanistan and CARs. India had already planned a 628 KM long rail project which will extend from Chahbahar to Zaranj, across the border to Afghanistan. (Haider, 2020) Thus, enhanced Sino-Iran relations put strong breaks on Indo-Iranian relations.

## **Pakistan-Iran relations**

### **Border conflicts**

Common border between Pakistan and Iran meets at Baluchistan and Sistan province. Border security has been a perpetual source of tension between the two countries. The Baloch insurgencies have been problematic for bilateral relations. Since 2017 a sudden rise in border attacks from both sides has been witnessed. The level of mistrust between Iran and Pakistan is reflected in regular accusations from each side against the other in relation to support for Baloch insurgents. Jundullah and Jaish Al-Adl are cause of friction between the two countries. This group is involved in cross border attacks on Iran. Major General Mohammad Baqeri had issued a warning that Iran was willing to attack Jaish Al-Adl sanctuaries in Pakistan. In June 2017, an Iranian drone was shot down by the Pakistan air force while flying in Pakistani airspace. (Naveed, 2017) During August and September 2018, a visible rise in mortar shelling and rocket firing was witnessed in Makran and Chagai districts. In December 2018, six Frontier Corps soldier were killed by terrorists in Turbat, which Pakistan alleged to have support from Iran.

These recurring incidents indicate a major shift in geopolitical factor driving a wedge between Iran and Pakistan. This rift is aggravated by the significance each side assigns to such events. Pakistan's support to Afghan Taliban and Baloch insurgents is of serious concern to Iran. Similarly, Pakistan's concern is Iran's support to insurgent groups working inside Pakistan to fuel terrorism and sectarian issues. However, a positive development was observed in early 2020 when Pak-Iran joint border commissioned held a three-day meeting at Quetta and agreed to

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take effective measures on their respective sides to curb terrorism, which poses serious threat to the law-and-order stability of both countries. (Saleem, 2020)

### **Saudi Arabia**

Pakistan's deep-rooted relationship and reliance on Saudi Arabia is most important factor to view Pak-Iran relations. Saudi Arabia had asked Pakistan's involvement in its regional-security plan. Saudi Arabia and Iran draw their legitimacy from religion and have ambitious designs. They use ideology as a cover to achieve other political motives. Common belief in Pakistan is that Iran and KSA have used Pakistan for their proxy war through religious groups. It is estimated that 285 madrassahs have financial support from Saudi Arabia and Iran; two third receive support from Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states and one third from Iran and Iraq. (Riedel, 2016)

In the past, Pakistan has had closer ties with Saudi Arabia than with Iran, but since last decade, successive Pakistani governments have tried to push for an even-handed foreign policy to avoid being perceived as pro-Saudi and anti-Iranian. Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia also stems from Saudi-US relations in the Middle East. The ties between US and Saudi Arabia have direct impact on geopolitics of Middle East and Pakistan's relations with Iran. It is a critical interaction of diplomatic relations between Pakistan, Iran, the US and Saudi Arabia. All four states, the US, Saudi Arabia, Iran and India have high stakes in Afghanistan. On the other hand, situation in Afghanistan is directly linked to situation in Pakistan. China is another factor in these relations particularly when CPEC has lot of advantage for Iran and Pakistan and it does not suit India.

### **Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is critical for the stability for all regional powers. But it is more critical to Pakistan and Iran being neighboring states. Indian interests have been to reach to central Asian states via Afghanistan and also to increase influence in Afghanistan to use its proxies freely to destabilize Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistan would like to retain all options to maximize its influence in Afghanistan. Iran is vital for India's access to Afghanistan in which India has immense strategic and security interests. So, India-Iran security relations and construction of Chahbahar port is not in line with Pakistan's desire for influence in Iran.

## **Implications for South Asian security**

South Asia is the world's most dangerous place as declared by the former US President Bill Clinton. The region is characterized by an interconnecting web of old and new security challenges. There are unresolved territorial interstate-disputes such as Kashmir, Durand Line, a wide range of ethnic, religious, left-wing uprisings, and civil uprisings. The deep-rooted vulnerabilities between two nuclear archrivals Pakistan and India add more towards its volatility. India keeps projecting as the dominating and leading power of South Asia on the basis of conventional military capabilities, the growing economy, sound democratic system and highly skilled and educated middle class. Pakistan with its nuclear capabilities, well-trained and well-equipped army, geographical location, strategic and economic relations with China and other powers, challenges and balances India's superiority in the region. (Rajagopalan, 2011)

South Asia is host of two nuclear powers and the inter-state and intra-state conflicts have overwhelming effect on the regional security stability. During the past few decades, communal unrests in different parts of India, sectarian and ethnic conflicts in Pakistan, rivalry among the major political parties of Bangladesh; struggle for power and continuous war inside Afghanistan and struggle for assertive communist party and monarchy in Nepal have been amplified due to the internal conflicts in the region. Unsettled inter-state conflicts are major cause of internal rifts in South Asia, which have given rise to some of the most catastrophic problems like instability in religious, sectarian and political chaos, terrorism, violence, drug and human trafficking, mismanagement of water and increasing scarcity, border and territorial clashes, uprising and inequality and refugee problem etc.

Security and political situation in South Asia have been hampered by Kashmir conflict, LOC skirmishes, Siachen glacier issue, Indus river water sharing problems, cross-border terrorism, ideological and religious conflicts between India and Pakistan. Tamil Nado conflicts in Southern India and Sri Lanka have been in the mainstream and still haunting the national integrity of both the states. Border issues between Pakistan-India, Bangladesh-Pakistan, India-Bangladesh, Sri Lanka-India, Bhutan-India and India-China are major problems of South Asia. After the 9/11 attacks, militancy, radicalization, drugs and weapons smuggling and refugee's problems between Pakistan and Afghanistan, illegal migration across the borders between Pakistan-Afghanistan and India-Bangladesh and water sharing issues in Pakistan-India, India-Bangladesh, Sri Lanka-India and problems of access to Indian market between India and Bangladesh are major disputes which are prominent in South Asian politics. India's desire to manage and dominate the water resources caused rifts between Bangladesh-India and Pakistan-India.

The economic condition of the region has a direct impact on its security. With higher inflation rate and poverty, almost 30% population in South Asia lives under the poverty line. Afghanistan With highest number of people living under the poverty line 38% followed by Nepal 7%, Bangladesh 6%, Pakistan and India 3%.



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(The Website for World Poverty available at <https://worldpoverty.io/map>) The current patterns of enmity and hostility among the states of south Asia are linked with the interests as well as the influence of superpowers had in the past in this region. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1980s Pakistan came close to the US, which is one of the major reasons behind the sour relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Although India adopted non-aligned policy, but it developed good relations with the former USSR, based on its foreign policy. This affiliation on India and Pakistan with the two major powers of the world increased tension between both the countries to an extent that they came at the verge of a war with each other.

The US and NATO forces remained very active in South Asia after the 9/11 with substantial involvement of Pakistan both politically and militarily. Pakistan's internal stability and security were highly destabilized because of its alliance with the US in the war against terror and Al-Qaeda. India demands Pakistan to pull down its terrorist infrastructure (the so-called jihadist & religious militants) whereas Pakistan demands that India should end its activities in Baluchistan and Kashmir.

Impact of Iran-India relations on Pakistan will best be viewed through Afghanistan. Iran and India are two strategically important countries in their respective regions. Iran is second largest country on the periphery of the Middle East and a leader of Shite Muslim, while India is rising power and striving to be regional hegemon. Chahbahar port is indicative of India's role as driver of infrastructure development and enhanced regional connectivity with Afghanistan bypassing Pakistan. Chahbahar port is expected to handle 20 million tons of trade annually and will work as transportation network between India-Iran and Afghanistan. Chahbahar is only 72KM away from Gwadar port and strategically aims to limit the Chinese influence, which China is looking to gain through One Belt One Road project. (Pant, 2018) For its strategic objectives, Iran's location is major factor for Indian interest. Chahbahar offers direct access to India without having to traverse to China or Pakistan to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Heavy Indian presence in Afghanistan and in Central Asia could limit Pakistan's influence and also help India to contend with China's growing presence in the region. Afghanistan is directly linked with internal security of Pakistan. Gwadar is located in southeastern Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan region, close to the western Indian ports of Mumbai and Mundra. Chahbahar has the potential to advance India's geopolitical interests, by providing it access to central Asia. The port could also enable Delhi to have better surveillance of Pakistan by employing its engineers and intelligence set up. Chahbahar is also an alternative to Strait of Hormuz in case of any blockade, which will provide India access to Iranian energy sources. Chahbahar would strengthen India's oil trade with Iran at lower cost and establish better connectivity. (Motevalli & Marlow, 2016) Chahbahar provides an opportunity for India to go beyond Central Asia to Russia and Europe. It also enhances political proximity of India to Central Asian States, Iran and Russian.

India is already spending a lot to build infrastructure inside Afghanistan. India has constructed 135-mile Zaranj to Delaram road from the Iran-Afghan border to inside Afghanistan at a cost of \$100 million. Plan of a railway link from Chabahar to Zahedan is already under consideration (Behuria, 2015). In 2016, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Singh Modi signed an agreement between Iran, India and Afghanistan which establishes Chabahar-linked transport and transit corridors between India, Iran, and Afghanistan. It has enabled India to deliver its good to Afghanistan without any intervention from Pakistan. (MEA-Indian Government, 2016)

## **Conclusion**

India's emergence as major power has its own liabilities and advantages. Indian quest to reach beyond immediate neighbors to court states circling the hostile states have many challenges. The fine blend of convergence and divergence national security interests compel the far-off regional states to cooperate in the regional security complex through developing bilateral relations. Thus, Indo-Iranian relations are manifested through strong geopolitical and geo-economic realms, despite many ups and downs.

India's construction of roads in Afghanistan, port in Iran and security assistance to CARs are aimed at enhancing its geopolitical outreach beyond South Asia. The strategic power balance in the Asian sub-regional security complexes is in a flux, as regional states are trying to realign their relations in the changing security environment. Indo-Iranian relations have strong bearing on Middle Eastern, South Asian and Central Asian power equation. Despite many hurdles, both states are trying to enhance their bilateral relations compelled by regional geopolitics. If the change of administration in the United States is an opportunity, then the Sino-Iranian strategic agreement is a big challenge for India and Iran to continue on the same trajectory. Therefore, the puzzle of foreign policy option with each state in South Asia, Iran, India, and Pakistan would be a complex challenge, which requires a patient handling and delicate balancing of the situation.

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